

To what extent was  
Themistocles  
responsible for Greek  
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Wars...



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----- To what extent was Themistocles responsible for the Greek victory in the Persian Wars? Daniel Ashby

Themistocles was responsible for the Greek victory in the Persian wars to a considerable extent. The key to Athens' strength in the 5th Century BC was in this general and statesman and therefore, as Greek victory relied so heavily on Athens, Themistocles vitally contributed to the outcome of the Persian king's invasion of 480-479 BC.

His early life reflects the character and skills developed that were responsible for these contributions. Five pivotal roles he undertook were of varying degrees responsible for Greece's success against Xerxes.

Themistocles possessed an incredible foresight and began to prepare against the inevitable Persian invasion early on, his political leadership to a domestic level in Athens contributed to the state's naval strength, and similarly, his political leadership in the conception of a united Greek defence was a significant achievement.

As well as this, Themistocles' strategy in key battle such as Thermopylae, Artemisium and Salamis were vital to the war effort. \*\*\* To be able to understand to what extent Themistocles was responsible for Greek victory in the Persian Wars it first needs to be discussed how he rose to the position of authority and developed the skills that were required of him to make such a substantial impact on the war effort. For as Aristotle said many years later, 'If you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development. It is evident that Themistocles' early life reflects his character and his decisive actions seen later in his life. Themistocles began removing class distinction at a very young age, something that would aid his political

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career and influence the war effort in the future considerably. In about 520 BC Themistocles is born of the merchant Neocles of Phrearrhioi and his Thracian wife Abrotonon. Phanius, a 'philosopher well read in history' as Plutarch puts it, contrarily believes his mother to be a Carian woman from Halicarnassus called Euterpe.

In either case they were foreign to Athens and living in the immigrant district, though still a respectable and wealthy family. Neocles remained outside the political life of the city which left Themistocles with little hope of amounting to any political importance as family status held a bearing on one's post in government. Though without the rise of democracy and the ostracism of the Greek tyrants, Themistocles was likely never to be able to shed the confines of this class status and become the statesman and military leader he became to be.

The democratic revolution led to many social changes in Athens.

Nonetheless, there was still a very irrepressible separation between the distinctions of society. Themistocles' famous persuasive capabilities are seen in creating a bridge between himself and the aristocratic above him as a young boy. Plutarch describes him as cunningly removing the 'distinction between aliens and legitimates' by convincing well-born boys to go to the Cynosarges, the public gymnasium just outside Athens' city walls, and exercise with him.

In this we can already see that he would be a politician of the people, breaking down the barriers between the aristocratic and the regular citizen.

This would later win him the support required to carry out his important

policies and strategies vital to Greek victory in the Persian wars. As a youth Themistocles was prone to standing against authority, affecting his determination to achieve his own ends by whatever means in Xerxes' invasion, the reasoning behind many Greek successes during 480-479 BC.

He was said to be a very troublesome youth, impulsive and prone to public life; a dangerous combination. Themistocles illustrates this as he states that, ' Even the wildest colts made very good horses, if only they got the proper breaking and training. ' Plutarch infers that the ' story-makers' pursuing the idea that his father disinherited him and mother committed suicide because of his disgraces was false, but this still embodies the idea that he was a boy prone to acting out against authority.

To a certain degree the characteristics of his youth, despite his own affirmation of ' breaking and training', beneficially prevail to adulthood. The Roman biographer Cornelius Nepos ascertains that ' The vices of his early youth were compensated by great virtues'. These same vices, his impulsive attitude in the public life, were responsible for the very virtuous achievements he is referring to. In fact these character traits foreshadow the decisions he would make years later in the Persian Wars. Comparatively, his impulsiveness matured into a cunning and uncontrollable determination in the face of authority.

He was cleverly deceitful in the construction of a fleet of triremes, he was uncompromising against the Spartan commander Eurybiades at the first gathering at Corinth in 480 BC, and he was determined to get his own way in vital battles such as Salamis and Artemisium whether that required

deceiving those authorities above him or not. Plutarch, Nepos, and Themistocles himself all refer to a degree of uncontrollable yet cunning determination that serves a great purpose in Greece's victory over Persia. Above all this, ' while he was still a youth ' public affairs laid their grasp upon Themistocles. Plutarch also describes that while other boys would entertain themselves and indulge in leisurely activities, Themistocles would be composing and rehearsing to himself mock speeches. From an early age he shows a propensity and natural gifting for politics and persuasion, something that was essential in the scheme of the Persian Wars. It is clear that from the beginnings Themistocles was exhibiting characteristics, skills, and determination leading to the enormous extent of responsibility he held in Greek victory during the Persian Wars. \*\*\*

Through incredible foresight into the events that would unfold during the Persian wars, Themistocles is able to prepare Greece as a nation to defend their freedom against Xerxes and Persian imperialism. The prediction of Persian invasion and consequential fortifications of Athens as well as the conception of a defensive and offensive Greek response, the Athenian statesman and general played a significant role in the victory over the Persians. It is evident that Themistocles had anticipated Darius' first invasion of 490 BC because of the early preparations he made in defence of Athens.

This foresight was the first step Greece made to defend herself against the ' barbarians' and hence holds a degree of responsibility for Greek victory in the Persian wars. Thucydides says that Themistocles had a great gift for analysing complex situations and taking action, and that is just what he did.

As early as 492 BC, soon after his election as Archon Eponymous in 493 BC, <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-themistocles-responsible-for-greek-victory-in-the-persian-wars-essay/>

he had begun preparations to fortify the Piraeus Peninsula. This may have been in reaction to Mardonius' subjugation of the Ionian revolt and subsequent wreckage of his fleet as he sailed around the tip of Cape Athos in the same year.

This could have been seen as a hostile attempt to venture into mainland Greece and seek revenge against the Eretrians and Athenians for supporting the Ionians in the burning of Sardis. It could also have simply been in reaction to an observation of Persian imperialism, as their expansive endeavours were seemingly pointed towards the west. A strong wall was built to fortify the entire peninsula with a citadel overlooking its three natural harbours, diverting naval importance from other harbours such as Phaleron.

Themistocles' foresight was proved accurate as construction is said to have been interrupted by Darius' siege of Eretria on the island of Euboa and the confrontation with the Athenians on the plains of Marathon. The fortifications of this area held importance to later naval encounters such as at Salamis as well as the defence of the western shores of Attica, making it of great importance to the war effort as a whole. In 490 BC during Darius' invasion of Greece, Themistocles learned that you cannot solely rely on ground troops without naval support.

Themistocles was likely to have been acting as one of the strategos at the battle alongside Miltiades as by this time he was a prominent political and military leader of Athens, thus providing him with first hand experience of Persian tactics. If the Athenian hoplites had not managed to outrun the Persian fleet sailing around the coast to Athens after the slaughter of the

enemy infantry in order to defend their city, the outcome of the war would have met a devastating turn of events. Themistocles knew that a dependency on Greek infantry alone was a dependency on luck, a key factor in Miltiades' victory at the battle.

He knew this would resolve tragically for Athens when facing an inevitable second invasion force sent to mainland Greece. However, Themistocles resolves that in the same way the Greeks were disadvantaged at Marathon, so too the Persians would not be able to sustain a considerable army in mainland Greece without naval support. If Athens was to become the dominant naval entity in the Aegean, the Persians could be rendered impotent. Modern scholar Kresner supports this and attributes long Persian lines of communication and support partly responsible to her loss.

If the Greeks were able to disable these lines, the Persian land force would be unsustainable and they would be forced to return to Persia. Therefore, through Themistocles' understanding of Persian tactics he revealed a plausible Greek defence and an exploitable Persian weakness, bringing Greece one step closer to her victory in Xerxes' invasion of 480-479 BC. Plutarch observed that, 'as a man of intellect, foresight and cunning,' Themistocles 'stood alone.' This statement is very true in that Themistocles' intellect unravelled the tactics of the Persians in their simultaneous land and sea engagement of Greece.

In relation to this, his incredible foresight led him to realise the inevitable invasion of Greece and that with a strong naval presence the Persians could be defeated. Themistocles' political cunning also played a vital role in the

scheme of the war effort, but this will be examined further on. Themistocles was hence responsible, through extraordinary foresight, for the preparations and preliminary tactics that resulted in a crippled Persian fleet and therefore defeated invasion force. \*\*\* Themistocles' distinguished political leadership in Athens holds a high degree of responsibility for the outcome of the Persian wars.

He crucially contributed by overcoming those opposing his naval vision and convincing the Athenian peoples and generals to build a fleet of triremes. He could not prevail in convincing the state in favour of his naval vision without first subduing rival political figures who were sure to oppose his notion, hence, Themistocles utilised the weapon of ostracism to his advantage. It is very apparent that the Athenian public and generals at the time were plagued with overconfidence and admiration for their hoplite army that successfully beat back Darius' invasion of 490 BC, denying the need for an improved fleet all the while.

The victory at Marathon where, with numbers suggested by Bury and Meiggs, 9 000 Greek hoplites stood against an overwhelming 20 000 Persian troops occupied the minds of the populous to an immensely. The city's celebrations illustrate this idea. The ancient historian Pausanias describes the city being filled with frescoes and inscriptions commemorating Greek victory, which have since been uncovered by modern archaeologists. A festival in honour of Artemis and Apollo, the Boedromia, was established to thank the gods for their assistance.



Thucydides tells us that even the burial practice of the 192 fallen hoplites was achieved in an unusual fashion because of their exceedingly outstanding valour. As well as this, prominent men in this time of political change playing leading roles in the politics of the day such as Themistocles' rivals Aristides and Xanthippius were against any naval development and supported the reliance on an infantry force. Themistocles was a leading member of the political life of Athens.

He was well known by the people and had a profound ability to persuade others in favour of his argument. With this political popularity and prowess he was able to gain the support enabling a successful usage the weapon of ostracism against his rival politicians. Aristides and Xanthippius were ostracised in 483 BC and 485 BC, leaving Themistocles without serious opposition. Themistocles convinces the Athenians of the inevitable and imminent Persian attack and the necessity to build a new fleet. To Themistocles' luck a large vein of silver was found at Laurium in 483 BC.

Over the course of the next year, two and a half tonnes of the precious metal was extracted. Thousands of silver drachma would have been forged, many of which are housed in the British Museum's colossal coin collection.

Themistocles' cunning, mentioned earlier in Plutarch's observation, can certainly be seen in his persuasion of Athens' generals and public to build a fleet of triremes with the money made from Laurium silver. Without serious political opponents he was able to deceive the public with talk of their neighbour off the southern coast of Athens, Aegina.

The rival state was accused of posing a threat to the Athenian merchant ships with Themistocles thereafter pointing out to the Ecclesia that to be able to control the sea ways instead of Aegina, a large fleet was needed. By 482 BC Themistocles successfully convinced the Athenians to invest the money in triremes rather than splitting it among themselves, and waged a brief naval war on Aegina afterwards. Herodotus says 200 triremes were constructed while Aristotle says 100.

Herodotus has exaggerated his numbers in other parts of his histories, for instance the Persian army consisting of 2-5 million men, something impossible by ancient standards, so it is likely that Aristotle is closer to the mark. We do know that by the time of Battle of Salamis there were 200 ships in Athens' command. Kresner is of the opinion that Greece's superior naval strength helped her to victory in the second Persian invasion while Ehrenberg supports this and states that Salamis essentially ended Persian naval aggression and thus made Greek victory a realistic expectation.

Therefore, Themistocles' leadership ability in Athens enabled him to secure his leading political position and influence the city to fund and authorise the construction of a large fleet of triremes. Themistocles' achievement was a significant factor in the Greek victory of 480-479 BC. \*\*\* Themistocles' distinguished political leadership can also be found in his actions surrounding Greek unity, a concept that ultimately led to Greek victory in the Persian wars. Modern scholar Mullins is of the opinion that the quality of Greek leadership helped her to victory over Persia.

Supported by Mullins, Themistocles held a significant role in the unity of the Greek city-states, bearing a great responsibility in Greece's victory over Persian invasion. Greece was divided and would only overcome the 'barbarian' with their combined resources. Greece hastily and unsystematically prepared for Xerxes invasion of 480-479 BC, calling a congress at Corinth in 481 BC, inviting delegates from all city-states to attend. Many of the northern states of Greece had medised by this time and so the diplomacy at the congress of Corinth was vital to Greek success as Xerxes drew closer.

The Panhellenic League was established, which was an alliance aimed at ceasing all internal disputes and diverting all attention on a united effort against the Persians. Despite this, there were still strong underlying feelings of resentment in some. According to Herodotus, Themistocles waived Athens' claim to command in favour of the Spartans because of the strained relations between the Athenians and other city-states, all in the interest of preserving a degree of Greek unity. It was unlikely that other city-states, certainly from the Peloponnese, would join under Athenian leadership.

Ten commissioners, called probouloi, were appointed to ensure stability while Themistocles was re-elected strategos in Athens, and appointed the very rare position of sole leader of the Athenian forces. His new found title considerably boosted his influence, especially over the Spartan in command of the Greek navy, Navarch Eurybiades. This was because he was the leader of the Athenian contingent of the fleet which made up the majority of Greece's naval force under Eurybiades' leadership.

This allowed Themistocles to further influence the strategic decisions made in the war effort, thus increasing the extent of responsibility he had for the victory over Persia. Themistocles cunningly used the very unity that he had so desperately to achieve as leverage to ensure his own strategy was carried out, allowing for the vitally important battle of Salamis to occur. After the confrontation at Artemisium and the fall of the defence of Thermopylae, Eurybiades 'showed little determination in the face of danger', says Plutarch, and was anxious to set sail to the Isthmus where the Peloponnesian army and its fortifications lay.

Themistocles was, of course, the more skilled naval tactician and supports the use of the narrow straits of Salamis as the best arena to confront the Persian fleet. Despite his obviously superior tactics it is Themistocles' adept leadership skills and uncompromising determination that leaves the Spartan commander successfully convinced. It is in Themistocles' opposition to the plan to defend the Isthmus whereby his famous remark is made.

According to Plutarch Eurybiades had said: 'You know Themistocles, at the games they thrash anybody who starts before the signal,' to which Themistocles replied, 'Yes, but they do not crown anybody who gets left at the post.' The idea that risks were a necessity in times such as these was a defining moment of Themistocles leadership. Eurybiades was still insistent, leaving Themistocles no choice but to play upon Athens' major role in the Greek defence. The Athenian fleet was the largest contingent of the Greek forces and so lent him substantial leverage.

He went as far to threaten to join the Persian invaders if they did not heed his advice. Themistocles successfully forced the now frightened Spartan commander to leave the triremes at Salamis in case the Athenians abandoned the war efforts. Themistocles' inordinate leadership ability made a significant contribution to the Greek unity which in turn held a great extent of the responsibility for the victory over the Persian invaders of 480-479 BC.

\*\*\* Themistocles' strategic contribution in the Battle of Salamis was a key factor to the war effort, and one that would be responsible for Greek victory against the Persians.

Themistocles instigated the battle of Salamis on September 28th 480 BC by deceiving Xerxes, leading to the crippling of his vast fleet. In the same way as he had deceived Eurybiades with the prospect of faltering unity, so too did Xerxes fall prey to such lies. The Greek commanders were in fact arguing as to what their next move was to be, and so Themistocles wrote a letter to the Persian camp. According to Herodotus, he wrote about 'Greeks [being] afraid and planning to slip away.' This 'opportunity of unparalleled success' was taken advantage of by Xerxes who sent his fleet into the Straits of Salamis.

He separated his naval force by sending his Egyptian contingent to blockade the western channel to Salamis to ensure the Greeks did not escape.

Eurybiades was forced to accept Salamis as the battlefield thereafter

because of this opportunity of a weakened Persian navy. The battle of

Salamis was a decisive victory for the Greeks, one which was instigated by

Themistocles and was a significant factor to Greek victory in the war. The

famous 'decree of Themistocles' was discovered in Troezen, the area to <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-themistocles-responsible-for-greek-victory-in-the-persian-wars-essay/>

where Athenian women and children were evacuated, in 1959 inscribed into a marble stela.

It describes that there were 200 triremes available to the Greeks at the battle of Salamis as well as many other strategic details. Some say it is one of those 'too good to be true' proofs but it is now believed to be genuine. Many Athenian males became expert seamen able to navigate the treacherous Greek coasts that befell Xerxes' fleet so many times. As well as this the mobility of triremes were to the Greek's advantage in such narrow and choppy conditions. Themistocles lured the Persian navy into the narrow strait with his letter where many of the Athenians lay in wait.

Scholars debate the exact details but it is known that the Persians are surprised and broadsided by the Greek fleet in the narrow strait. Modern scholar Kresner attributes long Persian lines of communication partly responsible to her loss. The destruction of Persian's navy at Salamis rendered her infantry unsupported and weakened. This eventually led to its retreat, thus ending the Persian wars. Therefore, Salamis was of great importance to the war effort while Themistocles was behind the victory. \*\*\* Therefore, for all these reasons Themistocles was responsible for the Greek victory in the Persian wars to a considerable extent.

His foresight and preparations in the face of Persian invasion, his leadership in Athens and the construction of a fleet of triremes, his part in the creation of a united Greek defence, and his considerable strategic contribution in key battles, all led to the defeat of Persia and the victory of Greece against all odds. Bibliography Ancient Historians: Cornelius Nepos (c. 110 - 24 BC) The

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Roman biographer lived a few hundred years after the events of the Persian wars but would have had access to sources that we don't have access to now.

He was also an acclaimed historian who wrote extensive biographies of famous men, found in at least sixteen books. Herodotus (c. 484 BC - 425 BC) The ancient Greek historian gathered opinions of '40 Greek cities' and views of 'the inhabitants of 30 nations' for his Histories with the idea that he would retell their stories without imposing his judgements as fact. This means that unlike other ancient historians the sources we are presented with are not limited to their own personal perspective. Despite this, he does occasionally include rather far-fetched stories and also has a tendency to exaggerate his numbers.

Plutarch (c. 46 - 120 BC) The Greek historian, biographer and essayist wrote extensively about Themistocles. It is important to note that critical and sympathetic sources referring to Themistocles both seem to point to the importance of his leadership in leading Greece to victory. Plutarch himself was sympathetic to the more conservative Athenians such as Aristides, finding Themistocles lacking integrity. Nonetheless, he was still willing to concede that without the leadership of this general and statesman Greece would have been doomed. Thucydides (c. 60 - 395 BC) The Greek historian has been dubbed the father of 'scientific history', because of his strict standards of evidence-gathering and analysis in terms of cause and effect without reference to intervention by the gods, as outlined in his introduction to his work. Modern Historians: Bury, John Bagnell (1861 - 1927) The Irish historian and scholar held a chair in Modern History at Trinity College, which <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-themistocles-responsible-for-greek-victory-in-the-persian-wars-essay/>

he held for nine years. In 1898 he was appointed Regius Professor of Greek history a post he held simultaneously with his history professorship.

In 1902 he became Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University. He obviously had a thorough grasp of Greek history and therefore Themistocles as well. Meiggs, Russel (1902 - June 24, 1989) The British ancient historian served as prefect of Keble College, Oxford from 1945 until 1969. He was widely acclaimed by his students and wrote about 5th Century Athenians as well as Herodotus. He is said to have been a challenging man who had no interest in submission to authority and encouraged fierce integrity.

These similar traits are found in Themistocles himself, creating a somewhat bias towards him in Meiggs writings. Sources: Answers. com. 'Themistocles'. <http://www.answers.com/topic/themistocles> Accessed: 17/07/11 The Greeks Crucible of Civilisation. 'Themistocles c. 523 - c. 460'. [http://www.pbs.org/empires/thegreeks/htmlver/characters/f\\_themistocles.html](http://www.pbs.org/empires/thegreeks/htmlver/characters/f_themistocles.html) Accessed: 15/07/11 Greg, Ong. 'How important was Themistocles to Athens in the first half of the 5th Century BC?'. September 22, 1997 <http://members.fortunecity.com/surfcom/essays/themisto.html> Accessed: 19/07/11 Griffith. Year 12 Resources'. July 29, 2009 <http://mrgriffo.blogspot.com/2009/07/year-12-ancient-lives-of-eminent.html> Accessed: 21/07/11 Haywood, J. 'Historical Atlas of Ancient Civilisations'. Penguin Books Ltd: New York, 2005. p. 50-51 & 102-105 Herodotus. 'Histories' Wordsworth Editions Ltd: London, 1996 History Channel. 'The Brilliance of Themistocles'. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKxuAerW9YQ> Accessed: 21/07/11 HSC <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-themistocles-responsible-for-greek-victory-in-the-persian-wars-essay/>



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