

Andreia and the battle of thermopylae history essay



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The clashing of swords, the scent of fear and desperation in the air and the looks of pure determination in the eyes of the Greek army are what I envisioned as I read about the Battle of Thermopylae. Imagine being so desperate to protect your country and your family that you resort to using your bare hands and even your teeth to try to battle off the opposing forces; knowing it is a lost cause but not willing to give up, even after you have watched your courageous king fall in battle. Courage, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, means the “ mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear or difficulty.” To me, nothing exemplifies the definition of courage than the Battle of Thermopylae. For three days, King Leonidas led what is said to be a suicide mission in trying to block the only road that the Persian army could use to pass into Boeotia and, subsequently, Athens. This may have worked if the whole battle plan was not laid to waste by a local resident turned traitor who showed the Persians a path through the mountains which they could use to flank the Greek army. The story of the 300 can be looked at as both courageous and cowardly in the ways of the foreshadowing and actions before the battle, actions during the long battle, and how King Leonidas handled the consequences of the stunning betrayal.

The Battle of Thermopylae, which took place in the year 480 BC, was actually the second battle in which the Greeks faced off with the Persians. In the year 490 BC, the Greeks fended off the advances of the Persian army and their King, Darius I, at the Battle of Marathon. The Battle of Thermopylae, though, would take place between his son, Xerxes I, and one of the two Spartan kings, Leonidas. Leonidas was a man who never thought to become King but

is well remembered as one of the greatest. According to Herodotus in *The Histories*, a man named Demaratus, an exiled Spartan king who had defected to the side of the Persians described to Xerxes that “ if you defeat these men and the force that remains in Sparta, there are no other people on earth who will take up arms against you, because you are about to face the noblest king and the bravest men in all of Greece” (192). Leonidas was also said to be descended from the great Herakles, better known to us as Hercules. The tie to Herakles and some other religious references help to determine why the Spartans would choose to have their battle at Thermopylae. Thermopylae was said to be integral to the demise of their hero, Herakles. Thermopylae is also close to the city of Delphi, where the famed oracle resided. The oracle at Delphi was an important part of the process in preparing for battle, as well shall later see.

Prior to the war, Sparta, Athens, and a few other Greek cities, met at the Isthmus of Corinth to decide on if they were going to resist Xerxes and his forces and how they could go about it. To the Greeks, this was no ordinary battle. Being surprised at the actions of the Spartans during the war, Demaratus explained to the Great King Xerxes that the Spartans “ behaved as they did because they were fighting for an ideal dearer than mere life itself: the ideal of freedom” (Cartledge, 19). And indeed they were, since the famed oracle at Delphi “ had prophesized that either the Lacedaemonian [Spartan] people would be uprooted by the barbarians or their king would die” (Herodotus, 195). After hearing this, Leonidas, according to Paul Cartledge in *Thermopylae, The Battle That Changed the World*, campaigned

to be made the commander in chief of the troops so that he could lead this suicide mission, calling it an “ act of self-sacrifice” (Cartledge, 128).

Thermopylae, also known as the “ Hot Gates” because of natural healing sulfuric springs in the area, was a narrow pass located with the sea on the right side and the Kallidromos mountain range on the left. The Greeks set up shop in the narrowest part and began repairing an ancient Phocian wall nearby in preparation for the battle. It would be here that about 7, 000 Greek hoplite soldiers would hold off the massive Persian army for two days. The Greek army included 300 Spartans, 300 because it had “ strong symbolic and practical overtones in Sparta, as it was the fixed number of the regular royal bodyguard” (Cartledge, 129). Leonidas hand chose these men because they had heirs at home in case they should die during the battle. Other Greek peoples were included in the large number of troops, including Thespians and Thebans. The number would have been larger if the battle had not coincided with the important Olympic Games. Modern scholars say that the land force of Xerxes was about 80, 000 people, which is a rejection of Herodotus’ theory of a Grand army equaling over 5 million people. The Greeks, upon seeing the arrival of Persian forces, “ panicked and talked about retreat” (Herodotus, 192). But Leonidas voted that their army would stay while sending messengers for help from allies.

There was a full four days before the battle actually began. Xerxes was egotistically hoping that the sheer size of his forces would cause the Greek army to flee, which, courageously, they did not. On the fifth day, Xerxes got a little upset over this and sent a small portion of his troops, the Medes and Cessians, to attack. The battle lasted all day and, in the end, the Persian
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troops returned with their tails between their legs after suffering a significant amount of casualties. The next day, Xerxes sent his elite warriors, The Immortals, to attack but with the same end results. Though the Persians outnumbered the Greeks, they were unable to take advantage of their massive numbers in such a small space and with inadequate weaponry. Their spears were much shorter than the Greek spears. The Greeks were also able to trick the Persians by suddenly running away, which caused the Persians to give chase, thinking they were fleeing the battle, until the Greeks, about to be overtaken, would stop and slay their attackers. Over these two days, the Persians attacked the Greeks company by company until Xerxes, at a loss as to how to deal with this sudden turn of events, retreated to come up with another way of taking out these pesky Greeks.

This brings me to the main definition of coward in the story of the Battle of Thermopylae. It was at this time, with Xerxes raging over his lack of success, that a man named Ephialtes came to talk with the Great King. Ephialtes, a goat farmer from Malis in search of a hefty reward, came to the Persian king with the news of a trail that led through the mountain and could be used to trap the Greeks from behind. After Xerxes sent his men to scout the area, Ephialtes was later used to lead the Persian men up the path, in the final battle, as the rest of Xerxes forces faced the Greeks from the front.

Ephialtes, whose name in Greek today has been given the meaning of “nightmare”, was condemned for his part in the death of the Greeks and lost his right to any reward from Xerxes once the Persians were later defeated. With a bounty on his head, he later fled to Thessaly where he met his demise for a reason unrelated to Battle of Thermopylae.

Xerxes, excited about this new bit of information that could help him succeed in finally conquering Greece, sent his Immortals to scout the Anopaea pass that night. The Greeks guarding the walls only figured out about the Persians invading the path from the sounds of the Persian footsteps in dry leaves. In the morning, the Leonidas learned that they had been betrayed and went about preparing for their courageous final battle. Leonidas had his seer, a man called Megistias, perform haruspicy. This was known as a right of divination by interpreting the entrails of a sacrificial animal. From this, he concluded that the Greeks would die at dawn. Hearing this, Leonidas sent away everyone but his 300 Spartans, 700 Thespians, and 400 Thebans, whom Herodotus describes as being held against their will by Leonidas. At this point, Leonidas makes his famed declaration of “ This evening, we shall dine in Hades” (Cartledge, 149), an allusion to the famous Greek epic poem, Homer’s *Odyssey*.

The final attack began at midmorning. Xerxes began the day by pouring a drink offering to the Gods at dawn. Once the Persian forces reached the path, Leonidas ordered his men to venture out further from their small sanctuary than they had in previous attacks, leaving behind the narrow, protective pass. Herodotus describes the ensuing battle vividly, “ many barbarians fell while their company commanders whipped each and every man, driving them constantly forward” (Herodotus, 196). The Greeks fought with all their strength and desperation. Once their foremost weapon, their spears, broke, they hacked at their enemy with their swords. During this ferocious point in the battle, the courageous king, Leonidas, fell. The Spartans tried four times to beat back the Persians so that they could rescue

their beloved king's body and, finally, " by sheer courage the Greeks dragged him away" (Herodotus, 196). The Greeks pulled back behind their wall and gathered together onto a hill while the Thebans broke off and surrendered to the Persians. The Greeks fought to defend themselves with every weapon they had left. If they had none, they used their bare hands and teeth until few were left alive. These brave men were buried where they died in a mass grave. Even though the Greeks fought bravely to save their king's body, Xerxes had it decapitated and mutilated, the head he ordered to be put on a pike. According to Nic Fields in *Thermopylae 180 BC: The Last Stand of the 300*, the possible remains of Leonidas were later (about 40 years later) brought back to Sparta for a " ceremonial reburial, and a hero-shrine was later established in his honour" (15).

Herodotus also mentions three of the 300 Spartans who had not participated in the battle. These represent a certain level of cowardice, but then, since they were Spartan, these men found ways to redeem themselves. Herodotus claims that two men were sent from camp for having some type of an eye infection in which the men were unable to see to fight. These two men, not too far from the battle, were able to decide for themselves whether they would go back and help their king or just head back to Sparta. Upon hearing of the betrayal, one of the men asked for his war gear and headed back to the battle while the other one returned, alone, to Sparta. The man who went back to the battle died but the other returned and faced his shame in Sparta. Herodotus says " no man would give him light for his fire or talk to him; meanwhile he was shamed by being called Runaway Aristodemus" (Herodotus, 198). He later won back his honor at the Battle of Plataea by

finally committing the same self-sacrifice as his deceased comrades by breaking ranks, just as the enemy reached the army, and attacking the opposing force like a man possessed, ensuring that he would meet his death at this battle. The third man mentioned by Herodotus was sent away as a messenger before the battle began, to Thessaly. After he was finally able to return home to Sparta, the warrior then “hanged himself in disgrace” (Herodotus, 198). This was most likely because of a case of “survivor-guilt” (Cartledge, 156).

According to Herodotus, there were many epitaphs carved into the wall that overlooks the mass grave of brave Greeks. One read “In this place four thousand Peloponnesians fought four million men.” Another, quoted by Fields, read “Stranger, go tell the Lakedaimonians [Spartans] that here we lie, obedient to their laws” (15). Written by the great poet Simonides, these words, full of pride and defiance, remain to inspire future Greeks to live up to the glory and honor of their ancestors. The story of this battle is an integral part of Spartan myth and it was a huge turning point, not only for Greece but for the world. Even though the Greeks lost at the Battle of Thermopylae, the tale of the sheer will of those few men who stayed behind was enough to rally the forces of Greece to band together at the Battle of Salamis and toss Xerxes and his huge army out of Greece.

For this paper, I believe this is to be an impressive example that could be used for both courage and cowardice. These Greek men who stayed behind to battle the massive amount of Persians went willingly to their deaths to defend their country and families in the name of freedom. They may have even made it out alive if it had not been for the cowardly Ephialtes who was <https://assignbuster.com/andreia-and-the-battle-of-thermopylae-history-essay/>

just out for a reward. There were the other instances of cowardice too, the Thebans who ran off to surrender to the Persians while the rest of the men were fighting tooth and nail for their lives, literally. There were also the men who had not been present during the battle but found ways to make up for not being a part of the slain masses. All of these men faced overwhelming odds and made really tough decisions with barely a blink of an eyelash. I am not sure I would be able to be as courageous as these men were. Nowadays, we can somewhat equate this story with our own military and how these patriotic people willingly join up and fight a war to protect us, especially since the events of 9/11.