

Introduction to the Battle of Thermopylae

The Great King of Persia, Xerxes, had long desired to fulfill his father's dying wish to take vengeance on Athenians for the defeat they dealt the Persians at Marathon in 490 BCE, which, in turn, was an expedition that was undertaken to avenge Athens' involvement in the failed Ionian revolt against Persian rule. Xerxes had even ordered one of his slaves to whisper "Remember the Athenians!" into his ear several times per day to keep his mind focused on this revenge. After a lengthy debate within his court, Xerxes decided to undertake a large scale invasion of Greece that began in the Spring of 480 BCE.

Troops were mustered from the farthest reaches of the Persian Empire, effectively resulting in the assembled force becoming the "largest army the world had ever seen." Herodotus writes a catalogue of the Persian forces and reports the total number of troops to be more than two million combatants; the poet Simonides claims four million, while at least one Persian source (reported indirectly) totals around 800,000. Regardless of the actual number of combatants, the campaign was certainly on a larger scale than had ever before been attempted.

During the deliberations before the campaign, Xerxes had asked the advice of a deposed King of Sparta, Demaratos, as to what the Persian army might expect when fighting the Greeks. Xerxes believed that all the city-states of Greece would quickly surrender when facing the assembled might of his numerically superior forces. Demaratos, however, claimed that the Spartans (at least) would continue to fight against the Persians regardless of the size of the army that Xerxes was able to muster for the invasion. The Great King found this claim laughable and dismissed Demaratos from his court.

Previous Persian invasions against Greece had travelled across the Aegean on naval transports. This army, however, was too large to travel by boat and therefore had to march on land. It was said that Xerxes setup a throne to marvel at his forces as they marched past and that it took three full days for the entire army to pass by this spot. They marched northward through Anatolia (modern Turkey), across the Hellespont on a pontoon bridge built out of the ships in Xerxes' fleet, and then along the Aegean coast of Thrace and Macedon into northern Greece. In Herodotus' account of this campaign, Xerxes showed great disdain for the natural geographic boundaries that prevented his approach to Greece. After his engineers built an initial pontoon bridge across the Hellespont, a storm arose and wrecked the bridge. Before making a second attempt, Xerxes gave orders to have the waters

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of the Hellespont whipped and to have fetters thrown into the strait to remind the waters that Xerxes, as the living god of the world, was the master of the Hellespont. Later, as the Persian fleet approached the Mt. Athos, Xerxes had his men dig a canal through one of the finger-like peninsulas of the mountain to show that he was master of this stretch of land that had once wrecked his father's fleet during a previous invasion.

News of the Persian advance reached the Greek city-states, who then each made various plans either to resist the invasion or to submit to Persian rule, which the Greeks called "Medizing." One initial course of action involved a semi-united stand in Thessaly, but various religious festivals delayed the mustering of the Greek army. As the Persian army approached Thessaly, the Thessalians Medized due to a lack of support from the other Greek states.

Not able to prepare a full-scale defense in time, a few city-states from Northern Greece (including Phocians, Locrians, and Thespians [note the position of these places on the map]) decide to make an attempt at delaying the Persian army in the small pass known as Thermopylae ("the hot gates"). This pass was a natural choke point along the campaign path between Thessaly and northern Greece and had previously been used by the Phocians, who built a wall there, to defend their land against the Thessalians. This advance party stationed at Thermopylae was meant only to delay the Persian advance until a larger army could be assembled to defend Greece. Leonidas, one of the kings of Sparta, and a personal bodyguard of 300 Spartiates arrive in Thermopylae to oversee the operations there. Upon his arrival, he ordered the rebuilding of the old Phocian wall to aid in their defense of this narrow pass. The Phocian troops, being well aware of a circuitous path that would allow the Persians to encircle the Greeks assembled at Thermopylae, ask Leonidas for permission to guard this path themselves. While all of these preparations were made, the city-states of the Peloponnese debated where the potential united defense of Greece should take place. This, then, is where we pick up the story.