

PERSIAN WAR—ERA SUMMARY

ANCIENT GREECE—560 TO 472 B.C.

RISE OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE TO AFTERMATH OF THE PERSIAN WAR

Like the Trojan War, the Persian War was a defining moment in Greek history. The Athenians regarded the wars against Persia as their greatest moment, and the history of the Persian War as recorded by Herodotus is one of the oldest and most famous histories ever written.

The Persian king first decided to attack Greece after Athens came to the aid of the Greek colonies in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) who were in rebellion against the Persian empire. The rebellion was ultimately crushed, but Darius the Great was so angered by Athens' interference that he determined to send an army across the Aegean sea to crush the offending city-state.

The population and resources of the Greeks were dwarfed by the limitless wealth of the Persians, but Athens resolved to defend itself. They were led by Miltiades, a general who had been involved in the revolt against Persia. At the *Battle of Marathon* (490 BC) he urged the Athenians to attack the Persians immediately after they landed on the Greek peninsula, without waiting for reinforcements. Although their army was only a fraction of the size of the Persians, the Athenians prevailed in their daring assault. The Battle of Marathon is perhaps the single most important battle in Greek history. Had the Athenians lost, Greece would have eventually come under the control of Persia and all the accomplishments of the Greeks may have been lost to posterity.

The Persians did not attack Greece again for ten years, but when Darius's son Xerxes became king, the Persians launched another expedition against Athens. This time Xerxes was determined to use overwhelming force so he gathered an army of several hundred thousand infantry and a navy of six hundred ships. He demanded that the Greek city-states submit to him without resistance and many did, including Thebes. The Athenians and Spartans however, insulted the Persian ambassadors and vowed resistance to the end. Fortunately for all of Greece the Athenian politician Themistocles had foreseen trouble many years ahead of time and had convinced the Athenians to begin building a navy so by the time of the great Persian invasion, Athens had over two hundred battle ships.



GREEKS AT THE BATTLE OF SALAMIS

While Xerxes gathered his army at the Hellespont, the Greek city states that had decided to resist the Persians (many of the smaller cities had already conceded defeat and refused to send armies), were fielding a united Greek army, under the leadership of Sparta. The first great battle of the Greeks against Xerxes army was at *Thermopylae*, a narrow pass in the north of Thessaly. It was there that the Spartan King [Leonidas](#), with 300 Spartans, fantastically outnumbered, held out for three days, before being overcome by treachery. Eventually the Spartans were killed to a man, but not before inflicting horrific damage to the elite Persian fighting troops and delaying Xerxes' passage by critical days.

While Leonidas held the pass at Thermopylae, Greek ships worked to evacuate Athens and its surrounding communities to local islands. The Greek fleet was stationed on the island of Salamis in sight of the ruins of Athens when, after a fit of infighting, the decision was made to give battle to the Persians at once. At the ferociously fought naval *Battle of Salamis*, the Greeks won a dramatic and decisive victory, destroying much of the Persian fleet. The thoroughly traumatized Xerxes returned to Persia, after the disastrous battle, leaving [Mardonius](#) in charge of the conquered region. Athens was still under Persian domination but most of the citizens fled to local islands and refused to return to the occupied city, while the Spartans returned to the fortified Peloponnese peninsula.

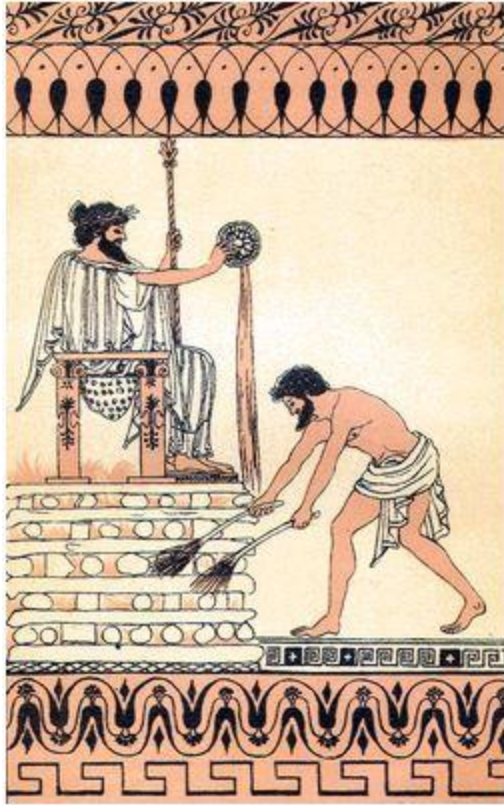
It was not until the following spring that the Greeks emerged from their fortified peninsula, ready to drive the Persians from Greek soil. But finally a terrific battle was fought at *Plataea*, and the Persians were annihilated by a united Greek army, led by Sparta on one wing and Athens on the other. The Persian war was remarkable not only for its ferocious battles, which showcased the superiority of Greek military methods, but also for the striking personalities involved, the democratic character of the military command, and the ability of the fractious Greeks to drop their strong divisions and unite behind a single cause. The war is a popular one to study, not only because of its striking military engagements and historical significance but also for the great human dramas that were played out behind the scenes.

The Rise of Persia

The [Histories](#) of Herodotus are most famous for their spellbinding account of the Persian War, but they also contain many fascinating stories about the rise of the Persian Empire.

In the century prior to the Persian war, Greece was a poor and disunited collection of independent city-states, surrounded by wealthier and more powerful empires, such as Lydia, Media, Babylon, and Egypt. The region directly east of mainland Greece was populated with Greek speaking colonies, but by 600 BC most of the region was controlled by [Croesus](#), the fabulously wealthy king of Lydia.

Directly south of Lydia were the nations of Assyria (Syria), Babylon (Iraq), Phoenicia (Lebanon), and Judea (Israel). In Ancient Times, the control of this region alternated between the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian Empires. By 600 BC the most powerful empire in the region was Babylon, under [Nebuchadnezzar](#). To the East of Babylon was the empire of the Medes (Iran) and the small kingdom of Persia, which was only a vassal kingdom of Media.



GROESUS ON THE FUNERAL PYRE

In 560 BC, [Cyrus the Great](#), the king of Persia started a career of [conquests](#) and brought all of the above mentioned regions, under his control. The Persian Kingdom, which arose under his leadership, became the most powerful Empire the Ancient world had ever seen. Cyrus ruled for 30 years, but died in 529 on a campaign in Scythia. His Empire was briefly ruled by his son [Cambyses](#) who extended his conquests into Egypt, but died shortly thereafter. As Cambyses died with no heir, there was considerable palace intrigue before an heir was settled on, but the headship eventually fell to [Darius the Great](#), the king who ordered the first unsuccessful Persian invasion of Greece.

The kingdoms of the east varied significantly in customs, religion and livelihood. They included sea-faring kingdoms, such as Phoenicia, agricultural kingdoms, such as Phrygia, and pastoral kingdoms, such as Media, but all were governed as autocracies. Cities and states paid tributes to the emperor, and all city administrators served at the pleasure of an autocratic higher authority. The idea of self-governing

city-states was nearly unknown outside of the Greek colonies. Even more striking and unique were the Greek ideas of satire and open dissent toward authority figures, and the idea that all citizens shared in the common culture. The Greeks were self-consciously civilized, and considered their neighbors, however wealthy and powerful, to be mere slaves.