

The Battle of Thermopylae

From the beginning of the 5th Century B.C. the all powerful Persian Kingdom that extended up to the coastline of Asia Minor, began its attempts to expand towards the West, to the lands mainly of Greece. The first serious organised operation by King Darius failed after the Hellenic victory in Marathon in 490 B.C. Nine years later, in 481 B.C., a second campaign was launched against Greece after being planned and organised for many years by Xerxes, son and successor to Darius. In fact, before beginning, he sent emissaries to the Greek cities asking for “γην and ὕδωρ” (=earth and water); in other words, asking them to submit to the Persian forces. The only cities he did not send emissaries to were Athens and Sparta

The Persian Kingdom at that time was considered to be mythical by the Greeks: great wealth, huge land areas, powerful armies, dozens of conquered races. Herodotus, who described the complete campaign of Xerxes, reported that the force that began to march against Greece in 481 B.C. amounted to 1,700,000 warriors and 1,207 warships. In total, including attendants and non-military, they numbered around 5,000,000. These numbers are surely exaggerated, since the Persian force seemed much larger to the eyes of the Greeks. Most studies agree today that the army probably amounted to between 150,000-400,000 men. It is worth noting however that the army included warriors from 46 different nations, while its most significant unit was the “Immortals”, the select Persian Royal Guard who were named thus because their number always remained at 10,000.

The Greeks received information concerning the numbers and aspirations of the Persians from spies they had sent to Sardis, Xerxes’ headquarters. Having experience gained from the previous Persian campaign, they knew that in order to deal with such a superpower they had to form alliances to fight the common enemy. A unified national conscience had developed between the Greeks, despite the fact that they belonged to different races and were organized into City-States, with differences that in many instances could not be bridged. The strongest military force was Sparta, with the State of Athens having recently created the strongest naval force and had already begun to impose politics upon its allies, due mainly to the prestige it had acquired after the Battle of Marathon.

And so within this euphoric climate, a Pan-Hellenic meeting was held in Corinth in the autumn of 481 B.C., with the participation of almost all the Greek cities. This was the first official attempt to form an alliance of the nations by overstepping internal disputes and differences. Thirty-one (31) cities attended the meeting, mainly from Southern Greece, while the Thracians, Macedonians and quite a few other Thessaly cities did not take part, who would be the first to face the Persian forces and had no hopes of defence. Argos was also missing due to its animosity towards Sparta, Crete and Corfu, who were not in immediate danger due to their geographical positions.

It was decided at the meeting that they would not submit to the Persians but would defend together with an allied army and fleet. In fact the situation was deemed to be so crucial that all those who had been exiled in the past from their cities were recalled. The leadership of the army and the fleet was unanimously given to Sparta. The general defence plan of the Greeks, which was drawn up by the Athenian Themistocles, foresaw that the battle would be determined on the seas, but on condition that the passes from Central to Southern Greece

would be guarded. It was impossible to deal with the powerful Persian army in any other way. Fighting in the open plains would be catastrophic for the Greeks as they had no strong cavalry units and no stable notion of military and political leadership. There were however other areas in which they excelled: They were very fit, supple, used to marching with heavy armour, they knew the land and their weapons were heavier and more effective. The hoplite phalanx that the Spartans formed was a compact, moving metallic wall of shields and lances.

In the spring of 480 B.C., Xerxes was passing Hellespont and the “waking up call” of the Greeks was even more necessary. The first decision was taken following intense pressure by the Thessalians: To protect the northernmost pass – Tembi. Thus 10,000 heavily armed men arrived in the region, but there they realised that there were other passes from Macedonia to Thessaly and it was possible that the Persians would pass through them. And in fact Xerxes chose one of these other passes. At the same time, certain cities in Thessaly that were participating in the operation with their cavalry were not on good terms with the remaining Greeks. The Macedonian King, Alexander the 1st, knowing the power of the Persians, exhorted them to withdraw further south in order to avoid being massacred, and consequently the Greeks were then forced to retreat back to the Isthmus.

Xerxes’ army continued to advance without meeting any resistance, causing great damage and destruction, as he needed all the supplies in the region to feed his army. The whole of Thessaly, Lokrida and Boeotia fell to the Persians and the Oracle at Delphi prophesized destruction. The only cities that did not cross over to the Persians were Thespies and Platees.

The failure to guard Tembi pass and the unimpeded advancement of the Persian Army caused confusion among the Greeks. At the end of July 480 B.C., Xerxes had already arrived in Pieria and the Greeks decided to assemble at the next significant pass, which was Thermopylae. At the same time the fleet would be in Artemisio in Northern Euboea.

In ancient times the area of Thermopylae was completely different because today dry land has extended with the infilling of the Sperchio River. The road at that time passed along nearly the same route as today’s national highway, but the pass itself was much narrower, situated between the sea and the steep cliffs. It had a length of about 9 km and narrows in three places: at the eastern and western ends there was room for only one carriage, while the middle section was 15 m wide. The site was known as Πύλαι (Pilai) or Θερμοπύλαι (Thermopylae) or Χύτροι (Hytrai), due to the hot sulphur springs in the area that were used as open baths.

The site was vitally significant for the defence of the Hellenic cities. Xerxes would certainly pass through here since the other passes were inaccessible. The Pass would prevent the enemy from developing his land forces while the small channel of the Evripou prevented the possibility of the Hellenic Fleet being encircled. In addition, the fortifications that had been built previously by the Phocians to the east of the central pass of Thermopylae could also be utilised. By defending the Pass the Greeks would be able to apply a withdrawal strategy and at the same time wear out the enemy and cause him serious casualties, lower his morale and extend his enclosure in the Maliaki plain.

We do not have accurate information on the operations since there are no records of the events by writers of that time. Only Herodotus recorded the events of the battle but this was done nearly a generation later. The general defensive plan would only have been known to a very few people, while the Spartans never spoke about strategic matters. The ultimate objective of the mission was to prevent the Persian Army from passing through the pass.

The Hellenic Army was placed under the command of Leonidas, King of Sparta, and it finally reached Thermopylae at the beginning of August. In total, a force of about 6,000 men was assembled. The numbers were again given by Herodotus: 300 Spartans, 500 Tegeats, 500 Mantineians, 120 from Arcadian Orchomenos, 1,000 Arcadians in general, 500 Corinthians, 200 from Phlian, 80 Mycenaeans, 700 Thespians, 400 Thebans, the complete army from Opuntion Locrain and 1,000 Phocians. The majority were from the Peloponnese but despite this, the force that Leonidas had under his command was only 300 men; i.e. the number allowed by law. Those selected were all citizens with sons, so that the family would not be lost. He also took the Thebans under his command because there were rumours that at the first opportunity they would desert to the Persians. At the same time, 271 triremes (of which 127 were Athenian) and 9 Pentekontori waited for the Persian Fleet at Artemisio with the objective of not allowing the enemy to enter the strait.

The army sent by the Peloponnese was just a small part of their forces. According to Herodotus, the main force was to arrive later, after the completion of the Carneia Festival in Sparta and the Olympic Games. However, the festivals did not prevent the Peloponnesian Fleet to sail. In actual fact, it seems that the Lakedaimonians mainly wanted to secure their own region and not Central Greece, and for this reason they kept their army in Sparta. But they may also have believed that the allied force was strong enough to guard the Pass at Thermopylae.

Leonidas immediately organised his defence: He repaired the wall and when he was informed that there was another pass, the Anopaia path that led from the mountain to the southern part of the army camp, he sent 1,000 Phocians to guard it. In continuation, he called a meeting under the threat of the Persians. The Peloponnesians asserted that they should proceed to the south to guard the Isthmus, but the Phocians and the Locraians were displeased because this action would leave them unprotected. Leonidas voted in favour of them remaining and this decision was adopted by all. They sent emissaries to the allied cities seeking reinforcements, but it was certain that Sparta would not send an army before the end of August.

In the meantime, Xerxes had arrived close to the Straits. The scout that he sent to determine the strength of the Hellenic army saw only the Lakedaimonians, who that day were camped outside the walls. His description surprised Xerxes: a few soldiers were training and caring for their hair. Demaratus, a Spartan King who had defected to the Persians, explained that this was a Spartan custom before any serious battle. If the Persian Army was able to overcome the obstacle of the brave Lakedaimonians, then no one else would be able to stop them.

Xerxes waited four days without taking any action, believing that the Greeks would withdraw. He also waited however for the arrival of his Fleet which had been damaged due

to a storm along the shores of Pilio. When he finally sent heralds to ask the Greeks to surrender, they encountered a categorical no, and as we were informed by Plutarchos, he also received the historical reply from Leonidas, “μολὼν λαβέ” (Molon lave = “come and get them”). On the fifth day he decided to attack since his army had to move in order to find food. Thinking that the Greeks were impertinent and impetuous, he sent Medes and Cissians with orders to take the Greeks prisoner and to bring them back alive. The resistance they encountered however was tough, and the same result was achieved by the “Immortals” who were sent into battle led by General Hydarnes. The area was very narrow, the atmosphere stifling due to the hot springs, and their lances were short, and they could not use their famous bows under these conditions.

The Lakedaimonians, more experienced in this form of warfare, pretended to retreat. The Persians were forced to pursue them and were subsequently trapped in the narrowest part of the pass, fighting hand-to-hand with the Spartans. Their casualties were high and they were forced to withdraw during the night. In fact, as Herodotus characteristically reported, Xerxes jumped up three times from his throne as he watched the battle, fearing for his army.

On the second day the Persians repeated their attack but again without success. The Greeks were divided into battalions according to their cities and entered battle one after the other, forcing the Persians to retreat earlier this time, and again with high losses.

Xerxes was perplexed and while pondering what to do, a Greek named Ephialtes, son of Eurydimos and Malida, presented himself and informed the King that the Lakedaimonian positions were accessible from the Anopaia path. That same night, Hydarnes and the “Immortals” proceeded along the path, guided by Ephialtes. He calculated that they would reach the Pass in about 15 hours.

The dense forest with its oak trees and the darkness of the night covered them and when they reached the peak at dawn, the Phocians were surprised and withdrew higher up the mountain to save themselves from the Persian arrows. When Hydarnes satisfied himself that they were not Spartans and since his main objective was something else, he immediately began to descend towards the Pass. The actions of the Phocians are considered by many historians today to be the turning point of the battle. In other words, if they had resisted and had not retreated because they were only thinking of saving themselves, the encirclement of Leonidas may possibly have been avoided.

In the meantime, the bad news arrived back at the Lakedaimonian camp. The first to see the impending catastrophe the previous night was the soothsayer Megistias, who warned of death at dawn. Some deserters from the Persian forces informed them that night that the Persians would encircle them while the guards on the peaks of the mountains informed them at dawn as to the same danger... that Persian forces were descending from the mountain pass and would end up behind them. The Greeks found themselves in a difficult situation. They had a council of war where opinions varied. Some wanted to leave while others wanted to remain to guard the pass. Leonidas, foreseeing catastrophe, allowed all his allies to leave. Those that remained were 300 Spartans, 700 Thespians led by Demophilus and 400 Thebans commanded by Leondiadis, possibly unwillingly. The soothsayer also remained, after sending his son away. They knew that the guarding of the pass was just a

matter of time, but they could still cover the withdrawal of their allies as well as cause the enemy to suffer further losses.

At sunrise Xerxes carried out his usual libations and the attack began at around 0900-1000 hours. The Greeks changed their tactics: they moved to the widest part of the pass, formed up closer to the Persians and prepared to fight hand-to-hand with all their strength, in order to crush them before the arrival of Hydarnes. During the clash many Persian soldiers were killed or fell into the sea, but this time the Greeks also suffered heavy losses. The most serious was the death of Leonidas himself, with his men fighting over his body and the Spartans finally won.

When Hydarnes arrived, the situation changed. The Greeks withdrew back to the wall and from there to Kolonos Hill, where they were finally surrounded by the Persians. They fought bravely with their swords or their hands when their lances broke, but they were all killed by Persian arrows. The only ones who survived were some Thebans who finally surrendered and who were branded as slaves. That same night the Hellenic Fleet sailed from Artemisio to the south.

Total losses suffered by the Persians were high: 20,000 dead, including the two brothers of Xerxes, sons of Darius. Of the Greeks that took part in the last battle, almost no one survived. The dead were buried where they fell, and a stone statue of a lion was placed there in their memory by the Amphictiones, which does not exist today.

But the 300 Spartans mainly have remained in history. Herodotus in fact states that he knows their names, which are inscribed in a memorial in Sparta. Among those that stood out was Dienekes, who when informed that the Persians were so numerous their arrows would blot out the sun, he replied that this would suit them as they would fight in the shade. The Poet Simonides wrote an epigram in memory of the Lakedaimonians, which has also been chiselled onto the modern monument in Thermopylae:

Ω ξείν' ἀγγέλειν Λακεδαιμονίοις ὅτι τῆδε

κείμεθα τοῖς κείνων ρήμασι πειθόμενοι

(= "Stranger, tell the Lakedaimonians (Spartans) that we lie here buried, obedient to their laws.")

Ephialtes, whose name is synonymous with the notion of treason, took refuge in Thessaly. Amfiktionia in Pylaia set a price on his head but he was finally killed some time later by someone else for another reason.

The crucial battle at Thermopylae ended in defeat for the Greeks. Some attributed this to the treason of Ephialtes, others to the abandonment of the Anopaia path by the Phocians, while still others to the small force that Leonidas had at his disposal and to the more general policy of Sparta. The sacrifice of 1,000 or so men has however remained in history forever as

the most characteristic expression of Spartan bravery. Leonidas managed to safeguard the honour and fame of Sparta, as well as the withdrawal of his allies, while at the same time delaying significantly the advancement of Xerxes and causing his forces to suffer serious losses while raising the morale of the Greeks, who finally crushed him during the naval battle at Salamina just a few weeks later.