



Written by [Fr. James Thornton](#) on June 27, 2023

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## Ancient Fighter for Freedom

Upon the defeat of the Persians at the Battle of Marathon, King Darius of the Persian Empire came to believe that his failure to conquer the Greeks was the result of insufficient forces committed to the expedition. Convinced that with a larger army the Greeks could be vanquished, he laid plans for a new campaign. However, his plans were interrupted by a revolt in Egypt, which occupied him until his death in 486 B.C. His successor and son, Xerxes I, continued the work of suppressing the revolt, since Egypt was an important province of the Persian Empire. However, the new Persian king was not initially enthusiastic about another war against the Greeks. His chief advisor and cousin, Mardonius, nevertheless continued to pressure him. Herodotus quotes him as telling the king, "Master, it is not fitting that they of Athens escape scot-free, after doing the Persians such great injury. Complete the work which thou hast now in hand, and then, when the pride of Egypt is brought low, lead an army against Athens. So shalt thou thyself have good report among men, and others shall fear hereafter to attack thy country." Herodotus suggests that Mardonius' true motive was that "he longed for adventure, and hoped to become satrap of Greece under the king."



Hero of history: Although the Oracle of Delphi predicted his death in battle against the Persians, Leonidas, king of Sparta, heroically led his warriors at Thermopylae to save his country from conquest.

Xerxes' uncle Artabanus, not wishing to see his nephew take unnecessary risks, argued to the contrary: "I counselled thy father, Darius, who was my own brother, not to attack the Scyths, a race of people who had no town in their whole land. He thought however to subdue those wandering tribes, and would not listen to me, but marched the army against them, and ere he returned home lost many of his bravest warriors. Thou art about, O king, to attack a people far superior to the Scyths, a people distinguished above others both by land and sea."

Xerxes found the counsel of his cousin Mardonius more convincing and, upon completion of the suppression of the Egyptian revolt, set out to assemble a mighty host to crush the Greeks once and for all. That task took him four years. Every province of the empire was bidden to contribute its quota of soldiers along with equipment and supplies, all of which the king gathered together at Sardis, in



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western Asia Minor.

In Sardis there lived a very wealthy man, Pythius, a descendant of Croesus, the last king of Lydia. Pythius offered Xerxes a generous gift of money to help finance the war against Greece, which Xerxes declined, instead rewarding Pythius with a gift of 7,000 gold Darics. Shortly before the march on Greece, there occurred an eclipse, which suddenly darkened an otherwise sunny day. This greatly upset Xerxes, thinking it an ill omen, until his Magi assured him that the omen was directed at the Greeks, who would soon lose their great cities to Xerxes' conquering armies. To Pythius, however, the eclipse signified catastrophe for the Persians. He had given his five sons as soldiers to Xerxes' forthcoming campaign, and suddenly was worried about their safety. Consequently, he approached Xerxes, asking if his eldest son might stay behind so that he would have someone to care for him in his old age. Xerxes, furious at Pythius' request and interpreting it as a loss of faith in the king's plans, which to Xerxes was a type of treason, responded by telling him that his punishment would be the forfeiture of his eldest son's life. The king ordered the son of Pythius executed, then cut in half, with the two halves of the body placed on either side of the road on which the great army marched off to war.

Remarkably, Xerxes ordered a pontoon bridge built across the Hellespont, from Abydos on the Asian side to Sestos on the European side. The first of these bridges was swept away by a storm, but the second, which was actually two bridges next to one another, held firm. According to accounts, it took seven days and nights for Xerxes' army to cross it. Herodotus estimated the size of the Persian army at five million men. Modern historians agree that it was no more than a tenth that size, or even less, which, in that age, was nonetheless gigantic.

Accompanying the army was a navy of some 1,207 triremes and 3,000 supply and transport vessels that followed along the coast more or less parallel with the advance of the ground forces. During the first Persian invasion of Greece, a storm around the Mount Athos Peninsula cost the Persian navy 300 ships and 20,000 men. To avoid another such setback, Xerxes ordered a canal cut through the Athos Peninsula as part of the preparation for the campaign. The canal took three years to dig and, when completed, was sufficiently wide to allow two triremes to pass through side by side. Traces of the canal still exist.



**Engineering marvel:** The bridging of the Hellespont (now called the Dardanelles) by Xerxes was, according to historians, a phenomenal undertaking. Across the double-wide walkway a gigantic Persian



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army passed on its way to Greece.

## Strategic Alliance

Leonidas, third son of King Anaxandridas, ascended the throne of Sparta in 490 B.C. as the 17th king of the Agiad line, a dynasty believed to have descended from Heracles, the god-like hero of Greek mythology.

The Greeks were, of course, fully aware of the aggressive plan of Xerxes and that a new invasion was coming. In fact, Xerxes himself had sent heralds ahead to many Greek cities, proclaiming his intentions and demanding a gift of earth and water from each, the earth and water signifying their submission to him. And indeed, as the Persian horde approached, many of the smaller Greek city-states, wishing to avoid ruin, acquiesced to Persian overlordship or declared neutrality. Athens and Sparta led the resistance and were joined by other city-states. Those city-states that formed the resistance met in congress at Corinth, where it was agreed that, given the threat posed by Xerxes, the fratricidal wars and feuds among the Greeks must end and that only through unity — albeit temporary unity — could Greece be saved. They would form an alliance to preserve Greek liberty. The Spartans sought to understand better what should be done by consulting the Oracle of Delphi. According to Herodotus, the prophecy of the Oracle, more than likely apocryphal, read as follows:

O ye men who dwell in the streets of broad Lacedaemon!  
Honor the festival of the Carneia!! Otherwise,  
Either your glorious town shall be sacked by the children of Perseus,  
Or, in exchange, must all through the whole Laconian country  
Mourn for the loss of a king, descendant of great Heracles.  
He cannot be withstood by the courage of bulls nor of lions,  
Strive as they may; he is mighty as Jove; there is nought that shall stay him,  
Till he have got for his prey your king, or your glorious city.

In other words, Sparta (also known in ancient times as Lacedaemon) would either lose its king, or see its city conquered and destroyed and its people enslaved or driven away.

As the Persian forces moved slowly down Greece's eastern coast, the Greeks realized that the Persians would have to travel through the narrow pass at Thermopylae on the southern coast of the Gulf of Malia. At that time, the pass was only about 50 feet in width between the steep mountains on one side and the sea on the other. Here, with determined warriors, it was believed that Xerxes could be halted, or at least delayed for some time. Leonidas led 300 Spartan hoplites along with 6,700 allied soldiers to defend the pass.

## Molon Labe

At Thermopylae, Leonidas and his men found the ruins of a wall that had been constructed by the Phocians long before as a defense against the Thessalians. Leonidas immediately gave orders for its rebuilding. As the Persian force approached the pass, scouts were sent ahead. Most of Leonidas'



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soldiers were kept concealed behind the old Phocian wall, so that the enemy would not learn their precise strength. Enough, however, were visible to the Persians for them to know that they would be dealing with Spartans, whose reputation was fearsome. Xerxes ordered his army to halt some distance from the Greeks. Knowing that the Greek force was necessarily small compared to his, and wondering how they could possibly hope to prevail against him, he did not take their defensive position seriously and assumed that within a few days, they would withdraw. Four days passed, yet the Greeks stood their ground. So it was that, wishing to avoid at that point a clash of arms, Xerxes promised honorable treatment to Leonidas and his small army if they would merely lay down their arms. To that, Leonidas responded with the words "*molon labe*," that is, "come and take them." Xerxes promised then to make Leonidas his viceroy over all of Greece. Leonidas' answer was that he would rather die for the liberty of the Greek people than to rule over them. With that, Xerxes' patience was at an end. He ordered an assault on the Greek line.

With so narrow a front, the Persians could bring only a fraction of their superior numbers to bear. Showers of arrows were launched, but to little avail since the Greek armor was an effective defense. At the place where the two armies met, there ensued a terrific slaughter, the victims of which were primarily the soldiers of Xerxes. Herodotus comments that although Xerxes "had plenty of combatants, he had but very few warriors." The bloodbath continued for the remainder of the day. The following day, Xerxes sent in the Persian elite corps, known as the Immortals, who, it was imagined, would quickly finish off the Greeks. Instead, they too suffered enormous losses. A favorite Spartan tactic was to appear to turn and run, and when the Persians would follow, thinking they were about to scatter their enemy, the Spartans would suddenly turn around, impaling even greater numbers of their foes on their spears. At the end of the second day, the Persians went back to their encampment without having made any progress.

**Buying time:** By choosing a narrow battleground, only 50 feet wide, the 300 Spartans and their allies were able to delay the Persian juggernaut, which allowed the citizens of Athens to evacuate to a safe location. Thus a moral victory was won. (Wikimedia/public domain)



## Betrayal

Xerxes was much troubled, having no way to push through the pass. Then, a certain Ephialtes, a Greek of the Malian tribe, came to the Persian camp offering to show them a footpath through the mountains



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that led to a place behind the pass. He expected in exchange for the information to receive a great reward from Xerxes. Military historian Hans Delbrück writes that discovery of a route around the Thermopylae pass was inevitable since in mountainous regions there are always alternate routes. He adds, "The villainy of a traitor, Ephialtes ... was ... not necessary to open the pass of Thermopylae to the Persians. Even in enemy territory a guide can always be found, whether by means of kindness or force, reward or punishment." In any case, the Persians were quick to seize the opportunity, and a large body of Immortals, led by their commander Hydarnes, spent the night traversing the mountainous path. Leonidas had been made aware of the trail and had earlier sent a force of 1,000 Phocians to guard it. But with the approach of the Persians, the Phocians, rather than fight, fled to the crest of a mountain while the Persians continued on toward Thermopylae.

Leonidas was forewarned by deserters that the Persians were about to outflank him by use of the mountain trail and, therefore, knowing that he and his small army were thereby doomed, sent away most of the warriors, so that they could assist in the war in other places. And so, on the third day of battle, Leonidas and his 300 Spartans, along with 700 Thespians and 400 Thebans, stood fast at the pass, determined to hold out as long as any were still alive. Leonidas and what remained of his 300 fought the main army approaching from the west, while the others fought Hydarnes and his Immortals approaching from the east. Historian J.B. Bury comments that at this point, the Spartans "were no longer content with merely repelling assaults; they now rushed out upon the enemy." Though they killed many Persians in that charge, Leonidas himself was killed. A battle then ensued over the body of the Spartan king in which two brothers of Xerxes were slain. At last, the Spartans and their allies were driven back onto a hillock where they made a last stand. All the Spartans were killed, along with several hundred of the allied troops. Xerxes ordered his men to find the body of Leonidas, which they did. He ordered it dishonored by having the head cut off, putting it on display on a pole, and crucifying the headless body.

The heroic resistance of King Leonidas and his dauntless Spartans and brave Thespians was not in vain. What was in the short term a defeat was, in the long term, a moral victory, setting the stage for final victory. The delay in the Persian advance offered the Athenians precious time to evacuate their city, which would soon fall to the Persians, and time to prepare for a decisive naval battle.

Long after the Battle of Thermopylae, a monument was erected there on which the following inscription appears:

Go, tell the Spartans, thou that passest by,  
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.



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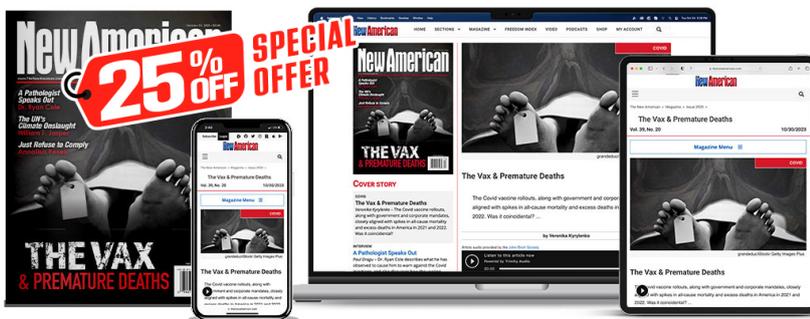
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