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## Themistocles of Athens: Ancient Fighter for Freedom

Born in Athens around the year 528 B.C., Themistocles was the son of Neocles, a man of modest background, and his non-Athenian wife. Although he was a member of the ancient Lycomid family, he was considered of low birth, something of a political handicap in that era. He nevertheless rose to become a statesman and military leader of tremendous significance in the history of ancient Greece. Themistocles was an extraordinary man. The late J.B. Bury of the University of Cambridge states, “The greatest statesman of this critical period in the history of Athens, greater than either of his two rivals, Xanthippus and Aristides, greater than the hero of Marathon himself, was Themistocles.” Another historian, Chester Starr of the University of Michigan, says of Themistocles that he “possessed amazing powers of foresight, persuasiveness, and sharp logical ability.” And the military historian Major-General J.F.C. Fuller states that Themistocles was “among the greatest” of the great men of that time.



Great man: Renowned historian J.B. Bury of the University of Cambridge wrote of Themistocles that he was “the greatest statesman of this critical period in the history of Athens” and “a man of genius.”

Elected an *archon* (one of 12 magistrates) of Athens in 493, Themistocles is believed to have participated in the Battle of Marathon in 490, possibly as the *strategos* (general or military leader) of his *phyle*, or tribe. He was particularly concerned with the naval strength of Athens, since that city-state and Aegina had been at war, a war that was primarily naval. In addition, there were always in the back of the minds of Athenians thoughts about the possibility of another Persian invasion. For those reasons, Themistocles moved the main port of Athens from Phaleron, which was vulnerable to attack, to Piraeus, which was a natural harbor and more easily defended, and which he ordered fortified.

It was around that time that a rich deposit of silver was discovered at an Athenian state-owned mine in nearby Laurium, south of Athens. It was proposed by some politicians that the proceeds from the silver be distributed to all Athenian citizens. But Themistocles, especially mindful of the Persian threat, demanded that the money be used to build warships, greatly expanding the navy of Athens. The ruling assembly agreed, and Athens soon possessed a naval force of 200 triremes, the largest navy among the Greek city-states. Had Themistocles not insisted on that dramatic expansion of Athens’ navy, it is difficult to see how the Greeks could have survived the coming war with Persia.

In 481 B.C. it became clear that Xerxes, ruler of the Persian Empire, was about to launch another



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campaign against Greece. He had sent heralds to the various Greek cities demanding submission. Yet, heralds were sent neither to Athens nor to Sparta, since it was Xerxes' intention to obliterate these cities as punishment for Athens' support of the Ionians during their revolt in 499, and for the active opposition of both cities to the invasion 10 years before by Xerxes' father, Darius.

As a result, that same year a congress of the Greek city-states met at Corinth to lay plans for a unified defense. Most importantly, the congress determined that all internecine warfare must end immediately and that commands on land and at sea must be unified to be effective against the Persians. One area of substantial disagreement was where the main point of Greece's defensive resistance should be. The southern Greek cities, in the Peloponnesus, thought that the narrow Isthmus of Corinth was ideal in that regard. That plan, however, was fatally flawed in that, with their huge navy, the Persians would have no difficulty landing troops behind the defensive line at the isthmus. Moreover, and even more importantly, it meant that all of Greece outside of the Peloponnesus would be surrendered without a fight. Since it was widely known that the Persians intended utterly to destroy Athens and slaughter or enslave its people, the Athenians stated that they would go their own way if that strategy were adopted. Because the participation of Athens was crucial, it was therefore decided that the attempt would be made to defend as much of northern Greece as possible.

A defense at the Vale of Tempe, a narrow gorge through which the Persians would travel as they moved southward, was suggested. A force made up of Spartans under Evaenetus and Athenians under Themistocles — 10,000 men in all — marched to Tempe. Upon arrival, however, it was discovered that the gorge could be bypassed relatively easily. To stay there invited disaster, and so the forces were withdrawn. The only other point where a defense might succeed was Thermopylae; consequently, Leonidas of Sparta and his forces were dispatched there. Simultaneously, a Greek fleet of 324 *triremes* and nine *penteconters* sailed up the strait between the island of Euboea and mainland Greece. A smaller portion of these ships remained at Chalcis, the narrowest part of the strait, to guard against an attack from the south that could trap the Greeks in the strait. The remaining ships continued on to Artemisium, at the far northern edge of Euboea, to protect the army at Thermopylae from any attempt by the Persians to land forces behind their position.

The Persian fleet at this time was anchored off the coast of Magnesia, at Cape Sepias, a place that was not sheltered from weather disturbances, an important consideration in those days because of the fragility and instability of the large warships. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus noted that, since the Persian fleet was so large, only a small portion of the ships were moored to the land. The rest, he writes, "swung at anchor further off. The beach extended but a very little way, so that they had to anchor off the shore, row upon row, eight deep. In this manner they passed the night." And so it was that a powerful storm arose the following day that destroyed at least 400 ships, along with, in the words of Herodotus, "a countless multitude of men ... and a vast treasure." Yet, so great was the Persian advantage in warships that the invaders swiftly recovered their equanimity.

Despite the losses, the Persians at this point sent 200 of their ships down the east coast of Euboea, with orders to sail around the southern end of the island and up the strait to trap the Greek fleet. Here too, however, nature proved uncooperative. Another violent storm enveloped the naval squadron, destroying all 200 ships. When this news reached Themistocles and his men, they were greatly heartened. Although the Persians still held a numerical superiority, the two navies were now more closely matched in size.



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**Planning ahead:** Themistocles correctly reasoned that it was only a matter of time — a short time — until the Persians would again seek to conquer mainland Greece. Thus he insisted that Athens greatly increase the size of her fleet.



## The Battle of Artemisium

Themistocles decided to test Persian naval tactics by sending a fleet to the Persian port at Aphetae. The Persians were amazed when they saw the small Greek fleet sailing toward them, thinking that it certainly would be overwhelmed and defeated. Herodotus writes that at a signal, the Greeks “brought the sterns of their ships together into a small compass, and turned their prows on every side towards the [Persians].” In the meantime, the Persian fleet sailed in a circle around the Greeks. At another signal, the Greek ships shot outward towards their enemy, smashing their bronze rams into the sides of the Persian ships, sinking several and, according to Herodotus, capturing 30. Both fleets returned to their bases after a battle that was inconclusive, though an unpleasant surprise to the Persians, who had expected an easy victory.

When word came that the Battle of Thermopylae had ended with the death of Leonidas and the victory of the Persians, who were then marching on Athens, Themistocles ordered the fleet south to the coast near Athens. At the same time, the people of Athens and the surrounding area, terror-stricken at the approach of the Persians, were evacuated to Aegina, Salamis, and Troezen. A small contingent remained on the Acropolis, which had been provisioned and fortified. The undefended city was overrun without effort, while the fortified Acropolis held out for two weeks. All of Athens was set ablaze, and the defenders of the Acropolis massacred — Xerxes’ revenge for the burning of Sardis during the Ionian Revolt in which Athenian hoplites had participated.

A considerable panic broke out among those from the Peloponnese as the Persians occupied Attica — the region around Athens — and drew nearer the isthmus. That led to fierce arguments among the Greeks, the southerners arguing for a defense of the isthmus, while Themistocles insisted on a sea battle off the coast of Salamis in or near the Bay of Eleusis. Themistocles went to the ship of Eurybiades, the Spartan naval commander, explaining to him that in a battle on the open sea, near the Isthmus of Corinth, the advantage goes to the navy with the greater number of ships, that is, the Persians, while within the confines of the battle he envisioned at the entrance to the Bay of Eleusis, the advantage was with the Greeks.



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Themistocles' arguments did not sway the southern Greeks, so he then challenged them with an argument that he believed they could not resist: He told Eurybiades that if they would not accept his plan, he would order his 200 ships to pick up all of the Athenians from their places of refuge and sail to Siris, a Greek colony in southern Italy, where they would be safe from Xerxes and where they could all build new lives. With that, Eurybiades was given no choice, since, without the Athenian fleet, resistance against Persia would be hopeless.

The first part of the plan of Themistocles was to employ a stratagem to lure Xerxes into the waters around Salamis Island where, because of the relative lack of space for maneuvering, the much larger Persian fleet would be at a disadvantage. Without telling anyone, he therefore sent one of his household slaves, a man named Sicinnus, who served as a tutor to his sons, to the Persian headquarters, pretending to be a traitor. He informed one of Xerxes' officers as follows:

The Athenian commander has sent me to you privily, without the knowledge of the other Greeks. He is a well-wisher to the king's cause, and would rather success should attend on you than on his countrymen; wherefore he bids me to tell you that fear has seized the Greeks and they are meditating a hasty flight. Now then, it is open to you to achieve the best work that ever ye wrought, if only ye will hinder their escaping. They no longer agree among themselves, so that they will not now make any resistance — nay, 'tis likely ye may see a fight already begun between such as favor and such as oppose your cause.

The message was conveyed to Xerxes himself, who, as a consequence, believed he could trap and defeat the Greeks at Salamis.

## **The Battle of Salamis**

The first thing Xerxes did was to order the Egyptian squadron of his fleet to station itself at the Megaran Straits, the western passage to the bay, to block that escape route. He next ordered troops landed on the tiny island of Psyttaleia, where they could assist any Persian survivors of sunken ships and kill any Greeks who landed there. Finally, the main Persian battle fleet was ordered arrayed in three columns at the eastern passage into the waterway. When a political rival of Themistocles, Aristides, arrived from Aegina, he informed the Greek commanders that the Persians had blocked both passages around Salamis, trapping the Greek ships, so that even the most obstinate of the opponents of Themistocles were now forced to fight with him. At dawn, Themistocles spoke before the fighting men, exhorting them by contrasting "what was noble with what was base, and bade them, in all that came within the range of man's nature and constitution, *always* to make choice of the nobler part."





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**Tactical mistake:** Xerxes was certain that he could crush the Greek fleet at the Battle of Salamis. He reckoned little of the skill of the Greek naval commanders.

Xerxes stationed himself on a golden throne atop a hill that afforded a clear view of the bay, where he planned to watch the annihilation of his Greek enemies. As it entered the bay, the main Persian fleet was forced to divide itself in two in order to pass around on either side of Psyttaleia Island, and then was pressed together to pass the narrows between the Cynosura Peninsula on Salamis and the mainland. Confusion set in at once as the first ships slowed and those behind piled up in a kind of nautical traffic jam, the oars of the many triremes becoming entangled. Whatever organization had prevailed at the start began to fall to pieces. To lure the Persians to sail on into the narrows, the Greeks appeared to be fleeing from the larger Persian force by sailing north toward the Gulf of Eleusis, but, after drawing the Persians into the trap, suddenly turned around toward the Persians' lead ships, forcing them to slow down again and bringing more chaos to the formation. Maneuvering was ever more difficult for the Persians, with the mass of their vessels forced so closely together. The size of the Persian fleet, twice that of the Greeks, was, in the circumstance, at a decided disadvantage.

A Greek commander, Ameinias, in one of the lead ships, was the first to sink an enemy vessel when he ordered his craft rapidly forward, crashing its bronze ram deeply into the Persian vessel, which quickly sank. Witnessing this, the spirits of the Greeks were uplifted and they all began attacking the Persian ships. The same commander pursued the ship of Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus, an ally of Xerxes and the actual commander of her ship. Believing herself to be in danger of capture or sinking, she rammed one of her own ships, sinking it, to save herself. Seeing that, Ameinias assumed that it was a Greek ship that he had been pursuing, and turned away. Xerxes, high up on his hilltop, recognized the queen's ship and watched it as it rammed what he mistakenly thought was an enemy ship. Having already realized that the battle was going badly, he exclaimed, "My women are fighting like men and my men like women."

A Greek tactic was to sail so close to the Persian vessels that the oars were snapped off one side, rendering the ship practically impossible to maneuver. The Greek ship would then turn around to sink the Persian vessel with its ram. In all, the Persians are said to have lost 200 ships, while the Greeks lost 40. Xerxes' dream of the conquest of Greece was shattered. In addition to the loss of so many ships and crews, the loss of prestige was catastrophic, since Xerxes' empire in western Asia Minor was made up



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of Greeks. “The Persians had good reason to fear the effect which the news of the crushing defeat of their navy might have upon the Greeks in Asia, and if Xerxes dreaded anything, he dreaded the revolt which actually came to pass the following year,” writes Bury.

Worse yet, Xerxes had lost mastery of the Aegean Sea. Though he was still dominant on land, with the loss of so many ships, the Greeks might now disturb his supply lines, further upsetting his plans. Consequently, he decided to withdraw personally back to Asia Minor. With the Persians gone from Attica, the Athenians were able to return to their burned-out city.

The ancient Greek poet Aeschylus, who was present at the Battle of Salamis, wrote that “Xerxes shrieked aloud when he saw the depth of his calamities,” and while watching the great sea battle develop into a disaster, “rent his clothes and uttered a shrill wail.” He apparently grasped that Greece would never be subdued by him, despite the might of his empire’s forces.



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