

# THE PERSIAN WARS: 490 AND 480 BC

THE BATTLES AT MARATHON, THERMOPYLAE, AND SALAMIS  
ARE EVENTS OF GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE

MILTIADES, LEONIDAS, THEMISTOCLES RISE AS MILITARY STRATEGISTS AND  
SAVIORS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Taiganides, E. Paul, [editor@greekethos.org](mailto:editor@greekethos.org)

Empowered by the monotheistic religion of Zoroaster, **Darius the Great** built the biggest and most powerful Persian Empire, which stretched from the Indus River [*India*] and Bactria [*Afghanistan*] to Egypt and Anatolia [*Turkey*]. Greek cities dotted the entire coastline of Anatolia, from Pontos to Palestine. These city states were former colonies of Greece. As such, these cities were **thorns** to the Persians; the way the state of Israel, plugged in the middle of the Arab world, infuriates Muslims.

The Greek city states of Anatolia rebelled against the Persian Empire. After quelling the uprising, Darius invaded Europe in 490 to punish mainland Greeks who had supported the rebellion. After his death, his son **Xerxes** invaded Greece in 480. But **tiny but democratic Greece** defeated the Persians, both times, not unlike the defeat of the Arabs in 2 wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by tiny but democratic Israel, [*with massive help, of course, from us, the USA*]. So, you see, “**History**” repeats itself in more ways than one!

## THE BATTLE AT MARATHON: MILTIADES!

Courier **Pheidipides** had jogged the 200 miles from Athens to Sparta and back to beg for help. Sparta did not respond with alacrity. So, 9,000 Athenians faced alone the 25,000 Persian forces that Emperor **Darius** landed by sea at the **Bay of Marathon** in August 490. General **Miltiades** strategy was to walk his forces to the center of the Persian formation till they reached the range of the Persian archers, attack in double time thereafter, and retreat to draw the Persians into the center. It worked! With his major forces deployed at the wings, Athenians enveloped the Persians. For the first time, the army of **Darius the Great** lost a decisive land battle to a brilliant battle strategist, one of many military strategists to emerge in the next 2 centuries!

**Pheidipides**, once again, ran the 26-miles distance to the city of Athens at the end of the day-long battle at Marathon to utter “νενικικαμε” [*we won*]. He died from exhaustion. In honor of this splendid deed, the “**A 42-km Marathon Race**” was instituted in the **1896 Olympics** in Athens. [*Σπυρος Louis, a Greek shepherd, won the first ever race*]. Besides the Olympics, hundreds of cities along with our **Columbus** around the world organize Marathon races; a **unique global honor** for Greece.

Spartans arrive late to see 6,400 Persians and only 192 Athenians dead. Envious of the glory bestowed on Athens for their victory, Sparta vows to help next time, which comes soon at the **Gates of Fire** [*Thermopylae*], the 50-foot narrow [*at that time*] path between the Malian Gulf and the Kalidromos mountain cliffs, 200 km north of Athens, a treacherous area between Kamena Vourla and Lamia.

## THE BATTLE AT THERMOPYLAE: LEONIDAS!

**Xerxes**, the King of Kings, as he claimed, was not going to **make the same mistakes as his father**. In 480, he invaded Greece with more than a **million soldiers** from 47 different countries. Dressed in his gilded **purple robes**, he led the land forces. His brother led the Persian fleet of over 1000 ships from Phoenicia, Egypt and 10 other states such as **Halicarnassus** of Anatolia whose contingent of ships was headed by their half-**Cretan** Queen, **Artemisia**, the first ever woman to fight in a naval battle. Pillaging the countryside of Northern Greece, **Xerxes’s** nefarious avalanche came to a screeching halt in front of the **Gates of Thermopylae**. There stood King **Leonidas**, son of Alexandides, with his **300 Spartans**. Enticed with riches to surrender their arms, Leonidas response was prompt and direct, “**ΜΟΛΩΝ ΛΑΒΕ**” [*come and get them*].

The battle raged for days, until shepherd **Efialtes** [Εφιαλτης], bribed, he guided Persians at **night** through a goat bath behind the Thermopylae hot springs. Encircled, Leonidas dismissed the other 700 Greeks, and fought to the last Spartan. **Xerxes** impaled the head of Leonidas on a spike and paraded it in front of his troops. However, **Leonidas’s** brave stand is a timeless **paradigm of epic valor** in the defense of homeland [*patrida*]. Traitor Efialtes, the son of Eurydemos of Trachis, became synonymous with **nightmares**. [*The Greek word for nightmare, is εφιαλτης = efialtes*]. **Xerxes** did not fare any better than Efialtes. He was assassinated by his son **Artaxerxes** a decade after he returned to Persia.

# ΜΟΛΩΝ ΛΑΒΕ



## ***THE NAVAL BATTLE OF SALAMIS: THEMISTOCLES!***

Today and for a long time now, Greece is **number ONE** in merchant shipping. Greek ships are not only ferrying goods and passengers within the Mediterranean Sea but they are also the biggest fleet around the globe. This incredible achievement can be traced back to the brilliant strategy of **Themistocles** of Athens. Themistocles knew that the Persians would come back after their humiliating defeat at Marathon. So he convinced Athens and the Aegean island states like Aegina, Spetses, Andros, Chios, Karpathos, et al, to build ships, triremes, which became legendary in the prosperous times of trade in the Aegean Sea since the defeat of Persia in 490.

After Thermopylae, **Xerxes** marched into Athens and burned down everything, even committing the **sacrilege** of demolishing the Acropolis temple to Goddess **Athena**. He found no Greek ships in the Piraeus harbor. They had sailed into the Salamis Straights. He saw no people, either. Themistocles ordered 100,000 Athenians to become **evacuees** on the island of **Salamis**.

Themistocles spread the rumor that the Greek fleet was in disarray, and that the Peloponnesian ships were about to flee in the middle of the night. This enticed **Xerxes** to attack **prematurely in the dark**. The Persians were shocked to find the Greek ships counter-attacking with **disciplined ferocity**. At the end of the day, the Persian fleet, demoralized, down to 300 ships by now, retreated. Watching from the shore, **Xerxes** was awed by the skillful strategy of Themistocles and, believing the rumor that the bridge he had built at the Hellespont [Ελλησποντος] would be attacked by the victorious Greek fleet, he departed for Anatolia.

His chief general Mardonius remained in Greece with much of his land forces, but Mardonius was killed a year later at the Battle of Plataea near Thebes. At that battle, the Greeks captured the treasury of **Xerxes**, and Pericles used the money to build the **Dionysos Theater** below the Acropolis, where **Aeschylus**, the greatest tragedian and a native of Salamis, who had fought in both the Marathon and the Salamis battles, staged his famous play “**The Persians**”, which won the first prize in 472. And that is how we know so much about these epic battles!

Brilliant **Philip** and his gifted son **Alexander** of **Makedonia** avenged the Persian burning and looting of Greece by conquering Asia a century and a half later, which will be the subject of the 4<sup>th</sup> issue of **Greek Ethos**.

*Taiganides, Ελισσαίος Paul, [eptai@aol.co](mailto:eptai@aol.co)*