The Greco-Persian Wars

Even as democracy was taking its final shape in Athens in the early 400s BC, the city—and the rest of Greece—was plunged into war. The Greek city-states came into conflict with the vast Persian Empire, bringing Greece into war with a much larger and stronger opponent.

Causes of the Conflict The roots of the Persian Wars lay not in mainland Greece but in the region called Ionia in Asia Minor, what is now Turkey. Founded as Greek colonies, the Ionian city-states had become some of the largest and wealthiest Greek cities, but they had fallen under Persian rule in the 500s BC. The Greeks of Ionia, unhappy with Persian rule and wanting independence, rebelled in 499 BC in what was called the IONIAN REVOLT. Faced with a much larger Persian army, they asked their fellow Greeks for help. Among the cities that sent aid was Athens, who supplied ships to the Ionian rebels. Despite this assistance, the Persians put down the revolt. Furthermore, the revolt made Persian emperor Darius angry enough to seek revenge. He planned to punish the Ionians’ allies, especially Athens, by attacking the Greek mainland.

The First Persian Invasion In 490 BC, the Persians set out to fulfill Darius’s plans for revenge. A huge fleet carrying tens of thousands of Persian troops set out for Greece. The fleet came ashore near a town called Marathon not far from Athens. Warned in advance of the Persians’ approach, some Athenians wanted to hide within the city walls of Athens, but the Athenian leader Miltiades convinced them to set out for Marathon to meet their foe. In the BATTLE OF MARATHON, the Athenians arrived at Marathon quickly and caught the Persians at work unloading their ships. The Athenians charged the beach in a phalanx (FAY-lanks), a tight rectangle formation in which Greek heavy infantry soldiers called hoplites held long spears out ahead of a wall of shields. The Persians, caught by surprise, counterattacked, but more Greeks closed in on them from the sides. Though they outnumbered their foe, the Persians retreated. According to legend, an Athenian messenger named Pheidippides ran from Marathon to Athens after the battle to announce the Greeks’ victory. He completed the 26-mile run but died from exhaustion after he delivered the message. This legend inspired the modern marathon race, a 26-mile run that commemorates the messenger’s dedication and athleticism.
Preparations for a Second Invasion

The Greek victory at Marathon shocked both Greeks and Persians. The Athenians could not believe that they had defeated a much stronger foe. The Persians, humiliated, were furious. Wanting revenge more than ever, Darius planned a second invasion of Greece, but he died in 486 BC, before he could launch that second invasion. His son Xerxes, vowing to get revenge for his father, continued planning another attack on Greece. In 480 BC, 10 years after the first invasion, Xerxes set out for Greece. His army included hundreds of thousands of soldiers and sailors together with all their animals, weapons, food, and other supplies. According to the accounts of the Greek historian Herodotus, the Persian army was so huge that it took them a week to cross a bridge they built into Greece, though this figure is certainly an exaggeration. Faced with another invasion, the Athenians called on other Greek city-states to help fight off the Persians. Among the states that responded to the call was Sparta. Though the two cities were bitter rivals, Athens and Sparta agreed to work together to fight the Persians. Athens, which had recently built a large and powerful navy, took charge of the Greeks’ fighting ships. Sparta took charge of the Greeks’ armies.

The Second Persian Invasion

As Persian forces marched into Greece, the Greeks worried that they would not have time to prepare their troops for battle. To slow down the Persians, a group of Spartans led by King Leonidas, along with their Greek allies, gathered in a narrow mountain pass at Thermopylae (thuhr-MAH-puh-lee), through which the Persians would have to pass through to get to Greece. There, at the BATTLE OF THERMOPYLAE, the Spartans held off the entire Persian army for several days. In the end, a local resident showed the Persians an alternate path through the mountains, which allowed them to surround and kill the Spartans. Nevertheless, the Spartans’ sacrifice bought time for the Greeks’ defense.

After Thermopylae, the Persians marched south to Athens, which the Greeks had evacuated. The Persians attacked and burned the city but needed their fleet to bring them additional supplies. Not wanting the Persians to get what they needed, a clever Athenian commander named Themistocles lured the Persian fleet into the narrow Strait of Salamis near Athens. Because the Persian ships were so much larger than the Greek vessels, they could not maneuver well in the strait. With their opponents virtually helpless, the BATTLE OF SALAMIS began, and the Greek warships cut them to pieces. They sank many ships and sent swarms of soldiers onto others. Xerxes, who had brought a throne to the shore to watch the battle from afar, saw his navy go down in defeat.

The Battle of Salamis changed the nature of the war. The Persian army was now stuck in Greece, far from home and short on supplies. Demoralized, they were no longer a match for the Greeks. The next year, in 479 BC, a huge Greek army led by the full might of Sparta crushed the Persians near Plataea. After Plataea, the Persians gave up on their invasion and agreed to a peace settlement. The Greeks had won the Persian Wars.