

Lecture 12 Persian Wars II: Thermopylae



Leonidas at Thermopylae  
Jacques Louis David  
1814

HIST 332 Spring 2012

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Formation of the Hellenic League

- 31 Greek city-states meet to decide what to do about the coming threat from Persia
  - They mustered 40,000 hoplites
  - 400 triremes
- One of the few times in Greek history where disparate *poleis* worked together for the common good
- Some *poleis* willingly joined Persia

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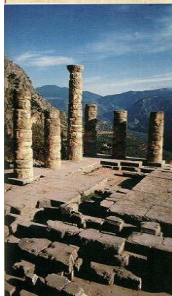
Oracle at Delphi

Oracle answered in true Greek oracular style--obscure verse

- Greece would be safe from the Persians behind a **wall of wood**

**Sparta:** want to build a wall across the Isthmus of Corinth

**Athens:** the wall of wood was in fact a fleet of wooden ships--the triremes of the Athenian navy



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## Themistocles



- Leadership of the war party taken over by Themistocles
  - different military vision
- Themistocles urges Athens build up the navy
  - change of policy lead Athens to becoming a great sea power

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## Silver mines at Laurion



### The Silver Mines

483 BCE new vein was discovered  
Themistocles persuades Athenians to invest new revenue on building a fleet of triremes.  
– used to defeat the Persians at Salamis in 480 BC.

### The Scale of Operations

- 350 mines producing 1000 talents a year
  - worked by 20,000 slaves.
- purity of the silver was protected by law
  - led to Attic "owls" being widely respected
  - coins found as far as India and Algeria
- Coin design (Athena and owl + olive-sprig) unchanged for centuries.

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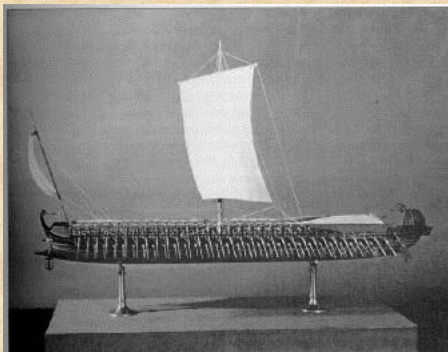
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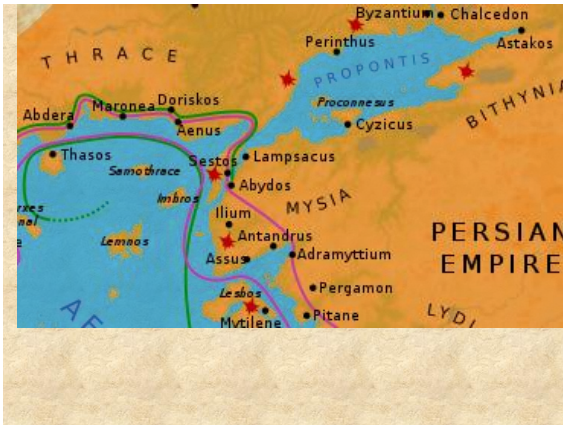
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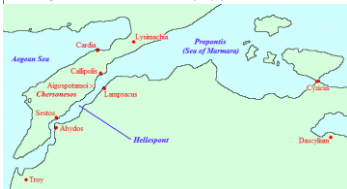
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### Xerxes' Bridge across the Hellespont

- Lashed triremes and pentaconters together for pontoon bridge: 2 miles long
- From Abydos 360 ships
  - From Sestos 314 ships
  - bows facing current
  - special anchors designed to hold ships in place
  - huge cables of flax and papyrus



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### Differences in Defensive Strategy

Greek strategy was divided as usual:

- **Sparta** wanted to fight at the Isthmus of Corinth
  - Sparta left the bulk of her army in the Peloponnese.
  - King Leonidas of Sparta brought with him three hundred Spartans
  - small turn-out of Sparta reflects disunity of strategy
- **Thebes** wanted to fight further north
- **Athenians** argued war would be won or lost at sea.
  - They built ships as fast as they could
  - Persian fleet outnumbered the Greeks 3:1
  - every day's delay would mean more Greek ships at sea
  - needed time to persuade more city-states to stand against Xerxes

The Greeks decided to send an expeditionary force north to meet Xerxes, to fight the Persians at hopeless odds, and to sacrifice themselves in order to improve the chances of ultimate victory.

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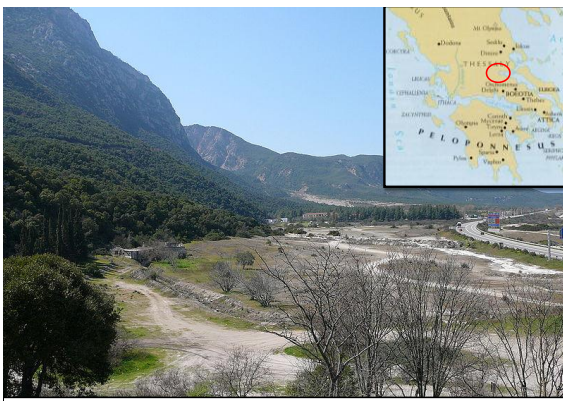
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Modern Thermopylae

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## Battle of Artemisium August 480 BCE

- 3 days of naval maneuvers in support of land forces at Thermopylae
  - Greeks outnumbered 3:1 (250:30-40)
- Pre battle: storms wreck 1/3 of Persian Fleet
- Day 1: Greeks encircle triremes
  - Persians suffer losses
- Day 2: Athens sends reinforcements
- Day 3: Persians send a semi-circle of ships
  - Greek ships hold the line
  - both suffer heavy damages
  - Themistocles orders a retreat to Salamis

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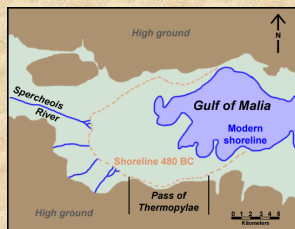
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## Topographical Advantage

- Very small pass between steep cliffs and Gulf of Malia
- Xerxes' huge army would have to stop and pass through




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### Forces at Thermopylae

Greeks
Summer of 480 BCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>force of 7,000 men marched north to block the pass</li> <li>Lead by Leonidas, Agiad king of Sparta with 300 Spartiate hoplites</li> </ul>

Persians
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>between 200,000-750,000 men</li> <li>sources are unreliable               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>esp. Herodotus</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

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### Battle of Thermopylae August 480 BCE

Xerxes surprised that the Greeks had not fled Waits four days <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Day 5: sides fought "all day" (Herodotus)</li> <li>Day 6: best troops could not break Greeks               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spartan tactic of pretending to retreat but then wheeling around in formation inflicted heavy casualties</li> <li>Rotating men in and out</li> <li>Terrain</li> <li>Hoplite armor superior to Persian armor</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzsBHUTD8z0&feature=related>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNNzuO7\\_I0Q&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNNzuO7_I0Q&feature=related)

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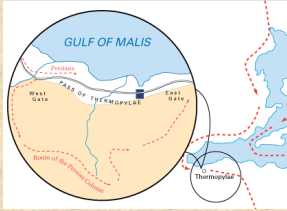
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### Persians now fearful of Greeks

- Greek local named Ephialtes shows Persians a path around pass – “Immortals” sent
- Greeks army goes south
- Leonidas stays with 300 Spartans to give Hellenic army time to escape
- Fulfills prophesy




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### Famous Spartan Quotes

- Μολών λάβει: “having come, take”
- “Eat a hardy breakfast for tonight we dine in Hades.”
- “Then we will fight in the shade.”

*Go tell the Spartans, passerby,  
that here, obedient to their orders, we lie.*

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### Persian advances after Thermopylae

- population of Attica evacuate to Peloponnesus
- Xerxes enters Athens unopposed – burns it to the ground in revenge for Sardis
- Persian fleet at Phaleron
- Greek fleet at Salamis
- Xerxes sets up his throne on a bluff over the Bay of Salamis to watch the final destruction of resistance




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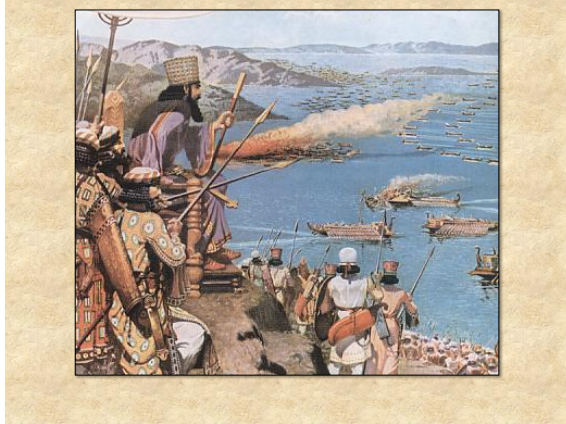
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