

PERSIAN WAR

560 TO 472 B.C.

RISE OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE TO AFTERMATH OF THE PERSIAN WAR

ERA SUMMARY – PERSIAN WAR

Like the Trojan War, the [Persian War](#) was a defining moment in Greek history. The Athenians regarded the wars against Persia as their greatest moment, and the history of the Persian War as recorded by Herodotus is one of the oldest and most famous histories ever written.

The Persian king first decided to attack Greece after Athens came to the aid of the Greek colonies in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) who were in rebellion against the Persian empire. The rebellion was ultimately crushed, but [Darius the Great](#) was so angered by Athens' interference that he determined to send an army across the Aegean sea to crush the offending city-state.

The population and resources of the Greeks were dwarfed by the limitless wealth of the Persians, but Athens resolved to defend itself. They were led by [Miltiades](#), a general who had been involved in the revolt against Persia. At the *Battle of Marathon* (490 BC) he urged the Athenians to attack the Persians immediately after they landed on the Greek peninsula, without waiting for reinforcements. Although their army was only a fraction of the size of the Persians, the Athenians prevailed in their daring assault. The Battle of Marathon is perhaps the single most important battle in Greek history. Had the Athenians lost, Greece would have eventually come under the control of Persia and all the accomplishments of the Greeks may have been lost to posterity.



GREEKS AT THE BATTLE OF SALAMIS

The Persians did not attack Greece again for ten years, but when Darius's son [Xerxes](#) became king, the Persians launched another expedition against Athens. This time Xerxes was determined to use overwhelming force so he gathered an army of several hundred thousand infantry and a navy of six hundred ships. He demanded that the Greek city-states submit to him without resistance and many did, including Thebes. The Athenians and Spartans however, insulted the Persian ambassadors and vowed resistance to the end. Fortunately for all of Greece the Athenian politician [Themistocles](#) had foreseen trouble many years ahead of time

and had convinced the Athenians to begin building a navy so by the time of the great Persian invasion, Athens had over two hundred battle ships.

While Xerxes gathered his army at the Hellespont, the Greek city states that had decided to resist the Persians (many of the smaller cities had already conceded defeat and refused to send armies), were fielding a united Greek army, under the leadership of Sparta. The first great battle of the Greeks against Xerxes army was at *Thermopylae*, a narrow pass in the north of Thessaly. It was there that the Spartan King [Leonidas](#), with 300 Spartans, fantastically outnumbered, held out for three days, before being overcome by treachery. Eventually the Spartans were killed to a man, but not before inflicting horrific damage to the elite Persian fighting troops and delaying Xerxes' passage by critical days.

While Leonidas held the pass at Thermopylae, Greek ships worked to evacuate Athens and its surrounding communities to local islands. The Greek fleet was stationed on the island of Salamis in sight of the ruins of Athens when, after a fit of infighting, the decision was made to give battle to the Persians at once. At the ferociously fought naval *Battle of Salamis*, the Greeks won a dramatic and decisive victory, destroying much of the Persian fleet. The thoroughly traumatized Xerxes returned to Persia, after the disastrous battle, leaving [Mardonius](#) in charge of the conquered region. Athens was still under Persian domination but most of the citizens fled to local islands and refused to return to the occupied city, while the Spartans returned to the fortified Peloponnese peninsula.

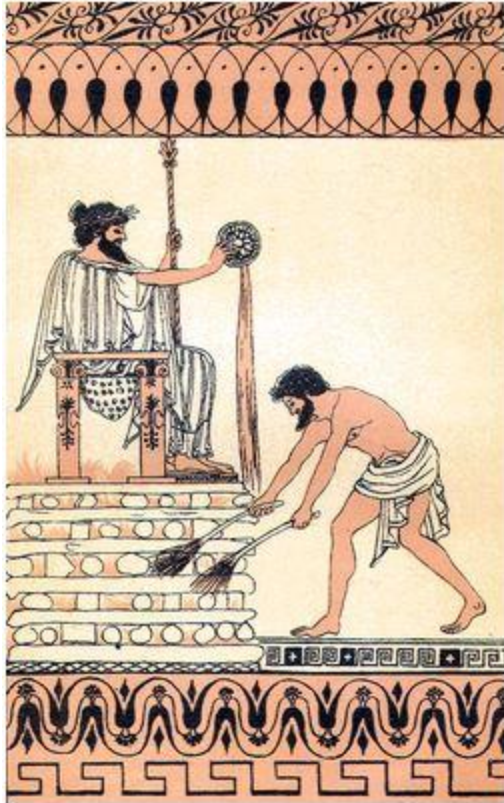
It was not until the following spring that the Greeks emerged from their fortified peninsula, ready to drive the Persians from Greek soil. But finally a terrific battle was fought at *Plataea*, and the Persians were annihilated by a united Greek army, led by Sparta on one wing and Athens on the other. The Persian war was remarkable not only for its ferocious battles, which showcased the superiority of Greek military methods, but also for the striking personalities involved, the democratic character of the military command, and the ability of the fractious Greeks to drop their strong divisions and unite behind a single cause. The war is a popular one to study, not only because of its striking military engagements and historical significance but also for the great human dramas that were played out behind the scenes.

The Rise of Persia

The [Histories](#) of Herodotus are most famous for their spellbinding account of the Persian War, but they also contain many fascinating stories about the rise of the Persian Empire.

In the century prior to the Persian war, Greece was a poor and disunited collection of independent city-states, surrounded by wealthier and more powerful empires, such as Lydia, Media, Babylon, and Egypt. The region directly east of mainland Greece was populated with Greek speaking colonies, but by 600 BC most of the region was controlled by [Croesus](#), the fabulously wealthy king of Lydia.

Directly south of Lydia were the nations of Assyria (Syria), Babylon (Iraq), Phoenicia (Lebanon), and Judea (Israel). In Ancient Times, the control of this region alternated between the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian Empires. By 600 BC the most powerful empire in the region was



CROESUS ON THE FUNERAL PYRE

Babylon, under [Nebuchadnezzar](#). To the East of Babylon was the empire of the Medes (Iran) and the small kingdom of Persia, which was only a vassal kingdom of Media.

In 560 BC, [Cyrus the Great](#), the king of Persia started a career of [conquests](#) and brought all of the above mentioned regions, under his control. The Persian Kingdom, which arose under his leadership, became the most powerful Empire the Ancient world had ever seen. Cyrus ruled for 30 years, but died in 529 on a campaign in Scythia. His Empire was briefly ruled by his son [Cambyses](#) who extended his conquests into Egypt, but died shortly thereafter. As Cambyses died with no heir, there was considerable palace intrigue before an heir was settled on, but the headship eventually fell to [Darius the Great](#), the king who ordered the first unsuccessful Persian invasion of Greece.

The kingdoms of the east varied significantly in customs, religion and livelihood. They included seafaring kingdoms, such as Phoenicia, agricultural kingdoms, such as Phrygia, and pastoral kingdoms, such as Media, but all were governed as autocracies. Cities and states paid tributes to the emperor, and all city administrators served at the pleasure of an autocratic higher authority. The idea of self-governing city-states was nearly unknown outside of the Greek colonies. Even more striking and unique were the Greek ideas of satire and open dissent toward authority figures, and the idea that all citizens shared in the common culture. The Greeks were self-consciously civilized, and considered their neighbors, however wealthy and powerful, to be mere slaves.

CHARACTERS – PERSIAN WAR

EARLY EMPIRES

Nebuchadnezzar	645–561 BC	King who conquered much of Assyria and made his capital at Babylon.
Amasis II	d. 525 BC	Second to last king of Egypt, died before Egypt was overrun by Cambyses.
Croesus	560–547 BC	Wealthy monarch of Lydia who lost his kingdom to Cyrus the Great.

RISE OF PERSIA

Cyrus the Great	558–529 BC	Prince of Persia who overran Medes, Lydia and Assyria to create the Persian Empire.
Harpagus	~ 550 BC	Minister of Astyages who betrayed him in favor of Cyrus.
Cambyses	d. 522 BC	Eldest son of Cyrus. Invaded Egypt, killed brother, then died.
Smerdis the Magi	~ 522 BC	Impersonated Smerdis, son of Cyrus and stole the throne of Persia.
Atossa	~ 521 BC	Daughter of Cyrus the Great, wife of Darius, mother of Xerxes
Darius the Great	d. 486 BC	With six conspirators seized the throne of Persia, primarily through craft rather than force.
Tomyris	~ 529 BC	Queen of the Scythians. Her army defeated and killed Cyrus the Great.
Democedes	~ 500 BC	Greek physician, valuable slave of Darius. Schemed and plotted to return to Greece.
Zopyrus	d. 482 BC	Loyal Persian General, helped Darius retake Babylon with an elaborate ruse.

IONIAN REVOLT

Histiaeus	d. 494 BC	Very close advisor to Darius, rescued him from disaster in Scythia, later rebelled. Father in law of Aristagoras.
Aristagoras	~ 494 BC	Son-in-law of Histiaeus. Led Rebellion of Greek Colonies in Asia Minor.

PERSIAN HEROES

Artaphernes	~ 500 BC	Brother of Darius, Satrap of Lydia during Ionian Rebellion. Lead Persian forces at Marathon.
Xerxes	520–465 BC	Raised an enormous army for Persian invasion of Greece. Defeated at <i>Battle of Salamis</i> .
Mardonius	d. 489 BC	Brother-in-law of Xerxes and commander-in-chief of Xerxes's Army.
Artabanus	~ 480 BC	Brother of Darius. Close advisor to Darius and Xerxes.
Artemisia	~ 480 BC	Queen of Halicarnassas and Cos. One of Xerxes most trusted advisors and Generals.
Demaratus	~ 480 BC	Exiled King of Sparta, advisor to Xerxes during his invasion of Greece.
Pythius	~ 480 BC	Satrap who magnificently hosted Xerxes and was repaid by having his eldest son slain.

GREEK HEROES

Bulis and Sperthias	~ 485 BC	Volunteered to sacrifice their lives to the Persian King to expiate the murder of Ambassadors.
Miltiades	d. 489 BC	Athenian General who led Greece to great victory at the <i>Battle of Marathon</i> .
Pheidippides	d. 490 BC	Ran from Athens to Sparta to warn of Persians. Ran to Athens after Marathon, then died.
Leonidas	d. 480 BC	Spartan King whose whole army died defending the pass of Thermopylae.
Themistocles	525–462 BC	Athenian hero of the <i>Battle of Salamis</i> . He masterminded Athenian naval supremacy.
Eurybiades	~ 480 BC	Head of Spartan Fleet during the Persian War.
Aristides	d. 468 BC	Athenian General and Statesman. Fought at Marathon, Salamis; created Delian League.
Pausanias	d. 470 BC	Spartan General who led Greece against Mardonius at the <i>Battle of Plataea</i> .

TIMELINE - PERSIAN WAR

- 605-562 Reign of [Nebuchadnezzar](#) as King of Babylon (modern Iraq).
- 586 **[Nebuchadnezzar](#) conquers Jerusalem, sends Jews into exile.**
- 570-526 Reign of [Amasis II](#) as Last Pharaoh of Egypt.
- 585-549 Reign of [Astyages](#) as King of Media (modern Iran, Afghanistan).
- 560-546 Reign of [Croesus](#) as King of Lydia (modern Turkey).
- 559-539 Reign of [Cyrus the Great](#) as King of Persia (Middle East and Central Asia) .
- 550-526 **Persian Wars of Conquest**
- 549 **Cyrus rebels against his grandfather Astyages, and unites kingdoms of Persia, Media.**
- 546 Cyrus besieges the capital of Croesus and conquers Lydia.
- 539 Cyrus besieges Babylon and conquers the Babylonian Empire.
- 538 **Cyrus releases the Jews from the "Babylonian Captivity".**
- 529 Cyrus is killed during a campaign in Scythia.
- 526 Cambyses II invades and conquers Egypt.
- 529-522 Reign of [Cambyses](#) as King of Persia.
- 522-521 [Smerdis the Magi](#) usurps throne of Persia on the death of Cambyses.
- 521-486 Reign of [Darius the Great](#) as King of Persia.
- 521 Darius seizes the throne from the usurper Smerdis, marries the [daughter of Cyrus](#).
- 521 Babylon revolts against Darius but is reconquered.
- 512 Darius campaigns in Scythia; is saved by [Histiaeus](#).
- 500-479 **Greco-Persian War**
- 500 Ionian Revolt. Athens supports Ionian Greek's rebellion against Persia.
- 493 [Mardonius](#) leads Persia's first, failed invasion of Greece.
- 490 **Persia's second invasion of Greece foiled by Athens' Victory at Marathon.**
- 481 Persia's third and largest invasion of Greece led by [Xerxes](#).
- 480 **Battle of Thermopylae—three hundred Spartans perish holding the pass.**
- 480 **Battle of Salamis—great naval victory for Greece destroys Persian fleet.**
- 479 *Battle of Plataea*—Persian driven from occupied territories of mainland Greece.
- 478 [Pausanias](#), hero of Plataea, dies in disgrace.
- 460 [Themistocles](#), hero of Salamis, dies in exile.

RECOMMENDED READING – PERSIAN WAR

CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS *

Haaren - <i>Famous Men of Greece</i>	Miltiades the Hero of Marathon to Aristides (4)
Guerber - The Story of the Greeks	The Great King to Death of Pausanias (16)
Macgregor - The Story of Greece	The Bridge of Boats to Battle of Plataea (18)

SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Cowles - Our Little Spartan Cousin	<i>entire book</i>
Weston – Plutarch's Lives	Aristides to Themistocles (2)
Tappan - Story of the Greek People	The Persian Expeditions to The Persian Invasion (cont.) (3)
Harding - Greek Gods and Heroes	Athenians Fight Persians to Aristides the Just (6)
Morris - Historical Tales - Greek	The Fortune of Croesus to Plataea's Famous Day (9)
Church - Greek Life and Story	The Battle-field of Freedom to Traitor or Patriot (6)
Church - Helmet and Spear	The Men of Marathon to Battles on Plain and Shore (5)
Church - The Persian War	<i>entire book</i>
Church - Stories from Herodotus	<i>entire book</i>
Abbott - Cyrus the Great	<i>entire book</i>

ALSO RECOMMENDED

Gould - Children's Plutarch - Greeks	The Savior of Athens to The Just Man (2)
Tappan - Old World Hero Stories	Darius of Persia to Xerxes of Persia (2)
Shaw - Stories of the Ancient Greeks	The Battle of Marathon to The Richest King (6)
Kaufman - Young Folks Plutarch	Themistocles to Aristides (2)
Horne - Statesmen and Sages	Themistocles (1)
Horne - Soldiers and Sailors	Nebuchadnezzar to Cyrus the Great (2)
Abbott - Darius the Great	<i>entire book</i>
Abbott - Xerxes	<i>entire book</i>

* *Level I and II Study Questions are based on Core Reading Assignments.*