

This painted pottery bowl portrays the defeat of a Persian soldier by a Greek soldier.



Fighting the Persian Wars

28.1 Introduction

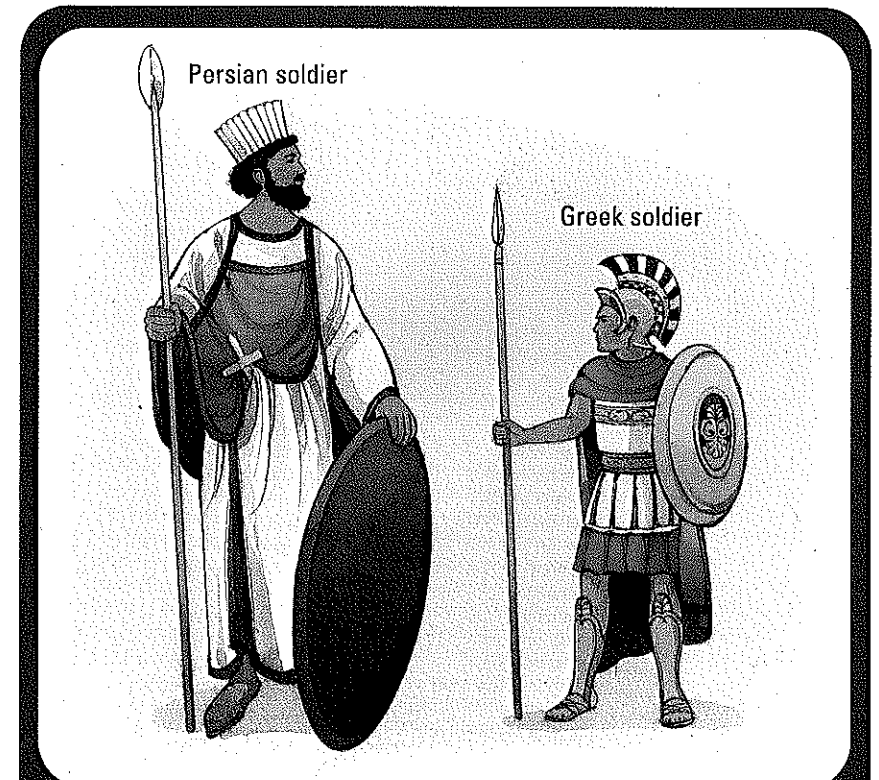
In Chapter 27, you learned about two very different city-states, Athens and Sparta. Sometimes their differences led these city-states to distrust each other. But between 499 and 479 B.C.E., they had a common enemy—the **Persian Empire**.

At the time, Persia was the largest empire the world had ever seen. Its powerful kings ruled over land in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. During the 400s B.C.E., the Persians invaded Greece, and the **Persian wars** began.

To fight the Persians, the Greek city-states eventually banded together as allies. **Allies** are states that agree to help each other against a common enemy.

Throughout history, soldiers have written home before battle. We can imagine the kind of letter an Athenian might have written to his family. “The Persians are fierce fighters. But I will stand shoulder to shoulder with the brave men of Greece—Spartans as well as fellow Athenians—and fight to the death, if that is what it takes to stop these murderous invaders.”

The tiny Greek city-states had much less land and far fewer people than Persia. How could they possibly turn back the powerful invaders? In this chapter, you will learn about important battles during the Persian wars and discover who won them.



Use this graphic organizer to help you understand how the Greek city-states banded together to fight the powerful Persian Empire.

28.2 The Persian Empire and the Ionian Revolt

The Persians started out as a small tribe in present-day Iran. They built a large empire by conquering their neighbors. Persian archers won many battles by unleashing a storm of arrows before their enemies were close enough to use their lances, or spears.

At its height, the Persian Empire was the largest empire the world had ever known. It was ruled by powerful kings who conquered Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, and parts of India and Europe.

To rule such a large area, King Darius, one of the greatest of the Persian kings, divided the empire into 20 provinces known as satrapies. He established a tax-collection system and appointed officials to rule local areas. But he allowed conquered people to keep their own customs and religions.

The Ionian Revolt, which began in 499 B.C.E., marked the beginning of the Greek-Persian wars. In 546 B.C.E., the Persians had conquered the wealthy Greek settlements in Ionia, in Asia Minor. The Persians took the Ionians' farmland and harbors. They forced the Ionians to pay tributes, or the regular payments of goods. The Ionians also had to serve in the Persian army.

The Ionians knew they could not defeat the Persians by themselves, so they asked mainland

Greece for help. Athens sent soldiers and a small fleet of ships. Unfortunately for the Ionians, the Athenians went home after their initial success, leaving the small Ionian army to fight alone.

In 493 B.C.E., the Persian army defeated the Ionians. To punish the Ionians for rebelling, the Persians destroyed the city of Miletus. They may have sold some of its people into slavery.



King Darius of Persia holding a council of war.

28.3 The Battle of Marathon: A Stunning Victory

After the Ionian Revolt, King Darius decided to conquer the city-states of mainland Greece. He sent messengers to ask for presents of Greek earth and water. The presents would be a sign that the Greeks agreed to accept Persian rule. But the Greeks refused to hand over the tribute. Instead, they threw the messengers into pits and wells. Legend has it that they shouted, "If you want Greek earth and water, help yourselves!"

Darius was furious. In 490 B.C.E., he sent a large army of foot soldiers and **cavalry** across the Aegean Sea by boat to Greece. The army assembled on the plain of Marathon. (See the map on page 277.)

A brilliant general named Miltiades convinced the other Greek commanders to fight the Persians at Marathon. Desperate for help, the Athenians sent a runner named Pheidippides to Sparta. Pheidippides ran for two days and two nights. When he arrived, he found the Spartans celebrating a religious festival. They told him that they could not leave Sparta until the next full moon.

The Athenians and their allies had to face the Persians alone. Miltiades stretched his men across a narrow valley. For several days, both sides hesitated to attack.

Finally, Miltiades decided to attack. He ordered the center portion of his army to advance. When the Persians came forward to meet them, he then ordered the left and right sides of his army to sweep down and attack the Persians from the sides as well.

Soon the Persian soldiers were running for their ships. Then the Greeks marched back to Athens in time to defend the city against the Persian cavalry.

The Greeks had won a stunning victory. But their fight with the Persians was only beginning.

cavalry soldiers who ride on horses



The Battle of Marathon was the first of many battles between the Greeks and Persians.

Hellespont the long, narrow body of water between Europe and Asia in present-day Turkey

28.4 The Battle of Thermopylae: The Bravery of the 300

After King Darius died, his son, King Xerxes, organized another attack on Greece. Xerxes put together a huge army of more than 180,000 soldiers. To get his army to Greece, Xerxes chose to cross the **Hellespont**, a narrow sea channel between Europe and Asia. There he made two bridges by roping hundreds of boats together, with wooden boards across their bows. Then he walked his army across the channel into Europe. (See the map on page 277.)

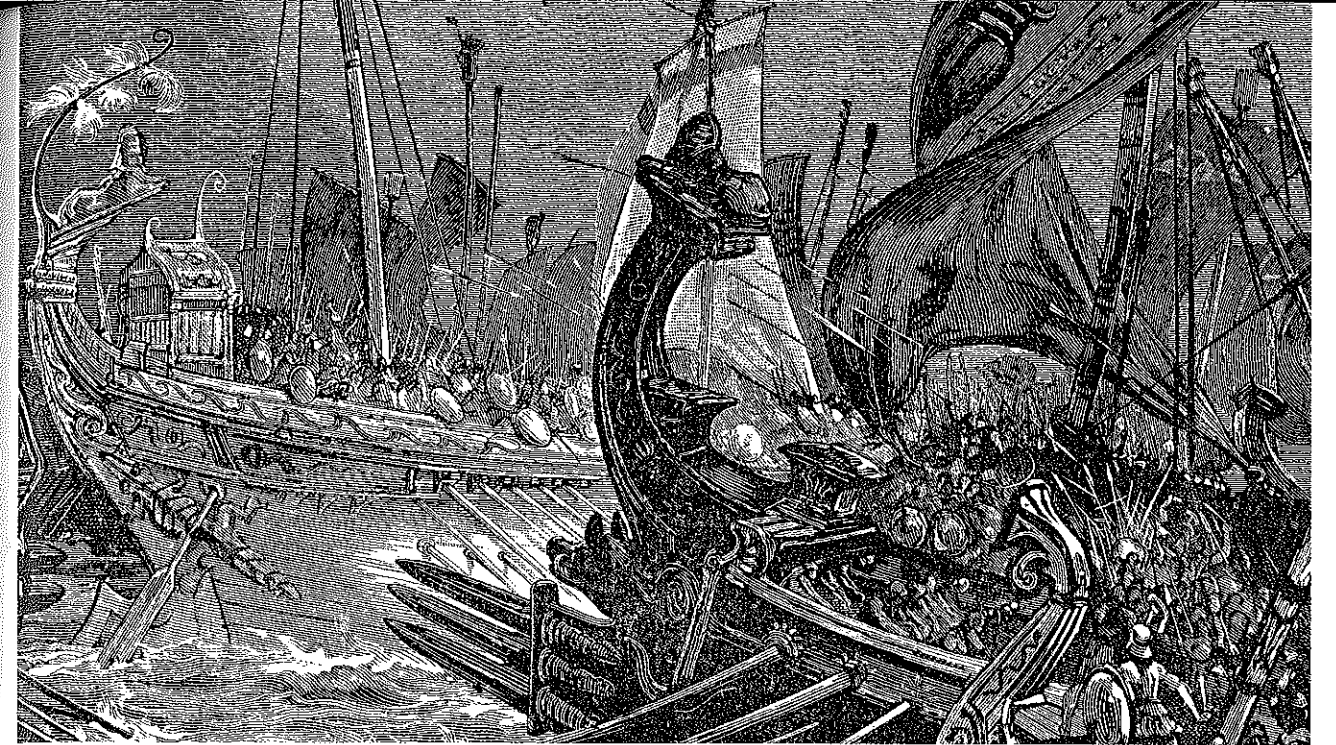
The Persians were delayed by the fierce fighting in the narrow pass at Thermopylae.

In 480 B.C.E., Xerxes marched west from the Hellespont and then south. Several Greek city-states were overwhelmed. Athens and Sparta decided to work together to fight the enemy. The Athenian navy would try to stop the Persian navy. Meanwhile, the Spartan king, Leonidas, would try to stop the Persian army.

The Spartans chose to make their stand at a place called Thermopylae, where the Persian army would have to go through a narrow pass between the mountains and the sea. Leonidas had only 6,000 to 7,000 soldiers to stop 180,000 Persians. Still, when the Persians tried to get through the pass, the Greeks drove them back. Then a Greek traitor offered to show the Persians a secret path through the mountains. The path would allow them to attack the Greeks from the front and the rear at the same time.

Leonidas knew that he could only delay the Persians. To keep his army from being destroyed, he ordered most of his troops to escape. With a much smaller army, including 300 Spartans, he prepared to fight.

The Spartans were obedient to the end. Legend says they fought until their weapons broke. Then they fought with their hands. In the end, all 300 were killed. But the Greeks would never forget their bravery.



28.5 The Battle of Salamis: The Navy to the Rescue

When news of the slaughter at Thermopylae reached Athens, its citizens panicked. They boarded ships and sailed for nearby islands. They left in such a hurry that they had to leave their pets behind. Legend has it that one loyal dog swam alongside a ship, following its master all the way to shore, where it died.

Only a small army was left to defend the city. Within two weeks, Xerxes had burned Athens to the ground.

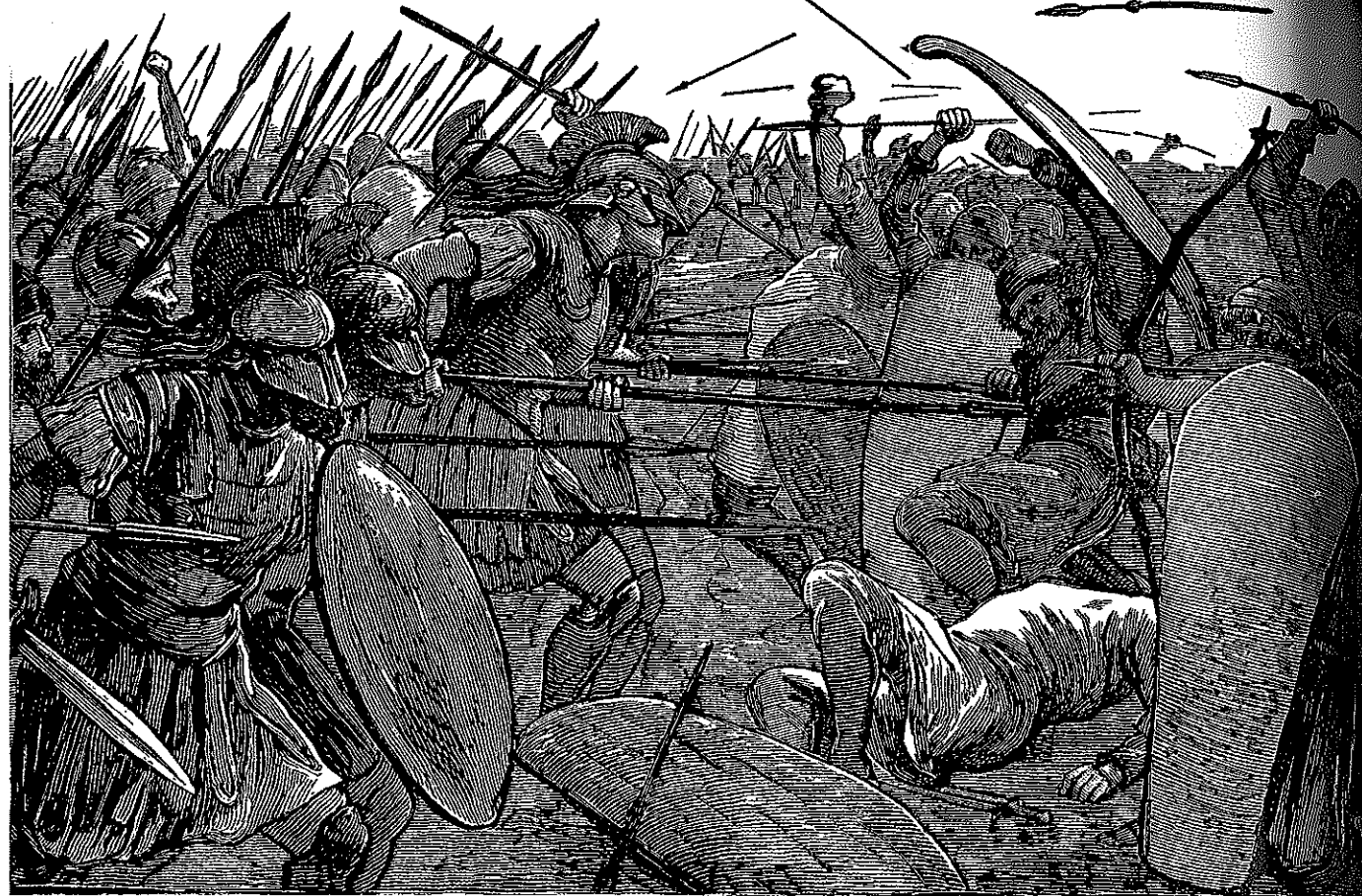
An Athenian navy leader, Themistocles, thought he knew a way to defeat the Persians. He wanted to fight their navy in the narrow channels between the islands and the mainland. The Persians would find it hard to move their ships around to attack the Greek navy.

For his plan to work, Themistocles had to get the Persian ships into a channel near a place called Salamis. So he set a trap. He sent a loyal slave to Xerxes' camp with a message. The message said that Themistocles wanted to change sides and join the Persians. If Xerxes attacked now, it said, half the Greek sailors would surrender.

Xerxes fell for the trick. He ordered his ships to enter the narrow waterway between Salamis and the mainland to attack.

As the Persians approached, the Greek ships seemed to retreat. But this was just another trick to draw the Persians farther into the channel. Soon the Greeks had them surrounded. The Greek ships had wooden rams at the front. They rammed into the Persian boats, crushing their hulls and sending 300 of the ships to the bottom of the sea. The Greeks lost only 40 ships. Once again, the Greeks had beaten the mighty Persian Empire.

At the Battle of Salamis, the Greeks tricked the Persians into entering a narrow channel, where the Greeks rammed the Persian ships.



The Spartans led the fight against the Persians in a fierce battle outside the city of Plataea.

28.6 The Battle of Plataea: The End of the Persian Wars

After the defeat at Salamis, Xerxes fled with some of his soldiers. He was afraid the Greeks would get to the Hellespont first and destroy the bridges he had built. As it turned out, the bridges had already been wrecked by a fierce storm. Xerxes had to ferry his men across the water by boat.

Xerxes left the rest of his army in Greece with orders to attack again in the spring. When spring arrived, the Persians approached Athens once more. The Spartans feared that the Athenians, with their city destroyed, would agree to make peace with Persia. But the Athenians proudly declared their “common brotherhood with the Greeks.” They would fight.

The decisive battle took place outside the town of Plataea in 479 B.C.E. Led by the Spartans, a force of 80,000 Greek troops destroyed the Persian army. The threat from the Persian Empire was finally over.

This important victory preserved the Greeks’ independence and kept Persia from conquering all of Europe. The Greeks paid a high price for their victory. Thousands of Greeks were dead, and the city of Athens was in ruins. But the Athenians would soon rebuild their city and raise it to even greater glory.

28.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how Athens and Sparta joined forces to defeat the Persian Empire. The Persian wars began with the Ionian Revolt and ended 20 years later with the Greek victory at the Battle of Plataea.

After the wars, Athens would become the center of Greek culture and expand its own empire. In the next chapter, you will tour the city at the height of its power and learn more about Greek culture.

The Persian Wars, About 490–479 B.C.E.

