

The Persian Wars: The Quest to Conquer Ancient Greece

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A monument to Leonidas, the king of the Greek city-state of Sparta who died while fighting the Persian army at Thermopylae, Greece, stands on the battlefield. Photo: Pixabay

Persia was a large ancient empire. It is also called ancient Iran. It existed more than 2,500 years ago. Its lands went from northern Africa to the Middle East and even to part of India.

The Persians wanted to rule more lands. They tried to take over Greece two times. These battles are now called the Persian Wars.



If Persia had won, it would have changed Greek culture. Instead, the Greeks were able to stay free. They kept their culture and passed it on. Many Greek ideas are still used today.

Starting the wars

Back then, Greece was made up of many city-states. A city-state was a city that controlled the area around it. Some of the strongest city-states were Athens and Sparta.

The king of Persia was King Darius. He already ruled over the north part of Greece. But he wanted to take over all of the city-states.

The city-states were independent. This means that no king ruled over all of Greece. They ruled over themselves. When Darius attacked, Athens, Sparta and others decided to join against the Persians.

Battle at Marathon

The Persian king attacked with 90,000 men. The Greeks only had 10,000 to 20,000.

The Greek army was made of hoplites. These were foot soldiers who wore heavy armor. Each hoplite had a large shield, a spear and a sword. Their armor and weapons were made of a strong metal called bronze.

The Persian and Greek armies fought near the town of Marathon. The Greeks had better weapons and better armor. Their army was smaller, but the Greeks won the battle. This ended the first Persian War.



Fighting at Thermopylae

After Darius, Xerxes became the next king of Persia. Xerxes attacked Greece again. The Persian army was even larger than before.

This time, the Persians entered Greece at Thermopylae. This was a passage through mountains near the sea.

The passage was defended by a small Greek army led by Leonidas, the king of Sparta. The Greeks fought bravely for three days. In the end, the Persian army was too large. The Greeks were all killed.

Salamis and Plataea

Many Greek city-states were afraid of Persia. They went over to the Persian side. The Persians even broke into the city of Athens.

Later, the Greeks and Persians fought a sea battle at Salamis. This was an island near Athens. The Persians had 500 ships, while the Greeks had 300. Still, the Greeks were able to win.

Xerxes did not give up yet. The Persians and Greeks fought again, near the city of Plataea.

About 30 Greek city-states joined forces. They were able to gather 110,000 hoplites. The Persians had about the same number of soldiers, but the hoplites won.



Peace at last

After more defeats, Xerxes finally gave up. The two sides agreed to have peace.

The Persian empire continued for another 100 years. Meanwhile, the Greek city-states were able to stay free. Greek culture grew stronger.