The Battle of Thermopylae

On a narrow strip of beach between a mountain and the Aegean Sea about 6,000 Greek warriors prepared to face the might of the largest army in the ancient world. Sent to stop the advance of the 200,000 soldiers of the Persian army camped before them, the heavily armored Greek soldiers undoubtedly cursed their wait and weighed their slim chances of survival as sand and sweat mixed beneath their bronze helmets and breastplates.

The narrow pass beside the mountain is called Thermopylae, and the Greeks who guarded it that August day in 480 BCE knew many of them would be buried in its sands. The fight to the death that took place there would be recorded in time and history as a noble battle against impossible odds.

The Spartans

The backbone of the Greek force was a unit of 300 Spartans, commanded by the Spartan king, Leonidas (son of the Lion). Impressive in their scarlet cloaks and helmets topped with horsehair crests, the Spartans had been trained for war since boyhood. Since death in battle was their highest honor, Spartans vowed never to run from or surrender to an enemy. Spartan mothers instructed their sons to “Come back with your shield or upon it.”

The Persians

The invading army came from every corner of the vast Persian Empire. Facing the Greeks were Medes and Persians in armor of iron scales. Assyrian troops in brass helmets stood beside Moschians in wooden ones. Eastern Ethiopians, their straight black hair beneath helmets made from horses’ scalps, marched with Western Ethiopians dressed in leopard and lion skins, their bodies painted half white and half scarlet. Warriors from India in cotton dresses carried bows made from cane. Scythians in tall hats as pointed as their daggers hefted battle axes beside Thracians in long cloaks of many colors.

But the finest troops of the Persian army were the king’s Ten Thousand, nicknamed “The Immortals” because if one fell in battle another leaped to replace him. The handpicked elite of the Persian army, they went into battle with glittering gold decorations, followed by their wives and servants.

In 190 BCE Xerxes’ father, Darius I, attempted but failed to conquer the Greeks. Furious, Darius swore to have revenge but died before it was possible. Xerxes did not forget his father’s failure. For four years Xerxes planned and prepared his invasion and conquest of Greece. He sent ambassadors to the Greek city-states to demand a tribute of earth and water, symbols that the Greeks accepted Persian rule. Some cities responded, but others—including Athens and Sparta—did not. The Spartans are said to have thrown Xerxes’ ambassadors down a well, telling him to get their king’s earth and water themselves. Determined to punish the Greeks for their insults, Xerxes launched his invasion in 481 BCE.

Preparing for Battle

The Greeks knew of the planned invasion well in advance and Athens built a fleet of 200 ships for its defense. At a meeting in 481 BCE representatives of 30 Greek cities agreed to unite to fight the Persians.

Sparta, famous for its warriors, would choose the leaders of the army and navy. When Xerxes and his army began their slow march down the coast of Greece, avoiding the inland mountains, the Greeks acted at once. Athens’ ships, joined by vessels from other cities, set sail. Leonidas and his 300 Spartans marched north to gather allies and delay the Persians while reinforcements were gathered.

A Strategic Location

The Spartan king chose Thermopylae as the best place to meet the Persians. Called the “Hot Gates” because of a nearby hot mineral spring, it seemed an ideal spot for defense. The narrow passage between the mountains and the sea meant the heavily outnumbered Greeks could form a wall of spears and shields to prevent the entire Persian army from attacking all at once. The ruins of an old wall stretched between the sea and mountain, and the Greeks quickly rebuilt it so they could fight behind its stones. Leonidas sent 1,000 of the allies who had joined him to guard a little-known pass through the mountains that skirted around his army. The rest of his men raided the farms around them. They killed animals and burned farms and crops that the hungry Persians could have used. Then they waited for the enemy to arrive.

News of the Persians’ approach soon reached them. “Their arrows will blot out the sun,” one scout claimed.
“Good,” a Spartan is said to have replied. “Then we will fight in the shade.”

The Battle

About August 18, 480 BCE, a Persian scout reported to Xerxes that the Greeks were in sight. He surprised the king by saying some of the Spartans were in front of their wall exercising and combing their hair and beards. A Greek who had joined Xerxes explained that this was not vanity; the Spartans were preparing for death. It took four more days before all of the Persian army reached Thermopylae. Xerxes may have expected the Greeks to flee before his much larger force, but if so, he was disappointed. When all of his army had arrived, Xerxes ordered his men to attack. The wall of Greeks stopped three attacks and thousands of Persians fell in the sand and the sea. The next day the king promised great rewards for a victory and even greater punishments for failure, but not even the Immortals could push the Greeks aside. In front of the Greeks' stone wall lay a second wall of bleeding Persian corpses. The smell of death reached Xerxes, who watched the fighting from his white marble throne and agonized over the death of several thousand of his soldiers.

That night a Greek traitor, Ephialtes, came to Xerxes. For a reward he offered to lead the Persians over the mountain path that passed behind the Greeks. At once Xerxes sent his Ten Thousand to attack the Spartans from the rear. They brushed aside Leonidas’ 1,000 guards and hurried to join others for the next day’s attack. Scouts reported to Leonidas that he would soon be surrounded, and he sent most of his allies away to safety. The 300 Spartans had no intention of leaving the battlefield. Some of their allies also decided to stay, but their numbers were no match for the Persians. Herodotus wrote that the Spartan king told his men to eat a good breakfast since they would have dinner in Hades.

At mid-morning of the next day the final attack came. The Greeks killed thousands of Persians, but they were dying as well. Leonidas was killed almost at once, and the Spartans fought like madmen to recover his body. When the Immortals attacked from behind, the few remaining Spartans climbed a small hill to continue the fight. By mid-afternoon the last of them, fighting with hands and teeth, were buried under a cloud of arrows and spears. All 300 Spartans, and most of their allies, died as they wished – facing the enemy. Xerxes had cleared the pass of Thermopylae, but Herodotus records that 20,000 Persians never returned home.

Aftermath

To conceal his losses, Xerxes quickly had the dead Persians buried. Leonidas’ head was cut from his body and mounted on a pole as a warning to other stubborn Spartans. Yet as the Persians marched on, the story of Greek courage at Thermopylae spread before them. Greek pride increased, and for the first time, the fiercely independent city-states were truly united. Within a year the Persian fleet was defeated at Salamis and a Persian army was destroyed at Plataea. Frustrated, Xerxes returned home. Against all odds the Greeks had triumphed over the greatest empire of the ancient world.

The Greeks did not forget how Leonidas and his 300 Spartans had lit the torch of Greek resistance. A stone lion was placed at Thermopylae to honor Leonidas. Near it a monument, inscribed with the names of his 300 heroes, proclaimed:

“Go tell the Spartans, thou who passest by, That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.”

Reviewing Profiles: On a separate sheet of paper, write the answers to the questions below.

1. **Understanding Ideas**  What was the Persian plan for the attack on Greece?
2. **Interpreting Ideas**  Why did the Greeks choose Thermopylae as the place to oppose the Persians?
3. **Contrasting Ideas**  How were the Greek and Persian armies different?
4. **Analyzing Ideas**  Why is the battle of Thermopylae called a “victory in defeat?”
5. **Evaluating Ideas**  Does modern warfare create the same kind of heroes as the Spartans at Thermopylae?
The Trial and Death of Socrates

Early one morning in 339 BCE a quiet group of students gathered in the meeting place where their friend and adviser, Socrates, had stood trial a few weeks before. An Athenian jury had sentenced their mentor to death, and at sunset a cup of poison would silence him forever.

Socrates as Teacher

Socrates lived in poverty rather than charge his students fees. Wearing the same cloak every day, he usually walked the streets of Athens in bare feet. He had no wish to buy material things, preferring to own the truth. He tossed ideas into the air like a juggler. It was said he raised thousands of questions but answered none of them. He asked questions of everyone he met and forced his students to use reason and logic. He never took himself or others too seriously, but his keen wit and sharp tongue—qualities that defended his strong sense of right and wrong—would cost him his life.

Troubled Times

Athens surrendered to Sparta at the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BCE, and the Spartans forced the Athenians to replace their democratic government with a group of 30 tyrants, 2 of whom had studied with Socrates. The tyrants took away valuable property and executed hundreds of Athenian citizens. Although Socrates opposed these rulers, it was well-known that he also disliked democracy.

When the 30 tyrants were forced to leave Athens in 403 BCE, the city’s democratic government was restored. Because of his connection to the tyrants and his criticism of democracy, the new rulers felt Socrates was a bad influence particularly since he ridiculed democratic leaders and other important Athenians.

The Athenian leaders, fearing that Socrates’ constant criticism and contempt for authority would upset the peace of the city, repeatedly warned him to stop his teaching and his criticism of the government. He refused to do so. Finally, the leaders brought the 70-year-old philosopher to trial, accusing him of denying the existence of Athens’ gods and of introducing new gods that the government had not approved. A more serious charge, however, was that he corrupted the Athenian youth by teaching his students to disrespect and disobey their elders.

Athenian Trials

A trial in ancient Athens was very different from a modern-day trial. To assure swift justice, each case had to be presented and a verdict rendered in one day. Since there were no judges or attorneys, accused people, who could be charged with a crime and brought to trial by anyone, were expected to defend themselves. Their fates rested in the hands of a jury that could range from 101 to 1001 citizens. (There was always an odd number to prevent tie votes.) The jury voted by dropping tokens marked guilty or not guilty in large jars, and there was no appeal from their decision. The accuser proposed the penalty the defendant should be given if found guilty. If convicted, the defendant also proposed a sentence, and the jury chose one of the two proposals. Since all decisions required a simple majority, one vote could determine guilt or innocence.

The Case of Socrates

The 501 jurors at Socrates’ trial listened as the philosopher’s accusers claimed that he had denied the gods and was an evil influence on the youth of the city. Realizing that he had little hope of being found innocent, the wise old man did not prepare a defense, but apologized to the jury for his simple manner of speaking. Next, Socrates explained that the real reasons for his trial were rumors that he had twisted the truth and believed himself to be superior to other men. He had denied these falsehoods for years. It was true, he said, that the oracle of Delphi has called him the wisest man of all. Socrates himself did not understand this until he realized that his wisdom was in admitting what he did not know. Most men who were considered wise could never admit they did not hold the answer to every question. Rather than twisting the truth, he claimed, he made his students see the mistakes in their reasoning, which made him enemies.

He continued by saying he never denied that the gods existed. He had worshiped in the temples many times. The jury should realize that he, Socrates, was a gift from the gods to Athens. He was a “gadfly,” a critic who annoyed the city’s leaders by pointing out what was wrong. Far from corrupting young men, his entire life was an example of simple living and the quest for truth. Socrates told the jury, “acquit me or not; but whichever
you do, understand that I will never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times.”

By a vote of 281 to 229 the jury found Socrates guilty. Since his accusers had asked for the death penalty, Socrates was expected to ask the jury for exile, which would certainly have been granted. But the elderly teacher shocked the jury by asking for a reward instead of a punishment. He asked them to have the government provide him with free meals for life, an award given to Olympic champions. When the jury became angry, friends begged Socrates to change his mind. Faced with Socrates’ refusal to compromise and angered by his stiff-necked pride, the jury voted 361 to 140 in favor of the death penalty. The philosopher did not fear death and told the court, “The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways – I to die and you to live. Which is better god only knows.”

Carrying Out the Sentence

Executions usually took place within 24 hours of a death sentence, but Socrates’ death was delayed several weeks. Each year Athens sent a delegation to the temple of Apollo on the sacred island of Delos. No executions could take place until the delegates returned in their ship. At the time of Socrates’ trial, unfavorable winds had delayed the ship.

During the weeks of waiting, friends and family visited the condemned man. Some of his wealthier students bribed the officials of the prison to allow Socrates to escape, but the old man refused. The verdict was wrong, he said, but the law must be obeyed. To run away would make it seem that he had abandoned his beliefs.

On his last morning Socrates’ chains were removed and he said goodbye to his weeping wife and children. He spent the rest of the day as he had most others – teaching. But this day, his lesson centered on death. He told the students that all philosophers should look forward to dying. Once the soul was free from the demands of the body it could find true wisdom in the next world.

Although it was customary for the poison to be administered after sunset, Socrates bathed before sunset and then called to the jailer to prepare the deadly poison. Socrates drank the hemlock and walked around his cell until his legs grew numb. He told his grieving friends to stop crying like hysterical women, and laid down upon his bed. As the chill of death crept from his legs to his heart, he asked that a bird be sacrificed to Asclepius (the god of healing) as gratitude for his painless death. Soon his breathing slowed and then stopped.

The Legacy of Socrates

Socrates’ teachings were continued by his pupils, especially Plato, whose writings tell us most of what we know about the philosopher. Socrates spent his life examining his own ideas and trying to discover the truth about many subjects. His contribution became an important part of the heritage of Western civilization – a legacy that reminds us to think for ourselves and to stand up for what we believe is right.

Reviewing Profiles: On a separate sheet of paper, write the answers to the questions below.

1. **Interpreting Ideas** Why is Socrates considered a hero?
2. **Evaluating Ideas** Why did he call himself a gadfly?
3. **Comparing Ideas** How were trials in Athens different from modern-day trials?
4. **Forming Opinions** Socrates’ death has been called a suicide. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.
5. **Analyzing Ideas** Most of our knowledge of Socrates comes from one source, Plato. Why should this make historians cautious in writing about Socrates?