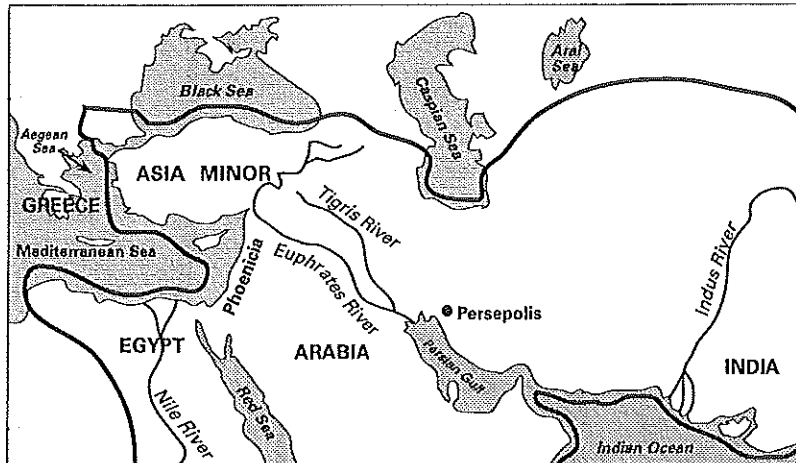


# Background Information About the Persian Wars

## Event A: The Expansion of the Persian Empire



At the beginning of the fifth century B.C.E., the Persian Empire was the largest in the world, stretching from Asia Minor to India, and from the Caspian Sea to Egypt and Arabia. The Persians overwhelmed their opponents with their large, highly-trained army, and expanded their empire by conquering new peoples. Persian warriors became known as the *Ten Thousand Immortals*, because if

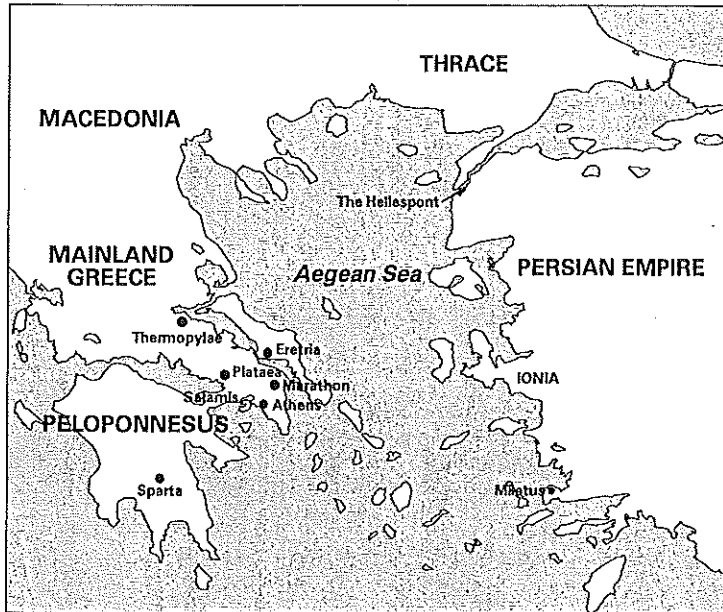
one of them died in combat, he was immediately replaced by another. Their mighty cavalry was composed of nobles who were trained from boyhood to ride horses and shoot arrows.

Despite their powerful army, Persian kings avoided ruling their subjects by force and through fear. One of the greatest Persian kings was Darius (pronounced DAHR-ee-yuss) the Great, who ruled from 522 to 486 B.C.E. Darius was a brilliant politician and administrator, and a capable military man. In order to rule his diverse empire more efficiently, he divided it into 20 large provinces, or *satrapies* (pronounced SAH-treh-pee-z), each run by an appointed official. Persian kings believed that they could more easily win the loyalty of their subjects if they ruled fairly rather than through force. So, while the people had to pay taxes, they were also allowed to keep their own language, religion, and laws.

Darius decided to build a new capital at Persepolis (pronounced pur-SEP-oh-liss) with the incredible amount of wealth produced by the Persian Empire. This city became known for its beauty and splendor throughout the ancient world. According to legend, it would take 10,000 horses and 5,000 camels to carry the royal treasures that were kept in the city. Darius's desire to acquire more land and economic power drove him to conquer nearby lands throughout his reign. In 513 B.C.E., he launched the first Asian invasion of Greek city-states in Asia Minor. He knew that conquering these city-states would give him control of many Greek trade routes, allowing him to obtain more resources to run his enormous empire.

Greece presented a dramatic contrast to the powerful and orderly Persian Empire during the early sixth century B.C.E. Greece was divided into hundreds of tiny, independent political units, known as city-states. Because of Greece's geography, the people developed their cultures in isolated regions and had very little contact with one another. The ancient Greeks based their identities on their ethnicity and the region of their origin, referring to themselves as Athenians, Spartans, or Ionians, rather than as Greeks. Unlike the orderly Persian Empire, life in the Greek city-states was characterized by frequent outbreaks of warfare over land disputes. Furthermore, city-states had limited resources, and some were relatively poor.

## Event B: The Ionian Revolt



In 546 B.C.E., the Persians conquered Ionia, a prosperous Greek settlement in Asia Minor. The Persians were not the first to invade this area. In 1000 B.C.E., the Ionians themselves had displaced non-Greeks living in the region. Like the Ionian-Greeks, the Persians realized that the rich farmland and the accessible harbors in the area could be used to create a profitable trade network.

After conquering Ionia, the Persians set up Greek “puppet rulers,” or local leaders whose nations were controlled by the Persians, to govern the area. They also forced the Ionians to pay tribute and to serve in the Persian army during times of

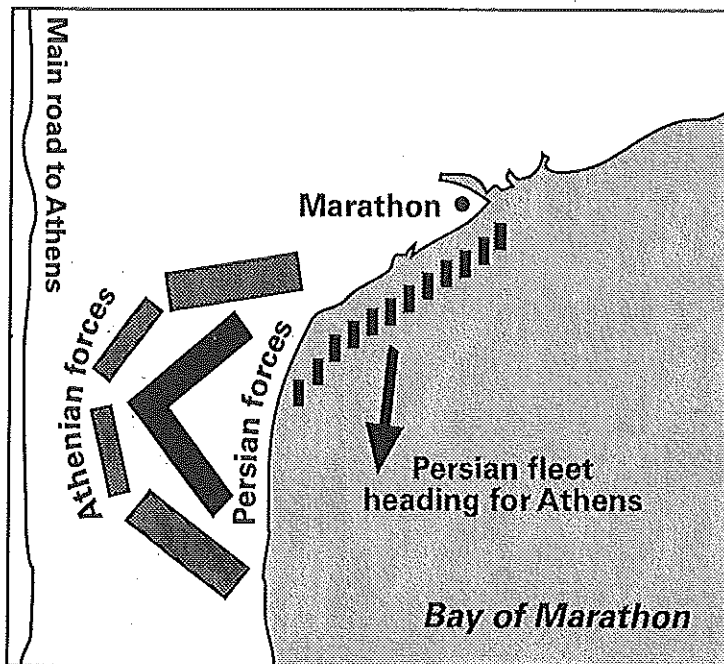
need. Many Ionians were unhappy about having to pay taxes to the Persians. They particularly resented the Persians for taking over the trade routes the Ionians had once controlled.

In 499 B.C.E., the Ionians rebelled against Persian rule. The Ionians asked for help from Sparta, the strongest Greek city-state. However, the Spartan king refused to help, because he realized his troops would have to march for three months just to reach the Persian Empire. Instead, two other city-states from mainland Greece, Athens and Eretria (pronounced eh-REH-tree-ah), agreed to offer assistance to the Ionians. They sent ships and troops to support the small Ionian army.

When the Persian king, Darius, learned about the revolt, he immediately ordered his troops to sail to Greece and attack the rebellious city-states. In the face of the powerful Persian army, many of the Greeks lost their nerve. Many of their troops surrendered, or changed sides to join the Persians, in the hope of avoiding harsh punishment. The Ionian and Athenian troops, however, fought a difficult battle to resist Persian rule. After five years, the Persian troops defeated the Ionians. They stormed into the Ionian city of Miletus (pronounced mill-EE-tuss), burned one of its holy sites, and transported the people to Persia to sell them as slaves.

The Ionian Revolt, which ended in 493 B.C.E., marked the beginning of the Persian Wars. Even after the revolt was crushed, Darius was determined to make the Ionians pay for the losses his army had suffered. However, he was more furious with the Athenians who had assisted the Ionians. According to legend, he ordered one of his servants to repeat “Master, remember the Athenians,” to him three times a day, to ensure that he did not forget to punish them for their part in the rebellion.

## Event C: The Battle of Marathon



After the Ionian Revolt, Darius decided to attack the city-states of mainland Greece to prevent any further rebellions and to take revenge on Athens. In 490 B.C.E., Darius sent his forces of approximately 200 ships and 20,000 troops south across the Aegean Sea to Marathon (pronounced MA-RA-thon), a town 26 miles north of Athens.

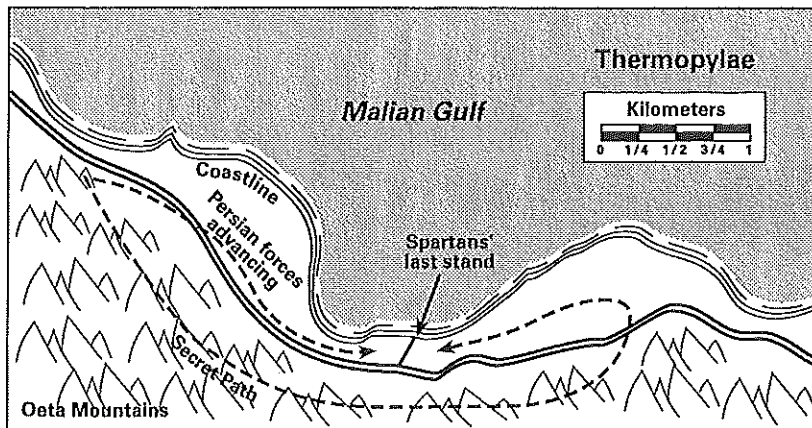
The Athenians, who had an army of 9,000 soldiers, were heavily outnumbered. They sent one of their famous runners, Pheidippides (pronounced fy-DIP-ih-deez), to Sparta to ask for help. However, the Spartans replied that they were in the middle of an important religious festival, and could not send troops for several

days. Dismayed, the Athenians tried to choose the best military strategy. Some of the Athenian generals wanted to stay in Athens and protect the city's walls. One leader, named Miltiades (pronounced mill-TY-ah-deez), however, argued that the Athenians' only hope was to stop the Persian advance before it reached Athens. He led the Athenian army north to Marathon, where they met the Persian troops.

For two days nothing happened. The Athenians were not willing to attack the Persian cavalry out in the open, where they would be easily slaughtered. On the other hand, the Persians did not want their weaker foot soldiers, or *infantry*, to fight against the heavily armed Greek soldiers. On the third day, the Persian commander decided to take a chance and sail to Athens to attack the city by sea before the Spartan troops arrived. He ordered the cavalry, the Persians' most powerful military resource, onto ships, which set off for Athens.

When the Athenians learned that the Persian cavalry was gone, Miltiades immediately took advantage of the opportunity to attack the remaining Persian infantry. Without their cavalry, the Persian troops were weakened, and therefore unable to attack the enemy from an advantageous point. As a result, the Persian army suffered severe casualties, losing 6,400 of their men while Athens lost only 192. According to legend, Pheidippides ran from Marathon back to Athens to announce the victory, and died from exhaustion upon arrival. He became known as the first "Marathon runner." The Greeks consider the battle at Marathon one of the most important events in their history. Their ability to defeat such a large army with their small forces gave them confidence that they could protect Greece from all future Persian invasions. Despite the Persian defeat, however, Darius was still confident that with more military power, he could successfully conquer Greece.

## Event D: The Battle of Thermopylae



While Darius was preparing his forces for another attack on Greece, he died. He was succeeded by his son Xerxes (pronounced ZERK-seez). Scholars often disagree about Xerxes' character and achievements. Some consider him a powerful and honorable military man, while others portray him as overly proud and impatient. Despite his own unwillingness to

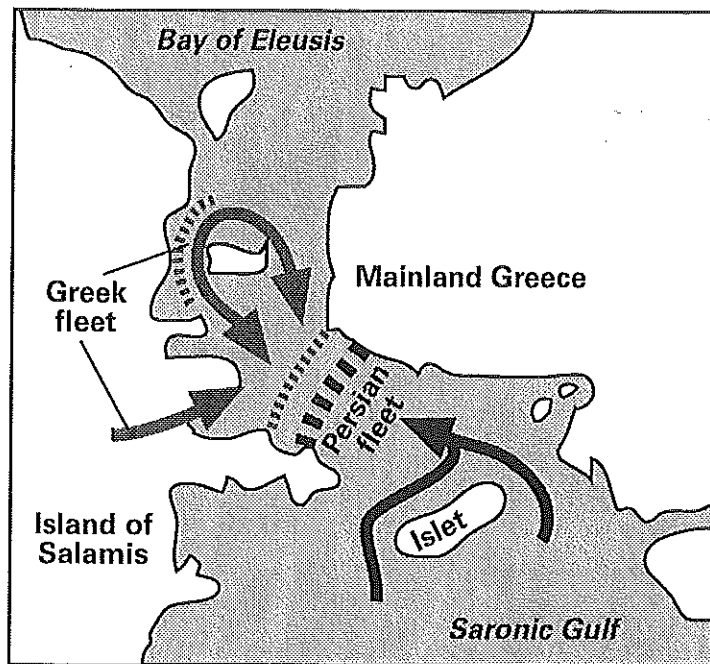
attack mainland Greece, Xerxes was heavily influenced by a relative, who told him that if he conquered Athens, his name would be "held in honor all over the world."

Xerxes thus began to put together a huge army of 250,000 soldiers and a navy of 600 ships to attack mainland Greece. His army was made up of Persians, as well as the subjects of the Persian Empire, including Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Ionian-Greeks. Xerxes also constructed two bridges of boats roped together to span the Hellespont (pronounced heh-LISS-pont), a 33-mile-long sea channel that separates Europe from Asia. These bridges, which were an amazing feat of engineering, allowed the Persian army to easily march over the water and onto the Greek peninsula.

In 480 B.C.E., Xerxes led his army across the Hellespont and marched through northern Greece to Macedonia and Thrace. The northern and central Greek city-states quickly surrendered to the Persian forces. Sparta and Athens decided to work together to stop the Persians from advancing into central and southern Greece. The Athenian navy was given the responsibility of preventing the Persian navy from supplying reinforcements to its land forces. The Spartans, under their king Leonidas (pronounced lee-oh-NY-duss), agreed to set up defenses at Thermopylae (pronounced thur-MOP-ih-lay), a narrow pass between mountains and sea about 100 miles northwest of Athens.

Although Xerxes saw the Spartan defenses, he ordered his troops to advance south and push along the road and through the narrow pass. Unable to use their superior numbers in the narrow space, the Persian soldiers fell back repeatedly and suffered severe losses. After two days of fighting, a Greek traitor showed the Persians a secret path around the pass and through the mountains that allowed them to attack the Spartans from behind. When Leonidas discovered this, he asked for reinforcement troops. However, Sparta refused to send more soldiers because of a religious festival. Thus, Leonidas was left to defend Thermopylae against the Persians with only a small force. Outnumbered and surrounded, the Spartans nevertheless defended Thermopylae until their last man was dead. Supposedly, when Xerxes found the body of Leonidas after the bloody battle, he ordered his officers to cut off his head and fix it on a pole as revenge for the problems the Spartans had caused him.

## Event E: The Battle of Salamis



When news of the defeat at Thermopylae reached Athens, most Athenians fled to the island of Salamis (pronounced SAH-lam-iss) to avoid being captured. With no resistance, Xerxes and his troops marched to Athens and completely destroyed the city. Fearing the Persians' advance, officials of many other Greek city-states began to fortify their cities for battle. However, Themistocles (pronounced them-ISS-tah-kleez), an Athenian general, asked them to leave their cities and unite their forces near Salamis. He convinced the leader of the Greek navy that the only way to defeat the large Persian army would be to lure them into battle within narrow channels, where it would be

difficult for the Persians to maneuver their large, heavy ships. Also, he feared that Greek forces might sail off to defend the Peloponnesus instead of mainland Greece. Therefore, he wanted to keep the Greek fleet on the island, where they would have no choice but to fight against the Persians.

Xerxes, whose navy had experienced great losses at Thermopylae, did not want to attack the Greeks by sea. When he consulted his advisors, all but one person, Queen Artemisia (pronounced ahr-tem-EE-zhah) of Persia, wanted to fight the Greeks at Salamis. Artemisia advised the king to wait, because she believed that the Greeks would eventually retreat due to disunity or a lack of supplies. However, Xerxes rejected her advice and stationed his warships at Salamis. Hoping that Greek troops would come out to fight in open waters, he waited for an opportunity to attack. However, instead of attacking the Persian forces, the Greeks decided to set a trap for Xerxes. Themistocles sent him a false message, saying that he had changed sides and now wished for a Persian victory. Xerxes, who had become impatient and was looking for any opportunity to attack, willingly believed the message. Assuming that the Greeks were not unified and ready to flee, he ordered his troops into the channel between Bay of Eleusis and the Saronic Gulf.

Once the Persian fleet had entered the channel, Greek warships surrounded them. The Greek fleet, which was lighter and easier to maneuver, attacked the heavier Persian warships, breaking their oars and ramming their hulls. The Persian ships were left entangled and unable to move. The Persians lost 200 ships, while the Greeks lost only 40. Devastated, Xerxes and the rest of his troops withdrew from Salamis and retreat to the Hellespont. For a few more months, a small Persian army carried out the military campaigns against Greece. Finally, in 479 B.C.E., the Greek army defeated the Persians at the Battle of Platea and forced them to retreat completely from Asia Minor.

