

The Saviours of Greece

Emily Hood 1995

The question of which city state, Athens or Sparta, did the most to defeat the Persians is a complex one. Herodotus makes his position clear, “one is surely right in saying that Greece was saved by the Athenians.” (Bk 6 sect 139) The roles of each city, however, are not that clearly defined; each had their victories and an important role to play in the war. It does seem, though, that Athens had a much more active role in the conflict, and therefore can be seen to have done more. They were there at the beginning of the struggle with Persia, and whereas the Spartans advocated a defensive strategy, the Athenians pushed for an offensive stance. I do not believe though, that the Athenians would have won the war without Spartan involvement.

Credit for the Greek victory at Marathon, the major battle of Darius’ second invasion of the Greek mainland, must be given solely to the Athenians. It could also be said, however, that it was the Athenians who brought the battle on themselves, by supporting the Ionian revolt and refusing to submit to Persian authority. Whatever the causes, Marathon was a decisive battle and one that the triumphant Athenians were justly proud of. In 490 BC Darius sent Datis and Artaphernes, as co-commanders of the Persian army, to force the Athenians to submit. Athens had learned of this threat and had recalled all ostracised citizens previously, one of the most valuable proving to be Miltiades, a former tyrant in the Chersonese. The polemarch, or commander in chief, at that time was Callimachus. His role in the battle is often overshadowed by Miltiades, but it is nevertheless an important role. The Persian fleet landed at the bay of Marathon, intending to march overland to Athens. The Athenians were split as to how they were to react to this threat, but in the end, Callimachus adopted Miltiades’ plan and advanced to meet the Persians. As Herodotus says,

“Miltiades’ words prevailed. The vote of Callimachus the War Archon was cast on the right side, and the decision to fight was made.” (Book 6 sect 109)

Before they left the city however, they sent word to the Spartans asking them for help, which unfortunately, they were unable to provide, as they were involved in important religious ceremonies. This seems to have been an acceptable reason to the Athenians. Their only other help came from the city of Plataea, which sent one thousand hoplites to their aid. The battle itself is described by Herodotus as “long drawn out” bk6 sect 115. The Greek ranks were strong on both sides, but weak in the middle, so, as the middle was overcome by the Persians, the flanks closed in. The Persians were soon routed and took to their ships, with the Greeks pursuing them. The Persian fleet sailed round to Athens, but as the army had already returned, they set sail for Asia. The Spartans arrived too late for the battle, but there seems to have been little blame, and Herodotus says that “they were so anxious not to be late that they were in Attica on the third day after leaving Sparta.” (Bk 6 sect 123) This victory must be attributed to the Athenians however, and illustrates the active role they were prepared to play in the conflict. This victory also boosted their self esteem and patriotism.

After Marathon, the Greeks had a ten year respite. This was due to Persia’s occupation with internal matters, such as the death of Darius and an Egyptian revolt. Xerxes succeeded to the Persian throne in 485 BC, and began to gather troops from around his vast empire, with thoughts of another Greek campaign. During this time, Athens was embroiled in internal squabbling among its political leaders and also in military forays against the island of Aegina, then the strongest naval power in Greece. Themistocles, an Athenian politician, had been

pushing for a stronger fleet as early as 493 BC and, when a rich silver vein was discovered, he convinced the assembly to extend the navy. This was completed by 480 BC, and proved to be an enlightened move. Athens was now better prepared than any other Greek state for a Persian invasion, yet it was to the Spartans, with their formidable reputation in military matters, that the Greeks turned to for leadership. They met in 481 and decided that the individual states would call off their feuds for the time being, forming an alliance which was named the League of the Greeks. Sparta was given authority over their combined forces. In this way, Sparta is shown to have an important role in the war.

It was at this time that the Persian army crossed the bridge of boats at the Hellespont and began their march through Greece. The Greeks' original plan of defense was to mass the troops at the Isthmus of Corinth. This plan, however, was unacceptable to the Athenians as it left Athens undefended. The generals grudgingly agreed to send an advance army well north to stand at Thessaly, as well as sending the navy to engage the Persian fleet at Artemision. It was soon realised that the Greek army was open to attack from the rear in Thessaly, and so they withdrew to Thermopylae or 'The Pass of the Hot Springs'. The northern Greek states now surrendered to the Persians. The Spartan King in charge of the advance guard, Leonidas, had a force of about seven thousand, among them Peloponnesians, Phoicians, Locrians, Thebans, Thespians, and his three hundred Spartans. When the Persians arrived at Thermopylae, there was a period of four days before they attacked. Herodotus quotes an adviser warning Xerxes about the Spartans "You have now to deal with the finest kingdom in Greece, and with the bravest men." (Bk 7 sect 209)

With this statement Herodotus demonstrates his high regard for the Spartan troops. Meanwhile, a storm had arisen which drove many of the Persian ships into the cliffs at Artemision, while the Greek ships remained protected. The Spartans held the pass at Thermopylae for three days before a Greek showed the Persians another pass around the Mountains. When Leonidas realized they were in a doomed situation he sent many of his troops away.

Herodotus gives his views on why:

"I myself am inclined to think that he dismissed them when he realised that they had no heart for the fight and were unwilling to take their share of the danger" (Bk 7 sect 220)

The Spartans held their position gallantly, and fought to the last man. At around the same time, the Athenian fleet had taken the offensive and attacked the Persians for two successive evenings, causing losses and then withdrawing under the cover of dusk. Thus the holding of Thermopylae by the Spartans had achieved two objectives. Losses were inflicted on the Persian fleet, both directly through attack and indirectly by forcing them to expose their ships to a dangerous coastline, and the Spartans' self sacrifice had strengthened the Greek determination to 'do or die.'

At this point it appears that neither Athens nor Sparta were able to hold back the Persians, who now marched on into Attica. Athenian citizens were evacuated onto the islands of Salamis and Aegina. The leaders of the combined armies still favoured a defense at the Isthmus, and it took a threat from Themistocles to withdraw the Athenian navy to make them agree to defend Salamis. The Persian army soon occupied Athens, where they plundered and burned the city. The Greek navy was still positioned in the Salamis sound. Themistocles saw the narrow space as an advantage, and tricked Xerxes into entering the straits and engaging the Greeks. The Greek ships performed better in the confined space and the Persian forces were soundly beaten. Xerxes himself now returned to Sardis, sent his navy to guard the Hellespont and Mardonius to winter in Thessaly with the army. Salamis can be seen as largely

an Athenian victory, as it was Themistocles' foresight and strategy, and the Athenian navy which won the battle.

As soon as Spring returned, the Persians again marched south, and again the Spartans were unwilling to commit a force to protect any land north of the isthmus. However, after pleas from Athens, Megara and Plataea, a hundred thousand hoplites under the Spartan commander Pausanias were moved north. Again it is Athens who pushed for an active role, while Sparta favoured a passive one. The Greek forces pushed Mardonius back until he took up a position in Plataea. There was now a period in which, as Herodotus says "neither side was willing to begin the general engagement" (Bk 9 sect 41), The Persian cavalry, however, constantly harassed the Greeks. After eleven days, Mardonius finally decided to attack. The Spartans were the first to be attacked, and while they were unable to oppose the Persian cavalry and bowmen, once they had engaged them in hand to hand combat, the Spartans proved the better soldiers. Herodotus says of the Persians:

"in courage and strength they were as good as their adversaries, but they were deficient in armour, untrained, and greatly inferior in skill" (Bk 9 sect 602)

Mardonius himself was killed in the battle, and after this, the Persians either surrendered or withdrew. Many tales grew up about individual Athenian bravery in this battle, but it was the Spartans who took the brunt of the Persian attack and were most responsible for their retreat. All that was left now was to deal with the Persian navy, and the Spartan captain, Leotychidas defeated them at the battle of Mycalae.

The efforts of both the city states were of immense importance, and it is hard to assign either one with the responsibility of defeating the Persian army. The great effort given by both Spartan generals and Spartan soldiers was intrinsic in many of the victories. It is, however, the Athenians who are the most involved and, in some ways, have the most at stake in this conflict. They were the only city involved in every one of the major battles and were always pushing for a much more active stance against the Persians. Therefore, it was Athens who was the driving force behind the defense of the Greek mainland against the Persian invasion.

Bibliography

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