

# MARATHON, SALAMIS, AND WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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**M**arathon is a word known worldwide through its link to the race (26 miles and 385 yards) in the Olympic Games. Many also know that its origin honors the Greek runner who raced to Athens to announce to the anxious Athenians that they had defeated the Persians at Marathon. He had strength only to deliver the message before he collapsed and died. With respect to **Salamis**, many have neither heard of **Salamis** nor its relationship to Marathon. Nevertheless, from a historical perspective and if defined in terms of their significance to the development of Western Civilization which was founded on the principles of the ancient Hellenic heritage, it can be stated with certainty that it would not have happened without the Greeks prevailing over the Persians at both sites. The reason for asserting this conclusion requires a review of the events which led to the battles of Marathon and Salamis.

**Attica** is the region in Greece which also encompasses Athens. It was the area into which the refugees of the Dorian invasion (9th century **BCE**) eventually settled. They spoke an Attic dialect which became the language of the Athenians. Over the centuries, significant migration took place from Attica to the central western region of **Anatolia**, and the islands of Chios and **Samos**. A number of cities were established and prospered. Of greater importance was the fact that these peoples spoke the language of the Athenians. With the help of this common language, it was only a matter of time before some cities grew in size and commercial importance to the extent that they dominated the region in which they were located (roughly an area on the coast of 100 miles in length and some 20 miles in width). This general region was called **Ionia** and it contained such well known cities as Miletus, **Ephesus**, **Priene**, and **Clazomenae**. As they prospered, these cities, too, founded new cities from the shores of the Black Sea to Egypt.

Simultaneously with the **Hellenization** of the west coast in Anatolia, there was a rising power in the kingdom of **Lydia**, whose capital was **Sardis**, about 75 miles northeast of Ephesus. Its King Croesus was exceedingly wealthy and was the first to issue coins as a means of monetary exchange. He was favorably inclined to the Hellenic culture and spent substantial sums of money in gifts to the Oracle of Delphi. However, he coveted the rich cities of Ionia and was successful in seizing them and imposing tribute. His successes and enormous wealth led him to challenge Cyrus, the King of Persia. Croesus invaded Persia, was defeated by Cyrus who then seized Ionia and the other Greek cities of Anatolia.

In 492 BCE, Darius I assembled a fleet of 600 ships and a great military force led by General **Mardonios**, a relative, for the invasion of Greece. The troops crossed the Hellespont and marched through Thrace into Macedonia, but they were constantly harassed by the **Thracians**, who inflicted significant casualties on the invading force. Meanwhile, as the fleet approached Mount **Athos** on the Macedonian coast, a sudden storm wrecked more than half of it. These losses were severe and resulted in the retreat of the Persians back to Asia Minor. But the Athenians knew that another assault would be forthcoming. And indeed in 490, it occurred.

Darius decided to reach Greece by island hopping. With a force of 25,000 men and 600 triremes, the Persians first landed at **Naxos**, overcame the resistance, burned the city and temples, proceeded next to **Delos**, then **Carystus** in south **Euboea** and finally to **Eretria** prior to the planned landing at Marathon.

For what reason was Marathon selected as the landing site? It was recommended by **Hippias**, once tyrant of Athens, who joined the Persians with the goal of recovering his power. Not far from Marathon, there was a plain about six miles in length and a mile in width which was ideally suited for the Persian cavalry forces. It was this site which he believed would surely yield a victory for King Darius.

The Athenians, having received information of the impending invasion were uncertain as to their defensive strategy. Some wished to fight them in Athens while others advocated resisting them on their march to Athens. When word was received that

the Persians had landed at Marathon, the issue needed to be resolved quickly. With **Miltiades** as general (much earlier he had once served in the Persian army and knew their weaknesses), a force of 10,000 Athenians and 1,000 **Plateans** marched swiftly to Marathon, and encamped on a hillside overlooking the plain. In addition, he dispatched **Pheidippides**, their swiftest runner to Sparta to seek their support. The Spartans replied they could not participate until their religious festival had run its course.

The Greek forces were united by a common language and heritage. Moreover, they were superior in armaments, and in training, especially in their ability to maintain their unity in movement and rapid response to commands during battle. In contrast, the Persian army consisted of conscripts from various tribes and regions with different languages and backgrounds and even in some cases, a questionable loyalty to the Persians.

Having received intelligence that the Persian cavalry was not on land, Miltiades decided to attack. He concentrated his forces so that both flanks were the strongest in number and depth, and the center the weakest. The alignment of the Persians was essentially uniform in depth with their best units in the center. With both sides arrayed in battle formation, Miltiades ordered the attack. To the astonishment of the Persians, the Greeks forces ran in unison toward the Persians. The volleys of arrows shot by the Persians were essentially ineffective as the sturdy shields of the Greeks deflected them. When the opposing forces clashed, the initial momentum favored the Greeks but the Persians in the center overcame the initial assault and forced the Greeks to give ground. Miltiades had foreseen this development and ordered his troops on both flanks to envelop the Persian force. As this occurred, the disciplined Greek forces inflicted heavy casualties on the Persians who, after a hard fought battle, fled from the field towards their ships with the Greeks in hot pursuit. Herodotus writes that the Persian losses were 6,400 and only 192 for the Greeks. A lofty mound at Marathon contains the remains of the Athenians slain in battle.

Decisive as the victory at Marathon was, the Greeks knew that the Persians would not accept this defeat as a closure to their goal of conquering Greece and the other people of Europe. Indeed, both sides began preparations for the seemingly inevitable next phase of the war.

By the middle of 480, Xerxes, the son of Darius who died in 486, had created a massive military force. Herodotus states that the army amounted to 1,700,000 men with 80,000 cavalry, and a fleet in excess of 1,000 warships supported by 3,000 cargo ships. Today, most historians view a force of 160,000 men as more credible. The support of such a massive military force presented a logistical task of daunting proportions.

The Greeks were not idle. **Themistocles**, a prominent Athenian statesman, argued for the construction of a powerful navy. Since they could not match the Persian army in numbers, he persuaded the Athenians that the destruction of Persia's navy would be the only realistic strategy for victory. Without the supplies provided by their fleet, the Persian army could not long sustain itself. His arguments persuaded the Athenians to construct over 100 triremes. These warships had as many as 170 rowers. Fast and **maneuverable**, and under proper guidance, they presented a powerful asset in the defense of Greece.

In 481, on a Spartan initiative, representatives of all Greek cities were invited to a meeting in Corinth. Thirty one cities accepted the invitation. All agreed that a collective effort was necessary. King **Leonidas** of Sparta was appointed commander of the combined land forces, and Spartan **Eurybiades** of the navy. The combined naval force consisted of 340 triremes with Themistocles in command of the Athenian component.



Xerxes I

In 480, Xerxes constructed two bridges of ships over the Hellespont. Each ship was joined one to another by chains. It took seven days for his army to cross into Thrace. They marched along the coastline and moved through Macedonia, and into **Thessaly**. In the meantime, the Greeks were still weighing the sites at which they could oppose the Persians. They finally agreed upon Thermopylae, about 80 miles north of Athens. Its topography favored a defense. There was a defile which was quite narrow between the sea and **Mt. Kallidromon**. Indeed, the defile was narrower than it is today. The Persian forces would be forced to **com-**press themselves into a narrow front for passage, thereby permitting the Greek defenders to fight on comparatively equal terms. **Leonidas** marched north with a force of 7,300 soldiers of whom 300 were Spartans. They took defensive positions at Thermopylae. In the meantime, the Persian fleet while sailing south along the coast of Magnesia was caught in a strong gale and lost many of its ships and personnel. **Themistocles** believed that this was an opportune time for the Greek navy to attack. The

battle continued for two successive days. Losses were heavy on both sides. Herodotus wrote, "...many Greek ships were lost and many Greeks killed, but the barbarians lost even more men and ships." The Greek fleet sailed south, rounded **Sounion** and headed for **Salamis**.

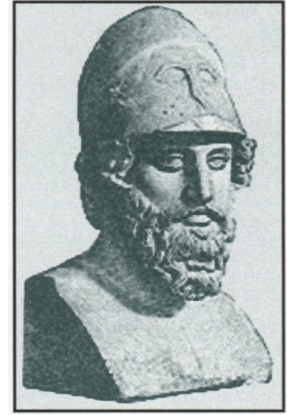
While the sea battle was in progress, Leonidas and his soldiers withstood the massive Persian army for three days. But an act of treachery undermined its spirited defense. **Ephialtes**, a traitor, went to the Persians at night and revealed a pathway around the mountain which led to the rear of the Greek defenders. On learning this, Leonidas knew that they could not hold their

positions. With the exception of the 300 Spartans and the 700 Thespians who chose to remain with them, Leonidas dismissed the remainder of his army to head back to Athens for future engagements. Leonidas and his men were all killed in the final action. The remarkable resistance of the Spartans even today is cited as an act of heroic courage and dedication to duty. A Memorial erected to commemorate the Spartans who died there reads :

*"Go, tell the Spartans, thou that passest by, That here, obedient to their laws, we lie."*

The Persian forces with only token resistance moved toward Athens. The populace evacuated Athens and fled to [Aegina](#), [Salamis](#), and [Tiryns](#). Athens was captured and plundered. The small contingent of defenders of the Acropolis were killed.

As bleak as events appeared, Themistocles planned for the defeat of the Persian fleet. It had anchored at [Phaleron](#) Bay. He sent a trusted slave, [Sikkinos](#), to [Xerxes](#) to inform him that the Greek fleet was preparing to retreat from Salamis. On hearing this, Xerxes ordered his fleet to sail from Phaleron towards the island of Salamis. He arrayed his ships in an arc stretching from the island of Salamis to a small island, [Psytaleia](#), which lies almost midway between Salamis and the mainland (near Piraeus), and then to the mainland. This effectively bottled up the Greek fleet. This was precisely what Themistocles had planned. The Greek triremes, fast and [maneuverable](#), rammed the Persian ships. In the [melee](#) which ensued, the Greek ships attacked again and again and within several hours, the Persian fleet was in disarray. Over 200 ships were destroyed, many more were captured. The Greeks lost 41. Xerxes viewing the defeat from the mainland, ordered the remainder of his fleet to disengage. He sailed back to Persia and placed his son-in-law, [Mardonios](#), in charge of the army left in Greece. The Greek land forces needed more time to defeat the remaining Persian forces and to regain the Greek cities seized by the Persians. For his brilliant naval victory Themistocles was accorded many honors.



Themistocles

The victory at Marathon was extraordinarily significant. Edward S. Creasy, a military historian in his classic book, *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*, writes:

"The day of Marathon is the critical epoch in the history of the two nations. It broke forever the spell of Persian invincibility, which had previously paralyzed men's minds. It generated among the Greeks the spirit which beat back Xerxes, and afterwards led on [Xenophon](#), [Agesilaus](#), and Alexander in terrible retaliation through their Asiatic campaigns. It secured for mankind the intellectual treasures of Athens, the growth of free institutions, the liberal enlightenment of the Western world, and the gradual ascendancy for many ages of the great principles of European Civilization."

Thus, the ancient Greeks at Marathon and Salamis assured for posterity a Western Civilization [unequaled](#) in history. The legacy of the ancient Greeks is so profound that many who live today have lost sight of the enormous gratitude owed to them. Whether in literature, the sciences, the theater, indeed, of any form of human creativity, in one sense or another, their roots lie in the intellectual brilliance of the ancient Greeks. For this reason, Marathon, Salamis and Western Civilization are one.

