

## **Thermopylae: Day One**

## **Reading 3**

On August 18, 480 BC, Xerxes assaulted the Greeks. As promised, the Persian arches filled the air with arrows. Then he ordered his army forward. Lightly armored with wicker shields, they moved forward and were torn apart by the long spears of the Greeks. The Persians fell by the hundreds, only to be replaced by other soldiers. The slaughter was immense. The Persians were forced to flee.

Xerxes was frustrated. The discipline of the Greeks was frightening. If a Greek soldier fell in line, another would rush forward to fill his place. Despite their overwhelming numbers, the Persians were forced to retreat. Xerxes was furious. In a rage, he called for the Immortals, his personal bodyguards, ten thousand men strong. He expected the Greeks to fall. But to his horror, it was the Immortals who fell; their bodies were added to the pile of dead Persians soldiers. A humiliating retreat was sounded. (81)

## **Thermopylae: Day Two**

The second day unfolded like the first. Thinking the Greeks would be exhausted, Xerxes sent in fresh troops. But it did not matter – the slaughter of his forces proceeded much as it had the day before. Worse, resentment and rebellion started growing in the ranks.

At the moment of frustration, the mighty Xerxes was finally brought good news. A Greek was brought to his throne with a secret. There was a pass through the mountain. He was willing to guide the Persians. He could take them on a secret march that would bring them to the rear of Leonidas' Greeks. (85)

The Immortals were thrilled at the prospect. Not only was their commander giving them the opportunity to have their pride restored, but they had the prospect of sweet revenge upon the Greeks. The group waited until dark to begin the ascent to the pass which was only guarded by local soldiers who were completely unprepared for the attack. (86)

## **Thermopylae: The Final Day**

Leonidas was alerted by a runner of the Immortals' approach. Most of the Greeks fled. Only Leonidas and what remained of his three hundred Spartans stayed, along with about 1,700 Greeks who were committed to defending Greece to the bitter end. Herodotus records that the Persian soldiers had to be driven under the sting of the whip to move forward against the Greeks.

At some point, Leonidas was killed. A fierce battle ensued over possession of his body. The Persians wanted a trophy. Four times the Greeks pushed back the Persians' attempts. In the end the Immortals surged forward, fighting from the rear. Surrounded, the Greeks made a courageous last stand. Most of their spears had now been hacked to pieces. They fought on with sword and shield. In the end, they were finally overcome by an onslaught of arrows, - the Persians unwilling to finish the hand-to-hand combat. (87) The Persian cost and humiliation at Thermopylae was high with nearly 30,000 dead.

### **Thermopylae: So What?**

### **Reading 4**

Was the battle a defeat for Greece; or was it a sacrifice for a greater good?

The death of Leonidas and his three hundred was seen at the time for what it was: a torch, not a light of a funeral pyre, but to light the divided and irresolute Greek people...Without Thermopylae, there would hardly have been that extraordinary surge of pride through Greece which produced the spirit that was to lead to Salamis and Plataea. For the first time in history a distinct sense of "Greekness" far overrode the almost eternal squabbles of their city-states to unite them. (89)

The fire of Thermopylae burned in Greek hearts. Word spread quickly that the Greek army had been wiped out, the great Spartan king killed in a heroic battle. With the sense that all of Greece was now in real jeopardy, a unity emerged that had never been seen before. United around the memory of these men who had died in defense of all of Greece, former bitter enemies put aside their differences. Some opened their gates to welcome Athenian refugees. Others volunteered their services to Themistocles.

While Leonidas' battled at Thermopylae, it permitted the navy under the direction of Themistocles to operate at Artemisium. During those several days of storm and brief but fierce battles, the Persians lost hundreds of their ships. Then another horrible gale storm struck. Two hundred Persian vessels were caught at sea. Most of them were lost. (83)