**Persian Wars Battle at Thermopylae - 480 B.C.**

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Leonidas King of Sparta

**What Was Thermopylae and What Was the Battle at Thermopylae?:**

Thermopylae (lit. "hot gates") was a pass the Greeks tried to defend in battle against Persians led by [Xerxes](http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/xerxes/g/Xerxes.htm), in 480 B.C. The Persians won the Battle of Thermopylae.

The [Spartans](http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/sparta/a/spartarisepower.htm) who led the defense were all killed, and they may have known in advance that they would be, but their courage provided inspiration to the Greeks, many of whom otherwise might have willingly *medized\** (become Persian sympathizers), or so the Spartans feared. Although the Spartans lost at Thermopylae, the following year the Greeks did win battles they fought against the Persians.

**Persians Attack the Greeks at Thermopylae:**

Xerxes' fleet of Persian ships had sailed along the coastline from northern Greece into the Gulf of Malia on the eastern Aegean Sea towards the mountains at Thermopylae. The Greeks faced the Persian army at a narrow pass there that [controlled the only road between Thessaly and Central Greece](http://www.livius.org/he-hg/herodotus/logos7_22.html). Spartan King [**Leonidas**](http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/people/g/leonidas.htm) was the general in charge of the Greek forces that tried to restrain the vast Persian army, to delay them, and keep them from attacking the rear of the Greek navy, which was under Athenian control. Leonidas may have hoped to block them long enough that Xerxes would have to sail away for food and water.

**Ephialtes and Anopaia:**

Spartan historian Kennell says no one expected the battle to be as short as it was. After the Carnea festival, more Spartan soldiers were to arrive and help defend Thermopylae against the Persians. Unfortunately for [Leonidas](http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/people/g/leonidas.htm), after a couple of days, a medizing traitor named **Ephialtes** led the Persians around the pass running behind the Greek army, thereby squashing the remote chance of Greek victory. The name of Ephialtes' path is **Anopaea** (or Anopaia). Its exact location is debated.

[Leonidas](http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/people/g/leonidas.htm) sent away most of the amassed troops.

**Greeks Fight the Immortals:**

On the third day, [Leonidas](http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/people/g/leonidas.htm) led his 300 Spartan [hoplite](http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/greekweapons/g/Hoplite.htm) elite troops (selected because they had living sons back home), plus their [Boeotia](http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/mapsgreeceparts/g/092107Boeotia.htm)n allies from Thespiae and Thebes, against Xerxes and his army, including the "10,000 **Immortals**." The Spartan-led forces fought this unstoppable Persian force to their deaths, blocking the pass long enough to keep Xerxes and his army occupied while the rest of the Greek army escaped.

**The Aristeia of Dieneces:**

*Aristeia* relates to both virtue and the reward given the most honored soldier. In the Battle at Thermopylae, Dieneces was the most honored Spartan. According to Spartan scholar Paul Cartledge, Dieneces was so virtuous that when told there were so many Persian archers that the sky would grow dark with the flying missiles, he replied laconically: "So much the better -- we shall fight them in the shade." Spartan boys were trained in night raids, so although this was a show of bravery in the face of countless enemy weapons, there was more to it.

**Aftermath:**

The Persians, whose naval fleet had already suffered seriously from storm damage, then (or simultaneously) attacked the Greek fleet at Artemisium, with both sides suffering heavy losses. According to the Greek historian Peter Green, the Spartan Demaratus (on Xerxes' staff) recommended splitting the navy and sending part to Sparta, but the Persian navy had been too heavily damaged to do so -- fortunately for the Greeks.

In September of 480, aided by northern Greeks, the Persians marched on Athens and burned it to the ground, but it had been evacuated.