

**PROFILE  
WORKSHEET****THE BATTLE OF THERMOPYLAE**

## CHAPTER 4

**T**hrough a narrow strip of beach between a mountain and the Aegean Sea about 6,000 Greek warriors prepared to face the might of the largest army in the ancient world. Sent to stop the advance of the 200,000 soldiers of the Persian army camped before them, the heavily armored Greek soldiers undoubtedly cursed their wait and weighed their slim chances of survival as sand and sweat mixed beneath their bronze helmets and breastplates.

The narrow pass beside the mountain is called Thermopylae, and the Greeks who guarded it that August day in 480 B.C. knew many of them would be buried in its sands. The fight to the death that took place there would be recorded in time and history as a noble battle against impossible odds.

**The Spartans**

The backbone of the Greek force was a unit of 300 Spartans, commanded by the Spartan king, Leonidas (son of the Lion). Impressive in their scarlet cloaks and helmets topped with horsehair crests, the Spartans had been trained for war since boyhood. Since death in battle was their highest honor, Spartans vowed never to run from or surrender to an enemy. Spartan mothers instructed their sons to “Come back with your shield or upon it.”

**The Persians**

The invading army came from every corner of the vast Persian Empire. Facing the Greeks were Medes and Persians in armor of scales. Assyrian troops in brass helmets stood beside Moschians in wooden ones. Eastern Ethiopians, their straight black hair beneath helmets made from horses’ scalps, marched with Western Ethiopians dressed in leopard and lion skins, their bodies painted half white and half scarlet. Warriors from India in cotton dresses carried bows made from cane. Scythians in tall hats as pointed as their daggers hefted battle axes besides Thracians in long cloaks of many colors.

But the finest troops of the Persian army were the king’s Ten Thousand, nicknamed “The Immortals” because if one fell in battle another leaped to replace him. The handpicked elite of the Persian army, they went into battle with glittering gold

decorations, followed by their wives and servants.

In 490 B.C. Xerxes’ father, Darius I, attempted but failed to conquer the Greeks. Furious, Darius swore to have revenge but died before it was possible. Xerxes did not forget his father’s failure. For four years Xerxes planned and prepared his invasion and conquest of Greece. He sent ambassadors to the Greek city-states to demand a tribute of earth and water, symbols that the Greeks accepted Persian rule. Some cities responded, but others—including Athens and Sparta—did not. The Spartans are said to have thrown Xerxes’ ambassadors down a well, telling them to get their king’s earth and water themselves. Determined to punish the Greeks for their insults, Xerxes launched his invasion in 481 B.C.

**Preparing for Battle**

The Greeks knew of the planned invasion well in advance and Athens built a fleet of 200 ships for its defense. At a meeting in 481 B.C. representatives of 30 Greek cities agreed to unite to fight the Persians. Sparta, famous for its warriors, would choose the leaders of the army and navy. When Xerxes and his army began their slow march down the coast of Greece, avoiding the inland mountains, the Greeks acted at once. Athens’ ships, joined by vessels from other cities, set sail. Leonidas and his 300 Spartans marched north to gather allies and delay the Persians while reinforcements were organized.

**A Strategic Location**

The Spartan king chose Thermopylae as the best place to meet the Persians. Called the “Hot Gates” because of a nearby hot mineral spring, it seemed an ideal spot for defense. The narrow passage between the mountains and the sea meant the heavily outnumbered Greeks could form a wall of spears and shields to prevent the entire Persian army from attacking at once. The ruins of an old wall stretched between the sea and mountain, and the Greeks quickly rebuilt it so they could fight behind stones. Leonidas sent 1,000 of the allies who had joined him to guard a little-known pass through the mountains that skirted around his army. The rest of his men raided the farms around his army. They killed ani-

imals and burned farms and crops that the hungry Persians could have used. Then they waited for the enemy to arrive.

News of the Persian's approach soon reached them. "Their arrows will blot out the sun," one scout claimed. "Good," a Spartan is said to have replied, "Then we will fight in the shade."

### The Battle

About August 18, 480 B.C., a Persian scout reported to Xerxes that the Greeks were in sight. He surprised the king by saying some of the Spartans were in front of their wall exercising and combing their hair and beards. A Greek who had joined Xerxes explained that this was not vanity; the Spartans were preparing for death. It took four more days before all of the Persian army reached Thermopylae. Xerxes may have expected the Greeks to flee before his much larger force, but if so, he was disappointed. When all of his army had arrived, Xerxes ordered his men to attack. The wall of Greeks stopped three attacks and thousands of Persians fell in the sand and the sea. The next day the king promised great rewards for a victory and even greater punishments for failure, but not even the Immortals could push the Greeks aside. In front of the Greek's stone wall lay a second wall of bleeding Persian corpses. The smell of death reached Xerxes, who watched the fighting from his white marble throne and agonized over the death of several thousand of his soldiers.

That night a Greek traitor, Ephialtes, came to Xerxes. For a reward he offered to lead the Persians over the mountain path that passed behind the Greeks. At once Xerxes sent his Ten Thousand to attack the Spartans from the rear. They brushed aside Leonidas' 1,000 guards and hurried to join others for the next day's attack. Scouts reported to Leonidas that he would soon be surrounded, and he sent most of his allies away to safety. The 300 Spartans had no intention of leaving the battlefield. Some of their allies also decided to stay, but their numbers were no match for the Persians. Herodotus wrote that the Spartan king told his men to eat a good breakfast since they would have dinner in Hades.

At mid-morning of the next day the final attack came. The Greeks killed thousands of Persians, but they were dying as well. Leonidas was killed almost at once, and the Spartans fought like madmen to recover his body. When the Immortals attacked

from behind, the few remaining Spartans climbed a small hill to continue the fight. By mid-afternoon the last of them, fighting with hands and teeth, were buried under a cloud of arrows and spears. All 300 Spartans, and most of their allies, died as they wished—facing the enemy. Xerxes had cleared the pass of Thermopylae, but Herodotus records that 20,000 Persians never returned home.

### Aftermath

To conceal his losses, Xerxes quickly had the dead Persians buried. Leonidas' head was cut from his body and mounted on a pole as a warning to other stubborn Spartans. Yet as the Persians marched on, the story of Greek courage at Thermopylae spread before them. Greek pride increased, and for the first time, the fiercely independent city-states were truly united. Within a year the Persian fleet was defeated at Salamis and a Persian army was destroyed at Plataea. Frustrated, Xerxes returned home. Against all odds the Greeks had triumphed over the greatest empire of the ancient world.

The Greeks did not forget how Leonidas and his 300 Spartans had lit the torch of Greek resistance. A stone lion was placed at Thermopylae to honor Leonidas. Near it a monument, inscribed with the names of his 300 heroes, proclaimed:

"Go tell the Spartans, thou who passes by,  
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie."

### REVIEW

*Use the reading to help you answer the following questions.*

- 1. Understanding Ideas** What was the Persian plan for attack on Greece?
- 2. Interpreting Ideas** Why did the Greeks choose Thermopylae as the place to oppose the Persians?
- 3. Contrasting Ideas** How were the Greek and Persian armies different?
- 4. Analyzing Ideas** Why is the battle of Thermopylae called a "victory in defeat"?
- 5. Evaluating Ideas** Does modern warfare create the same kind of heroes as the Spartans at Thermopylae?