

The Persian Wars

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1. Notes accompanying the PowerPoint presentation

This presentation and these notes assume knowledge of the background to the wars - i.e what the Persian Empire was, who the Greeks were and so on.

The presentation can be used without notes, using only the text on the slides themselves. These notes, however, give more information which you may find useful.

Slide 1: 500 BCE

This map shows the most important of the Greek city-states. There are in fact hundreds of them. Most are very small - some hardly more than a village with some surrounding territory.

The Peloponnesian League

Sparta is unique amongst Greek city-states. It has turned itself into a military state, whose citizens are trained from infancy to be tough soldiers.

The Spartans have used their military power to establish themselves as the leaders over most of the other city-states in the southern part of Greece. As this area is known as the Peloponnesian Peninsula, modern scholars call Sparta's sphere of leadership the "Peloponnesian League".

Athens

Athens is also unique amongst Greek city-states, but it could not be more different from Sparta. It is the largest and wealthiest of all the Greek city-states. It is a thriving commercial center. It has recently established the first democracy in history.

Slide 2: 499 BCE

As the map shows, the Greek city-states are not only located in the mainland and islands of what is now the country of Greece. They are also to be found along the west coast of Asia Minor (in modern Turkey). This area was originally settled by a branch of the Greek people known as “Ionians”, and is therefore known as “Ionia”.

By 500 BCE this area, along with the rest of Asia Minor (and in fact much of the Middle East), had fallen under the rule of the huge Persian Empire.

The Persians have mostly let the Ionian cities get on with their own affairs, so long as they pay their tribute. However, the current Persian king, Darius the Great, has recently been tightening Persian control over these Greeks. He has installed pro-Persian tyrants in all the Ionian cities.

Darius has recently expanded Persian power into Europe, to the north of Greece. He is planning to expand it even further.

The Ionian Revolt

In 499 BCE, Darius the Great, king of the Persians, leads his army into Europe. Before he has gone very far, however, news reaches him of a revolt in western Asia Minor. The Ionian cities there have risen against Persian rule.

Frustrated and angry, Darius calls off his western campaign and returns to deal with the trouble.

Slide 3: 499 BCE

The Greek rebels seek aid from their fellow Greeks, especially from the leading states, Sparta and Athens. Sparta refused, but Athens agreed.

The revolt is slowly put down by the Persians. After some severe reprisals, they treat the Greek cities leniently. The amount of tribute they pay has been eased, and the citizens left to run their own affairs with less interference. Even democracies are permitted.

Slide 4: 493 BCE

The intervention from Athens has made Darius realise that the western frontier of his empire would never be truly secure until he had conquered the whole of Greece as well. The mainland Greeks, and Athens in particular, are now in the Persians' direct line of fire.

As in most states faced with this kind of threat, the Athenians are divided into those who feel it best to come to terms with the enemy, and those who call for “no surrender”.

Gradually the Athenians come round to the “no surrender” view. They put their faith in Themistocles, one of the most brilliant statesmen Athens ever produced.

Slide 5: 490 BCE

In 490 BCE, therefore, Darius sends an expedition to attack Athens. This invasion begins the wars between the Persians and the Greeks which Western historians know as “The Persian Wars”.

A Persian force of 20,000 soldiers is transported across the Aegean Sea by the Persian fleet (in fact, mostly made up of Phoenician ships and crews). It is landed on the plain of Marathon, twenty-six miles northeast of city of Athens’ city centre.

The Battle of Marathon

The Athenian army marches out to meet them with about 11,000 soldiers. These are better armed and better led than the Persian force. The Athenian commander, Miltiades, places the bulk of his heavy-armed infantry troops in the wings, to either side of the Persian army. This leaves his centre greatly weakened, and it soon breaks. However, the wings sweep in, attacking the lightly-armed Persian troops from the sides and back. This causes them to panic and they are routed. The survivors flee to their ships, and the expedition sails back to Persian-ruled territory in Asia Minor.

Legend has it that a messenger called Pheidippides took the news of the victory back to Athens. This man ran back to the city, delivered his message and then sank to the ground, dead.

The modern long-distance running event called the “Marathon” is named after this battle; it is 26 miles long.

Slide 6: 480 BCE

Darius dies before he can organize a more determined effort to conquer the Greeks. His son, Xerxes, sets himself the task of completing what his father has started.

He carries out extensive preparations. He collects together a huge army at Sardis, the chief city of Asia Minor. Ancient writers give huge troop numbers - up to a million men, in some accounts. Modern scholars think this is far too large. Nevertheless, it was probably one of the the largest armies ever collected together up to that time.

The Bridge of Boats

Xerxes also collects a large fleet. But this time it will not transport the army itself. Instead, the army will march around the top of the Aegean Sea and down into Greece. To get it across the Hellespont, the narrow sea between Europe and Asia Minor, Xerxes orders many ships to be lashed together to form a bridge across which the troops can march.

The great expedition starts

The expedition to conquer the Greeks sets off in 480 BCE, led by the king in person. It marches northwest from Sardis. The fleet meanwhile sails northwards along the coast. These forces meet at the entrance to the Hellespont, and the army crosses into Europe across the Bridge of Boats.

Slide 7: 480 BCE

The Persians march along the Aegean coast, their fleet and army keeping in close touch and moving in tandem, and approach Greece from the north.

By now the Greeks are well aware of the danger closing in on them. Although their city-states have always quarrelled with each other, they now put aside their differences and hold a conference to plan a united defence. They raise a joint army and place it under Spartan command. At sea, Athens has built by far the strongest navy, which she places at the disposal of the Greek war effort.

Slide 8: 480 BCE

The Greeks army consists of about 7,000 men. To stand any chance of success against the huge Persian army, the Spartan commander, king Leonides, leads his small force to the coastal road at Thermopylae. The Persians will have to march along this in order to reach southern Greece, and the mountains here come almost down to the sea, creating a narrow, easily defensible pass.

At the same time, the Athenians send their fleet north, taking up station off the coast, near to the pass of Thermopylae.

The Battle of Thermopylae

To a great extent the narrowness of the pass of Thermopylae neutralizes the vast numerical advantage of the Persians. The Greeks hold off the Persian advance here for three days. Then a local Greek traitor offers to show the Persians a secret path over the mountains. This allows a large force of Persians to start moving around behind the Greek force.

On realising the danger, Leonides, the Spartan commander, sends the bulk of his army away to the south. He and 300 Spartans, plus about 400 other Greek soldiers, remain to guard their retreat.

Utterly outnumbered, these soldiers sacrifice their lives, almost to a man; but the bulk of the Greek army is safe.

The Battle of Artemisium

While the battle of Thermopylae is going on on land, at sea the Athenian and Persian fleets meet. A series of indecisive engagements between them results in equal losses. However, the Persian success on land, plus the losses to their much smaller fleet, induce the Athenians to withdraw back towards Athens.

Slide 9: 480 BCE

The Greek army and fleet both now fall back south, and the Persians follow. The Greek army takes up a strong defensive position near Corinth, guarding the entrance to the Peloponnese peninsula. The Persian army advances to Athens and burns the city to the ground. The Athenians have evacuated the city, with their women and children taken to the nearby island of Salamis.

The Persian king Xerxes meanwhile leads his fleet down the coast towards Athens, following the retreating Athenian ships. His aim is to completely destroy the Athenian navy. This will enable his forces to sail round the back of the Greek army.

The Battle of Salamis

Xerxes' fleet arrives off Athens, and, according to ancient accounts, the Athenian commander Themistocles lures the Persians into the narrow straits of Salamis. Here, the Persian ships become too crowded together, jostling each other and unable to move properly. The huge fleet begins to get out of control, and the Athenians choose this moment to attack. They sink many of the Persian ships, and those that can flee the fight. They return to Persian territory.

Slide 10: 480 BCE

With the fleet shattered, the Persian army withdraws from Athens, and marches back to the north. King Xerxes then returns home, taking much of his army with him. During this march, the number of Persian troops are greatly reduced by hunger, disease and the attacks of Greeks and other forces.

Xerxes leaves his general called Mardonius in command of the troops that are left. He remains in Greece for the winter, preparing to continue the war the following year.

During the winter, tensions amongst the Greeks - helped by Persian efforts to divide them - almost leads to the end of their alliance. If this had happened, the Persians may have successfully conquered Greece. In the event, however, the alliance holds.

Slide 11: 479 BCE

With the return of the fighting season, the Persians fortify a position near the small city of Plataea, and the Greeks raise a new joint army to deal with them. This is the largest the Greeks have ever raised, perhaps more than 45,000 men. The Spartans and their Peloponnesian allies form by far the largest contingent, but the Athenians have also contributed 8,000 men. As before, the Greek army is led by a Spartan commander.

The Battle of Plataea

The Persians wait in their camp for the arrival of the Greek army. This duly arrives, but a stalemate ensues with the Persians not leaving their camp and the Greeks not attacking it.

After 11 days, the Persians finally attack, fearing that the Greek army is being reinforced. In a confused battle, the more heavily armed Greek infantry troops (*hoplites*) win the day. The Persian general Mardonius is killed, and the Persians retreat back into their camp. The Greeks hurriedly pursue them and overrun the camp, completely destroying the Persian army.

The surviving Persian troops fight their way back to Persian territory. Like Xerxes' troops the previous year, they lose many men to disease, hunger and enemy attack. Only a few make it back.

Slide 12: 479 BCE

The remnants of the Persian fleet, meanwhile, take refuge on the coast of Asia Minor. The crews beach their ships and erect a camp a little way inland, on the slopes of Mount Mycale. The Persian soldiers in the fleet are strengthened by a Persian army stationed nearby.

The Battle of Mycale

The Greek fleet - mainly Athenian but under a Spartan commander - arrives. The fleet lands its soldiers from the ships, who attack the Persian troops drawn up near their camp. As at Plataea, the Persian troops are no match for the heavy-armed Greek *hoplites*, who rout the Persians and burn their camp and all their ships.

The Battle of Mycale is fought at around the same time as the Battle of Plataea, and the two battles between them give the Greeks complete victory over the Persians.

Slide 13: 479 BCE

In the aftermath of the Battle of Mycale, the Ionian Greek cities of western Asia Minor asserted their independence from the Persian Empire. The Spartans argued that, as it would be hard to protect these cities from future Persian attack, their populations should be resettled in Greece. The Athenians, however, were bitterly opposed to this idea, and it was not put into effect.

With the withdrawal of the remaining Persian forces from Greek soil in 479 BCE, many of the Greek city-states turn again to their own affairs. In particular the Spartans feel that the dangers passed, and they and their allies returned to southern Greece.

The Athenians did not share this view. A great power like the Persian Empire can easily raise more armies and fleets to attack the Greeks again. The Greeks of Asia Minor fear that the Persians will return in force.

The Delian League

The Athenians therefore form an alliance of the Greek city-states which were located on the coasts and islands of the Aegean Sea. For thirty years this will continue to protect Greece from the Persian navy. Within a few years the alliance will achieve complete naval dominance in the Aegean Sea. It will ensure that Greek maritime trade carries on safely, and will attack Persian territory in the Mediterranean when it gets the opportunity.

Modern scholars call this alliance the Delian League. This is because its congress meets on the island of Delos, in the middle of the Aegean Sea, and its treasury is located there.

Sadly, in time the Athenians will impose their will on the other League members, and turn it into a kind of empire.

2. Questions

A. Short Questions:

1. Which was the city which was at the center of an alliance covering the southern Peloponnesian peninsula of Greece? (*Sparta*)
2. Who was the Persian king who ordered the attack which led to the Battle of Marathon in 499 BCE? (*Darius, or Darius the Great*)
3. This attack was aimed at which city? (*Athens*)
4. Who was the Persian king who led the great invasion of Greece in 480 BCE? (*Xerxes*)
5. The Battle of Thermopylae is famous for the self-sacrifice of soldiers from which Greek city? (*Sparta*)
6. What is the naval battle called in which the the Athenian fleet routed the Persian fleet? (*Salamis*)
7. At the end of the wars, Athens organized an alliance between many Greek states to protect Greece from future Persian attack - waht was the name of this alliance? (*The Delian League*)

B. Analytical questions:

The information given within the presentation and notes will help to provide most of the answers. In some places, however, students may have to use some intelligent guesswork (or speculation, as it is called by historians) to fill in the gaps.

1. Why is the Battle of Salamis often regarded as the turning point in the Persian War of 480-79?
OR: In your opinion, what event marked the turning point in the Persian War of 480-79?
2. What were the factors which led to the Greek victory over the Persians in these wars, do you think?