The Persian Wars: The Quest to Conquer Ancient Greece

A monument to Leonidas, the king of the Greek city-state of Sparta who died while fighting the Persian army at Thermopylae, Greece, stands on the battlefield. Photo: Pixabay

The Persian Wars were a conflict between Greece and Persia about 2,500 years ago. Persia was a large empire that went from northern Africa to the Middle East and even into part of India. Persia is also called ancient Iran.

The Persians invaded Greece twice, in 490 B.C. and 480 B.C. Both times, the Greeks were able to win. If they had not won, the world might be quite different today.
King Darius ruled over Persia from 522 B.C. to 486 B.C. He had already taken over the north of Greece by 500 B.C.

Darius then wanted to take over Athens and the rest of Greece. At the time, Greece was made of many city-states, which were cities that ruled over their surrounding area. These city-states were independent, which means that they were not governed by the same rulers. The strongest city-states were Athens and Sparta.

In 491 B.C., Darius sent messengers ordering the Greeks to join the Persian Empire. The Greeks replied by killing the messengers. Athens, Sparta and others promised to join forces and fight off the Persian army.
Battle at Marathon

Darius put his general in charge of an army of 90,000 men. The Greeks had a much smaller force of 10,000 to 20,000 men. Persia also had strong archers who could shoot a bow and arrow from far away.

The Greeks, however, had hoplites. These were heavily armed foot soldiers with large round shields, spears and swords. Their armor was made of a strong metal called bronze. They were very organized and marched in a solid line, or phalanx. Each man’s bronze shield protected both himself and the soldier next to him.
The two armies clashed near the town of Marathon in 490 B.C. The Persians' arrows must have been an awesome sight. But they bounced off of the bronze-armored hoplites. The Greeks' longer spears, heavier swords and better armor helped them to win.

The Persians retreated to Asia, but they would be back in bigger numbers.

**Thermopylae**

After Darius, Xerxes became the next Persian ruler in 486 B.C. Six years later, Xerxes himself led a huge force to attack Greece again. This time, the Persians entered Greece at Thermopylae. This was a passage through the mountains on the east coast of Greece.

A small army of Greeks led by Spartan King Leonidas bravely defended the passage for three days. Every one of them was killed. Their brave fight became legendary and is still remembered today.

**Salamis**
Many Greek city-states were afraid of Persia, so they went over to the Persian side. The Persian army was even able to break into the city of Athens and burn it.

At the battle near the island of Salamis, the Greeks faced a larger enemy force again, but this time at sea. There were about 500 Persian ships against 300 Greek ships.

The Persians and Greeks both used a fast warship called a trireme. But the Greeks also had a great Athenian general, Themistocles. He had 20 years of experience and had won important battles in the past. Themistocles was able to trap the Persian ships in a narrow body of water. When the Greek ships attacked, the Persians had nowhere to run. Themistocles won a great victory.

**Plataea**

After Salamis, Xerxes went back to Persia but he did not give up. He left General Mardonius in charge. The large Persian army still controlled much of Greece.

In 479 B.C., the enemy armies met again near the town of Plataea. The Greeks gathered the largest hoplite army ever seen. Around 110,000 men were sent from 30 different city-states.

The Persians also had an army of about the same size. But once again, the hoplites won the battle for the Greeks.

**Moving on after the wars**

After more defeats, Xerxes was forced to give up. Around 449 B.C. the two sides agreed to finally have peace. This was not the end of the Persian Empire, which stayed strong for another 100 years. But the Greek city-states were free to govern themselves.

After the Persian Wars, Greece was able to develop new art and ideas. Much of Greek culture was passed on and is still studied today.
Quiz

1. Read the section "Origins of the wars."
Which sentence from the section shows how the Greek city-states planned to defeat King Darius?

(A) He had already taken over the north of Greece by 400 B.C.

(B) At the time, Greece was made of many city-states, which were cities that ruled over their surrounding area.

(C) These city-states were independent, which means that they were not governed by the same rulers.

(D) Athens, Sparta and others promised to join forces and fight off the Persian army.

2. Read the paragraph from the section "Moving on after the wars."

After more defeats, Xerxes was forced to give up. Around 449 B.C. the two sides agreed to finally have peace. This was not the end of the Persian Empire, which stayed strong for another 100 years. But the Greek city-states were free to govern themselves.

What is the MOST accurate explanation of this paragraph?

(A) The Persian Empire continued after the wars, but Greek city-states ended.

(B) The Persian Empire was weak from many years of fighting Greek city-states.

(C) After many years of fighting, Greek city-states and Persia ruled themselves.

(D) Xerxes agreed to leave the Greek city-states alone because he liked them.

3. Use the map and information from the section "Origins of the wars" to select the TRUE statement.

(A) Macedonia was one of the most powerful Greek city-states.

(B) Darius controlled a large empire that included the north of Greece.

(C) Messengers were sent from Greece to the Persian Empire by sea.

(D) Greek city-states did not have any borders near the Aegean Sea.
Examine the image in the section “Salamis” and read the selection from that section below.

Themistocles was able to trap the Persian ships in a narrow body of water. When the Greek ships attacked, the Persians had nowhere to run.

How does the image support the information in the selection above?

(A) by showing that Persian ships were very different from Greek ships
(B) by showing that there were many narrow bodies of water in Greece
(C) by showing that Themistocles planned very carefully for the attack
(D) by showing that the ships and the soldiers were crowded close together