

In the late summer of 480 B.C. the myriad hosts of the Persian Empire descended upon Greece in an attempt to add that divided country to the realm of Xerxes, the Great King. In a rare moment of unity some 31 Greek states had decided to place their forces on land and sea under the command of Sparta. At this moment in history the Spartan state enjoyed two great advantages over any potential rival for supremacy: first, her heavy infantry, the Spartiatae, were the finest trained and best disciplined in Greece, men whose greatest glory would be an honourable, battle death, and, second, Sparta was not widely suspected, as was Athens, of harbouring grand, expansionist goals.

Initially a Greek force of about 7,000 heavy infantry under King Leonidas of Sparta was to hold the narrow pass of Thermopylae (c. 50 feet wide) where it ran between the mountains and the sea against some 250,000 Persians. When the Persian force came upon the smaller Greek army, the Spartans were seen at a distance sitting upon the ground, carefully combing their long, shoulder-length hair--to look good for the coming festivities. Upon being informed that the Persian archers were so numerous that their arrows would blot out the sun, they cheerfully replied that they would be all the happier fighting in the shade.

For two full days Xerxes sent his storm troopers against the Greek lines where the heavier armor and longer spears of the Greeks and the skillful fake retreats and attacks of the Spartans caused havoc with Persia's finest. However, on the third day, a Greek traitor showed an elite division of the Persian army a high pass through the mountains which ran behind the position at Thermopylae. Leonidas then sent the main Greek army south, before it could be trapped, taking only his 300 Spartiatae body guard, 400 Thebans, and 700 Thespians as a rear guard to delay the Persians. Eventually this tiny band was surrounded and, after some Thebans had surrendered, the rest were slaughtered on a small hill in the pass, fighting with hands and teeth when their spears had been broken and shields lost. Leonidas' corpse was decapitated and nailed headless on a cross.

Subsequently the Spartans were hailed as the noblest martyrs of Greek freedom, and a memorial was raised to them in the pass after the Persian menace had been beaten back in the next year:

"Tell the Spartans, passer-by, that here
Obedient to their word, we lie."

Yet showing far greater heroism were the men of Thespieae, a small city-state in the territory of Boeotia whose total population was c. 15,000. The 700 Thespian volunteers were no warriors trained from birth to the arts of Mars and inculcated with the ideal of a glorious battle death, but ordinary Greek citizens, farmers, merchants, and tradesmen who only occasionally took up arms. In fact, the 700 who died at Thermopylae were all the heavy infantry (hoplites) Thespieae had to offer--Sparta had 5,000 such in reserve at home. In the following year Thespieae offered up her remaining men to fight in the final land battle at Plataea. They were 1,800 in number, but lacked heavy equipment. On this occasion, however, the Greek side prevailed, and the Thespian heroes of Thermopylae were avenged. History has unfortunately forgotten their sacrifice and focused on the more dramatic death of the Spartans and their king.