



ANCIENTS TO MIDDLE AGES

GREAT
BATTLES
FOR BOYS

JOE GIORELLO
WITH
SIBELLA GIORELLO

Ancients to Middle Ages

Great Battles for Boys
EXCERPT

By Joe Giorello

Ancients to Middle Ages
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Excerpt Edition

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Maps of Western Mediterranean 264 BC & The Siege of Alesia by Jon Platek, Besvo via
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FOREWORD

IN ANCIENT TIMES, warfare was a way of life.

Men went into battle to settle almost every kind of conflict—from land and religion to politics and culture. Warfare was so important that most ancient political leaders were also military commanders, such as Julius Caesar.

The twelve battles in this book begin in the ancient world, which is the beginning of Western civilization, and move into the Middle Ages. You will learn about great empires that rose and fell, powerful kings that lived and died, and how the world we know today began developing—at the tip of a spear.

The Battle of Thermopylae

480 BC



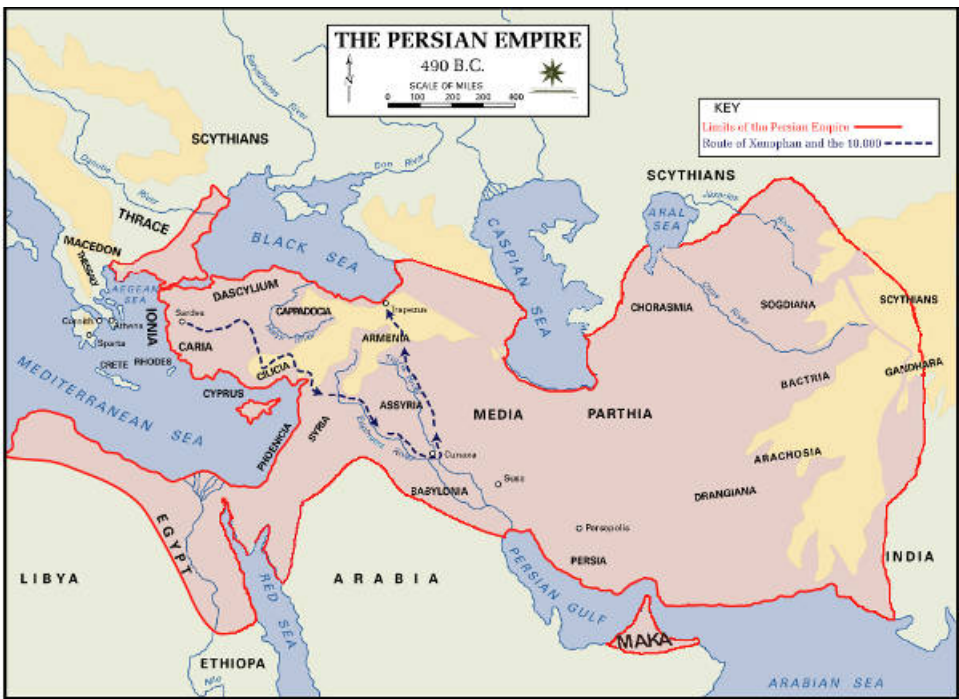
Ancient Greek pottery showing Greek soldiers

YOU'VE PROBABLY HEARD THE TERM "last stand." For instance, people will say, "They made a brave last stand."

Last stand is a military phrase. It describes soldiers in a defensive position who realize they can't win the battle, but instead of surrendering, they choose to keep fighting—to their death. The battle is their "last stand."

History overflows with many amazing last-stand battles. One of the first last stands took place more than 2,000 years ago at the Battle of Thermopylae. (By the way, Thermopylae is pronounced “thur-mah-pill-eye.” In Greek, it means “Gates of Fire.”)

During ancient times, the Persian Empire ruled more than half of the known world. Look at the map. The Persians controlled all the territory inside that dark line. Now look toward the south (bottom of the map) and find an area marked Persia. That was the empire’s home base.



Now look over to the map’s west side (left). Find Macedon and Ionia, which are outside that darkest line. These places, along with some outlying islands, were controlled by Ancient Greece. But the Persians wanted that territory, too, so they launched two military invasions.

The first Persian invasion, in 490 BC, failed.

But ten years later, in 480 BC, Persian King Xerxes launched the second invasion. Xerxes was determined to succeed. He amassed an army of men—some historians estimate Xerxes may have had one million men! Among his forces were 10,000 “Immortals,” an elite heavy infantry force used for frontal assaults and anchoring defensive lines.

Xerxes also gathered together a navy of 1,200 ships. The ships were called triremes and were powered by huge sails and three levels of oarsmen (“tri” meaning “three”). Onboard the ship, a drummer pounded out a steady beat to keep the rowers synchronized. The rowing was backbreaking work because the triremes were so large. Consider this: an average modern automobile weighs about two tons. An average ancient trireme weighed about *forty* tons.



Trireme

While these triremes sailed for Greece, Xerxes marched his massive army across the Persian Empire and into northern Greece. He crushed all opponents. His next plan was to turn his forces south and conquer Athens, a powerful Greek city-state. Back then,

there was only one route into Athens from northern Greece—through Thermopylae, the Gates of Fire.

Look at the next map. It shows Xerxes' invasion routes by land and sea into Greece. Over to the west (left) side, find Thessaly. Just below that is Thermopylae, a steep mountain pass.



Map courtesy of Bibi Saint-Pol

This mountain pass was even more treacherous for Xerxes because Spartan warriors were on the other side, waiting for the Persians.

If the Immortals were the Persians' elite fighting force, the Spartans were the Greeks' *ultra*-elite force. As boys, Spartans were taken from their families and forced to live in military barracks. They spent the rest of their lives learning how to fight and win battles. The Spartans lived for war.

Spartan King Leonidas was encamped at Thermopylae with 300 Spartan soldiers and 5,000 regular Greek soldiers. The Spartans were recognizable by their distinctive uniforms. They wore red

cloaks, bronze helmets, bronze breastplates, and bronze greaves to protect their lower legs. Spartans also carried an innovative shield called a hoplon. It was larger than most shields and curved outward. The hoplon allowed the Spartan warriors to line up in formation and push back against enemy lines while protecting their own men on either side. Other Spartan weapons included a six- to eight-foot thrusting spear that had an iron shaft at one end and a bronze butt-spike at the other, and a two-foot-long double-edged sword whose blade widened toward the tip.



Spartan Warrior

King Leonidas chose to meet Xerxes' invasion at Thermopylae for strategic reasons. The Persian forces greatly outnumbered the Greeks—by as much as fifty to one. But Thermopylae's narrow mountain path would only allow so many men through at one

time. Leonidas' men probably wouldn't have to fight all the Persians at once.

Xerxes didn't want to face the Spartans this soon. He planned to conquer Athens, then force those Greeks to fight on his side. Xerxes waited several days at Thermopylae, hoping the Spartans would leave. But the Spartans stayed, and Xerxes realized he had no choice but to fight them if he wanted to reach Athens.

First, Xerxes ordered his archers to fire a barrage of arrows at Leonidas' forces. But the Spartans deflected that volley with their hoplon shields.

Next, Xerxes sent in his infantry. These Persian soldiers had won many of their battles by smashing into their enemy and creating panic in the lines. But Leonidas' men didn't break, in part because the Spartans used a phalanx formation. The phalanx was four men deep and eight men across—a literal human wall!

At first, the massive numbers of Persian soldiers were winning against Leonidas' forces, but then the bronze wall of Spartans dug in and pushed back. Using their long spears to draw blood, the Spartans penetrated deep into the ranks of the Persians. Then the swords came out. Slashing and stabbing, the Spartans left the Persians to die on the battlefield. More and more blood spilled as the Spartan machine moved forward, stepping over the dead and wounded.

Realizing this was no regular enemy, the Persians retreated.

In ancient times, warfare was brutal and intense. But the close clashes didn't usually last long—probably less than one minute each. During this one attack, however, the Greeks killed more than 1,000 Persians.



Ancient Greek phalanx

On the second day of battle, Xerxes sent in the Immortals.

But the Spartans only shouted war cries and taunted the enemy to come closer. When the Immortals finally struck, the Spartans held their ground using their short swords for close-combat killing. The Immortals who survived this fight had to stumble back to camp over thousands of dead bodies.

Spartan battles were terrifying. Soldiers were sometimes given rations of wine *before* the battle broke out because so many soldiers would die or become disfigured. With that high casualty rate, the Spartans invented an early version of dog tags. Before the battle, soldiers would snap a twig and leave one-half in camp and tie the other half to their wrist. If a soldier died on the battlefield, his fellow soldiers could remove the wrist-twig, bring it back to camp, and match it to the other half to identify him.

At Thermopylae, the outnumbered Spartans were winning.

But on the battle's third day, a Greek traitor reached Xerxes and told the Persian king about another route into Athens. It was a little-known goat path that went around Thermopylae. Now Xerxes could move his forces around the Spartans—and sneak up from behind.

From the beginning of this battle, Leonidas may have realized it was a suicide mission—one of those last stands. His forces were heavily outnumbered, and no reinforcements were coming. That

knowledge may explain why on the third day of battle, Leonidas sent away most of his soldiers, keeping only his 300 Spartans and some well-trained Greeks.

Then the Persians snuck up on Leonidas. Xerxes demanded the Spartans surrender their weapons.

Leonidas replied, "Come and take them."

Xerxes then threatened to fire so many arrows it would blot out the sun.

"This is pleasant news," replied one Spartan warrior, "for if the Persians hide the sun, we shall have our battle in the shade."



Xerxes attacked them from all sides. The Spartan phalanx held—at first—but the battle soon descended into close-quarter combat with short swords. Leonidas' men killed thousands of Persians. But Xerxes' archers kept firing—Xerxes didn't even care if the arrows hit his own forces, as long as he won this battle—and one arrow hit Leonidas, killing him.

The Persian soldiers raced forward, overtook the Spartans, and slaughtered them all.

The Battle of Thermopylae was over. The Persians had won.

But even in death, the Spartans could claim some victories.

Even though outnumbered, they killed thousands of Xerxes men. The hard fight also slowed down the invasion of Athens. And while Xerxes fought the Spartans at that steep mountain pass, his triremes off the coast of Athens were getting hammered by violent storms. Hundreds of Persian ships sank. Finally, when Xerxes' forces managed to arrive in Athens, most of the city had already fled, having heard about the Spartans at Thermopylae. In response, Xerxes burned Athens to the ground.

Now the Persian king turned his sights his next great battle: the island of Salamis.

WHO FOUGHT?



Statue of King Leonidas

Spartan boys grew up to be soldiers—only soldiers. Every other job in Sparta was done by slaves.

At around age seven, Spartan boys were sent to military schools and never lived at home again. Barracks life was extremely difficult—on purpose. For instance, boys were given only small rations of food so that they would get hungry enough to steal. Being able to steal food was a valuable skill for soldiers inside enemy territory. To hone their thievery even further, the boys were beaten if they were caught stealing—not for stealing but for getting caught!

Spartan philosophy can be summed up by some of their sayings. Here are a few:

“He who sweats more in training bleeds less in war.”

“A city is well-fortified which has a wall of men instead of brick.”

“Come back with your shield—or on it.”

By age twenty, Spartan men were full-time soldiers. They remained on active duty until they were sixty years old, pledging their loyalty to the military and their fellow soldiers. Spartans also developed strong excellent character traits such as courage and self-control. That discipline made them deadly on the battlefield.

After the Persians killed King Leonidas in the Battle of Thermopylae, they paraded his body around Greece as a trophy—and a warning to anyone who might resist Xerxes’ invasion.

But later, the Spartans retrieved Leonidas’ remains and built a shrine in his honor.

BOOKS

300 Heroes: The Battle of Thermopylae (Capstone Press)

Leonidas: Hero of Thermopylae by Ian McGregor Morris

INTERNET

The History Channel online offers several excellent videos about the Battle of Thermopylae, including one about Spartan weapons and

battle formations: www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/leonidas/videos/spartans-implements-of-death

MOVIES

The 300 Spartans (1962). The 2006 remake of this movie is rated R.

The Battle of Salamis

September 23, 480 BC



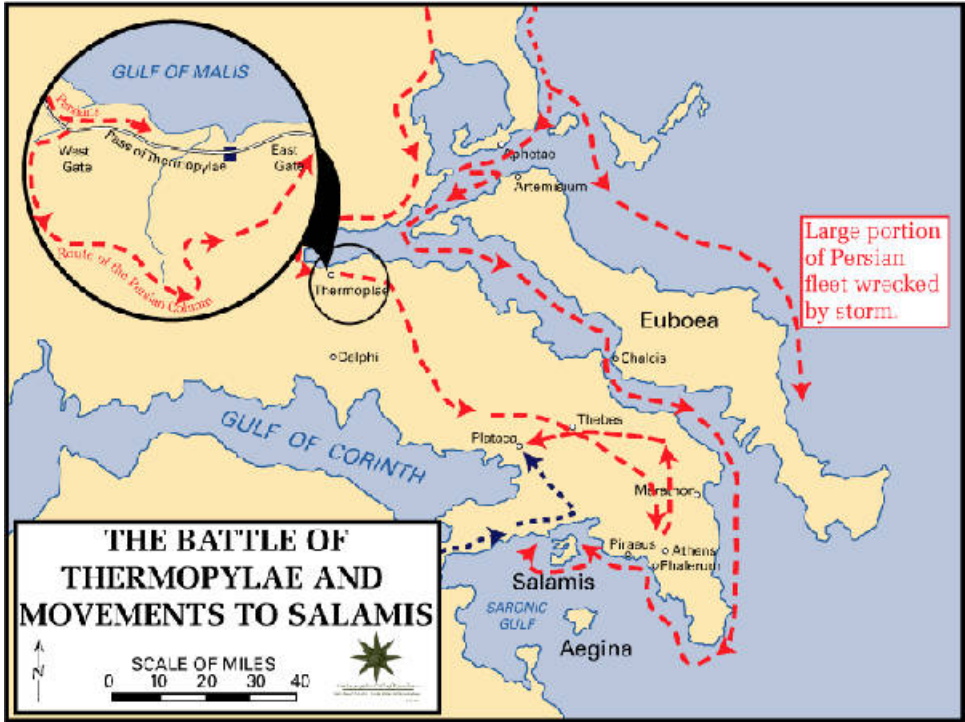
BATTLE OF SALAMIS.

WHILE XERXES FOUGHT the Spartans at Thermopylae, his triremes were sinking off the coast of Athens. He lost half his fleet, leaving him with only 600 triremes.

But the Greek navy was in even worse shape. It had only 200 triremes. Now, with Xerxes headed for Athens, those ships sailed to a nearby island named Salamis.

Look at the map. Dotted lines show the Greek triremes leaving Athens, and the path taken by Greek troops marching over land—all trying to escape Persian invasion forces. You can see the location

of Thermopylae in the middle of the map. Below that, find the island of Salamis.



The Persians expected a quick victory at Salamis. After all, they'd beaten the Spartans at Thermopylae, overtaken Athens, burned that mighty city to the ground, and still had three times as many ships as the Greeks. Moreover, the Persians were more experienced sailors than the Greeks. With all this in his favor, Xerxes felt confident—so confident that he decided to watch this battle from a nearby hillside.



Persian King Xerxes watches the battle from a hillside

Triremes used several tactics in battle. One tactic involved the ship's prow—the front end. It was equipped with a bronze battering ram that could smash into an enemy's wooden ship, tear open a giant hole, and sink the entire vessel, usually drowning the whole crew, too.

A second tactic was to sail so closely to an enemy trireme that their oars snapped off, disabling the ship.

A third tactic was called boarding. Once a ship was disabled, sailors would jump onboard and fight in hand-to-hand combat.

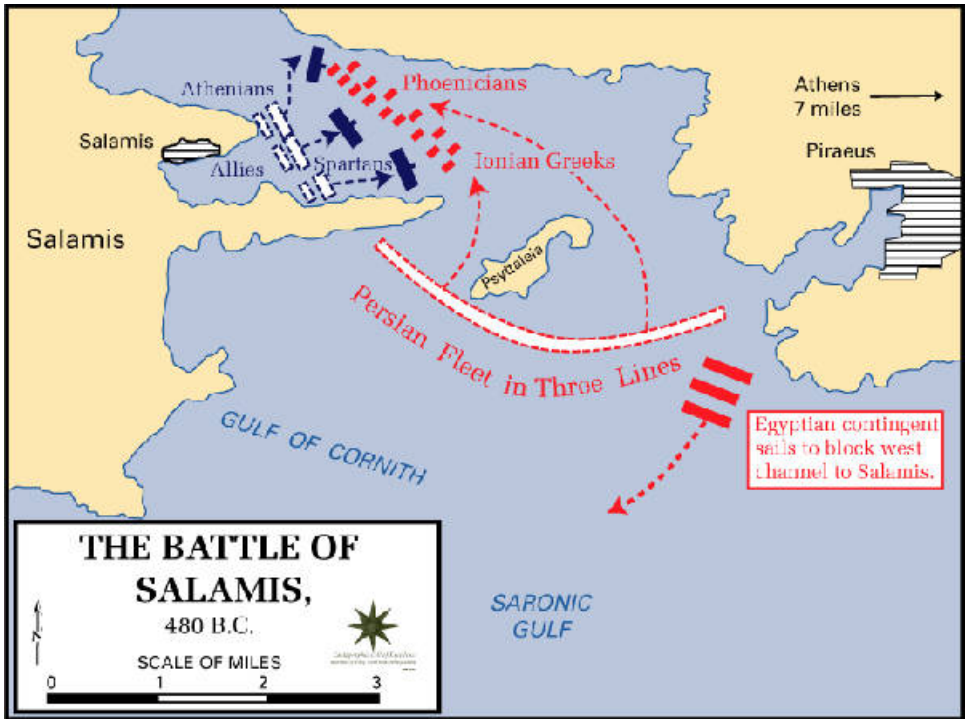


Greek trireme ramming Persian trireme, followed by boarding.

But for all these tactics to work, commanders need to be able to communicate with their sailors. Xerxes had conquered many foreign enemies, shifting them into his forces. Those men didn't speak Persian and couldn't understand battlefield orders. Naval commanders resorted to standing on the main ship's bow and giving orders with trumpet calls and flags. But once the fighting broke out, those signals were drowned out by all the yelling, screaming, and splashing. For that reason, it was crucial to have a clear battle plan *before* the actual battle began.

The Persians' plan heading into the Battle of Salamis was to form three lines of ships. These lines would sail into a narrow channel off Salamis, one right behind the other.

Look at the next map. It shows the Persians in this three-line formation off Salamis. Notice, too, how the Greek ships are lined up defensively against the island, almost as if trapped there.



But before the battle started, something unexpected happened. Some Greek prisoners of war escaped from the Persians and ran back to their countrymen. They revealed the Persians' plan to amass all those triremes in that narrow channel off Salamis, so many ships the Greek fleet couldn't escape. They'd either have to surrender or die.

The situation looked grim.

But thanks to a brilliant naval commander, the Greeks came up with a counterattack. The commander's name was Themistocles.

Themistocles decided they wouldn't try to stop the Persian ships coming into the channel. Nor would they try to escape. Instead, the Greek ships would hold their positions. Stay put. Let the Persians come.

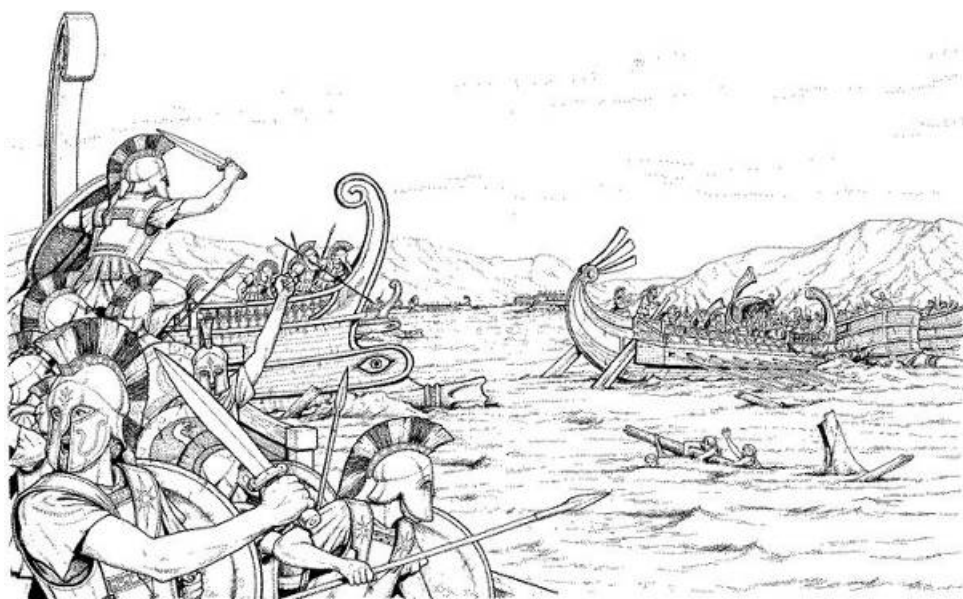
So the Greeks watched as the Persian ships sailed closer. And closer. The Persian ships clogged the entire channel. No Greek ship

could ever escape. Xerxes, watching this from that hillside, probably saw certain victory.

That's when Themistocles launched his attack.

Sailing straight at the Persians, the Greeks rammed their brass prows into the wooden hulls. The Persian triremes tried to maneuver out of the way but they couldn't. Too many ships were crammed into that narrow bay—and more vessels were lined up behind them.

As the ships sank, Xerxes' sailors fell overboard and drowned.



But Themistocles wasn't done. He ordered his ships to find any openings in the Persian lines. As some of the Greeks slipped through, they circled behind the Persians and attacked from the rear.

Now the boarding parties leaped onto the Persian triremes. Sailors swung swords, stabbed spears, and slaughtered their invaders. On land, the Greek soldiers began destroying the Persian army.

The Greeks won the Battle of Salamis—in a rout.

Now Xerxes was facing new problems. It was already September, winter was coming, and his damaged forces were running low on supplies. Xerxes decided to abandon this invasion, withdrawing the bulk of his army. But he left behind a small contingent of forces, hoping to come back and conquer the Greeks. The following year, however, the Greeks once again defeated the Persians. Xerxes finally withdrew all his forces.

The Battle of Salamis won freedom for Greece. And later, it would prove to be the battle that stopped the Persian Empire from expanding into the rest of the known world. Today, it's considered one of the most significant naval battles of all time.

WHO FOUGHT?



Bust of Themisocles

During the time Xerxes was marching his invasion force toward Greece, Themistocles was one of Athens' most prominent politicians and he persuaded the Athenians to build a naval fleet to fight the Persians. Those same ships were used to win the Battle of Salamis.

After Salamis, Themistocles was considered a hero. Unfortunately, fame made him arrogant and turned him into a lousy leader who was eventually sent into exile—banished from Greece. The Spartans even wanted to kill Themistocles, believing he was part of a treasonous plot against one of their generals. In exile, Themistocles traveled all the way into the Persian Empire.

And that's where history took one of its strangest turns.

You'd think the Persians would want to kill Themistocles for defeating them at Salamis. Instead, Themistocles started serving under King Artaxerxes I—the son of Xerxes!—and rose through the Persian ranks.

How is that possible?

There's an old saying, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

The Persians hated the Greeks. And the Greeks now hated Themistocles. That made Themistocles an enemy of Persia's enemy—or a "friend" of Persia.

For the rest of his life, Themistocles lived in the Persian Empire. It was only much later, after historians evaluated his role in the Battle of Salamis, that his reputation was restored to hero status in the Western world.

Today, Themistocles is considered a tactical naval genius.

BOOKS

The Battle of Salamis by Charles River Editors

Salamis 480 BC: The naval campaign that saved Greece by William Shepherd

The Greatest Battles of the Greco-Persian Wars: Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis by Charles River Editors

INTERNET

“The Persian Wars in 5 Minutes”: [youtube.com/watch?v=jMlInn7hKBn0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMlInn7hKBn0)

MOVIES

The 300 Spartans (1962) Although the movie focuses on the Battle of Thermopylae, Themistocles is one of the main characters.

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