

## CHAPTER 13

# “WOE TO THE LAND OF PERSIA!”

## THE PERSIAN EMPIRE AND ITS WAR WITH GREECE

Imagine that it's a few thousands years in the future, and humans and aliens have known each other for a while and even trade goods. They look alike, but everything else about them is different: food, language, religions, customs, clothes, science, family life, government—you name it. But the humans don't trust these strange beings. What if the aliens decide to stop trading and start conquering? Many countries that normally didn't get along with each other would band together to keep the aliens out.

To many Greeks (we're back in the past now), the Persians were as alien as space beings would be to humans. Ancient people tended to be **xenophobic**, and the Greeks were no exception. They were frightened of the power of these foreigners, and didn't understand them or their culture. They were concerned that the Persians would try to take over their land and kill or enslave them. Who wouldn't want Greece? they reasoned. The Persians, they thought, would naturally crave the good life they saw the Greeks living. According to the historian Herodotus, the people in the rest of the Aegean area thought

66 HERODOTUS AND  
AESCHYLUS

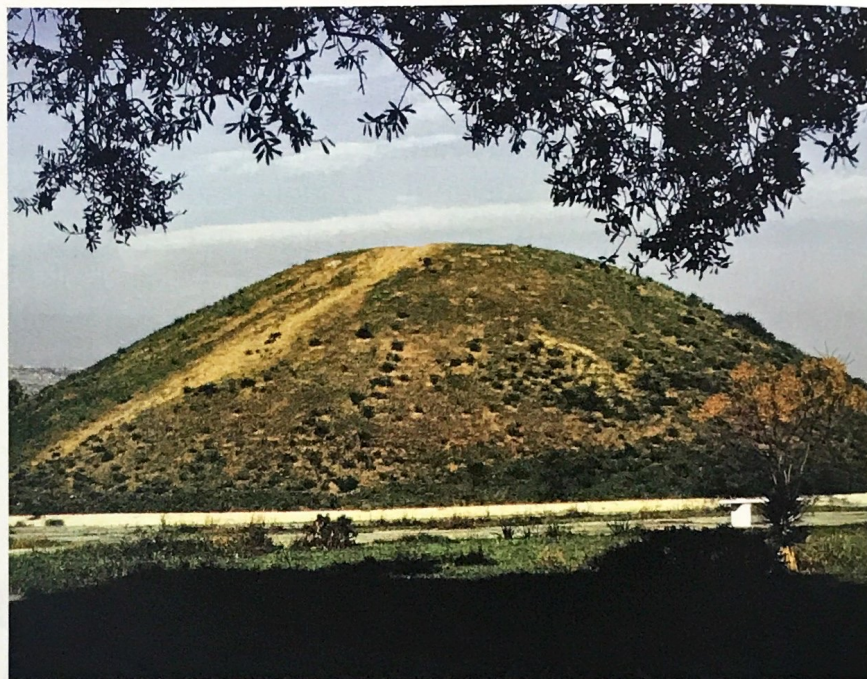
{ *xenos* + *phobia* =  
“stranger” + “fear”  
“Xenophobic” means “having  
fear or hatred of foreigners.”



*The Greeks were fascinated by what they saw as the “outlandish” clothing and furniture of their Persian enemies. The painter of this vase was from a Greek colony in southern Italy and chose to highlight the pointed hat and unfamiliar clothing of the Persian (center) speaking with King Darius.*



*The funeral mound of the Greek soldiers who died in the battle of Marathon still stands as a monument to their courage.*



*Many people think that this statue represents Leonidas, the Spartans' most revered general.*

though their customs forbade them from sending a large army into battle during these holy times, it probably wouldn't hurt anything if a smaller group went. So he led 300 soldiers north. When the festivals were over, the rest of the mighty Spartan army would follow. Other Greeks joined Leonidas, and soon 10,000 soldiers arrived ready to meet the Persian force of 100,000.

Xerxes waited at a narrow pass called Thermopylae, knowing that Greek spies were reporting the size of his army back to their own people. He was convinced that the Greeks would be so terrified at the news of how many Persians were waiting for them that they would retreat. And many of them did, but not the Spartans. They spent their time exercising and combing their hair. The Persians laughed when they heard this. Little did they know that this was the way the Spartans got ready for a battle that might be their last.

Finally, Xerxes grew impatient. He ordered his men through the narrow gap, where the Greek soldiers were waiting for them. As the Persians came through, the well-disciplined Greeks slaughtered them. Xerxes ordered his troops to retreat.



The Spartans were overjoyed. They had held the Persians back from entering most of Greece, and soon the rest of their army would join them and they would chase the hated invaders from their land. All they had to do was wait for fresh troops. But a Greek traitor told Xerxes about a hidden path in the mountains that would take his soldiers around the pass and into the Greek camp, where the soldiers were resting in their tents.

Spartan sentries heard leaves rustling and saw what was happening. They ran to Leonidas to tell him that the Persians were ready to attack. A messenger from Xerxes arrived and ordered Leonidas to hand over his weapons. “Come and take them,” was his defiant reply.

And Xerxes came. Leonidas was killed early in the battle. And then every single one of the Spartan soldiers, and others from different parts of Greece, died after fighting ferociously.

So Xerxes and his forces won the battle of Thermopylae. Shortly afterwards, Xerxes’ army marched into Athens and burned it down (its inhabitants fled before the Persians arrived).

**THE PERSIAN WARS**

**499–494 BCE**

Ionian Greeks rebel against Persian king

**490 BCE**

Persians under Darius invade mainland Greece;  
Athenians defeat Persians at the Battle of Marathon

**486 BCE**

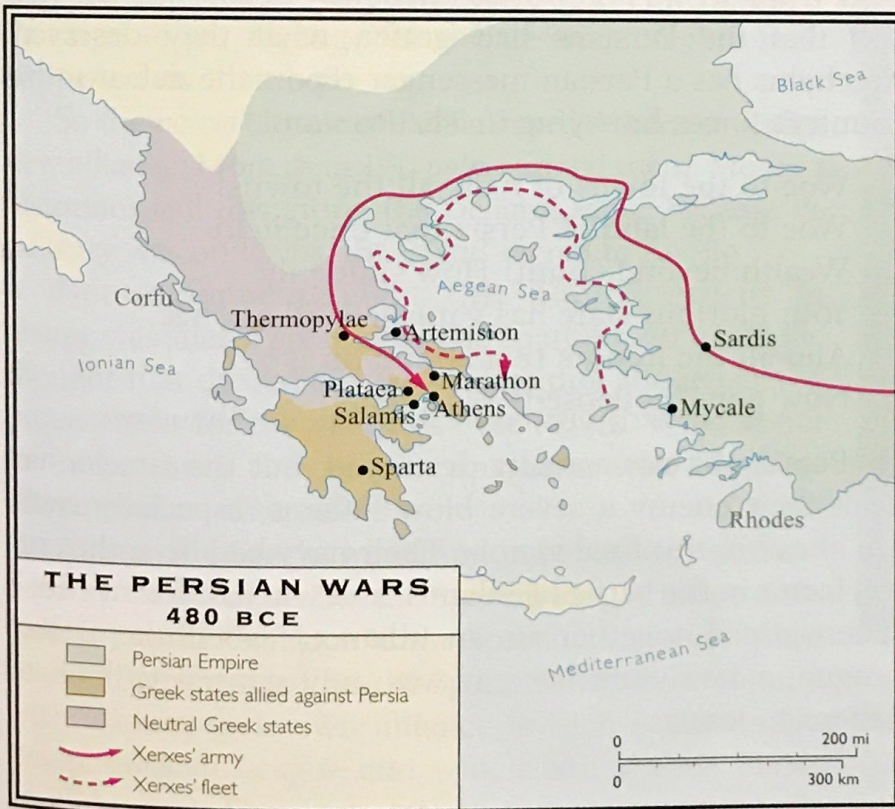
Darius dies and is succeeded by his son Xerxes

**480 BCE**

Persians defeat Spartans at Thermopylae;  
Greeks defeat Persians at Salamis

**478 BCE**

Greek *poleis* form the Delian League





“ Aeschylus, *The Persians*,  
472 BCE

**AND WITH  
ONE HAND TIED  
BEHIND OUR BACKS**

When a Spartan soldier was told that there were so many Persians that the sky would be thick with their arrows once the battle started, he replied coolly, “Then we’ll fight in the shade.”

But the brave Spartans had delayed the Persian advance to the south long enough for the Greek forces to gather at an island near Athens named Salamis. Themistocles tricked Xerxes into following the Greek ships into a narrow channel, where the smaller and more maneuverable Athenian ships were able to destroy the larger but clumsier Persian vessels.

The Athenian playwright Aeschylus witnessed the battle of Salamis. In his play *The Persians*, written several years later, he has a Persian messenger report,

The Greeks behaved as if they’d caught a haul of fish,  
Stabbing the tuna with the tools at hand.

Pieces of oar, and fragments of the wreckage  
Served them as weapons. All the sea was filled  
With screams and groans, until the dark night fell  
Upon the scene and covered it in black. . . .

[N]ever on one day

Have men perished like this, thousand by thousand.

The Greeks were thrilled at this victory. To the Greeks, their triumph was proof that their way of life was the best and that the Persians had gotten what they deserved. Aeschylus has a Persian messenger report the defeat to his country’s forces by saying in *The Persians*:

Woe to the towns of Asia, all the towns!  
Woe to the land of Persia that once held  
Wealth beyond count! How suddenly  
Your glorious state has vanished, all at once,  
And all the honors that attend on it  
Now gone, collapsed! Woe, woe!

Persia was not actually destroyed, but the Greeks had dealt their enemy a severe blow. Athens, especially, came out ahead in this final victory. Their navy had been the crucial factor in the battle of Salamis, and when different Greek states joined together in an alliance, called the Delian League, a few years later, it was only natural to look to Athens to lead it.