

## The Persian Wars: Marathon and Thermopylae

While Greek city-states warred with one another, the threat of war from outside the peninsula could unite them. In 499 BCE, Athens had aided fellow Greek city-states in Ionia, the Greek area of Asia Minor, when they rebelled against rule by the Persians and their king, Darius. Persia is the historical name given to the high plateau area of what is today Iran.

### Marathon

In 490 BCE, Darius launched an attack against Athens in retaliation for its earlier support of the Ionian Greeks. Few of the other Greek city-states answered Athens's call for help. As a result, the Athenian force of 11,000 soldiers was greatly outnumbered as it faced 15,000 Persian invaders on the battlefield at Marathon. Through fierce hand-to-hand combat, the Athenian soldiers ousted the Persians.

The battle at Marathon is known as much, however, for the story of Pheidippides as it is for the Athenian victory. The leader of the Athenian forces, Miltiades, sent the runner Pheidippides to Athens to announce the victory. Pheidippides ran so fast and so hard over the 26 miles that, after he gave his message, he collapsed and died on the spot. The Olympic marathon, roughly 26 miles long, honors Pheidippides's feat.

### Thermopylae

When Darius's son Xerxes attacked Greece in 480 BCE, Sparta and other city-states joined Athens to fight the Persians. The Persian army landed above a narrow pass called Thermopylae, which at the time controlled the only road between northern and central Greece. On one side of the pass are mountains and on the

### Teaching Idea

**A marathon is 26 miles, 385 yards. Ask children if they know anyone who has ever run a marathon and if that person ever talked about what it was like to run that far. If you are a marathoner, you might bring in your number from a race and any pictures or news clippings and talk about how long you had to train for the race, any special foods you needed to eat, and how you felt while running and when you finished.**

**Or, if you know someone who has run a marathon, invite that person as a special guest. If your class has read the Greek myth about Atalanta, you can discuss her race with Hippomenes.**

## IV. Ancient Greece

### Teaching Idea

**C. P. Cavafy wrote a poem titled “Thermopylae” in 1901. Discuss with children what the following lines might mean:**

**Honor to those who in the life they lead  
define and guard a Thermopylae.  
Never betraying what is right,  
consistent and just in all they do  
but showing pity also, and  
compassion; . . .  
generous in small ways, still helping  
as much as they can;  
always speaking the truth . . .**

other side, cliffs and the sea. Before the battle, Xerxes sent a message to the Spartan commander, Leonidas, telling the Spartans to lay down their weapons. As noted earlier, the Spartans were famous for sending short, “laconic” answers. Leonidas’s reply was “come and take them.”

The early stages of the battle were described by the Greek historian Herodotus in his work *The Persian Wars*:

The pass’s defenders [the Greeks] are deployed around the rocks and as the Persians attempt to move through the pass, they are speared. Many of the wounded fall into the sea.

After some fighting Xerxes learned from a Greek traitor that there was a back way that would enable him to outflank the Greeks. Xerxes ordered his soldiers to take the mountain path and attack the Greeks from the rear. On the third and final day of the battle, the pass was defended by 300 Spartans and 400 Thebans, soldiers from the city-state of Thebes, all commanded by Leonidas, the king of Sparta. These brave men faced thousands of Persian soldiers. They knew that they would almost certainly die, but they were willing to sacrifice their lives in order to slow down the Persian advance and allow the remainder of the Greek army to retreat to safety. In the end, all of them were killed defending the pass.

The Spartans’ refusal to surrender and willingness to die for their city-state has come to symbolize heroic resistance. The last stand at Thermopylae has been immortalized in a short epitaph:

Go and tell the Spartans, stranger passing by,  
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.

After mowing down the brave Spartans and Thebans, the triumphant Persians headed for Athens. The people of the city had been evacuated, and the Persians entered an empty city. They burned Athens and would probably have achieved complete victory, had it not been for the cunning of the Athenian commander, Themistocles. Themistocles tricked the Persians into bringing their entire fleet into a narrow channel along the Bay of Salamis, from which Greek fighting ships called triremes emerged to ram and attack. The Persians lost over 200 ships and this naval victory proved to be the turning point of the war. In 479 BCE, the Greeks took the war to Persian territory and defeated them.

The cultural significance of the Persian Wars was enormous. The great Battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis acquired almost mythic status and were retold in drama, poetry, sculpture, and wall paintings for years to come. These battles were indicators of the greatness of Greece and the bravery of the Greek people.