

B. Causes of the Wars

1. The Conquest of Ionia by Persia

- a) For over two hundred years, Greek colonies has existed on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea, which the Greeks called Ionia.
- b) The main cities, Miletus, Ephesus, and Mycale were neighbors of the Lydian Empire, to which they paid annual tribute.
- c) Under the Lydian king Croesus the Greek city-states enjoyed a relatively secure and prosperous relationship with Lydia.
- d) In 547 BC, however, Lydia was conquered by Cyrus of Persia.
- e) Since the Greeks had chosen not to help the Persians, Cyrus decided to punish them. He conquered them and forced them to pay tribute and provide troops to the Persian Empire.
- f) After the conquest of Ionia, Cyrus and his successors were busy elsewhere. As we have seen, the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 BC and Egypt in 525 BC.
- g) In 513 BC, the new king Darius led an expedition against a nomadic tribe known as the Scythians, and he conquered northern Greece along the way.
- h) Now Persia controlled the northern and eastern shores of the Aegean. This meant that the trading routes of the Greeks and their colonies were threatened.

2. The Ionian Revolt (c.500 BC)

- a) As was customary within their empire, the Persians allowed the Ionian Greeks to retain their form of local government.
- b) The one condition the Persians set was that the Ionians, like all subject peoples, had to remain loyal.
- c) When the Ionian colonies wanted democracy, they probably would have been allowed, except they rebelled.
- d) Receiving help from Athens, they formed their democracies, but as part of the revolt, the Athenians attacked the city of Sardis (in Lydia), where a son of tyrannos Peisistratus named Hippias was said to be. (Hippias was hated by the Athenians, because he had ruled temporarily after his popular father, but he had been a harsh ruler. He had fled from Athens and taken refuge in the Persian empire.)
- e) The Ionian Revolt was successful. The combined Greek forces sacked Sardis, the capital of the Persian satrapy.
- f) When Darius heard the news, he had to be told who the Athenians were, since Greece was hardly famous yet, but from then on he stoked his desire for revenge with the help of a slaves tasked with whispering at every meal, "Master, remember the Athenians."

C. The First Persian Campaign (492 BC)

1. Darius assigned the conquest of Greece to his son-in-law Mardonius.
2. Mardonius led an army accompanied by a fleet of 300 ships along the coast of northern Greece.
3. By a freak event of nature, an unexpected storm off the Chalkidiki peninsula, the Persian fleet was destroyed and Mardonius decided to turn back. (The fleet, made of warships called *triremes* could not navigate through rough water, let alone a major storm, because the ships were designed only for war maneuvers.)

D. The Second Persian Campaign (490 BC)

1. Darius assembled a fleet twice as large as the previous one, and sent it directly across the Aegean to Athens.
2. Upon seeing the Persian fleet off the coast of Greece, the Athenians sent a messenger named Phidippides to obtain help from Sparta. Phidippides ran 140 miles in 36 hours. This is where the word “marathon” comes from, since the Persian fleet landed at Marathon.
3. The Spartans would not come because they were celebrating a religious festival during a full moon. Athens had to fight alone.
4. The Battle of Marathon (490 BC) saw the Athenians outnumbered at least 2 to 1 (some say as many as 10 to 1) but nonetheless they were victorious because of the quality of their phalanx soldiers and the cunning of their commanders who created a “double envelopment” maneuver to surround the larger enemy force.
5. This victory gave the Greeks some respite to prepare for the next wave. Fortunately for them, Egypt rebelled against Persia in 486 and Darius died later that year as well, causing further delays to Persia's efforts at conquest.

D. The Third Persian Campaign (480-479 BC)

1. Persian Preparations

- a) The new Persian king, Xerxes, assembled an army that some historians believe may have numbered as many as two million! 600,000 appears a more likely – and still amazing – figure.
- b) Xerxes's army was so large that when Greek spies were captured, he had them toured around the army and released so that they would report back what they had observed to the Greeks. Obviously, Xerxes believed his force was invincible. (This is an example of what is known as “psychological warfare,” whereby you strive to drain your enemy’s “will to fight.”)
- c) Accompanying this army was a fleet of 1300 warships, making this combined invasion force easily the largest ever assembled by that point in history.

2. Two “Great Defeats”: Thermopylae and Artemisium (480 BC)

- a) To avoid the storms off Chalkidiki, Xerxes had his men cut a canal through part of the peninsula. Nonetheless, nearly 400 of his ships were lost in another storm. “Only” 900 remained.
- b) This fleet moved on to Cape Artemisium, where it was met by a force of 300 Greek ships. The Persians lost 200 ships, the Greeks 100. The odds on the sea were now 7 to 2.
- c) On land, the huge Persian army made its way through the mountains of Greece via mountain passes down to Thermopylae (the “Hot Gates”).
- d) Here the Greeks chose to mount a defense under King Leonidas of Sparta, because there was little room to maneuver and the Persians' greater numbers would not matter. The battle would hinge on the quality of the soldiers, and their ability to work together in the coordinate *phalanx* formation in tight quarters. At this the Spartans were the most expert in the world.
- e) Sadly, the Greeks were betrayed by a traitor named Ephialtes, who revealed to the Persians the existence of a small mountain trail which led to behind the Greeks lines.
- f) Knowing that they could not hold off an attack from both sides, most of the Greeks retreated.
- g) Leonidas and his famous 300 Spartans stayed behind to guard the retreat. Their sacrifice has been viewed as one of the great acts of military valor in all of history. In a tactical sense, what it provided was a significant delay, which allowed the rest of the Greeks to better prepare to coordinate their resistance to the Persian onslaught. On a psychological level, it must have been demoralizing for the Persian invaders to find it impossible to break down a small defending force of such prowess and will power for so long. The death of the 300 was a defeat, but it must be considered the greatest defeat in all of history!