with Argos, on which Cleomenes inflicted a terrible defeat at Sepeia about 494, nearer home with her own helots, who attempted a revolt (of uncertain date and duration), and nearer still with the quarrel between her kings, which led to Demaratus’ withdrawal to Persia. Moreover, at some point she committed herself in principle to the anti-Persian cause and even sent out her army to Marathon—though it arrived only in time to congratulate the Athenians on their success.

But there was another enemy. The rich, commercial island of Aegina, its triangular peak clearly visible some 20 miles from Athens’ harbour at Phaleron, was a hostile rival as soon as Athens turned her attention seriously to the sea. There had been one early war. Now, about 500, began a period of conflict or threats of conflict which lasted through the eighties. How many Athenians felt in 489 that Persian flight had left them free to deal with a more immediate enemy?

There is an interesting clue. In 482 an exceptionally rich vein of silver was discovered in the Attic mines at Laurium. There was debate on the use of the profits. One side, led very probably by Aristides, nicknamed ‘the Just’, a hero of Marathon (he was elected archon in 489), later to distinguish himself in the crisis of 480/79 and to organize the Delian League in 478, argued for a simple distribution among the citizens. Others, whose spokesman was Themistocles, felt otherwise. Themistocles was renowned for his cleverness (some did not use the word in a friendly sense) and foresight. Foresight he had certainly shown when as archon in 493 he had begun to fortify a new and safer harbour at Piraeus, and would show afterwards when he tried to warn and literally fortify Athens against the threat of Spartan jealousy. In 482 he argued that the windfall should be used, not for largesse but for the building of a fleet, 200 warships (‘triremes’), which would, as it turned out, be the backbone of Greek resistance to the Persian navy. But that was not his point at the time. He urged instead that a fleet was needed against Aegina, a point which at least reveals the priorities among his audience. Was this deception, or may even his foresight have been a bit blunted by what Pericles later described as ‘the eyesore of the Piraeus’—Themistocles’ new Piraeus?

The Persians felt no need of foresight, only determination to get their revenge. The Great King, Darius, was fond of Greeks (witness Histiaeus; above, p. 37) but not of Greeks who defeated him, and immediately after Marathon he began to prepare for a greater onslaught. But the plans were thwarted by a revolt in Egypt (487) and Darius’ death soon after. Revenge was left to his son, Xerxes. Egypt was brought to order in 485, and the great scheme could be resumed.

Let us remember the situation. Persia held north Africa as far as Cyrenaica, while beyond that was the friendly Phoenician colony of Carthage, itself pressing on the Greeks of Sicily. Persia held the north coast of the Aegean as far as Macedon. Persia held Asia Minor and the offshore islands of the Aegean. Mainland Greece was a very small nut between the teeth of a mighty nutcracker. It never ceases to amaze that it should have been thought to merit the attention it was given. Darius’ pride had been injured (but it had already suffered once in southern Russia without similar reaction); his queen, Atossa, was said to have coveted the services of Greek handmaidens; Xerxes may have been touched with megalomania, but none of these things seems to justify the effort—or the risk.

The nut itself was not wholly sound. Greek attempts, once the imminence of danger had been realized in 481, to find help at any distance, from Crete, Corcyra, and Syracuse, were refused or turned aside with equivocation. North of the Isthmus of Corinth only Athens and one or two small states, Phocis, Plataea, Thespiae, were prepared to fight; but neither Thessaly nor Boeotia had much enthusiasm for the cause. Inside the Peloponnesse Argos was neutral. At the heart of Greek sentiment, Apollo’s oracle at Delphi was counsailing what at the most generous can only be called prudence.

When what Herodotus calls ‘the Greeks who had the best thoughts for Greece’ met at Sparta in 481 and then at Corinth in spring 480, they resolved to forget their differences (chiefly those
between Aegina and Athens) and gave Sparta the command on land and, with no material but some diplomatic justification, at sea (though the voice of the new Themistoclean navy could never be ignored). The Spartan kings could muster some 40,000 hoplites and substantially more light-armed troops; the Spartan admiral (the kings rarely took to sea) something over 350 ships—fine forces in Greek terms, but puny in the face of the army which Xerxes had collected from all his empire and which was on its way towards the Hellespont and Europe as the Greeks were talking at Corinth, or in the face of the navy, drawn principally from Phoenicia and the subject Greek states of Asia Minor, which was to accompany that army along the coast of Thrace while it looked for a river that it would not drink dry. It is impossible to fix even approximate figures. Herodotus' 1,750,000 for the army is absurd; 200,000 might be nearer the mark. His 1,200 ships owes less to fantasy; let us say about 1,000. No matter—the Greeks should have been overwhelmed.

The only answer was to find a position to defend where Persian numbers would be of less account and which could not readily be turned by the Persian fleet (though many throughout seem to have been less aware of this than they should have been). The first choice was the Gorge of Tempe where the coast road to the south turns into north-western Thessaly, and a force of 10,000 was sent to hold it. But closer inspection either confirmed fear of Thessalian irresolution (one of Thessaly’s leading families, the Aleuadæ, was said to have been among the foremost in urging Xerxes to invade), or exposed geographical vulnerability (there were other routes from the north; naval landings were possible in the south). The Greeks retired south, and northern Greece was left to the Persian.

Two defensive lines remained, at the narrow coastal pass of Thermopylae where the fleet could block the adjacent north-Euboean strait, or at the Isthmus itself with the fleet a little to the north at Salamis. Against the latter was the abandonment of Attica, against the former a natural Peloponnesian reluctance to fight for anything but their own. There are signs of some indecision, but the choice fell on Thermopylae. Leonidas, who had succeeded to the Spartan throne after his brother Cleomenes’ suicide, moved north with a small Peloponnesian force, including 300 Spartan ’Equals’, and with a hollow promise of full reinforcement, collected willing contingents from some neighbouring states, with 400 Thebans more as hostages than troops, and occupied the narrow pass. The fleet settled off the coast by Artemisium.

Herodotus does not integrate the operations on land and sea that followed when the Persian arms arrived; nor, therefore, can we. But they were interdependent. The fleet, primarily Athenian, was there to protect the army and, perhaps, to test its new ships against what its commanders must have known were the faster vessels and better seamanship of the Phoenicians and the other Asiatics. With some confusion, some panic, and much help from (it was believed) ‘God’, it achieved both aims. The serious naval engagements were indecisive, but even that was encouraging. Meanwhile storm had already wrecked many Persians on their way south and now wrecked as many more when Xerxes sent a squadron of 200 to encircle Euboea and catch the Greeks in the rear, ‘God’ thus doing his best, Herodotus says, to equalize the opposing forces.

In the pass Leonidas’ men held out magnificently for two days against the best that Xerxes could send at them. But on the third the Persians found an ill-guarded mountain track and moved round on Leonidas’ rear. Most of the Greeks were sent home, but Leonidas, his famed 300, and the men of Thespiae, who merit equal fame, remained; the Thebans stayed too—but not because they wanted to. All but the Thebans, who surrendered, fought and died. It was almost a victory.

Two lessons had been learnt, that Greek ships and sailors were adequate and that the Greek hoplite was supreme. The problem now was to apply those lessons. The second did not immediately arise. When Xerxes occupied an evacuated Attica, his first concern was, very properly, with the sea. It is a pity for him that he was not in a position to concern himself with one seaman,
Themistocles, in command of the Athenian navy which he had created. It was he who saw that the only hope lay in battle not anywhere in the open sea, further south at the Isthmus of Corinth or elsewhere, but in the narrow strait between Salamis, to which the fleet had withdrawn, and the mainland where Persian numbers would not count, indeed would count against them. His problems were to persuade his allies that this was what they had to do, and persuade the Persians that that was what they wanted to do. A mixture of diplomacy and blackmail ('either you stay or we go and found a new city in the west') solved the former; a ruse, a secret message to the Persians, solved the latter. Early one morning the Persians rowed into the confusion of the narrows; by afternoon the survivors were struggling out again. The bravery of the Greeks, foremost the Aeginetans and Athenians but Corinthians and the rest as well, and the skill of Themistocles had broken Xerxes' fleet and his nerve. The fleet was sent home, and Xerxes with the bulk of his army painfully retraced the confident steps of a few months before.

There will have been some celebration on Salamis that night. There was cause for celebration in Sicily as well. Some said on the very day of Salamis, the Syracusans had crushed the Carthaginian advance at Himera. In east and west the pressure was off, or so it must have seemed.

But Xerxes had left behind his general, Mardonius, with a large force of his best soldiers, far more than the 35,000 or so that the Greeks could muster. In face of this the unity of Salamis began to look a little hollow. Quite simply, the Athenians wanted their homes back in security; the Peloponnesians felt happier behind the Isthmus wall. One wanted offensive war, the other did not. There was a winter of bitter argument before Athenian threats were again effective (Themistocles does not now appear by name; instead Aristides edges forward) and the Spartan Pausanias, regent for Leonidas' son, came out to face Mardonius at Plataea on Boeotia's southern border.

The battle, when it came, was more typical of battles in
general than Salamis had been—it was a chaotic affair. Neither side, the Greek especially, knew what it was doing, but the Greek hoplites, primarily the Spartans, pushed their way out of the mess to complete victory. On the same day, it was said, the fleet, which had ventured hesitantly across the Aegean, landed on the Ionian coast at Mycale, routed the Persians who opposed them, destroyed much of what was left of their ships, and so cleared the Aegean and began the liberation of the Asiatic Greeks.

There is no one explanation of the outcome. That the hoplite phalanx was a superior military machine; that the Persians made more mistakes than the Greeks (not many); that the Persians were far from home while the Greeks were at home and fighting for their home; that those who fought willingly as free men, 'fearing the laws more than your [Xerxes'] subjects fear you', as the exile Demaratus had once boldly said to the King—all these things counted, and so did luck, or 'God'.

The results can be more clearly seen. The distinction between Greek and barbarian (foreigner) became one between Greek and Barbarian (national enemy), 'appeasement' became 'treachery'. Sparta had won on land, Athens at sea; were these two supremacies to continue, were they to merge or clash? Athens had won as a budding democracy, Sparta as a monarchic oligarchy; would the difference divide not only them, but other Greeks? So the pattern was set.

Further Reading

A. Andrewes, Greek Society (Harmondsworth, 1975) is the best general introduction to Greek history; O. Murray, Early Greece (London, 1980) is a good modern account of the period. A more detailed account will be found in the second edition of the Cambridge Ancient History; with vol. iii 3 (1982) it has reached The Expansion of the Greek World, Eighth to Sixth Centuries BC. C. W. Fornara, Archaic Times to the End of the Peloponnesian War (Cambridge, 1983) is a useful collection of sources in translation.

For dark age Greece see A. M. Snodgrass, The Dark Age of Greece
Greece: The History of the Archaic Period


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