



0. GREEKS DEFEAT the PERSIANS - Story Preface

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### 11. GREEKS DEFEAT the PERSIANS

Greeks, including men in their 60s, fought with heavy shields. This contemporary depiction of such a shield appears on an ancient kylix (drinking cup) from the 5th century, B.C. It shows a Greek hoplite and a Persian warrior fighting each other. The original kylix is maintained by the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons. PD.

Although he was personally no longer part of the battle, Xerxes left behind an enormous amount of infantry. The Greeks wanted all-things Persian out of the country. On a plain at Plataea, where Persians could use their cavalry, Sparta took command of a huge, combined Greek army determined to force the invaders to leave Greece, once and for all.

Faking a retreat, Spartans - like they did at Thermopylae - lured the Persians where they did not want to be. Then, using the phalanx - a large group of men tied together in a synchronized line - the Greeks fought mercilessly.

It is difficult, from a distance, to comprehend the battle. Their shields were unbelievably heavy. Greeks fought until they were sixty years old, but it became difficult for some to hold their equipment. Heavy helmets would block the soldier's ears, making it difficult to hear.

In this Thermopylae-inspired stand, in 479 BCE, Greek forces stopped Xerxes (this is an animated battlefield) and his millions of troops from conquering, and subjecting, Greece. To the Persians, the loss was not that significant. What was Greece, given the size of Xerxes' empire? But to the Greeks, the victory at Plataea was huge. The Athenians marked that victory by creating the Parthenon, which remains one of the wonders of the ancient Greek world.

Wanting to rule themselves, most Greeks scorned Persian rule. Attempting to create equality of rights under the law, they did not want those rights stripped away.

To be sure, not everyone was equal, and at least fifty percent of the people living in Athens were enslaved. But Greeks liked competition. They liked to argue. They liked competitive athletics.

Persians had a different way. They wanted a calm social order. They appreciated strength through solidarity. Each side condemned each other for their separate ideals. But something significant was happening in Greece and, with the defeat of the Persians, a kind of Greek enlightenment could begin to flourish.

Greek thinkers were beginning to develop ideas. There had always been "medicine," but now we see a theory of medicine. There had always been politics, but now we see a philosophy of politics.

Competition allows that type of explicit theory to take place. And while the theory of democracy develops against a background of slavery, at least those who are free begin to understand how important liberty is to one's life. As a stele called the "Daiva Inscription" - found at Persepolis - makes clear, democracy and Persian rule were incompatible:

*King Xerxes says: By the grace of Ahuramazda these are the countries of which I was king apart from Persia. I had lordship over them. They bore me tribute. What was said to them by me, that they did. My law...held them...*

Listing many subject countries, Xerxes makes a limiting comment about Greece:

*Yaun<sup>^</sup> [the ancient word for Greeks] those who dwell on this side of the sea [in what is now Turkey] and those [who surrendered before Xerxes sacked Athens] who dwell across the sea ...*

But not all the Greeks.

Had it not been for the Spartans and Thespians who fought so courageously at Thermopylae, the Greek ideas of democracy - and the rule of law - may have died in their cradles. Perhaps Simonides of Ceos had such thoughts in mind when he wrote this memorial to the Three Hundred:

*Go tell the Spartans, passerby,  
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.*

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/GREEKS-DEFEAT-the-PERSIANS-300-Thermopylae-and-Rise-of-an-Empire)

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## Questions 2 Ponder

### Why Did Athenians Build the Parthenon?

In 479 BCE, the Greeks joined forces to stop Xerxes from conquering all of Greece. Celebrating their role in the victory, at Plataea, Athenians built the Parthenon, which honored their goddess, Athena.

Do you think that by creating this monstrous building, which still stands on the Acropolis, the Athenians were honoring themselves or expressing gratitude for a hard-fought victory? Explain your answer.

### Which Is Better: A Messy Democracy or Strength Through Solidarity?

Attempting to create equality of rights under the law, in a democracy which actually did not provide equal rights for everyone, the Greeks treasured their self-rule. The Persians, on the other hand, valued a calm social order and strength through solidarity.

How do we decide which system of government is better? Can we ever really understand a type of government which differs from our own without also understanding the culture in which that government exists? Explain your answers.

### How Do Ideas Lead to Enlightenment?

As people in ancient Greece experimented with democracy, they began to think about other "big ideas."

As ancient Greek thinkers began to develop those ideas, Greece experienced a kind of enlightenment. A "theory of medicine" and a "philosophy of politics," for example, helped people to look at issues differently.

How do ideas lead to enlightenment?

Is a specific form of government necessary to encourage the development and exchange of competitive ideas? Explain your answer.

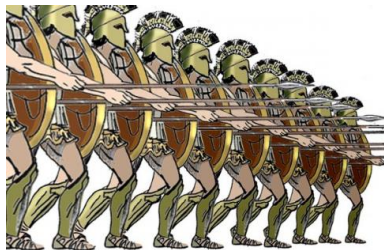
## Media Stream



### Ruins at Plataea

Image online, courtesy [militaryhistoryonline.com](http://militaryhistoryonline.com) website.

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### 300 - The Greek Phalanx

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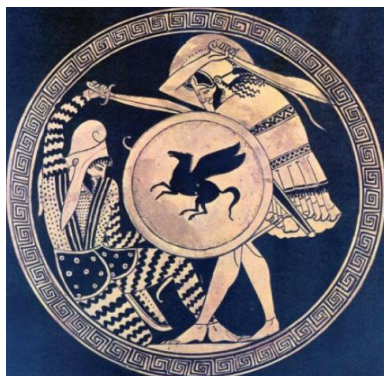


### Plataea - Scene of Battle

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### Parthenon - Wonder of Ancient Greece, Part 1

From, *The Wonders of Ancient Greece*.

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