

BIOGRAPHY FROM
ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS
LEGENDS, FOLKLORE, AND STORIES OF ANCIENT WORLDS

The Life and Times of

PERICLES



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***For Your Information**



CHAPTER
ONE



WINNING AGAINST ALL ODDS

On a hot summer morning, a small Athenian army looked out anxiously from their hillside camp across the plain of Marathon. Less than nine thousand strong, they saw what seemed to be a sea of Persian warriors. In 490 B.C., Persia was the world's leading superpower, ruling a vast empire that stretched in an unbroken swath from modern India to Turkey. For several generations, Persian soldiers had acquired a reputation for invincibility. Sometimes their opponents would surrender without a fight. Their ferocity was the main reason the Persian Empire had steadily expanded.

Now it was the Athenians' turn—even though they occupied a puny territory encompassing just a few hundred square miles. A few years earlier, Athens—one of hundreds of tiny city-states that dotted the map of Greece—had supported a brief rebellion by the Greek settlement of Miletus (see map on p. 11), which lay on the west coast of modern-day Turkey. The rebellion had been ruthlessly crushed. The Persians decided to punish the Athenians for helping to support it. They sent hundreds of ships and an estimated 30,000 men to capture the city. This formidable force splashed ashore in the expansive Bay of Marathon.

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The Athenians, forewarned of the Persian landing, sent their entire army to Marathon and arrived in time to control the one road that led to Athens, about 20 miles away. The two sides faced each other for more than a week without taking any action. The Athenians had hoped that the Spartans—another city-state famous for the high quality of its warriors—would join them in this crucial fight. But a day or two earlier, a long-distance runner named Pheidippides (pronounced fie-DIP-uh-deez) had returned from Sparta with chilling news. The Spartans were in the midst of a religious ritual. They would come when it was over, in about a week.

On this morning, the Athenians didn't have a week. They didn't even have a few hours. Athenian lookouts spotted part of the enemy force reboarding their ships. The tactic was obvious. Marathon was on one side of a peninsula. The city of Athens was on the other side. The bulk of the Persian army would remain at Marathon to tie down the Athenians. The troops now clambering onto the ships would sail around the tip of the peninsula, head up the other side, and easily capture the undefended city.

The Athenian generals held a brief conference. They had already decided how they would fight the battle. Now it was time to put their plan into action. They passed their orders to the troops. The men were not professional soldiers. Nearly all of them owned small farms in the countryside outside Athens or operated small businesses inside the city. They had to purchase their own army equipment. Now it was time to use it.

Grimly, the men began fastening bronze shinguards called greaves onto their lower legs. Bronze corselets protected their chest, stomach, and back. Heavy bronze helmets sported horsehair crests that seemed to add another foot to their height. Then they grabbed their *hoplons*—thick, round wooden shields three feet in diameter—and their long wooden spears tipped with deadly iron points. They must have been perspiring heavily. Temperatures were already well into the 80s, and their equipment weighed over 50 pounds.

These are bronze greaves. Athenian soldiers strapped them onto the front of their shins. They provided protection for the soldiers' lower legs against sword thrusts.



After forming their units, they came down off the hill and began marching toward the Persian lines, about a mile away. As they drew closer, Persian archers launched arrows at them. The Athenians raised their shields. Nearly all of the missiles bounced harmlessly away. Singing their battle song, the Athenians readied their spears and began jogging toward the enemy.

While the advancing Athenians may have seemed like an unbroken line to the waiting Persians, that wasn't quite the case. They were divided into three sections, and those sections were not of equal strength. As the Persians soon discovered, the center consisted of just over a thousand men. Even though they weren't as heavily armed as their attackers, the Persians opposite the Athenian center absorbed the initial charge and began pushing the Athenians back. Their generals must have smiled as they anticipated yet another military success.

If they did, they gloated too soon. The weakness in the Athenian center masked the Athenian strategy, which was to build up the strength of their two wings. These heavily reinforced wings hacked their way through their enemies. Then they wheeled and rushed to the aid of their embattled comrades in the center.

The Persians were trapped. With thousands of heavily armed men bearing down on them, they panicked. Many threw away their

weapons and tried to run away, seeking the safety of their ships. Only then did they make a stand. Several prominent Athenians were killed on the beaches as the frightened Persians finally made their escape. They left behind the corpses of more than 6,000 of their comrades. According to contemporary sources, just 192 Athenians died.

But the danger hadn't passed. The Persian ships began rowing rapidly to the south. Their intention was obvious—to catch up with the ships that had left earlier. They could still capture Athens. The battle-weary Athenian soldiers—a number of them suffering from wounds—cut their rejoicing short. They had to get back home before their enemies arrived. They set off in a desperate race.

The Athenians won. When the Persian ships arrived, they found the victorious army waiting for them. After a period of indecision, the Persians began the long voyage home. They would be back.

According to legend, Darius the Great, the Persian ruler, ordered one of his slaves to remind him about the Athenians every day. His death in 486 didn't end the threat. His son Xerxes (ZERK-seez) succeeded him and a few years later began raising a huge army of several hundred thousand men and a fleet of hundreds of ships. This time, though, the Spartans were ready to lend a hand. Three hundred of them held off the entire Persian army for three days at the narrow pass of Thermopylae (ther-MAH-puh-lee) until a man who showed the Persians a secret path to their rear betrayed them. Every Spartan perished.

As the Persian juggernaut poured into the countryside outside Athens, the citizens fled to the nearby island of Salamis (SAH-lih-miss). They watched in anger and horror as the Persians burned their city and farms. But an Athenian general named Themistocles (theh-MISS-tuh-kleez) came up with a brilliant plan. He sent a slave to tell the Persians that the Greeks were going to evacuate Salamis the following day. The man told the Persians that they could catch the



This map shows the locations of the major battles during the two Persian invasions. The first one ended at Marathon in 490 b.c. The second and much larger invasion overwhelmed much of Greece ten years later before being checked at Salamis. Most of the Persians were forced to retreat. The remaining Persian troops were defeated by a combined Athenian and Spartan army the following spring.

fleeing Greeks if they sent their ships into the narrow strait that separates Salamis from the mainland.

Xerxes took the bait. Anticipating an overwhelming victory, he set up an improvised throne on a ridge that overlooks the strait. He watched his navy blunder into a trap. The Persian ships outnumbered the Greeks by more than three to one, but they were forced into a narrow column as they entered the strait. The agile Greek ships swarmed around the leading Persian ships and halted them. As more Persian vessels continued to pour into the bottleneck, the fleet

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Darius the Great was a Persian emperor who ruled from 522 B.C. until his death in 486 B.C. During his reign, the Persian territory reached its furthest extent. He was shocked when his soldiers were defeated at the Battle of Marathon and vowed vengeance. He began preparations to send a much larger army but died before his plans were complete.

became increasingly confined and unable to move. At least two hundred Persian ships were sunk. More were captured. The victory gave the Athenians control of the sea and threatened Persian supply lines. That forced Xerxes and most of his army to pack up and go home. Enough stayed for a battle the following year near the city of Plataea (pleh-TEE-uh). For a while the outcome was in doubt, but the Greeks were ultimately victorious. The Persian threat was over.

What is perhaps the greatest half-century in human history was about to begin. It is unrivaled in terms of its accomplishments in art, architecture, literature, and drama. Above all, it firmly established the democratic principles under which Athens was governed. No one would be more influential in shaping this exciting era than a man who had been a toddler at the time of Marathon and had just entered his teens as the defeated Persians headed home for the final time.

His name is Pericles (PAIR-ih-kleez), and his name is forever connected with what succeeding generations would call the Golden Age of Greece.

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