Thermopylae and Salamis

In 480 BC, Darius’s son, Xerxes, invaded Greece with an army, one writer claimed, of five million men. Such a figure is impossible but, even so, Xerxes was so confident that when some Greek spies were captured he showed them his army and set them free.

Alarmed by the strength and size of the Persian army, 31 Greek city-states formed an alliance. A force of seven thousand soldiers, commanded by the Spartan king, Leonidas, confronted the Persian army at Thermopylae, a narrow strip of land between the mountains and the sea. However, a traitor showed the Persians a secret pass through the hills. Most of the Greeks retreated, but Leonidas and three hundred of his men stayed to face the Persians. They wrestled and combed their hair as Spartans always did before a battle. Then they fought to the death.

Next, the Persian army marched on Athens. The Athenians had sent all the women and children south, so the city was almost deserted. The Persians defeated the few defenders and burned Athens to the ground.

The Athenians, however, had realized that the best defence was to build a navy. Their fleet, with warships from other city-states, lay to the west of the city in the Straits of Salamis. Although the Persian navy trapped the Greek ships in the straits, in the battle that followed the Persian fleet was destroyed. Xerxes returned to Persia; Greece had survived.

A Greek warship rams a Persian ship at the battle of Salamis in 480 BC. The Greek fleet is made up of 310 triremes (see page 28). Each is commanded by a man under the age of 50 and has a crew of ten marines aged 20-30, four archers and 170 rowers.

Half the Greek navy lures the Persian fleet into battle in the narrow straits where it is difficult to move freely in the strong breeze. The other half then surprises them by attacking from the rear. The Persian ships are smaller and more manoeuvrable but the heavier Greek ships are able to ram and sink them.