Thermopylae

In the spring of 480 BC the Persians set out to invade Greece, and so expand their powerful empire. At the time Greece was made up of city-states, such as Athens and Sparta. Sparta was home to the Spartans, the toughest Greek soldiers. Many city-states joined forces and planned to stop the Persians at the narrow pass of Thermopylae. Greatly outnumbered, the Greeks used the confined space in the pass to help fight off the Persians for two days. On the third day some of the Persian troops, led by a Greek deserter, went round a mountain pass behind Greek lines. Most of the Greeks retreated but one group, led by 300 Spartans, stayed behind. They fought off wave after wave of Persian attackers, but eventually all of them were killed.
Artifacts like this gold cup are evidence that the Persian civilisation was rich and cultured.

A Greek ostracaon, or pot shard, was used as a voting ballot in democratic elections.

THE GREEKS FIGHT BACK
After Thermopylae the Persians swept south. They captured Athens and destroyed it. But then the Greek navy wiped out the Persian navy in the Battle of Salamis. Without naval support the Persian army was forced to retreat. The Greeks beat the remaining Persians at the Battle of Plataea. Athens was rebuilt and became the centre of Greek culture, famous for its philosophy, art, literature and science. It also had a democratic government, controlled by the people rather than a king. Democracy is the system of government in most countries today.

Thermopylae was a crushing defeat for the Greeks. However, the heroic actions of the Spartans in the face of certain death was an inspiration to Ancient Greek soldiers, and many other soldiers throughout history.

The Persian Empire was eventually brought down by the Macedonian king, Alexander the Great.

Ancient Greece produced many great thinkers, like Aristotle, who would have a deep effect on Western civilisation.

Neoclassical architecture, the style used in Washington's Capitol building, is based on Ancient Greek architecture.