



The Greatest Battles in History: The Battle of Salamis

Charles River Editors

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“Forward, sons of the Greeks,
Liberate the fatherland,
Liberate your children, your women,
The altars of the gods of your fathers,
And the graves of your ancestors:
Now is the fight for everything.” – The Greek battle hymn sung before the Battle of Salamis according to Aeschylus

The names of history’s most famous battles still ring in our ears today, their influence immediately understood by all. Marathon lent its name to the world’s most famous race, but it also preserved Western civilization during the First Persian War. Saratoga, won by one of the colonists’ most renowned war heroes before he became his nation’s most vile traitor. Hastings ensured the Normans’ success in England and changed the course of British history. Waterloo, which marked the reshaping of the European continent and Napoleon’s doom, has now become part of the English lexicon. In Charles River Editors’ Greatest Battles in History series, readers can get caught up to speed on history’s greatest battles in the time it takes to finish a commute, while learning interesting facts long forgotten or never known.

When the Spartans’ famous and sacrificial stand at the Battle of Thermopylae ended during the Second Persian War, the Athenian fleet was forced to fall back, and Xerxes’ massive Persian army marched unopposed into Greece before advancing on Athens. The Greek armies were scattered and unable to face the might of Persia, so Athens was forced to do the unthinkable: evacuate the entire population of the city to Salamis, from where the Athenians watched in horror as Xerxes’ troops plundered the defenseless city, set it aflame, and razed the Acropolis.

However, the Athenians remained belligerent, in part because according to the oracle at Delphi, “only the wooden wall shall save you.” Indeed, this would prove true when Themistocles managed to lure the Persian fleet into the straits of Salamis. There, on a warm day in September 480 BCE, hundreds of Greek and Persian ships faced each other in a narrow strait between the Attic peninsula of Greece and the island of Salamis. The battle that ensued would prove to be epic on a number of different levels, as it set a precedent for how later naval battles were fought in the ancient Mediterranean, turned the tide in the Greeks’ favor against the Persians in the Persian Wars, and ultimately played a role in Athens’ rise to a preeminent role in the Hellenic world.

Bereft of much of his fleet after Salamis, Xerxes feared being stranded on the wrong side of the Hellespont, as there was a chance Themistocles might take the allied navy north to destroy his bridge across the straits. Accordingly, he retreated with the greater part of his army, back through Thermopylae and then from there to Persia, and many of his men perished from lack of adequate supplies and disease. Thus, it can safely be said that while Thermopylae continues to be more celebrated and better remembered, Salamis was the decisive

battle of the Second Persian War.

A careful examination of the Battle of Salamis and its aftermath reveals that perhaps the most important aspect that the battle had on Greece was the fulfillment of the oracle's prophecy that a "wooden wall" would protect the Greeks against the Persians. The wooden wall of Greek ships proved to not only protect the Greeks from the invaders but also helped to propel the Greeks, particularly the Athenians, to a position of hegemony in the Mediterranean that was not surpassed until the rise of Rome several hundred years later.

The Greatest Battles in History: The Battle of Salamis analyzes the history and legacy of one of antiquity's most important battles. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the Battle of Salamis like never before, in no time at all.

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