

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

---

## NO GLORY THAT WAS GREECE


*The Persians Win at Salamis, 480 B.C.*

**T**here are few moments in history when so much was decided in so little time as the naval encounter between the Greeks and Persians at Salamis in 480 B.C. (Hiroshima may also qualify, but barring our nuclear extinction, the epochal returns on it are still out.) Salamis was more than just a battle. It was the supreme confrontation between East and West, in which all manner of futures were either set in motion or denied. The Persians may have taken the lead in an attempt to check the spread of Greek individualism, but the other centralized despotic powers of the eastern Mediterranean basin apparently cheered them on. The Greek words "freedom" and "citizen," Victor Davis Hanson points out, did not exist in the vocabulary of other Mediterranean cultures.

As military operations go, the one mounted by the Persian emperor Xerxes has to be ranked in terms of size, lengthy preparation, and sophisticated planning with the Spanish Armada and the D Day invasion. That operation, which culminated at Salamis, turned out to be a last chance to stamp out the irrepressible culture of the West. "Had Fortune favored numbers, we would have won the day," a messenger tells

*the mother of Xerxes in Aeschylus's The Persians. (The Athenian playwright had himself supposedly fought at Salamis.) "The result shows with what partial hands the gods weighed down the scale against us, and destroyed us all." But what if that scale had been weighted at the opposite end? What if the Persians had won? It nearly happened. It should have happened. If the rowers commanded by the Athenian statesman-general Themistocles had not prevailed, would there be, some 2,500 years later, a Western civilization in the form we know it? Or would Themistocles, had he survived Salamis, have resettled the Athenian people in Italy, thus giving the ideals of freedom and citizenship a chance for a second flowering?*

◆ *Victor Davis Hanson has published nine books, including THE WESTERN WAY OF WAR, THE OTHER GREEKS, and WHO KILLED HOMER? (with John Heath). His book on the death of the family farm, FIELDS WITHOUT DREAMS, was voted the best nonfiction title of 1995 by the San Francisco Book Reviewers Association. Hanson teaches classics at California State University in Fresno.*



The interest of the world's history hung trembling in the balance. Oriental despotism, a world united under one lord and sovereign, on the one side, and separate states, insignificant in extent and resources, but animated by free individuality, on the other side, stood front to front in array of battle. Never in history has the superiority of spiritual power over material bulk, and that of no contemptible amount, been made so gloriously manifest.

So wrote the often apocalyptic German historian and philosopher Georg Hegel of the aftermath of Salamis. The Greeks of the time agreed. Aeschylus's play *The Persians* is the only extant Greek tragedy based on a historical event, that of the singular victory at "Divine Salamis," where the gods punished the arrogance of the Medes and rewarded the courage of a free Greece. Epigrams after the battle recorded that Hellenic sailors had "saved holy Greece" and "prevented it from seeing the day of slavery." Legend had it that on the day of the majestic Athenian-led victory, Aeschylus fought, Sophocles danced at the victory festival, and Euripides was born. For the last 2,500 years, Western civilization has celebrated the miracle of Salamis as both the very salvation of its culture and the catalyst for a subsequent literary, artistic, and philosophical explosion under the aegis of a triumphant and confident Athenian democracy. The temples on the Acropolis, Athenian tragedy and comedy, Socratic philosophy, and the genre of history itself followed the Persian Wars: Thus, not only did the victory at Salamis save Hellenism, but the spiritual exhilaration and material bounty from the Athenians' astonishing victory made these cultural breakthroughs possible.

Before Salamis most of the Greek city-states were agrarian, parochial, and isolated, intimidated by 70 million subjects of the Persian Empire to the east, and overshadowed by millions more in the Near East

and Egypt. After Salamis, the ancient Greeks would never again fear any other foreign power until they met the Romans. Indeed, no Persian king would ever again set foot in Greece, and for the next 2,000 years no easterner would claim Greece as his own until the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans in the fifteenth century—an event that proved that an unchecked Eastern power most certainly would and could occupy a weakened Greece for centuries.

Before Salamis, Athens was a rather eccentric city-state whose experiment with radical democracy was in its twenty-seven-year-old infancy, and the verdict on its success still out. After the battle arose an imperial democratic culture that ruled the Aegean and gave us Aeschylus, Sophocles, the Parthenon, Pericles, and Thucydides. Before the naval fight, there was neither the consensus nor confidence that Greek arms would protect and enhance Greek interests abroad. After Salamis, for the next three and a half centuries murderous Greek-speaking armies, possessed of superior technology and bankrolled by shrewd financiers, would run wild from southern Italy to the Indus River.

If the Persian Wars marked a great divide in world history, then Salamis served as the turning point in the Persian War. And if Salamis represented a dramatic breakthrough in the fortunes of the Greek resistance to Persia, then the role of Themistocles and a few thousand Athenians explains the remarkable Hellenic victory against all odds. Hence, it really is true that what a few men did in late September 480 in the waters off the Athenian coast explains much of what we take for granted in the West today.

First, we should remember that the decade-long Persian Wars—comprising the battles of Marathon (490), Thermopylae and Artemesium (480), Salamis (480), Plataea (479) and Mycale (479)—offered the East the last real chance to check Western culture in its embryonic state, before the Greeks' radically dynamic menu of constitutional government, private property, broad-based militias, civilian control of military forces, free scientific inquiry, rationalism, and separation between political and religious authority would spread to Italy, and thus via the Roman Empire

to most of northern Europe and the western Mediterranean. Indeed, the words freedom and citizen did not exist in the vocabulary of any other Mediterranean culture, which were either tribal monarchies, or theocracies. We should keep in mind in this present age of multiculturalism that Greece was a Mediterranean country in climate and agriculture only, but one entirely *anti*-Mediterranean in spirit and values compared to its surrounding neighbors.

Hegel knew, as we may have forgotten, that had Greece become the westernmost province of Persia, in time Greek family farms would have become estates for the Great King. The public buildings of the agora would have been transformed into covered shops of the bazaar, and yeomen hoplites paid shock troops alongside Xerxes' Immortals. In place of Hellenic philosophy and science, there would have been only the subsidized arts of divination and astrology, which were the appendages of imperial or religious bureaucracies and not governed by unfettered rational inquiry. In a Persian Greece, local councils would be mere puppet bodies to facilitate royal requisitions of men and money, history the official diaries and edicts of the Great King, and appointed local officials mouthpieces for the satrap ("the protector of power") and the magi.

The Greeks might later fine or exile their general, Themistocles; had the Persians dared the same with Xerxes, they would have ended up disemboweled—like the eldest son of Pythias the Lydian, who was cut in half, his torso and legs put on each side on the road for the royal army to march between. Such was the price Pythias paid when he dared request from Xerxes military exemption for one of his five sons. Despite the arguments of recent scholarship, the cities of the Persian empire were not in any fashion city-states. We would live under a much different tradition today—one where writers are under death sentences, women secluded and veiled, free speech curtailed, government in the hands of the autocrat's extended family, universities mere centers of religious zealotry, and the thought police in our living rooms and bedrooms—had Themistocles and his sailors failed.

The thousand or so Greek *poleis* that arose sometime in the eighth



### SAVIOR OF THE WEST

*The statesman-admiral Themistocles (shown here in this idealized bust) led the Athenian navy at Salamis. Had he lost, would he have transported citizens of Athens en masse and Aeneas-like to Italy, there to found a new democratic city-state?*

(Alinari/Art Resource, NY)

century B.C. immediately faced an undeniable paradox: The very conditions of their success also raised the possibility of their own ruin. The isolated valleys of Greece, the general neglect from the rest of the Mediterranean world, the extreme chauvinism of highly individualistic and autonomous small Greek communities—all that had allowed the creation and growth of a free landowning citizenry like none other. Yet, there germinated no accompanying principle of national federalism or even a notion of common defense—all such encompassing ideas of government and centralized power were antithetical to the Greeks' near fanatical embrace of political independence and individuality; for crusty yeomen citizens, the very thought of federal taxes was an anathema. Today's supporters of the United Nations would find themselves without friends in ancient Greece. Indeed, even the most radical proponent of states' rights might seem too timid to the early Greeks. In terms of the Greek legacy of regional autonomy, John C. Calhoun, not Abraham Lincoln or Woodrow Wilson, was the true Greek.

By the sixth century B.C., the economic energy, political flexibility, and military audacity of these insular Greeks had nevertheless allowed them to colonize the coast of Asia Minor, the Black Sea region, southern Italy, Sicily, and parts of North Africa. In other words, a million Greeks and their unique idea of a free polis had gained influence well beyond either their natural resources or available manpower. Again, there was no accompanying imperial or even federated notion that might organize or unify such expansionary efforts; instead, roughly 1,000 bustling city-states—as Herodotus said, unified only by their values, language, and religion—pursued their own widely diverse agendas.

Other far older and more centralized powers—whether theocracies in North Africa or political autocracies in Asia—took notice. In broad strategic terms, by the early fifth century Persians, Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Carthaginians had seen enough of these intrusive and ubiquitous Greeks as shippers, traders, mercenaries, and colonists. Could not this quarreling and fractious people be overwhelmed by the sheer manpower and wealth of imperial armies *before* its insidious culture spread well be-

yond the Hellenic mainland and made the eastern Mediterranean a lake of their own?

Darius I and later his son Xerxes took up that challenge in the first two decades of the fifth century. After their respective defeats, there never again was a question in the ancient world about the primacy of the Western paradigm. In the decades following Salamis, relatively small numbers of Greeks—whether Athenians in Egypt, Panhellenic mercenaries hired by Persian nobles, or Alexander's Macedonian thugs—fought in Asia and North Africa for conquest and loot; never again were Hellenic armies pressed on Greek soil to battle for their freedom. After the defeat of Xerxes, when Greeks abroad faltered, either due to manpower shortages or to the sheer hubris of their undertaking, no Eastern power dared to invade their homeland. And when the Greeks succeeded overseas, which was far more often, they habitually wrecked their adversaries' culture, planted military colonies abroad, and then sent home slaves and money. Salamis established the principle that Greeks would advance, others recede, both in a material and cultural sense.

Much has been written about Rome's later great showdown with Carthage. But despite three murderous wars (264–146 B.C.), and a nightmarish sixteen-year sojourn of a megalomaniac Hannibal on Italian soil, the ultimate decision was never in doubt. By the third century B.C., the Roman manner of raising, equipping, and leading armies, the flexibility and resilience of republican government, and the growing success of Italian agriculturists, financiers, traders, and builders—all beneficiaries of past Hellenic practice ensured by the Greeks' successful emergence from the Persian Wars—made the ultimate verdict of the Punic Wars more or less foreordained. Given the size of the Roman army, the unity of republican Italy, and the relative weakness of Punic culture, the wonder is not that Carthage lost, but that it was able to fight so savagely and for so long.

In contrast to the later Romans, at Salamis the quarreling Greeks were faced with a navy three to four times larger. The Persian army on the mainland enjoyed still greater numerical superiority and was any-



where from five to ten times more numerous than the aggregate number of Greek hoplites. Persia itself could draw on manpower reserves seventy times greater than present in Greek-speaking lands and possessed coin money and bullion in its imperial vaults that would make Greek temples' treasuries seem impoverished in contrast.

Indeed, without an imperial structure, the Greek city-states were quarreling over the defense of the mainland right up to the first signs of the Persian assault. After Xerxes' descent through northern Greece in late summer 480, ostensibly more Greek *poleis* were neutral or in service to the Persians than to the Hellenic cause. And unlike Rome during the Hannibalic invasion, Athens by September 480 was not merely threatened, but already destroyed and occupied—and the population of Attica evacuated and dispersed. The situation was far worse than that which prevailed in Western Europe in mid-1940 after the Nazi victories over the European democracies.

Imagine a defeated and overrun France—without allies, Paris already destroyed, the Arc de Triomphe and Eiffel Tower in ruins, the countryside abandoned, its remaining free population in transit in small boats toward England and its North African colonies—choosing to stake its entire recovery on an outnumbered but patriotic French fleet in the harbor of Toulon. And then conceive that the French patriots and their outnumbered ships had won!—wrecking half the Nazi vessels, sending Hitler in shame to Berlin, and in a few months fashioning a heroic resistance on the occupied French mainland where its infantry went on to destroy a Nazi army many times larger and to send it back in shambles across the Rhine.

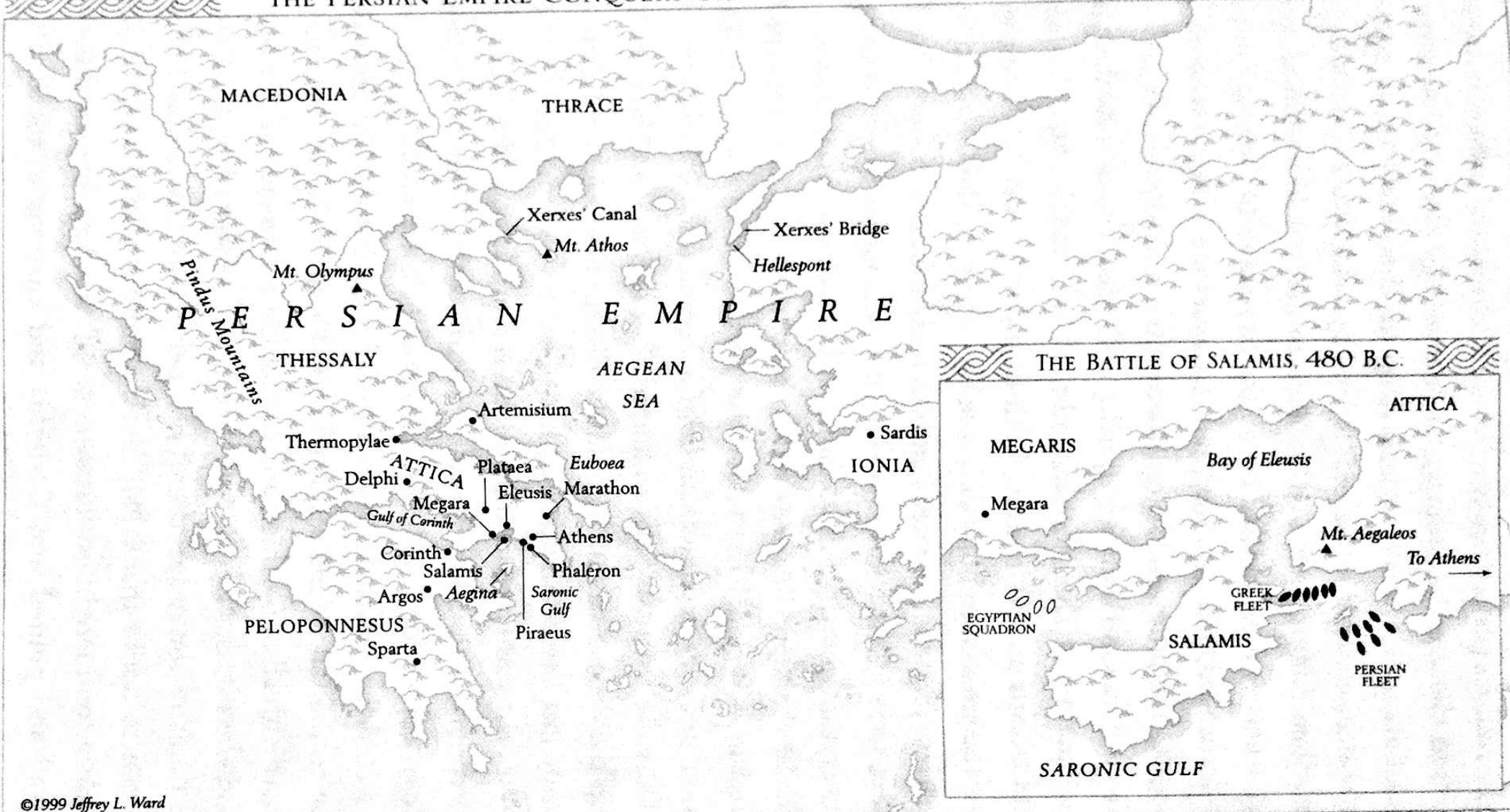
But granted that the Persian Wars marked the last chance of the other to end the nascent, though irrepressible, culture of the West, was Salamis itself the real landmark event in the Greeks' decade-long resistance to Darius and Xerxes? We can easily dispense with the first engagement at Marathon, the heroic Athenian victory fought a decade earlier. The Athenian victory there was magnificent and it prevented for

the time being the burning of Athens. But Darius' invasion force of 490 on the small Attic plain northeast of Athens was not large—perhaps not much over 30,000 in all—and it had previously occupied only a few Greek islands. Darius in this probe had neither the resources nor the will to enslave Greece. At most, a Persian victory would have served as retribution for Athens's recent unsuccessful intervention on behalf of the rebelling Ionian Greeks on the coast of Asia Minor. An Athenian defeat at Marathon would have also led to a renewed indigenous tyranny under the offspring of the former tyrant Pisistratus, more sympathetic to Persia. Thus due to limited objectives and the avoidance of war with most of the other Greek city-states, a Persian victory at Marathon by itself would have sidetracked, but not ended, the Greek ascendancy.

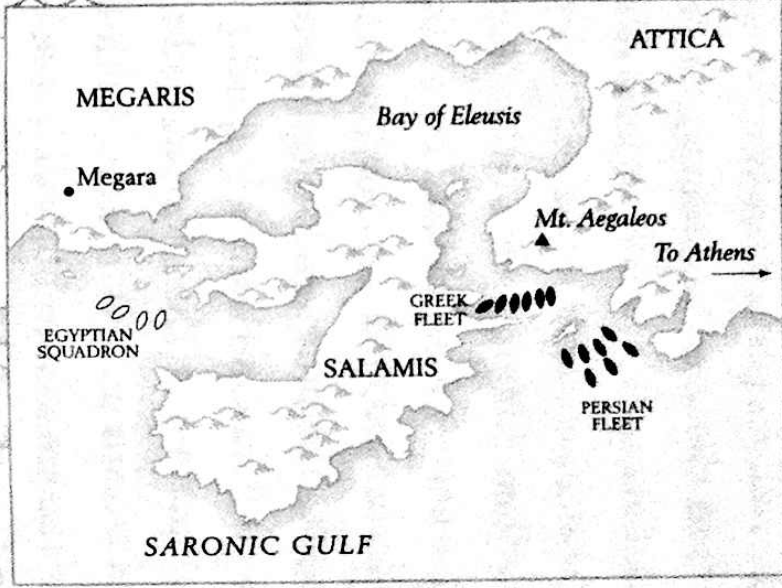
Darius died in 486, and the task of avenging the shame of Marathon now fell to his son Xerxes. The latter was intent not on another punitive raid, but envisioned a mass invasion, one larger than any the eastern Mediterranean had yet seen. After four years of preparation, Xerxes had his troops mobilized in 480. He bridged the Hellespont into Europe and descended through northern Greece, absorbing all the city-states in his wake, unfortunate Hellenic communities that had little choice other than destruction or surrender. Whereas there is no credibility in ancient accounts that the Persian army numbered more than a million men, we should imagine that even a force of a quarter- to a half-million infantry and seamen was the largest invasion that Europe would witness until the Allied armada at D Day, June 1944. We need not agree either with ancient accounts that the Persian cavalry numbered over 80,000 horses. But it may well have been half that size, still nearly five times larger than the mounted forces Alexander would use to conquer Asia more than a century and a half later. And there were probably well over 1,200 Phoenician, Greek, and Persian ships in the Great King's naval armada.

The Greeks agreed to try to stop the onslaught at the narrow defile of Thermopylae, the last pass in Greece above the Isthmus of Corinth, where terrain offered a credible defense for outnumbered troops. At that

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE CONQUERS GREECE: XERXES' INVASION, 480-479 B.C.



THE BATTLE OF SALAMIS, 480 B.C.



northern choke point there was less than fifty feet of passage between the cliffs and the sea. Accordingly, in August 480 the city-states sent the Greek fleet under Athenian leadership up the nearby coast to Artemisium. King Leonidas of Sparta followed by land with a token allied force of less than 7,000 hoplites. If the Persian fleet could be stalled, and the massive enemy army bottled up, all the city-states to the south might yet rally northward, join Leonidas, and so thwart the advance without much damage to the prosperous interior of central and southern Greece.

That bold Greek strategy quickly collapsed, and despite the courage of the Spartans at Thermopylae and the loss of much of the Persian fleet due to storms at Artemesium, both land and sea battles comprised together the greatest military defeat in the history of the Greek city-states. A Spartan king was now dead and his body mutilated, over 4,000 crack hoplites were killed, a large percentage of the Greek fleet was damaged, and everything north of the Isthmus at Corinth lay naked before the invader. An abandoned Athens was to be burned, and then perhaps re-inhabited as a regional capital of the Persian empire—a Greek Sardis, Babylon, or Susa—to collect money for Persepolis.

Thus the battle of Salamis loomed as the next—and last—occasion to stop the Persian onslaught. Had the Greeks not fought at Salamis—or had they lost there—the consequences are easy to imagine. The Greek fleet—if it had survived or if its fractious remnants could still have been kept together—would have sailed south to the Isthmus at Corinth, where in conjunction with the remaining infantry of the Peloponnese, they would have once more tried to fashion a last-ditch defense effort similar to the failed land-sea attempt at Thermopylae and Artemesium. But now with all of northern and central Greece conquered, the Athenians and the largest Greek naval contingent eliminated, and the Persian forces jubilant from a spring and summer of constant conquest, there is no reason to doubt that a half million Persians—aided by troops from even more conquered Greek states—would not have breached the isthmus wall and poured into Corinthia and environs to the south and west. The infantry invaders would have been aided, of course, by the

massive Persian fleet, which could land supplies and men where needed to the rear of the Greek defenders in Argolis and on the northern coast of the Peloponnese. In later Greek history, garrisoning the isthmus had never kept any invading force out of the Peloponnese—Epaminondas, even without naval support, proved that four times during the 360s B.C. alone.

The great battle of Plataea, fought in the spring after the Greeks' victory at Salamis, resulted in the destruction of the remaining Persian infantry in the field and marks the final expulsion of Xerxes' forces from Greece. But that landmark battle is understood only in the context of the tactical, strategic, and spiritual triumph of Salamis the September before. The Persians at Plataea fought without their king—Xerxes and some of his best Persian infantry had withdrawn to Persia after the naval defeat. There was to be no supporting Persian fleet off the coast of eastern Boeotia. And while the Greeks had bickered and fought up to the very moments before the battle at Salamis, at Plataea they were unified and confident by reason of their past naval success. Indeed, there may have been more Greeks at Plataea—70,000 hoplites and as many light-armed troops—than would ever marshal again in Greek history. Thus the Persians fought as a recently defeated force, without the numerical superiority they enjoyed at Salamis, and without their king and his enormous fleet. They could not be reinforced by sea. The Greeks, in contrast, poured en masse into the small plain of Plataea, convinced that their Persian enemies were retreating from Attica, demoralized from their defeat at Salamis, and abandoned by their political and military leadership.

The victories at Marathon and Plataea—and of course the unsuccessful Hellenic resistance at Thermopylae and Artemesium—were not in themselves the deciding battles of the decade-long Persian-Greek conflict. If Marathon delayed the hope of Persian conquest, and Plataea finished it, Salamis made it impossible. When the Persians retreated from Salamis, it was as a weakened army without its king, its fleet, and a great many of its soldiers.

Yet if Salamis was the key to the Greek victory in the Persian Wars,

what accounts for the Greeks' remarkable victory there? From the fifth-century accounts in Herodotus and Aeschylus's *Persians*, together with much later second- and third-hand sources—the historian Diodorus and the biographer Plutarch being the most prominent—and topographical reconnaissance around Salamis itself, scholars can more or less reconstruct the battle with some certainty. After a tumultuous meeting of the admirals of the Panhellenic fleet, the Greeks agreed to accede to the Athenian Themistocles' plan to pit their much smaller fleet—a little over 350 ships against somewhere between 600 and 1,000 Persian vessels—in the narrow straits between the island of Salamis and the Greek mainland west of Athens. The Persians had occupied all of nearby Attica and patrolled as far south as Megara, a few hundred yards opposite the northwest tip of Salamis. In contrast, the Athenian populace was dispersed, with men of military age at Salamis, the elderly, women, and children sent to the more distant island of Aegina and the coast of Argolis to the southwest.

Besides the need to reclaim his homeland, Themistocles' more critical plan was to precipitate an immediate fight while the Greeks still had some remnant notion of Panhellenic defense and his own country was in enemy hands for only a few weeks. Themistocles argued that within the confined space of the Salamis narrows, the Persians both would lack room to maneuver and could not employ the full extent of their fleet—allowing the outnumbered though heavier Greek ships to nullify their enemy's vast numerical superiority. In such confined waters, the less-experienced Greek sailors had little worry about being outflanked and surrounded by skilled crews in sleek triremes, and so could sail out to battle, ship to ship, in massed order, seeking to ram their own stouter vessels against the first ranks of the lighter Persian, Ionian, and Phoenician fleet. Any Persians or their allies who survived could be speared by Greek hoplites posted on nearby small islands, while the disabled Greek ships and their crews could find refuge on Salamis proper.

The sea battle was fought all day—most likely sometime between

September 20 and 30, 480 B.C.—and by nightfall the Persians had lost half their ships and the fleet was scattered. The key to the Greek success was to nullify Persian numbers and superior seamanship; this was done brilliantly both before and during the battle. Misled into thinking the Greeks were withdrawing to the northwest through the channel between Megara and Salamis, the Persians committed what would turn out to be two blunders: First, they detached a large portion of their armada to safeguard the exit, thus drawing off valuable ships from the scene of the battle itself. Second, Xerxes ordered his forces, while it was still night, to sail up the channel between Salamis and the Attic mainland—ensuring that his crews received no sleep or food, while nullifying their numerical superiority in the confined waters. Our ancient accounts are in conflict over the details of the fighting, but it seems most likely that about 350 Greek triremes set out in two lines, each ranging about two miles long across the channel, intent on ramming the three opposing lines of Persian ships, which were in disorder and at this point perhaps only enjoyed a two-to-one numerical advantage. Herodotus, Aeschylus, and later sources say little about the actual collision, but the Greeks, desperate to ensure the safety of their families on Salamis and to the west in the Peloponnese, used their heavier ships to repeatedly ram Xerxes' fleet, until his various national contingents began to break off and flee the melee. Although they still outnumbered the Greek fleet, the Persians' morale was shattered and within a few days, Xerxes sailed home to the Hellespont, accompanied by an infantry guard of 60,000, leaving behind his surrogate Mardonius with a large army to continue the struggle on land the next spring. Such are the barest outlines of the battle of Salamis.

On at least two critical occasions, the leadership of Themistocles ensured that the battle was fought at Salamis and that it was won there. Quite literally, had he not been present or had he advised different measures, the Greeks either would not have engaged the Persians or they would have been defeated. Very shortly afterward the Persian Wars would have been lost, and the culture of the West would have died in its

infancy after little more than two centuries. Other than Themistocles, there was no other Greek leader able or willing to marshal the Hellenic forces by sea in defense of Athens.

First, the decision to fight the Persians at sea seems to have been Themistocles' own. Earlier he had convinced his countrymen that the Delphic oracle's prophecy of salvation through the "wooden wall" meant the new Athenian fleet off the coast, especially the mention of "Divine Salamis" in Apollo's last two lines of the hexameter verse. Thus the Athenians had evacuated Attica and their capital at Athens, and fled by sea on Themistocles' initiative—a wise move since die-hard conservative hoplite infantrymen would have preferred to commit to a glorious last stand in the Athenian plain. And we should remember that the Athenian fleet of some 250 ships was recently constructed and in excellent shape—and entirely due to the persistence of Themistocles' statesmanship two years earlier. In a heated and polarizing debate, he had previously convinced the Athenian assembly not to dole out the returns from their newly opened Attic silver mines at Laurium to individual citizens, but rather to use that income to build ships and train seamen to protect the new democracy from either Greek or Persian attack. His prescient efforts in 482 had ensured that the Athenians now had a newly constructed armada right off its shores.

After the battered Greek flotilla limped down the coast from Artemesium, Herodotus relates that Eurybiades, the Spartan commander of the reconstituted Greek combined fleet, put the decision of where to fight to a council of Greek admirals. We should believe Herodotus' account that the non-Athenian Greeks quickly urged a withdrawal to bases to the south in Argolis, where they could fashion a defense at the nearby Isthmus of Corinth: "Since Attica was already lost, the majority of the views that were given came to the same conclusion, that is to sail to the isthmus and fight for the Peloponnese." That way, the Greeks felt, if defeated, they might still find refuge in their own harbors.

At that point in his narrative, Herodotus makes the Athenian Mne-



siphilus despair of such a decision: "Then everyone will go back to their own city, and neither Eurybiades nor any other will be able to hold them together, but the fleet will be scattered abroad and Greece shall perish through its own stupidity." Like the failed Ionian revolt a decade earlier, the mainland Greeks, Mnesiphilus knew, would also disperse after a crushing defeat, all boasting of further resistance as they privately sought accommodation with the Persians.

But once rebuffed, Themistocles immediately called a second meeting and convinced Eurybiades to marshal the Greeks at Salamis and fight where the narrow channels between the mainland would favor the defenders, where victory meant the salvation of the displaced Athenian people, and where the Peloponnesians could defend their homeland while the enemy was still distant. Themistocles added that the Greeks could ill afford to give up any more Greek territory—the islands in the Saronic Gulf and the Megarid were now defenseless. Indeed, the Persians were building a mole to Salamis itself, over which they planned to march in order to capture the exiled Athenians holed up on the island.

It would be utter insanity, Themistocles added, to fight in the open seas off Corinth where the Greeks' slower ships and smaller numbers ensured that they would be enveloped and outmaneuvered. Finally, now in open council, he threatened to take the Athenian fleet out of battle altogether and transport his people en masse over to Italy to refound the city, should the Greeks sail away and abandon Salamis. To this last-ditch effort and threats, the Greek admirals reluctantly gave in. The decision in mid-September was made to stay put and wait for the enemy. But would the Persian ships come into the narrow straits, or simply wait off the occupied Attic coast for the nearby moored Greek ships to feud and disband?

Themistocles' second great feat was to lure the invaders' vessels into the narrows. Herodotus reports the story that Themistocles sent his slave Sicinnus across the channel at night to the Persian camp with a planted story: Themistocles and his Athenians wished a Persian victory, Sicinnus reported to the enemy. He added that the Greeks were squabbling and

about to flee from Salamis for the isthmus. Xerxes' last chance to trap them would be to sail immediately in the morning between Attica and Salamis and catch the Greek ships unprepared and unorganized. Indeed, the Athenians and others might switch sides and join the Persians once they entered the straits.

Classical scholars still argue over the authenticity of Herodotus's story of a Themistoclean ruse. While the tale appears melodramatic and puts the decision to deploy over a 1,000 ships on the rumor of a single slave, there is no reason to doubt either Themistocles' guile or the Persians' gullibility. After all, the Persians a few weeks earlier had won at Thermopylae solely through the betrayal of Ephialtes, a Greek traitor, who showed them a route around the pass. Very early the next morning, after the successful nocturnal mission of Sicinnus, the Persians were convinced by the ruse and began rowing into the narrows and the Greek trap. From the descriptions of Herodotus and Aeschylus, the Persians ships were stacked and confused in the narrow bay off Salamis and were unable to use either their numbers or swiftness to penetrate or outflank the Greeks, who methodically rammed them with their heavier vessels. Themistocles fought bravely in his own clearly marked ship, while Xerxes watched the debacle in safety from his throne atop nearby Mount Aegaleus.

By any fair measure, Themistocles seems mostly responsible for the Greek victory. The existence of a large Athenian fleet was critical to the Greek cause and its creation was his legacy. Other than at Salamis, there were no other naval theaters between Athens and the southern Peloponnese that so favored the smaller and slower Greek fleet. Once invaded, Themistocles persuaded his countrymen to put their faith in ships, not hoplites, had them evacuate Attica, and then convinced the Greek admiralty to risk an all-out engagement in Athenian waters, which alone offered the chance for victory. Whatever the actual circumstances of the Persians' costly decision to fight according to Greek wishes, contemporaries at least believed that Themistocles had fooled Xerxes into committing his forces immediately into the narrows. And finally, at the key

moment of the engagement Themistocles led the Athenian contingent, aided by favorable tides, to cut into the enemy flank and rout the Persian fleet. In short, the key to the salvation of the West was the Persian defeat by the Greeks, which required a victory at Salamis, which in turn could not have occurred without the repeated efforts—all against opposition—of a single Athenian statesman. Had he wavered, had he been killed, or had he lacked the moral and intellectual force to press home his arguments, it is likely that Greece would have become a satrapy of Persia.

There is a postscript to Salamis that is too often forgotten. The Greek victory may have saved the West by ensuring that Hellenism would not be extinguished after a mere two centuries of polis culture. But just as importantly, the victory was a catalyst for the entire Athenian democratic renaissance. As Aristotle saw more than a century and a half later in his *Politics*, what had been a rather ordinary Greek polis, in the midst of a recent experiment of allowing the native-born poor to vote, would now suddenly inherit the cultural leadership of Greece.

Because Salamis was a victory of “the naval crowd,” in the next century the influence of Athenian landless oarsmen would only increase, as they demanded greater political representation commensurate with their prowess on the all-important seas. The newly empowered Athenian citizenry refashioned Athenian democracy, which would soon build the Parthenon, subsidize the tragedians, send its triremes throughout the Aegean, exterminate the Melians, and execute Socrates. Marathon had created the myth of Athenian infantry; Salamis, the far greater victory, had just superseded it. Imperialists like Pericles, Cleon, and Alcibiades, not the descendants of the veterans of Marathon, were the key players on the horizon.

No wonder crotchety Plato in his *Laws* argued that while Marathon had started the string of Greek successes and Plataea had finished it, Salamis “made the Greeks worse as people.” More than a century after the battle, Plato saw Salamis as a critical juncture in the entire evolution of early Western culture. Before Salamis, Greek city-states embraced an entire array of quite necessary hierarchies—property qualifications to

vote, wars fought exclusively by those landowners meeting the infantry census, and a general absence of taxes, navies, and imperialism. Those protocols defined freedom and equality in terms of a minority of the population who had ample capital, education, and land. Before Salamis, the essence of the polis was not equality for all, but the search for moral virtue for all, guided by a consensus of properly qualified and gifted men.

Plato, Aristotle, and most other Greek thinkers from Thucydides to Xenophon were not mere elitists. Rather, they saw the inherent dangers in the license and affluence that accrued from radically democratic government, state entitlement, free expression, and market capitalism. Without innate checks and balances, in this more restrictive view, the polis would turn out a highly individualistic, but self-absorbed citizen with no interest in communal sacrifices or moral virtue. Better, the conservatives felt, that government should hinge on the majority votes of only those educated and informed citizens with some financial solvency. War—like Marathon and Plataea—should be for the defense of real property, on land, and require martial courage, not mere technology or numerical superiority. Citizens should own their own farms, provide their own weapons, and be responsible for their own economic security—not seek wage labor, public employment, or government entitlement. The oarsmen of Salamis changed all that in an afternoon.

With the Aegean wide open after the retreat of the Persian fleet at Salamis, and Athens now at the vanguard of the Greek resistance, radical democracy and its refutation of the old polis were at hand. The philosophers may have hated Salamis, but Salamis had saved Greece, and so the poor under the leadership of Themistocles had not ruined, but reinvented, Greece.

A new, more dynamic, exciting, and in some sense reckless West would emerge under the leadership of the boisterous Athenian *demos*. What later philosophers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Spengler would deplore about Western culture—its rampant equality, uniform sameness, and interest in crass material bounty—in some sense started at Salamis, an unfortunate “accident,” Aristotle said, but one that nevertheless

shifted forever the emphasis of Western civilization toward more egalitarian democracy and a more capitalistic economy. Whatever we may think of the great strengths of, or dangers, in present-day Western culture—consumer democracy increasingly set free, rights ever more expanded, the responsibilities of the citizenry further excused—that mobile and dynamic tradition is also due to Themistocles' September victory off Salamis.

In late September 480, Themistocles and his poor Athenians not only saved Greece and embryonic Western civilization from the Persians, but also redefined the West as something more egalitarian, restless—and volatile—that would evolve into a society that we more or less recognize today.