

# ANCIENT HISTORY

## Greece 500-440BC – The Persian Wars

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### Greek Victory

Unity of the Greeks had a significant contribution to their victory in the Persian Wars. This began with the formation of the Pan Hellenic League in 481 BC. Athens and Sparta called for the Greek congress at the Isthmus of Corinth to decide the best way to defend Greece; in all 31 states responded. Despite the fact that the league lacked unity from the beginning, it was a significant union of the polis that led to their victory, through their ability to make decisions on behalf of all of Greece's safety. Themistocles understood the importance of unity between Greek states and surrendered overall command to the Spartans because he knew other Peloponnesian states would accept Athenians as their leaders; he thereby strengthened this unity, leading to victory.

After the 480 Battle of Thermopylae, Mardonius tried to corrupt the relationships between Athens and Sparta using diplomacy and bribery but failed to shake the unyielding bond between the polis, highlighting the primary role of unity created by Leonidas at Thermopylae by dismissing the Greek troops and staying behind with his 300 Spartiates, contributing to Greek victory, despite his death. According to Modern Historian Hammond, "The Battle of Plataea was the finest achievement of Greek unity." It saw the unification of Athenians and Spartan forces under the commandship of Pausanias-showing they could work together when their freedom was threatened. According to Thucydides "it was by common effort that the foreign invader was repelled" and Greek victory was able to be achieved.

The armour and weaponry of the Greeks had a significant impact on their win as it complimented the plains on which they fought and the type of fighting e.g. the Battle of Marathon and Plataea where it was open plains and good for hand to hand combat. The Greeks had defensive armour, bronze greaves, hoplon shields with iron headed spears and iron swords. Persians wore little or no armour, carry wicker shields which were useless against Greeks. Alan Lloyd says "Persian archery was alarmingly accurate." Tactics worked in conjunction with the armour and weaponry of Greeks, allowing for them to be victorious. Greeks fought in a phalanx formation, charging in tight shoulder to shoulder ranks with overlapping shields and thrusting spears. Conflict was up close, hand to hand combat which the Persians weren't used to as they fought from a distance with bow and arrows. Miltiades – an asset to the Greek army due to his previous knowledge of Persian tactics from being tyrant of the Chersonese – made the Greek troops in the 490 Battle of Marathon to use unconventional tactics that allowed for Greek victory. According to Herodotus, "the ranks of the centre [of the phalanx] were diminished" while the "wings were made strong." This allowed the Persians to break through the centre while the wings would encircle and trap the Persians. He also unconventionally instructed his soldiers to run thus engaging the enemy sooner and reducing the impact of the Persian archers. Ultimately these tactics of Miltiades allowed Greek victory at Marathon and was used in many other battle like Thermopylae and Plataea.

Strategies used by leaders in the Persian wars had an important contribution to Greek victory. At Marathon in 490, Miltiades' strategy was to strike "while the cavalry were away" according to the Suda Source – revealing his foresight which led to victory at Marathon; if it wasn't for this decision due to the absence of cavalry, the Athenians may not have fought, signifying the importance of Miltiades strategy leading to a great moral victory, and seen by the Athenians as a victory for democracy. Themistocles, "the man most directly responsible for saving Greece" according to Plutarch, also contributed to Greek victory through his strategies-Fighting at Artemisium and Salamis in 480-79BC due to its advantages for the Greeks: the narrow straits of Artemisium and the restricted waterways off Salamis which favoured the small Greek triremes and neutralised the large number of Persian ships. His strategy of deception; sending a slave to Xerxes warning that the Greeks were attempting to escape the Bay of Eleusis at night, luring the Persians to Salamis and

forcing the Greeks to make a stand there. According to Plutarch, he “had chosen the time for battle as judiciously as he had chosen the place.” This strategy arguably made Greeks victorious in the Persian wars.

In The Battle of Thermopylae in 480BC Leonidas, a Spartan commander used a self-sacrificing strategy of staying behind with his 300 Spartiates and according to Herodotus “sent away most of his troops.” This decision, despite having lost the Battle of Thermopylae, had a key role in future Greek victory as he was able to delay the Persian forces, allowing a full evacuation of Athens-according to the Troezen Decree as planned by Themistocles.

The leadership of Athenian and Spartan Commanders also helped bring conquest to the Greeks through their morale boosting techniques and motivation alone. According to Sanderson Beck, motivation for the Greeks was “fighting for their own freedom and independence.” According to Herodotus, Miltiades’ leadership at Marathon in 490 boosted the soldier’s morale through his ability to speak in public. His rousing speech promised they could “not only fight but win.” Themistocles also boosted the morale of his men, says Herodotus-“He delivered a stirring speech to troops.” Leonidas at Thermopylae also displayed great leadership through his courage and bravery in executing plans of dismissing the Greek army-contributing to the high morale of the Greeks that was felt throughout all Persian invasions as seen by the inscription at Thermopylae reported by Herodotus “Go tell the Spartans, traveller passing by, that here, obedient to our laws we lie.” His leadership sent a message of heroism, pride, hope and commitment to the ideal of freedom, leading to victory in many battles. The Spartan regent at Plataea, Pausanias also displayed leadership, where “victory was due to intelligent leadership, as well as great courage and discipline of the Greeks” determined modern historian Ehrenburg.

There had been a long held argument of whether navy or land battles significantly contributed to Greek victory. Majority of sources for this period were pro-Athenian like Herodotus and Thucydides who state that the navy won the war-which limits the reliability of their accounts as there is only one perspective. Herodotus states that Themistocles believed that Salamis would win the war “the whole fortune of the war depends on our ships.”(Herodotus) Salamis was a decisive battle, but in fact did not end the war. It can be argued that if it wasn’t for the land battle of Plataea in 479, the Persian may have won, due to the fact that there were 35 000 infantry and 120 000 cavalry of Persians, enough to conquer Greece if not beaten at Plataea under the leadership of Pausanias. The navy was still of significant importance to victory as Cook says “without a [Persian] fleet the Peloponnese could not be conquered,” but it should not be discounted that land battles also contributed to victory as Herodotus even admits “Pausanias...won the most splendid victory which history records.”

### **Persian Defeat:**

- The Persian army was made up of numerous nationalities resulted in language barriers and disparate equipment.
- Most of their troops were conscripted so there was no real motivation to fight.
- The huge size of the Persian army meant supply of water and food was a significant issue.
- The Persian lack of local knowledge.
- The Greek terrain favoured the close hand-to-hand fighting of heavily armed soldiers, also close constricted areas with mountainous terrain impedes the cavalry's ability.
- Strategic mistakes by the Persians which neutralised their numerical advantage (Thermopylae and Salamis with their narrow fronts), Cook states "the weakness [in the Persians] was in the higher command. The king had little experience of war" and "the lessons of Marathon had not been learnt".
- Xerxes' hubris – Xerxes' supreme confidence, harshness towards his subjects/soldiers, sycophantic advisors and the level of luxury he enjoyed all added up in the Greeks' opinion to arrogant overconfidence; this image of Xerxes (and his generals) is particularly conveyed by Aeschylus.

## Themistocles Role

Themistocles had a significant role in the implementation of Athens as a naval power. He was “the man most directly responsible for saving Greece” according to Plutarch due to his foresight in “uniting the whole city to the sea.”(Herodotus) Plutarch’s biography of Themistocles tells us he knew Marathon was only the beginning of more conflict, so he “kept himself in continual readiness, and his city also in proper training.” This shows his foresight as a leader and contribution to the victory of the Greeks. His preparation for the Greeks in becoming a naval power was training them, building 100 triremes using funds from a silver vein in Laurium. He also strategically moved the present port of Athens from Phaleron to Piraeus and fortifying the whole circuit-it ensured that Athens could still access the sea (escape route, food and water supply)-this prepared Athens for future Persian wars, showing his foresight allowing Greek victory. According to Modern Historian John Fine “The fleet which Themistocles built had saved Greece at Salamis.”

For the defence of Greece with the imminent threat of the Persians, he strategically chose the narrow straits of Artemisium and the restricted waterways off Salamis which favoured the small Greek triremes and neutralised the large number of Persian ships. He also convinced Eurybiades and the Greek congress to make a military stand at Salamis “the whole fortune of the war depends on our ships” (Herodotus). This is a Greek opinion that the Battle of Salamis won victory for all of Greece due to most sources of this period being pro-Athenian. This 480 Battle contributed significantly to Greek victory according to pro-Athenian sources like Herodotus and Aeschylus, as if the Persian won, no Greek army would be able to defend the Peloponnesian coastline and the Persians would have conquered. This shows the significance of Themistocles foresight to make a stance at Salamis and the importance of the navy in bringing victory. His foresight is further exemplified by the Troezen Decree which states that the battles of Artemisium and Thermopylae were strategically used by Themistocles to delay Persian forces allowing the evacuation of Athens. Also, the fact that the evacuation was pre-planned, before these two battles; if this had not occurred then Athens could have been conquered and Greek victory would never have been attained.

Themistocles understood the importance of unity between Greek states and surrendered overall command to the Spartans because he knew other Peloponnesian states would accept Athenians as their leaders. This decision allowed all the Greek states under Spartan command to successfully win the Persian wars due to their unity.

Themistocles was able to use deception to the Greeks advantage, by sending a slave to Xerxes warning that the Greeks were attempting to escape the Bay of Eleusis at night, luring the Persians to Salamis and forcing the Greeks to make a stance there. According to Plutarch, he “had chosen the time for battle as judiciously as he had chosen the place.” This strategy arguably made Greeks victorious in the Persian wars due to the advantages to them of battling there.

The advantages came from the naval tactics used by the Greeks in the specifically chosen location by Themistocles. The Greeks ships were small and manoeuvrable, unlike the large Persian ships which had to travel through one kilometre wide narrows, neutralising their large numbers. A Greek tactic was Ramming with “beaks clashing with beaks” according to Aeschylus who also said they would trap the Persians by “circling them around.” The majority of Persian ships were damaged where most Persians died from drowning “floating carcasses” (Aeschylus). This would impact on their ability to conquer Greece as Modern Historian Cook comments “Without a fleet the Peloponnese could not be conquered...” This emphasises the importance of Themistocles decisions and strategies through the navy in the defence of Greece.

He did have a significant contribution but there were other factors that contributed to Greek victory. Other leaders like Miltiades at Marathon with his morale boosting speeches, promising they could “not only fight but win” (Herodotus) The same for Leonidas at Thermopylae through self-sacrifice was able to delay Persian forces, allowing the evacuation of Greece according to the Troezen Decree as planned by Themistocles.

There had been a long held argument of whether navy or land battles significantly contributed to Greek victory. Majority of sources for this period were pro-Athenian like Herodotus and Thucydides who state that the navy won the war-which limits the reliability of their accounts as there is only one perspective. It is believed that the naval battle of Salamis led to victory, engineered by Themistocles. Herodotus states that Themistocles believed that Salamis would win the war “the whole fortune of the war depends on our ships.” Salamis was a decisive battle, but in fact did not end the war. It can be argued that if it wasn’t for the land battle of Plataea in 479, the Persian may have won, due to the fact that there were 35 000 infantry and 120 000 cavalry of Persians, enough to conquer Greece if not beaten at Plataea under the leadership of Pausanias. The navy was still of significant importance to victory as Cook says “without a [Persian] fleet the Peloponnese could not be conquered,” but it should not be discounted that land battles also contributed to victory; as Herodotus even admits “Pausanias...won the most splendid victory which history records.”

### **Contribution of Athens and Sparta to Defence of Greece**

Both Athenians and Spartans significantly contributed to Greek victory in the Persian Wars. This is displayed by their unity and separate offerings; that of the Athenians being by Miltiades, Naval power and Themistocles. Spartan contributions being: their leadership as a military power, Leonidas at Thermopylae and the battles of Plataea and Mycale.

Miltiades was an asset to the Athenian army due to his previous knowledge of Persian tactics. His contribution made the Greek troops in the 490 Battle of Marathon to use unconventional tactics that allowed for Greek victory. According to Herodotus, “the ranks of the centre [of the phalanx] were diminished” while the “wings were made strong.” This allowed the Persians to break through the centre while the wings would encircle and trap the Persians. He also unconventionally instructed his soldiers to run thus engaging the enemy sooner and reducing the impact of the Persian archers. Ultimately these tactics of Miltiades allowed Greek victory at Marathon and was used in many other battle like Thermopylae and Plataea-which shows the extent of his contribution on behalf of Athens.

Spartans contributed to the defence of Greece through their role as leaders in the Pan Hellenic League. Although this was instigated by Themistocles, it still shows they were held in high esteem as a military force that would significantly help in bringing victory to the Greeks. Themistocles surrendered overall command to the Spartans as he knew other Peloponnesian states wouldn’t accept Athens as their leaders according to Herodotus. Little evidence of the Spartan contribution indicates the bias of most sources like Herodotus who were pro-Athenian. The Spartans did lead the navy at Salamis and Artemisium using Themistocles’ strategy, but without such leadership, victory may not have come about.

The Athenian Themistocles had a significant role in the implementation of Athens as a naval power. He was “the man most directly responsible for saving Greece” according to Plutarch due to his foresight in “uniting the whole city to the sea.”(Herodotus) Plutarch’s biography of Themistocles tells us he knew Marathon was only the beginning of more conflict, so he “kept himself in continual readiness, and his city also in proper training.” He persuaded them to build 100 triremes using funds from a silver vein in Laurium. He also strategically moved the present port of Athens from Phaleron to Piraeus and fortifying the whole circuit-it ensured that Athens could still access the sea (escape route, food and water supply)-this prepared Athens for the defence of Greece and was a significant contribution. According to Modern Historian John Fine “The fleet which Themistocles built had saved Greece at Salamis.”

The Spartans heavily contributed to the defence of Greece at Thermopylae in 480, despite the fact that they were defeated. Leonidas, a Spartan commander used a self-sacrificing strategy of staying behind with his 300 Spartiates and according to Herodotus “sent away most of his troops.” This decision, despite having lost the Battle of Thermopylae, had a key role in future Greek victory as he was able to delay the Persian forces, allowing a full evacuation of Athens-according to the Troezen Decree as planned by Themistocles. He heavily contributing to the high morale of the Greeks that

was felt throughout all Persian invasions as seen by the inscription at Thermopylae reported by Herodotus “Go tell the Spartans, traveller passing by, that here, obedient to our laws we lie.” His leadership sent a message of heroism, pride, hope and commitment to the ideal of freedom, leading to victory in many battles after Thermopylae.

For the defence of Greece with the imminent threat of the Persians, the Athenian Themistocles strategically chose the narrow straits of Artemisium and the restricted waterways off Salamis which favoured the small Greek triremes and neutralised the large number of Persian ships. Athenians contributed over half of the 271 triremes at Artemisium-the significance of their input is seen in the victory there. His foresight is further exemplified by the Troezen Decree which states that the battles of Artemisium and Thermopylae were strategically used by Themistocles to delay Persian forces allowing the evacuation of Athens. Also, the fact that this was pre-planned, before these two battles; if this had not occurred then Athens could have been conquered and Greek victory would never have been attained.

The Spartan regent at Plataea, Pausanias also heavily contributed to Greek victory in 479 on behalf of Sparta. He displayed leadership, where “victory was due to intelligent leadership, as well as great courage and discipline of the Greeks” determined modern historian Ehrenburg. He chose to strategically stay in the foothills of the mountain where Persian cavalry power was impeded. He used the tactic of retreating in the night in order to successfully lure the Persians into the marches, where they were able to be pursued at their most vulnerable state-leading to Greek victory. Spartan contribution is also seen in the Battle of Mycale in 479 under the leadership of Spartan King Leotychidas-the first time the Greeks were on the offensive-again there is both Athenian and Spartan unity, working together to defeat the Persians.

There has been a long held argument as whether the navy was the deciding factor for Greek victory. The navy itself with under Spartan command of Eurybiades in Artemisium and Salamis, yet the strategies set in place for the navy were made by the Athenian Themistocles who according to Plutarch was “...the man most directly responsible for saving Greece.” It was Themistocles’ belief that Salamis won the war “the whole fortune of the war depends on our ships.” This is backed up by a majority of sources for this period was pro-Athenian like Herodotus and Thucydides. It can be argued that if it wasn’t for the land battle of Plataea in 479, the Persian may have won, due to the fact that there were 35 000 infantry and 120 000 cavalry of Persians, enough to conquer Greece if no beaten at Plataea under the leadership of the Spartan regent Pausanias. The navy was still of significant importance to victory as Cook says “without a [Persian] fleet the Peloponnese could not be conquered,” but it should not be discounted that land battles also contributed to victory where both Spartans and Athenians worked together.

Both Athenians and Spartans are seen to have significantly contributed to Greek victory and without such input, the outcome of the war may have differed, and Greek victory may not have been attained.

### **Contribution of Pausanias to Greek Victory**

The Spartan regent Pausanias had a significant contribution to Greek victory during the Persian invasion of 480-79 BC. His strategy and tactics was a remarkable achievement. However, it cannot be discounted that other factors such as Greek unity, weapons and armour, and other Greek leaders made a more important contribution to achieving Greek victory.

Pausanias had a key impact on Greek victory at Plataea through his strategies and leadership. He strategically chose the Cithaeron Hills as the defensive position for his troops, this-to the advantage of the Greeks-diffused the Persian advantage of numbers and cavalry. As part of his strategy, he refused to leave the foothills which protected the Greeks, despite “taunts” (Herodotus).He kept his force of Spartans and Athenians united through initially swearing an oath of allegiance. Modern Historian Hammond determined that “The Battle of Plataea was the finest achievement of Greek

unity,” which further proves the extent of Pausanius’ leadership to victory. Even Fine marvels at Pausanius’ task of “holding together [the army] for weeks,” particularly after the catastrophe of Persians fouling their water and intercepting the Greek food supply. Pausanius’ leadership[s and strategy was a significant factor in holding together the Greek army together to fight the final battle for the defence of mainland Greece against the Persians.

Pausanius’ tactics also contributed to the final Greek victory. He strategically chose to move his Greek troops west near a bridge where they would have more room to manoeuvre. He used the tactic of retreating in the night in order to successfully lure the Persians into the marches, where they were able to be pursued at their most vulnerable state-leading to Greek victory. Modern historian Cook identifies the failings in the “higher command” as the cause for the Persian defeat, a fact which Pausanius seemingly capitalised on to achieve the convince route of the Persian army. Pausanius with his tactics had a key role in impacting on Greek victory.

The Greeks had weapons and armour which was a key element that assisted in their victory. Pausanius utilised heavily armed hoplite warfare, but was not responsible for its development. To the benefit of the Greeks in rugged and narrow terrain, they used a phalanx formation with troops wearing defensive armour, bronze greaves, hoplon shields with iron headed spears and iron swords. The Persians, however, were lightly armed, using long distance bowmen and cavalry which didn’t suit the Greek rugged terrain and would be useless against heavily armed Greeks who fought hand to hand combat. Thus, the advantage of Greek armour and weaponry which impacted on Greek victory but was not a factor that Pausanius was responsible for.

Unity was another significant factor in Greek victory that Pausanius was not responsible for. This began with the formation of the Pan Hellenic League in 481 BC. Athens and Sparta called for the Greek congress at the Isthmus of Corinth to decide the best way to defend Greece. It was a significant union of the polis that led to their victory, through their ability to make decisions on behalf of all of Greece’s safety. Themistocles understood the importance of unity between Greek states and surrendered overall command to the Spartans because he knew other Peloponnesian states wouldn’t accept Athenians as their leaders; he thereby strengthened this unity, leading to victory.

After the 480 Battle of Thermopylae, Mardonius tried to corrupt the relationships between Athens and Sparta using diplomacy and bribery but failed to shake the unyielding bond between the polis, highlighting the primary role of unity created by Leonidas at Thermopylae by dismissing the Greek troops and staying behind with his 300 Spartiates, contributing to Greek victory, despite his death.

The leadership of others other than Pausanius contributed to a cumulative effect that allowed for Greek victory. Such leadership by Themistocles who boosted the morale of his men “He delivered a stirring speech to troops.”(Herodotus). Leonidas at Thermopylae also displayed great leadership through his courage and bravery in executing plans of dismissing the Greek army-contributing to the high morale of the Greeks that was felt throughout all Persian invasions as seen by the inscription at Thermopylae reported by Herodotus “Go tell the Spartans, traveller passing by, that here, obedient to our laws we lie.” His leadership sent a message of heroism, pride, hope and commitment to the ideal of freedom, leading to Greek victory.

The strategies of leaders other than Pausanius also had a key contribution to the victory of the Greeks. This is seen in Themistocles who implemented Athens as a naval power. He was “the man most directly responsible for saving Greece” according to Plutarch due to his foresight in “uniting the whole city to the sea.”(Herodotus) His preparation for the Greeks in becoming a naval power was training them, building 100 triremes using funds from a silver vein in Laurium. He also strategically moved the present port of Athens from Phaleron to Piraeus and fortifying the whole circuit-it ensured that Athens could still access the sea (escape route, food and water supply)-this prepared Athens for future Persian wars, showing his foresight allowing Greek victory. According to Modern Historian John Fine “The fleet which Themistocles built had saved Greece at Salamis.” Hence, the significance of Themistocles’ role is seen to have impacted on Greek victory, Pausanius was not responsible for this.

Pausanias had an important role in Greek victory in 480-79 BC due to his strategy and tactics used at Plataea for the defence of mainland Greece. However, other factors can be seen to have contributed to Greek victory, like the Greek armour and weaponry, unity of troops created by leaders who boosted morale and utilised successful strategies and tactics against the Persians –all of which heavily contributed to the defence of Greece and their victory against the Persians.

### **Contribution of Leonidas and Miltiades**

Miltiades and Leonidas both played a crucial role in the outcome of the Persian Wars. This was due to the knowledge Miltiades had on Persian tactics and armour, as well as his own strategies and ability to convince the Athenians to fight. Leonidas' contribution was made in the march to Thermopylae and the legacy he left for his fellow Greeks.

Miltiades, a former tyrant, had ample knowledge of Persian tactics and armour which contributed to the outcome of the first Persian War. He knew that they fought primarily on large open plains and thus specialised in light armour and archers. Miltiades, according to Herodotus, exploited this in the 490BC Battle of Marathon by instructing his soldiers to run thus engaging the enemy sooner and reducing the impact of the Persian archers. This ultimately caught the Persians off guard and allowed the close-quarter oriented Greek hoplites to engage the lightly armoured Persians. Without in-depth knowledge of Persian armament, the Battle of Marathon may not have been a resounding victory for the Greeks and may have altered the outcome of the wars.

Miltiades' initiative to create new and dynamic strategies also significantly contributed to the course of the Persian Wars. His approach of weakening of the centre of the phalanx to allow the stronger flanks to surround the enemy was a result of Miltiades breaking out of the normal tactics. This allowed the Greeks to seize the initiative which resulted in a crucial win for Greece. Without this revolutionary thinking the Greeks may have been overrun by the sheer size of the Persian army. As shown in the Suda, Miltiades only engaged the Persians while “the horsemen were away” revealing his foresight. Miltiades' sound strategic planning and ability to exploit the situation shows the large role he had in the Battle of Marathon. Thus the role Miltiades had on planning and executing the attack played a significant part in one of the most crucial victories of the Persian Wars.

Miltiades' ability to speak in public convincingly contributed to the course of the Persian Wars. According to Herodotus, Miltiades (along with the other 10 Athenian generals) helped convince the Athenians to fight such a large Persian force at Marathon with careful arguments and speeches. Herodotus reports Miltiades' rousing speech which promised they could “not only fight, but win” and he outlined some of the tactics he proposed to use. Miltiades played a large part in convincing the Athenian demos to take part in the fighting, without which there may have been an entirely different outcome.

The Spartan King Leonidas' command of 7000 hoplites (300 Spartans, 2000 helots) at Thermopylae had a significant effect on the safety of the Athenian people, aiding Themistocles' strategy of defeating the Persians through conducting battles in confined spaces.

Leonidas made the village of Alpenoi his base of operations and then took up a position with his troops near an ancient wall that they rebuilt. This gave the Greeks control of the narrow passage between the mountains and the sea, through which they could advance and retire. However, when he arrived in the area, he was informed that there was an alternative pass- a narrow track over the mountains. The 1000 Phocian troops volunteered to guard this path, since they were familiar with the area.

Although stalemate prevailed for weeks, with the Persians sustaining more losses than the Greeks, the Persians were told by a Greek traitor Ephialtes of a passage through the mountains that would allow them to continue their southward movement through Greece. The Persians were able to circle

around and attack the Greeks from behind. When Leonidas heard of the traitorous act, he immediately dismissed the majority of the Greek troops so they would be able to fight in future battles, acknowledging that defeat was inevitable.

Leonidas was left with his 300 Spartiates, the Thebans (who were suspected of being inclined to medise) and the Thesbians who had volunteered to stay behind. Leonidas led his troops to hold off the immense Persian army allowing the retreat of the Greek army. Leonidas and his force fought to the death demonstrating the belief that it was better to die honourably than surrender instilled a sense of duty in the rest of Greece throughout the war. This stand caused the Persian army to incur soldier losses and also decreased the morale of the mostly conscripted Persian army. So even though Leonidas lost the battle, he did have a significant impact on the course of the war in inspiring the Greeks and demonstrating their commitment to fight to the Persians.

Although ending in defeat, Leonidas was able to save Greek troops by dismissing them and then delaying the Persian forces allowing a full evacuation of Athens (according to the Troezen Decree as planned by Themistocles). He showed courage and bravery in executing their plans, and had Leonidas had a fair battle against the Persians it no traitors they probably would have won. Hence, he greatly contributed to the future outcomes of the war; contributed to the high morale of the Greeks that was felt throughout all the Persian invasions resulting in a unified force of Greeks which in the end earned them victory at Mycale and Plataea in 479 BC.

Leonidas at Thermopylae inspired his Spartans to stick to their strict code that it was right to fight to the end with their leader, embodying the essence of a true Spartan King and honoured with the epitaph. Mardonius tried to corrupt the relationship between Athens and Sparta using diplomacy and bribery but failed to shake the unyielding bond between the city-states, highlighting the primary role unity created by leaders played in the Greek victory in the Persian Wars.

If the Spartans didn't fight then the Greeks wouldn't have time to evacuate and Persians would have conquered. The fight sent a message of heroism and pride. It sent a message of pride, hope, commitment to their ideal of freedom, and the oracles prophecy was fulfilled, therefore they would win. Immediate defeat was necessarily the case, they had a memory of battle of marathons and could almost do it in Thermopylae.

Despite their loss to the Persians, Leonidas and his small force in their rear-guard action prevented the Persians from overtaking the retreating Greek forces. However, the courage of the Spartan king and his men was expected of them – there was no other action possible under Spartan law. This was shown by the inscription to the Spartans placed over those who died at Thermopylae as reported by Herodotus “Go tell the Spartans, traveller passing by, that here, obedient to our laws, we lie.”