



AN UNEQUAL STRUGGLE (Story of the Persian Wars)



Something very strange happened between 550 and 500 B.C. I don't really understand it myself, but perhaps that's what makes it so interesting. In the high mountains of Mesopotamia a wild mountain tribe had long been living. They had a beautiful religion: they worshipped light and the sun and believed it to be in a state of constant warfare with the dark - that is, with the dark powers of evil.

These mountain people were the Persians. For hundreds of years they had been dominated, first by the Assyrians, and then by the Babylonians. One day they had had enough. Their ruler was a man of exceptional courage and intelligence called Cyrus, who was no longer prepared to put up with the oppression of his people. He led his band of horsemen down onto the plain of Babylon. The Babylonians looked down from their mighty ramparts and laughed at the little band of warriors that dared attack their city. Yet, under Cyrus's leadership, they succeeded, through courage and guile. And so Cyrus became lord of that great realm. His first act was to free all the peoples held in captivity by the Babylonians.

Zoroaster
(Remember Chapter 2)

Ramparts - Walls around a fort.

Among them were the Jews, who went home to Jerusalem (that was, as you remember, in 538 BC). Not content with his great kingdom, however, Cyrus marched on to conquer Egypt, only to die on the way. But his son, Cambyses, succeeded. Egypt fell and the pharaoh was deposed. That was the end of the Egyptian empire, which had lasted almost three thousand years! And with its end, this little Persian tribe became master of nearly all the known world. But only nearly: they hadn't yet swallowed up Greece. That was still to come.

It came after the death of Cambyses, during the reign of a great king named Darius. He governed the vast Persian empire - which now stretched from Egypt to the frontiers of India - in such a way that nothing happened anywhere that he himself had not decreed. He built roads so that his orders might be carried without delay to the furthest parts of his kingdom. And even his highest officials, the satraps, were spied on by informers known as 'the king's eyes and ears'. Darius now began to extend his empire out into Asia Minor, along whose coasts lay the cities of the Ionian Greeks.

Now the Greeks were not used to being part of a great empire, with a ruler who sent orders from God knows where in the heart of Asia, expecting instant obedience. Many of the people who lived in the Greek colonies were rich merchants, used to running their own affairs and making their own decisions about the administration of their cities, jointly and independently. They had no wish to be ruled by a Persian king, nor would they pay him tribute. So they rebelled, and threw out the Persian governors.

In this they were supported by the Greeks in the motherland, the original founders of the colonies, and the Athenians, who sent them ships. Never before had the king of Persia, the King of Kings - for that was his title - been so insulted. That this insignificant tribe, these nobodies, should dare to challenge him, the ruler of the world! He dealt with the Ionian cities in Asia Minor in less than one year. But he wasn't finished yet. He was furious with the Athenians for meddling in his affairs. With the aim of destroying Athens and conquering Greece, he equipped a large fleet. But his ships were caught in a violent storm, dashed

Remember
Chapter 2



A1

R2

R3

R4

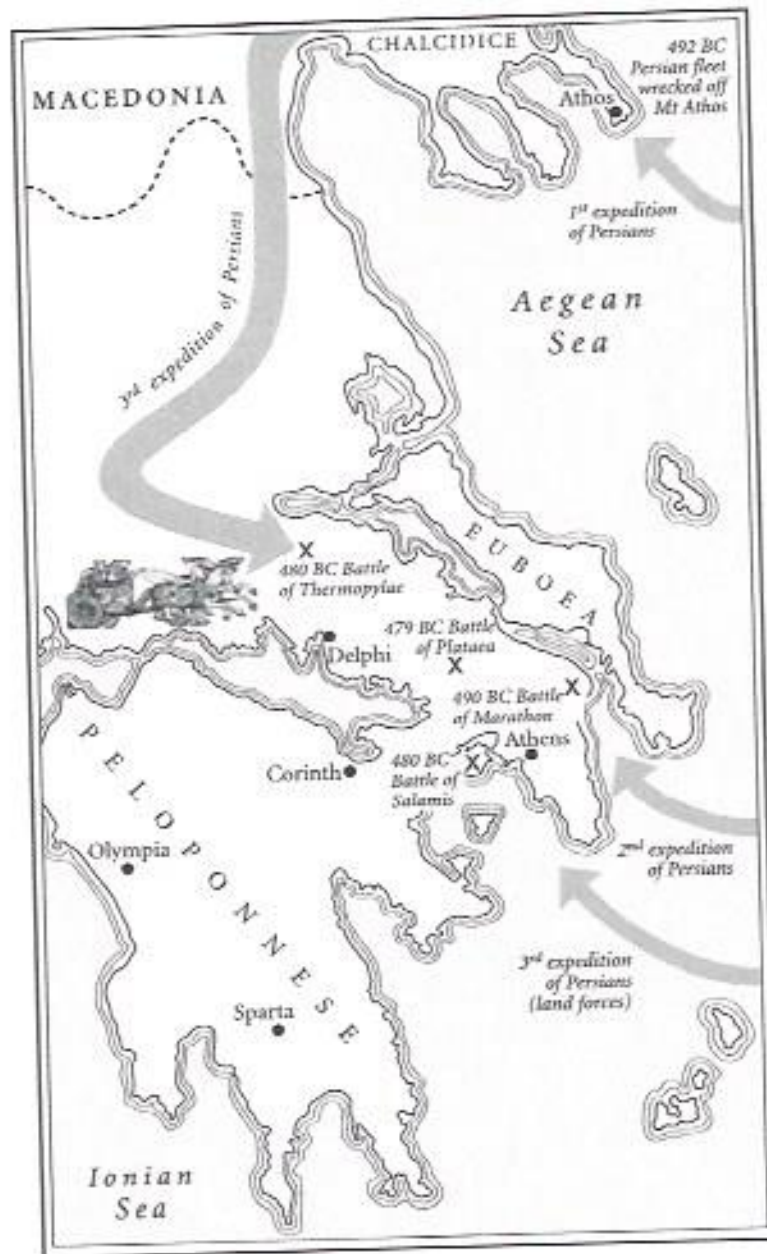
against the cliffs and sunk. At this his anger knew no bounds. The story goes that he appointed a slave to call out three times at every meal: 'Sire, remember the Athenians!' So great was his fury.

He then sent his son-in-law, with a new and mighty fleet, to sail against Athens. They conquered many islands on their way and destroyed a lot of cities. They finally dropped anchor not far from Athens, at a place called Marathon. There, the whole great Persian army disembarked, ready to march on Athens. It is said that they numbered seventy thousand men, as many as the entire population of Athens. With roughly ten thousand soldiers the Athenian army was outnumbered seven to one. Their fate was surely sealed. But not quite. For the Athenians had a general named Miltiades, a brave and able man, who had lived for many years among the Persians, and knew their fighting tactics. Added to which, the Athenians all knew what was at stake: their freedom and their lives, and those of their wives and children. So there at Marathon they formed ranks, and fell upon the startled Persians. And they were victorious. The Persians suffered heavy losses. Those remaining took to their ships and fled.

Such a victory! And against such odds! Others in his place might have thought of nothing but celebration. But Miltiades was shrewd as well as brave. He had noted that instead of sailing back the way they had come, the Persian ships had turned towards Athens, which lay undefended and open to attack. But as luck would have it, the distance from Marathon to Athens was greater by sea than by land. For ships had to negotiate a long spit of land easily crossed on foot. This Miltiades did. He sent a messenger ahead, who was to run as fast as he could, to warn the Athenians. This was the famous Marathon Run after which we call our race. Famous, because the messenger ran so far and so fast that all he could do was deliver his message before he fell down dead.

Meanwhile Miltiades and his army had taken the same route, marching in tremendous haste. This was just as well, for no sooner had they reached the harbour at Athens than the Persian fleet appeared over the horizon. But there was no more fighting: at the sight of their heroic enemy, the disheartened Persians turned tail

Battle of Marathon



The battles of the Persians in Greece.

and sailed for home. And not just Athens, but the whole of Greece was saved. This was 490 BC.

How the great Darius, King of Kings, must have cursed when he learnt of the defeat at Marathon! But at the time there was little he could do about Greece, for a revolt had broken out in Egypt which had to be suppressed. He died soon after, leaving his son and successor, Xerxes, to take revenge on Greece once and for all.

Xerxes, a hard, ambitious man, needed no urging. He assembled an army from among all the subject peoples of his empire. Dressed in their traditional costumes, with their weapons, their bows and arrows, shields and swords, lances, war-chariots and slings, they were a vast, swirling multitude, said by some to number more than a million men. What hope had the Greeks in the face of such a host? This time Xerxes himself took command. But when the Persians tried to cross the narrow neck of sea which separates Asia Minor from today's Istanbul, on a bridge made of boats, rough waves tore the bridge apart. In his fury Xerxes had the waves lashed with chains. But I doubt if the sea took any notice.

One part of this gigantic army attacked Greece by sea, while another part marched overland. In northern Greece, a small army of Spartans, who had made an alliance with the Athenians, tried to block the Persian advance in a narrow pass called Thermopylae. The Persians called on the Spartans to throw down their weapons. 'Come and get them yourselves!' was the reply. 'We've enough arrows here to blot out the sun!' threatened the Persians. 'So much the better', cried the Spartans, 'then we'll fight in the shade!' But a treacherous Greek showed the Persians a way over the mountains and the Spartan army was surrounded and trapped. All three hundred Spartans and seven hundred of their allies were killed in the battle, but not one of them tried to run away, for that was their law.

Later, a Greek poet wrote these words in their memory:

Go tell the Spartans, thou who passest by,
That here obedient to their laws we lie.

Now the Athenians had not been idle since their great victory at Marathon. And they had a new leader called Themistocles, an

Poem
on the
Site of
the Battle

astute and far-sighted man, who repeatedly warned his fellow citizens that a miracle like Marathon could only happen once, and that if Athens were to continue to hold out against the Persians, it must have a fleet. So a fleet was built.

Themistocles had the whole of Athens evacuated – not that the population can have been very large in those days – and sent to the little island of Salamis nearby. The Athenian fleet then positioned itself by this island. When the Persian land army arrived and found Athens abandoned, they set fire to the city and razed it to the ground, while the Athenians on their island remained unharmed as they watched their burning city from afar. But now the Persian fleet appeared, and threatened to surround Salamis.

The allies panicked, and were all for taking to their ships and leaving the Athenians to their fate. At this moment Themistocles demonstrated his extraordinary ingenuity and daring. Having finally succeeded in persuading the allies not to leave, he secretly sent a messenger to Xerxes saying: 'Make haste and attack, or the Athenians' allies will escape you!' Xerxes, who must have heard from his spies that the allies were set on leaving, fell for it. The next morning he attacked with his many small and nimble warships. And he lost. The Greek ships were larger and less easy to manoeuvre, but once again they were fighting desperately for their freedom. Not only that, but their victory ten years earlier at Marathon had inspired them with confidence. From a vantage point Xerxes was forced to look on while his smaller, lighter galleys were rammed and sunk by the Greeks' heavy ships. Aghast, he ordered the retreat. And so for the second time the Athenians were victorious, and against an even greater army than before. This was in 480 BC.

Shortly afterwards, in 479 BC, the Persian land army was also defeated by the combined forces of the Greeks and their allies, near Plataea. After this the Persians never again dared attack the Greeks. And this is very interesting, because it wasn't as if the Persians were weaker or more stupid than the Greeks – far from it. But, as I said before, the Greeks were different. For, whereas the great empires of the East bound themselves so tightly to the traditions and teachings

Fleet – Navy
ships

Battle
of
Salamis

Battle of
Plataea

of their ancestors that they could scarcely move, the Greeks – and the Athenians in particular – did the opposite. Almost every year they came up with something new. Everything was always changing. The same went for their leaders. Miltiades and Themistocles, the great heroes of the Persian wars, learnt this to their cost: one moment it was high praise, honours and monuments to their achievements, the next it was accusations, slander and exile. This was not the best feature of the Athenians, yet it was part of their nature. Always trying out new ideas, never satisfied, never at rest. Which explains why, during the hundred years that followed the Persian wars, more went on in the minds of the people of the little city of Athens than in a thousand years in all the great empires of the East. The ideas, the painting, sculpture and architecture, the plays and poetry, the inventions and experiments, the discussions and arguments which the young brought to the marketplaces and the old to their council chambers still continue to concern us today. It is strange that it should be so, and yet it's true. And what would it have been like if the Persians had won at Marathon? Or at Salamis, ten years later? That I cannot say.