The Persian Wars: Ionian Revolt

The Ionian Revolt, which began in 499 B.C. marked the beginning of the Greek-Persian wars. In 546 B.C. the Persians had conquered the wealthy Greek settlements in Ionia (Asia Minor). The Persians took the Ionians’ farmland and harbors. They forced the Ionians to pay tributes (the regular payments of goods). The Ionians also had to serve in the Persian army.

The Ionians knew they could not defeat the Persians by themselves, so they asked mainland Greece for help. Athens sent soldiers and a small fleet of ships. Unfortunately for the Ionians, the Athenians went home after their initial success, leaving the small Ionian army to fight alone.

In 493 B.C. the Persian army defeated the Ionians. To punish the Ionians for rebelling, the Persians destroyed the city of Miletus. They may have sold some of tis people into slavery.
The Persian Wars: Battle of Marathon

After the Ionian Revolt, the Persian King Darius decided to conquer the city-states of mainland Greece. He sent messengers to ask for presents of Greek earth and water as a sign that the Greeks agreed to accept Persian rule. But the Greeks refused.

Darius was furious. In 490 B.C., he sent a large army of foot soldiers and cavalry (mounted soldiers) across the Aegean Sea by boat to Greece. The army assembled on the plain of Marathon.

A general named Miltiades (Mill-te-ah-deez) convinced the other Greek commanders to fight the Persians at Marathon. In need of help, the Athenians sent a runner named Pheidippides (Fa-dip-e-deez) to Sparta who ran for two days and two nights. When he arrived, the Spartans were celebrating a religious festival and refused to leave until the next full moon.

Finally, Miltiades decided to attack. He ordered the center portion of his army to advance, and then the sides (flanks) attack when the Persians came forward.

Soon the Persian soldiers were running for their ships. The Greeks returned to Athens in time to defend the city against the Persian cavalry. The Greeks had won a stunning victory, but their fight with the Persians was only beginning.
Persian Wars: Battle of Thermopylae

King Darius’ son, Xerxes (Zerc-zees), organized another attack on Greece with over 180,000 soldiers. To get his army to Greece, Xerxes crossed the Hellespont (a narrow sea channel between Europe and Asia) by roping hundreds of boats together. Then walking his army across the channel into Europe.

In 480 B.C., Xerxes marched west from the Hellespont and then south, overwhelming several Greek city-states. Athens and Sparta united to fight the enemy with the Athenians trying to stop the Persian navy, while the Spartan king, Leonidas (Leo-oh-nigh-dus) would try to stop the Persian army.

The Spartans made their stand at a place called Thermopylae (Thur-mop-ah-lee) where there was a narrow pass between the mountains and the sea. Leonidas had an army 1/3rd the size of the Persians. The Greeks were still able to drive them back when they tried to get through the pass. Then a Greek traitor offered to show the Persians a secret path through the mountains. The path would allow them to attack the Greeks from the front and the rear at the same time.

Leonidas knew that he could only delay the Persians and so ordered most of his troops to escape. With a much smaller army, including 300 Spartans, he prepared to fight. In the end, all 300 were killed, but the Greeks would never forget their bravery.
Persian Wars: Battle of Salamis

When news of the slaughter at Thermopylae reached Athens, its citizens panicked. They boarded ships and sailed for nearby islands. Only a small army was left to defend the city. Within two weeks, Xerxes had burned Athens to the ground.

An Athenian leader, Themistocles, wanted to fight the Persian navy in the narrow channels between the islands and the mainland. The Persians would find it hard to move their ships around to attack the Greek navy.

Themistocles sent a loyal slave to Xerxes’ camp with a message that Themistocles wanted to change sides and join the Persians. If Xerxes attacked now, half the Greek sailors would surrender. Xerxes fell for the trick and ordered his ships to enter the narrow waterway between Salamis and the mainland to attack.

As the Persians approached, the Greek ships seemed to retreat. But this was just another trick to draw the Persians farther into the channel. Soon the Greeks had them surrounded. The Greek ships had wooden rams at the front to crush the hulls of the Persian ships and sink them. The Greeks lost only 40 ships and had once again beaten the Persians.
The Persian Wars: Battle of Plataea

After the defeat at Salamis, Xerxes (Zerc-zees) fled with some of his soldiers. He was afraid the Greeks would get to the Hellespont first and destroy the bridges he had built which had already been wrecked by a storm. Xerxes had to ferry his men across the water by boat.

Xerxes left the rest of his army in Greece with orders to attack again in the spring. When spring arrived, the Persians approached Athens once more. Fearing that the Athenian would make peace with Persia, the Spartans offered to help.

The decisive battle took place outside the town of Plataea (Puh-tea-uh) in 479 B.C.. Led by the Spartans, a force of 80,000 Greek troops destroyed the Persian army, finally ending the Persian threat.

This important victory preserved the Greeks’ independence and kept Persia from the conquering all of Europe. The paid price for their victory was thousands of dead Greeks, and Athens in ruins. But the Athenians would rebuild and be greater than before.