

Persian Kings - 2

Xerxes 518-465 BC

“Xerxes, son of Darius, Great King of Persia & Media, King of Kings, King of all Lands”.

“I am skilled in both hands and in feet. A horseman, I am a good horseman. A bowman, I am a good bowman, both on foot and on horseback. A spearman, I am a good spearman, both on foot and on horseback. This is indeed my capability. That my body is strong, as a fighter of battles I am a good fighter of battles. I will make the land of Persia border only onto the sky and make all lands into one land”

So Xerxes (as called by the Greeks) “Khashayar Shah” in his native tongue, son of Darius, describes himself on various inscriptions that have survived to this day.

Xerxes became king of Persia on the death of his father, Darius the Great, in 486BCE at a time when Darius was preparing a new expedition against Greece and facing an uprising in Egypt. Because he was about to leave for Egypt, Darius, following the law of his country had been requested to name his successor and to choose between the elder of his sons, born from a first wife before he was in power, and Xerxes, the first of his sons born after he became king, from a second wife, Atossa, daughter of Cyrus.

The new king Xerxes quickly suppressed the revolt in Egypt in a single campaign in 485 BCE. Xerxes then broke with the policy followed by Cyrus The Great and Darius of ruling foreign lands with a fairly light hand, ruthlessly ignored Egyptian forms of rule and imposed his will on the rebellious province in a thoroughly Persian style. Plans for the invasion of Greece, begun under Darius, were then still further delayed by a major revolt in Babylonia about 482 BCE, which was also suppressed with a heavy hand.

Having settled his Empire, Xerxes was then able to devote his attention to the invasion of Greece. Preparations were probably well-advanced at this stage, having been started by his father. Emissaries were sent to all the major Greek states inviting them to offer the traditional signs of allegiance - earth & water. Instructions were sent out calling for ships to be built, both warships and transports, and for all the fleets and armies of his subject lands to meet at pre-ordained times and places. Carthage was encouraged to attack Syracuse to prevent their large fleet and army from aiding the Greek mainland. Depots & stockpiles of food & supplies of every type were set along the route. Two “pontoon” bridges of ships were constructed across the Hellespont allowing the army to march across from Asia to Europe.

Herodotus records that Xerxes army consisted of 2,000,000 fighting men, his fleet of 1,600 warships, and 3,500 transports. The sheer scale of the organisation, planning and numbers involved, both actual, and comparative percentage of world population, made this invasion of Greece, the greatest military expedition in recorded history, greater even than the Allied invasion of Europe in WW2.

The Expedition began in April 480BCE when Xerxes reviewed his army at Cappadonia, and then they marched towards the Hellespont. It is said that Xerxes made a detour past Troy. Herodotus says this was because he wanted to make out that this campaign was in revenge for the Trojan wars. The difference being that this time, instead of Europe going abroad to Asia, Asia was making revenge on Europe. During April and May the Persian Army crossed the Hellespont bridges into Thrace.

They made slow progress through Thrace and divided into 3 groups. This was to minimise the over use of resources. They built roads and constructed passages as they went - this was to expand communication which was good evidence that the Persians meant conquest, and not punitive raids. They did not move from Thrace until July. This was a deliberate delaying tactic to install fear and to hope for internal tensions in Greece to mount. They were also waiting for the harvest so that it could be gathered in for food for themselves. The fleet and transport ships followed the coastline, keeping the army supplied.

No Resistance was met until the Persian Army reached the Pass of Thermopylae in August, which they found defended by a force of 7,000 Greeks commanded by Leonidas, King of Sparta, and 300 of his Spartan warriors, all picked Champions and members of his Royal Bodyguard. In a battle lasting 3 days the Greeks fiercely defended the pass until betrayed, outflanked and defeated. At the same time the Persian fleet was engaged in two battles with the Greek fleet at nearby Artemesium, both sea battles proved inconclusive. These first encounters with his enemy, gave Xerxes a taste of what victory in Greece may cost him. His army suffered more than 24,000 dead at Thermopylae while his fleet lost 100 warships at Artemesium and a further 400 to storms with a loss of between 60,000-100,000 sailors & marines.

Xerxes Army and fleet continued their southward journey reaching the abandoned city of Athens in early September, which they then burnt to the ground.

On 28th September Xerxes's fleet was tricked into battle at Salamis, named after a small island in the Saronic Gulf near Athens. Despite the Persians having a vast numerical advantage they were soundly beaten in the narrow channel with the loss of 200 warships and a further 50,000 sailors, marines & soldiers including several Royal Princes.

Having lost his communication & supply line with Asia, Xerxes was forced to retire to his Royal Palace at Sardis taking with him at least half of his army; whilst his fleet retreated to the Ionian coast. The army which he left in Greece under Mardonius, some 300,000 strong with it's pro-Persian Greek allies, was itself beaten at Plataea in 479 by a Greek coalition army 110,000 strong led & commanded by Sparta. According to Herodotus only 43,000 of the 300,000 Persians survived the battle, while the Greeks as a whole lost only 159 men.

The defeat of the Persians Fleet at Mycale off the coast of the Ionian city of Samos on or around the same day as Plataea, roused the Greek cities of Asia and ended Xerxes hopes of returning to Greece.

Of the later years of Xerxes little is known. He sent out Satrapes to attempt the circumnavigation of Africa, but the victory of the Greeks threw the empire into a state of slow apathy, from which it could not rise again. The king himself became involved in intrigues of the harem and was much dependent upon courtiers and eunuchs. In 465BCE he was murdered by his half-brother Artabanus who raised Artaxerxes I to the throne.

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