

BATTLE OF THERMOPYLAE: EVIDENCE OF SPARTAN COURAGE OR A
CASE FOR A SUICIDE SQUAD?

Full Names
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Persian king, Xerxes, invaded Greece in 480 BC to re-assert the Achaemenid Empire's dominion over Europe.¹ He sought to "obtain vengeance from the Athenians" for defeating Persian troops at an earlier battle (namely, the Battle of Marathon) just ten years earlier.² His strategy included moving the Persian forces over a bridge across the Hellespont strait to access the rest of the Greek hinterland.³ Although landing troops on the Greek coast was successful, Xerxes encountered stiff resistance from Spartans fighting under the command of their king, Leonidas.⁴ The ensuing Battle of Thermopylae proved that the Spartans were ready to defend their land to the death.⁵ The greatly outnumbered Hellenes fought bravely and managed to slow Xerxes' advance for a few days.⁶ Yet, historians have argued that Leonidas' approach was foolhardy at best. Diodorus Siculus, for instance, described Leonidas' stand at Thermopylae as evidence of a leader "much concerned with his own courage and generalship."⁷ Although he knew that Xerxes had marshaled a force of around a million foot soldiers alone, Leonidas insisted on defending the Thermopylae pass with a few thousand hoplites.⁸ Hence, the Greeks had pre-ordained their defeat by facing such a strong Persian offense. Notwithstanding the loss at Thermopylae, Leonidas instilled in the Hellenes a desire to overcome impossible odds, which truly bolstered their war effort.

¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. George Rawlinson (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Media, 2013).

² *Ibid.*, 430.

³ *Ibid.*, 443.

⁴ Diodorus Siculus, "Translation and Commentary, Diodorus Siculus Bibliotheca Book 11: 480–451 BC—the Alternative Version," in *Diodorus Siculus, Books 11-12.37.1: Greek History, 480-431 BC*, trans. Peter Green (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 49–176.

⁵ David Frye, "Spartan Stand at Thermopylae," *Military History* 22, no. 10 (2006): 38–44.

⁶ Charles King, *Famous and Decisive Battles of the World (History from the Battlefield)* (Philadelphia, PA: J.C. McCurdy & Co, 1884).

⁷ Siculus, "Translation and Commentary, Diodorus Siculus Bibliotheca Book 11," 54.

⁸ Herodotus, *The Histories*.

Inevitable Clash between the Old Ways and the New

Grounds for Facing a Powerful Persian Force

Hellenes' Aims at Thermopylae

Persian versus Hellenic Ways of War

Role of Religion in the Battle of Thermopylae

Impact of the Thermopylae Stand

Conclusion

Bibliography

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