

The Persian Wars

Carl Seaquist

Background

(Slide 1) Welcome to Carl Seaquist's lecture on the Persian wars. The Greek cities of Anatolia revolted against Persian rule around the turn of the fifth century, with minimal support from the Greek mainland in the early years. After several years the Persians retook all the city-states of Ionia, and then launched three attacks on the mainland in the opening quarter of the fifth century.

(Slide 2) Greeks had occupied portions of western Anatolia since the Bronze Age. If Robert Drews is correct that the Indo-Europeans, the ancestors of the Greeks, came originally from central Anatolia, it is even possible that Greek-speaking peoples lived in western Anatolia before they moved across the Aegean to the Greek mainland. In any case, the Greek cities of Anatolia were always in close proximity to non-Greek-speaking peoples. The Phrygians and Lydians, in the central portion of west Anatolia, developed powerful kingdoms, and gradually began to extend their power to the coast. Between the second quarter of the seventh century and the middle of the sixth, Lydians conquered most if not all of the cities of Greek Anatolia. When Croesus was defeated by Cyrus in 546, these cities fell to the Persians.

(Slide 3) The Persian monarchs sent representatives called satraps into the various areas within the empire to enforce their will and to manage the collection of tribute or taxes. Greek authors sometimes use the Persian word "satrap" (well, *xšācapāvan* in Old Persian, *satrapēs* in Greek) but often the Greek word for governor, *hyparchos*. The regions that satraps oversaw are referred to in English as "satrapies," in Greek *nomoi*. Darius' inscription at Bisitun does not use a word for satrapy, but rather refers to governors in an area, for example the satrap in Arachosia. Satraps did not rule territories as such, but they were representatives of the king distributed across the empire to impose the king's will on subject peoples. Or at least that is how it seems to have worked in the West; in Central Asia Achaemenid administration may have worked somewhat differently. The Greek cities of Anatolia were under the control of local leaders referred to in English as "despots" or "tyrants," and as long as they paid tribute, these cities were largely left to manage their own affairs. There were two satraps in western Anatolia, one at the old Lydian capital of Sardis and one near the entrance to the Black Sea at Daskyleion.

(Slide 4) Darius engaged in a major campaign in Europe around the year 513, and his army included soldiers from around the empire, including Ionian Greeks. Exactly what regions came under Persian domination at this period is not entirely clear, but it is probably fair to say that Darius focused his attention on Thrace, and he campaigned north of the Danube river in the region occupied by the Scythians. We know about Persian campaigns from inscriptions set up by to commemorate Darius' successes, and we know about some of these from Herodotus, who deals selectively with Darius' wars. But neither source gives a complete account, and neither gives us good insight into Darius' overall strategy. Herodotus inclines us to believe that the European campaign was done in vengeance for a Scythian invasion of Media a century earlier, but it is also possible that Darius may have been seeking to extend his empire, or simply putting pressure on neighboring peoples to keep them from threatening the core of his empire. In any case, there is no evidence that he wanted to bring the Greek mainland into the Persian empire. It was only when the Ionian cities revolted in 499 that the Persians came into conflict with the mainland Greeks.

Ionian Revolt

(Slide 5) As Herodotus tells it, the tyrants of Miletus are responsible for setting the mainland Greeks and Persians against each other. Histiaeus, the tyrant of Miletus, was rewarded for his service during Darius' campaign in Thrace with the right to establish a settlement in Thrace, in an area rich with silver and timber. Darius later had second thoughts, and recalled Histiaeus to the Persian capital as a way of keeping him from becoming too powerful. Similarly, Aristagoras, Histiaeus' nephew, who took control of Miletus in his uncle's absence, is also portrayed by Herodotus as being too ambitious for his own good.

(Slide 6) Aristagoras convinced Artaphernes, the Persian satrap at Sardis, the capital of Lydia, to help him invade the Cycladic island of Naxos, arguing that this would be a foothold that Artaphernes could use to extend his conquests throughout the Cyclades and eventually to Euboia. When this plan failed, he turned around and tried to get aid from the mainland to revolt against the Persians. First he went to Sparta, and when the king Cleomenes rebuffed him, he then went to Athens and convinced the assembly there to assist him. Athens sent 20 ships to Miletus, and the city of Eretria on Euboia added six more. After marching inland from Miletus to Sardis, a distance of about 60 miles, they succeeded in capturing the lower town. In the process a fire broke out, and the main temple in Sardis burned. The Greek troops suffered heavy casualties in withdrawing, and the mainland cities pulled out of the rebellion. This did, however, convince the other cities of Ionia to join in rebellion. The Persians were able to win a major naval engagement at Lade, off the coast of Miletus, thus ending the Ionian revolt in 494 BC.

First Invasion

(Slide 7) Whether Darius had originally intended to add mainland Greece to his empire or not, the mainland contribution to the Ionian rebellion was enough to convince him to take vengeance on Athens and Eretria. After order was established in Ionia, the king's son-in-law Mardonius was sent on a campaign into Greece proper. The Persians sent their army by land, with the navy hugging the coast to remain close to the land forces. Thrace and Macedonia were forced to submit to the Persians, but in 492 BC the Persian fleet was destroyed in a storm as it rounded Mount Athos in the Chalkidike. The Chalkidike is a region of southeast Macedonia composed of three peninsulas that jut into the north Aegean. This was to prove to be the first of three Persian invasions of Greece, and the beginning of an even longer period of conflict.

Second Invasion

(Slide 8) The second invasion came a couple of years later, in 490-489 BC. Since this is the first time the Persians come into actual armed conflict with troops in mainland Greece, it is usually viewed as the first Graeco-Persian war. This time the Persians sailed their army straight across the Aegean, thus avoiding the site of the earlier disaster, and encountered no resistance until they reached the island Euboia, where they besieged and captured the city of Eretria. In retribution for the Eretrians' role in setting off the earlier Ionian revolt, the entire population of the city was forcibly deported to a town near Susa, the Persian capital in Elam. The wholesale forced migration of subject peoples had been a tactic used earlier in the millennium by Neo-Assyrian rulers, and it was adopted at various times by the Achaemenids as well.

The other mainland city that had supported the Ionian revolt was Athens, a significantly larger city than Eretria, but still tiny as compared to the Persian empire. The Persians sailed to the closest point of Attica, which happened to be Marathon, about 25 miles from Athens, and there were met by the bulk of the Athenian forces, along with the troops of Plataea, a town in southern Boeotia that had put itself under the protection of Athens about 20 years earlier as a defense against the city of Thebes. The Greek troops dug in for several days, but eventually attacked, charging (according to Herodotus) about a mile in full armor before engaging the much larger Persian force. They bested the Persians, allegedly killing 6,400 while themselves only losing 192 soldiers, and forced the surviving Persians back onto their ships. The Persians quickly sailed around the cape to Athens, hoping to beat the Athenians back to their city, but the Athenian troops moved faster and, arriving at the Athenian harbor, prevented the Persians from landing. At this the Persians turned around and sailed back to Anatolia.

Third Invasion

(Slide 9) Thus the first Persian war amounted to just one major battle. While the Athenians were outnumbered, they had managed to pull off a major victory. It could be argued that the Persians had underestimated the force needed to cow the Athenians – certainly this is how the Athenians had interpreted their win. Or perhaps the Persians did not have the resolve to persevere. If there had been a real desire to conquer the whole of Greece, wouldn't the Persians have planned for longer battles and a greater supply chain? In any case, the Persian fleet returned home, and the sequel to this campaign, which did not come for another 10 years, proved a much larger undertaking. By this point Darius had died, and his successor, Xerxes, personally led the army on this occasion.

Herodotus devotes much space and adds great color to his account of the third invasion. He numbers the Persian army this time at 1.7 million men – clearly an exaggeration, though ancient accounts of troop numbers are always suspect, for a variety of reasons. He tells of how the Persians built a bridge to bring their army across the Hellespont, and how they dug a canal across the peninsula of Athos, through which they might bring their navy without running the risk of repeating their earlier disaster. While Herodotus presents the Greek response to the second invasion as being very last minute – the Athens only react after the Persians are in Euboea – this time the Greeks had plenty of advance warning. Xerxes had sent messengers ahead to Greece, encouraging cities to submit before the invasion had even begun. About 800 city-states are attested in Archaic and Classical Greece, but only 31 joined a league to defend against the Persians. Sparta was the consensus choice to lead the combined resistance, though jockeying for power within the confederacy between Sparta and Athens continued throughout the war. The Spartans were renowned fighters and clearly the main power in the Peloponnese, whereas Athens had built the largest fleet in Greece and was arguably the dominant city in Central Greece.

(Slide 10) I won't address the main battles here in any detail, but rather focus on the overall trajectory of the war. Note that on these maps I use triangles to locate places with more precision than on most of my maps.

The Spartans wanted to build a wall across the narrows between the Corinthian and Saronic Gulf and retreat into the Peloponnese, but this would abandon the rest of Greece to the Persians. The Athenians and Boeotians, in contrast, wanted to stop the Persians in Thessaly. A compromise was reached by which an initial stand would be made just south of Thessaly, and the Athenians would be prepared to abandon their city should this become necessary.

Thus the first major encounter of this war occurred, on land, at Thermopylae in Locris, as well as at sea off the coast of Boeotia at Artemesium. The stand at Thermopylae is perhaps the single most well-known story from the Persian wars, because after the bulk of the Greek forces that had guarded the pass here had retreated to join the main Greek forces to the south, the Spartan king Leonidas remained with 300 soldiers from Sparta, Thebes, and Thespieae, holding off the Persians as long as possible in a doomed but valiant stand. Meanwhile, the Greek fleet held the Persian fleet from passing into the narrow gulf between the island of Euboea and the Greek mainland until the army had succumbed at Thermopylae. Then the fleet retreated south as well. The Athenians were forced to abandon their city, leaving a small garrison on the acropolis that lasted two weeks. The Persians were then able to burn Athens, thus avenging themselves for the destruction of Sardis two decades earlier.

(Slide 11) The next stand was off the southern coast of Attica, between Attica and the island of Salamis. The women and children of Athens had been moved to Troezen (in the Peloponnese just south of the Methana peninsula), and Aegina and Salamis (two islands in the Saronic Gulf). With the relative strength of the Athenian navy and the difficulty of protecting the city, this had seemed the safest course. The Peloponnesians wanted to wall off the isthmus, but the Athenians convinced them to bring the fleet into the narrows between Salamis and Attica. They succeeded in baiting the Persians into fighting in close quarters, and the Greeks won a significant victory.

The Persians, rather than continuing on against the Peloponnese, regrouped instead. They still had a large army and navy – none of the Greek victories so far had really changed that --- but they were apparently surprised by the string of successes that the Greeks had had. Xerxes returned to Asia, having succeeded in avenging the attack on Sardis, and presumably he needed to attend to other matters of the empire. The Persian army returned to Thessaly for the winter, and the bulk of the Persian fleet sailed north to protect the Hellespont, thereby protecting a line of retreat to Anatolia.

(Slide 12) The final battles of the Graeco-Persian wars occurred on land in Boeotia; and at sea near Anatolia. In the spring the Greek and Persian armies maneuvered for a place to fight. Eventually they settled on the plain of Plateia, near Thebes, which had Medized. When battle was finally engaged, the Greeks gave the illusion of retreating, thus tempting the Persians to attack. They then stood firm and were able to gain the advantage.

Several days after the Greek victory at Plateia, the Greek and Persian navies fought off the Anatolian peninsula of Mycale, facing the island of Samos. The Persians had pulled their ships on the shore, and built a stockade around them. The Greeks landed a small troop of perhaps 600 marines and took the Persian ships with an infantry charge.

By this point Persian power was essentially undiminished, though the empire had suffered a series of losses. On the plus side, they had destroyed both Eretria and Athens, and thus taken revenge on the mainlanders for their role in the Ionian revolt. On the other hand, they had suffered several defeats at the hands of a people they considered little more than barbarians. The Persians still controlled Ionia and had expanded their power into the Balkans, but mainland Greece was still free.

(Copyright Slide) This presentation is protected by a Creative Commons' Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives license. That means you're free to share it with others in this form, but only if you give credit to the copyright holder (Carl Seaquist). You can't modify it and you can't use it for commercial purposes without Carl's permission. For details, see the Creative Commons website: <http://creativecommons.org/>.