

28 September 480 BC

The Battle of Salamis

The Athenian Navy Destroys
the Persian Fleet

We have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere, for good or ill, we have left imperishable monuments behind us.

Pericles on the Athenians

The battle of Salamis became the first great sea-battle to be described in recorded history. It was a momentous event in the long story of the wars between the Greeks and the Persian empire. The Greek fleet was able to defeat the much larger Persian navy at the straits of Salamis located between the island of Salamis and the Athenian port of Piraeus. By 480 BC the Persian army led by King Xerxes I had conquered large parts of Greece. The Persian navy consisting of a thousand galleys was threatening to surround and overwhelm the Greek fleet of 370 triremes located in the Saronic Gulf. The eventual victory was the result of some clever Greek trickery – a quality which was always a cause for Hellenic self-congratulation. The Greek commander Themistocles sent Xerxes a false message suggesting that he was preparing to change sides. Lured by the Greeks, the Persians then sailed into the narrow waters of the Salamis straits where the Greek triremes proceeded to launch a ferocious attack, ramming the Persian ships and sinking some 300

of them. The Greeks by contrast lost only about forty of their ships. The remainder of the Persian fleet had to withdraw and Xerxes was forced to postpone any further land campaigns for a year. This provided the Greeks with a crucial breathing space during which the autonomous city-states (*poleis*) set aside their customary quarrels. Their united armies, under the command of the Spartan general Pausanias, went on to defeat the Persians at the battle of Plataea in 479 BC.

Salamis represented the union of naval strategy with democratic zeal. In 508 BC, twenty-eight years before the battle, Cleisthenes' legislation gave citizenship to all the free men of Athens – including Themistocles, whose father was an aristocrat but whose mother was a non-Athenian concubine. Without Cleisthenes' reform the hero of Salamis would not have been an Athenian citizen. Ten years before Salamis the Greeks had won the great land victory at Marathon when, led by Miltiades, they had defeated the Persians. This had been a victory for the spear-carriers who could afford to buy their own expensive bronze equipment. But the Persians were notoriously well equipped with cavalry and archers – their country's huge plains enabled them to train such forces, an advantage denied the Greeks with their terrain of valleys and mountains. The Persians would be perfectly capable of returning in greater numbers.

Themistocles proposed that the Greeks should exploit the difficulties experienced by Persia and her allies (who included the Phoenicians) in maintaining their naval chain of supply and lines of communication. He therefore campaigned for an expansion of the Athenian fleet, then some seventy strong. But this was a proposal with profound democratic consequences.

The rich would have to pay higher taxes. Poorer voters, traditionally pro-democracy, supplied the triremes with rowers. A naval expansion therefore meant increasing the influence, and possibly the numbers, of democratic sympathizers. For the conservative and propertied classes a land campaign was always a safer bet politically since the infantry were drawn from those with more money. The 480s in Athens, despite the Marathon victory, threatened to degenerate into that endemic state of political and social conflict known as *stasis* to the Greeks. Silver helped to resolve the argument. The mines at Sunium, owned by the state, produced a rich extra seam in 483 and Themistocles persuaded the Athenian assembly to spend this surplus on his naval expansion programme so that Athens would have 200 triremes. He also persuaded the Greek states of the Peloponnese, including Sparta with her 150 ships, to form a combined fleet. A Spartan admiral was in command since no Corinthian or Aeginan would serve under an Athenian, but it was Themistocles who guided the strategy.

The fleet first sailed north of Euboea – an audacious move since the Greek traditionally fought near their own coastal mainland. A storm inflicted heavy losses on the Persians but the subsequent battle of Artemisium was inconclusive with heavy losses on both sides. Greek disaster struck on 19 August at the pass of Thermopylae, which leads from northern Macedonia into the rest of Greece: here 20,000 Persians defeated 300 Spartans and 700 Thebans. They went on to occupy Attica and destroy Athens. Salamis was a deliverance from this humiliation.

The victories of a citizen army and a citizen navy supplied the basis for the self-confidence of a civilization although

many of its distinctive cultural achievements pre-dated Salamis. The Olympic games, testimony to the Greek belief in the *agon* or contest which permeated all of life and not just athletics, were first recorded at Olympia in 776 BC. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, attributed to Homer, were written by the mid-ninth century BC. These epics provided the Greeks with a theology describing the gods, who might be angry or blessed, jealous or kindly but always unpredictable. Because the Greek soil was so poor the history of searching for a better territory starts early and by 700 BC such colonists were establishing themselves around the Mediterranean, and southern Italy would become Greek. Parmenides, whose associated school of philosophers were the first true metaphysicians, was born in 515 BC and developed the belief that the universe, although appearing to change, is solid and permanent. By 500 BC Heraclitus was teaching at Ephesus his distinctive view that all of nature and of humanity is in constant flux.

After Salamis the Greeks increasingly defined themselves in conscious opposition to an 'east' which was effete, luxurious, decadent and, above all, undemocratic. Having scored great victories over an empire which was so much larger, and richer, they suspected that they were blessed by the gods. Many Athenians also thought that the development of democratic institutions emphasizing common purpose was the key to their own moral and political superiority. The liveliness of that debate had its counterpart in the Athenian development of critical thought and of a philosophy which examined fundamental ideas about matter and atoms, law and morality, the difference between the subjective belief and objective truth. Informally in the *agora* or market place, more formally in the school or

gymnasium as well as in the Athenian assembly, intellectual debates raged. Plato, though an anti-democrat, would describe such exchanges of views as dialectic – the path to truth. This was a relentlessly open society, one in which an *idiot* was, literally, someone who withdrew from the public world of the *polis* in which it was a duty to serve. Their language itself, so the Greeks congratulated themselves, was uniquely equipped to express with precision the fine distinctions and abstract ideas which were debated in the fifth century BC.

Salamis did not remove the Greek sense of exposure to Persian threat. And it's that sense of living on the edge which explains the creative brilliance of the Athenian civilization. Herodotus established the new discipline of history when he set to work describing how but also *why* the Greeks and the Persians came to be at war. He handled evidence critically and drew on the Greek fascination with their own difference from the 'barbarians'. Tragedy was the Athenians' most distinctive literary form – a blend of philosophical speculation, religious ritual and sublime poetry never since equalled in any other world civilization. Ideas about the relation between men and gods, between free will and necessity, acquired a human dimension in the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, which reworked the ancient Greek myths to contemporary effect. But there was also a tragic dimension to the inability of the Greeks, after so brilliant an inauguration, to produce a political order whose unity would reflect their cultural depth. Conflicts within the seventy or so *poleis* were also vicious and ostracism – where one's political opponents were outlawed – was often used in Athens. Themistocles himself was ostracized having failed in his campaign for a further reform of the *Areopagus*, the origi-

nally aristocratic central council which governed Athens. Under the reformer Solon in the early sixth century BC the membership of the council had been opened up to all who had certain property qualifications and a rival council, the *Boule*, was established. But Themistocles wanted the democracy to go further and as fast as one of his triremes. He died c. 460 while serving, ironically enough, as a governor of some of the Asian Greek cities which were still Persian-controlled.

By 438 BC the Parthenon, the temple to Athena goddess of Athens in her role as *parthenos* (virgin), had been completed as a symbolic statement of the city's self-confidence. But seven years later the Athenian empire had embarked on the twenty-seven-year conflict with Sparta known as the Second Peloponnesian War. It was a war between two systems of government: between Athenian citizen democracy and Spartan aristocratic militarism. It had also been caused by the rough tactics used by the Athenians when developing their empire and by their imposition on their client states of regimes run by pro-Athenian appeasers. The war, ending in Spartan victory and the dismantling of the Athenian empire, sapped the strength not just of Athens but of all Greece. And the fact that Sparta was financed by Persian gold was a kind of revenge for Salamis. All of Hellas was now vulnerable to the rise of the Macedonian kings of the north – first Philip II and then his son Alexander. Philip's victory at the battle of Chaeronea imposed Macedonian kingship and overlordship over the Greek *poleis*. The end, however, was also a beginning. Alexander, seeing himself as a Homeric hero, was Hellenic culture's best ambassador. He and his successors transmitted Greek values (though not democracy) across the vast areas of Alexander's conquests in the east,

including Persia, and down to the Indus. The Roman republic rose to greatness during this Hellenistic period and the Romans themselves, for all their military and political prowess and distinctive achievements in the framing of laws, always knew that culturally they stood on the shoulders of the Greeks' gigantic achievements which were given the space and confidence to develop because of the victory at Salamis.