



June 2008

The Battle of Thermopylae: Principles of War on the Ancient Battlefield

Joseph Kleist

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Kleist, Joseph. "The Battle of Thermopylae: Principles of War on the Ancient Battlefield." *Studia Antiqua* 6, no. 1 (2008). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol6/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studia Antiqua* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

THE BATTLE OF THERMOPYLAE: PRINCIPLES OF WAR ON THE ANCIENT BATTLEFIELD

JOSEPH KLEIST

The tenacity of warriors in a battle can have a far greater influence toward victory for a civilization than a single battle's outcome. It is an interesting phenomenon in the history of warfare how unexpected results have occurred in numerous engagements between unevenly matched opponents on the ancient and modern battlefield. This was especially evident in the Battle of Thermopylae waged between the Greek and Persian forces in the late summer of 480 b.c.e. From a numerical standpoint, the massive Persian force led by King Xerxes should have easily wiped out the small Greek defense gathered at Thermopylae and continued on to victory against a seemingly inferior and disunited Greece. Instead, the Persians faced a prolonged three-day battle against the small Greek force led by King Leonidas and his three hundred Spartan warriors. The battle may have ended in defeat for the Greeks, yet it failed to crush the Greeks' morale and unity inspired by Leonidas's heroic example, and the Persians were defeated soon after. How was it possible for the Greeks to hold out and suppress the overwhelming Persian offense at Thermopylae longer than reasonably expected? Certain principles of warfare such as terrain, unity of command, mass, and maneuver, enabled the Greeks to prolong their defense at Thermopylae for three days and hinder the Persians from neutralizing the Greek defense immediately and securing an ultimate victory in this campaign.

In the first place, the terrain of Greece itself hindered the Persians from gaining immediate victory at Thermopylae and conquering all of Greece. By the year 480 b.c.e., the Persian Empire had expanded to become one of the greatest in history. Their rule extended from the east in modern Pakistan to the west through Asia Minor and Macedonia and south to Egypt.¹ In the spring of this same year, Xerxes ordered his army to cross the bridged peninsula at Hellespont and invade Greece from the northern countries of Thrace, Macedonia, and Thessaly. Complete control of the whole of Greece and access to the

1. Barry Strauss, "Greco-Persian Wars: Battle of Thermopylae," <http://www.history-net.com/magazines/mhq/3033206.html> (accessed 22 January 2007).

rest of Europe was Xerxes' ultimate objective.² Yet, how would his immense force perform in the foreign territory of Greece compared to their earlier success in Asia Minor and Egypt? Knowledge of the terrain and how it will affect your forces and the enemy is critical for the success of any military operation.³ Even though the Persians came from a mountainous region, they could have hardly prepared themselves for the type of terrain they would encounter upon entering Greece. Even for a light infantry soldier, the ruggedness of the Greek country and hillside, coupled with sharp rocks and thorny vegetation along the way, made for a tedious and severe journey.⁴ Such difficulty impeded Xerxes' attempts to achieve surprise and effective force of action had he reached the battlefield at Thermopylae earlier to await the oncoming Greeks. Since no detailed maps or charts of Greece were at his disposal, Xerxes also lacked the local knowledge that native Greeks possessed, which put him and his forces at an even greater disadvantage.⁵

Consequently, Xerxes faced another dilemma with the land not sufficiently supplying his forces with the basic essential resources for the conquest. Hardly any vegetation for Xerxes' pack animals to graze upon was found in the rugged Greek countryside. The natural water supply was also limited because Greece suffers annually from a dry period of eight months.⁶ It is not surprising that "the waters of some rivers failed" and huge amounts of food were used up every day for the thousands upon thousands of fighting men, not counting the sustenance needed for the supporting groups and draft animals of the invading expedition.⁷

The countryside of Greece and its failure to supply the Persians sufficiently proved to be a constant burden for Xerxes. At the same time, it became one of the most advantageous allies for the Greeks.

Even with their recent triumph over the Persians at Marathon in 490 b.c.e., the Greeks knew that the extreme deficit in numbers between their forces and the Persians in this particular campaign made the issue of key terrain all the more important. Unlike most of the northern Greek territories, the two most prominent city-states, Athens and Sparta, refused to pay as tribute the tokens of earth and water that Xerxes had demanded from Greece as a symbol of their willing submission to the invaders.⁸ This defiance prompted Xerxes to push his offensive further along the coastline into Greece toward Athens. Unknown to Xerxes, the route he chose along the coastline answered the question

2. Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.157.

3. United States Dept. of the Army, *Foundations of Leadership: MSL II* (Person Custom Publishing, 2006), 244.

4. Ernle Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 68.

5. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 99.

6. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 68.

7. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.187.

8. M. Haskew, "Greco-Persian War: Xerxes' Invasion," http://www.historynet.com/wars_conflicts/ancient_medieval_wars/3035381.html (accessed 20 February 2007).

as to where the Greeks should position themselves to fight the Persians. King Leonidas decided that the Pass of Thermopylae, or “the Hot Gates,” a narrow valley stretching three and a half miles long adjacent to the Euripus Channel, would provide the best advantage for the Greeks to intercept and engage the Persians.⁹ The pass was extremely narrow at the East and West Gates and the Middle Gates where the mountains were the sharpest in the center. It was at the Middle Gates, where the pass was no more than twenty meters wide, that the Greeks chose to stand and defend the pass.¹⁰ It was the choice geographical setting for “a comparatively small force to check a large one, which would not be able to deploy and take advantage of its numbers.”¹¹ Sun Tzu, ancient Chinese realist and strategist, commented that to fight a larger force, you only need the right position. An army’s position will also increase its strength.¹² With the right position determined, the Greeks’ test to defend the Hot Gates would also be determined in how well their commander King Leonidas led them in the engagement.

Success in warfare comes not merely from the troops’ fighting abilities but from the leadership proficiency of the group’s commander. It “demands that a single commander holds the authority to direct all forces toward the objective in a unified, coordinated effort.”¹³ This defines the principle of unity of command, which the Greeks had to muster from their commander, King Leonidas. According to Sun Tzu, a leader in war must be smart, trustworthy, caring, brave, and strict.¹⁴ Unfortunately, neither the Greek historians Herodotus nor Xenophon provided a clear description of Leonidas’s qualifications or leadership skills. Yet, some of Leonidas’s words recorded by Plutarch shed light on his courage and devotion for his country, qualifying him to be a choice leader for such a task set before him. When someone questioned his reasoning for taking only a few men to engage the massive Persian army, he replied, “If you think I should rely on numbers, then not even the whole of Greece is enough, since it is a small fraction of their horde; but if I’m to rely on courage, then even this number is quite enough.”¹⁵ His devotion to Greece was evident when Xerxes wrote to him demanding his submission by explaining, “It is possible for you not to fight the gods but to side with me and be a monarch of Greece.” Leonidas wrote back, “If you understood what is honorable in life, you would avoid lusting after what belongs to others. For me, it is better to die for Greece than to be a monarch of the people of my race.”¹⁶ From the audacity and resolve of his words, it was no mistake

9. Strauss, “Greco-Persian Wars: Battle of Thermopylae.”

10. Strauss, “Greco-Persian Wars: Battle of Thermopylae.”

11. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 95.

12. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Gary Gagliardi (Seattle, Wash.: Clearbridge Publishing, 2004), 62.

13. *Foundations of Leadership: MSL II*, 172.

14. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 22.

15. Plutarch, *On Sparta*, trans. Richard J. A. Talbert (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 170.

16. Plutarch, *On Sparta*, 171.

or coincidence that King Leonidas and the rest of his Spartans were chosen to lead the miniscule force in the first land encounter with the Persians at Thermopylae. The extreme militarism that defined Spartan society throughout the ages further explains why Leonidas and his three hundred warriors were ideal participants to defend Thermopylae.

Spartan warriors epitomized the Greek military muscle. The Spartan society stressed the importance of rearing their children to become absolutely proficient in the arts of war. Taken from their mothers at age seven or eight, the boys were sent to a rigorous training regime called the *agoge*. For the next thirteen years, they were trained vigorously in military drill, weapons training, athletics, hunting, and endurance against every form of deprivation to make them into Spartan warriors and citizens.¹⁷ Thievery was encouraged and even necessary for the young boys to survive the rigors of combat training and was punishable only if they were caught in the act.¹⁸ The law system given by Lycurgus, the father of Sparta who first established the military oriented reformation of Spartan society, “taught the children from a desire to render them more dexterous in securing provisions and better qualified for warfare.”¹⁹ Abused into submission and eventually molded into the established order, a Spartan warrior, priding himself on entering into one of the most elite and formidable fighting forces ever in history, emerged fully prepared to defend or die for the state that shaped him. Such was the fortitude and military proficiency that prepared Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans to lead the defense at Thermopylae.

With the pressure of Xerxes’ advancing force closing in on the heart of Greece in the summer of 480 b.c.e., King Leonidas desired to march his force northward towards Thermopylae, even against the council of the elders. They insisted that Leonidas stay in Sparta with his force and honor the Carneia, the holiest of all religious festivals among the Peloponnesians.²⁰ Leonidas’ loyalty to the law was steadfast enough, yet his concern with the Persians threatening the freedom of his countrymen forced him to proceed with only three hundred of his finest warriors. With the bulk of the Spartan army not at his disposal, why would Leonidas advance so suddenly with only a handful of his warriors? First, Sparta always held the reputation of being Greece’s strongest land force. Second, Leonidas believed that his presence would “inspire the rest of the allies to arms, and discourage them from joining the ranks of those who were already collaborating with the enemy, as they might if they got the idea that the Spartans were holding back.”²¹ Such a strong notion as that of a king marching forward with his warrior elite was convincing enough for several more city states to deploy their limited manpower for Greece’s defense. At this stage of events, Leonidas needed to implement his unity

17. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 61.

18. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 61.

19. Xenophon, “On The Spartans,” <http://www.csun.edu/~hcfl1004/sparta-a.html> (accessed February 26 2008).

20. Strauss, “Greco-Persian Wars: Battle of Thermopylae.”

21. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:206.

of command within the ranks of his defenders.

When the actual fighting began, the unity of command had to somehow take effect within the ranks of his individual soldiers. This concept mirrors the modern chain-of-command model wherein “authority passes down from the top through a series of military ranks in which each person is accountable to a superior.”²² Because Leonidas could not have trusted the morale, skill, and loyalty of the other Greek states, he designated his three hundred Spartans as the main phalanx officers.²³ According to Greek military protocol, the phalanx structure was divided into six *morai* or regiments. Each hoplite *morai* had one colonel (*pol-emarchos*), four captains (*lochagoi*), eight lieutenants (*penteconters*), and sixteen sergeants (*enomotarches*).²⁴ The purpose of this subdivision was for every soldier in the hoplite to receive and follow the orders of formation and attack from the commander with the utmost reliability. This leadership structure enabled Leonidas to maintain complete control and unity of command throughout his force. Any chance for a formidable defense depended upon every individual soldier to perform any task at hand with the utmost prestige according to the commands of Leonidas in every phase of the battle waiting to commence.

King Leonidas and his defending force held off the Persian offense successfully for three days by their superior use of mass. Mass as a principle of war means “organizing all the elements of combat power at your disposal to have decisive effect on your enemy.”²⁵ In the Battle at Thermopylae, this principle applies to the unit’s size, arms and armor, and battle formations under the Persian and Greek’s commands. In regard to the Persians’ use of mass, their strength in numbers had been their saving grace in all previous conquests.

Strength in numbers had favored the Persian army as they had been unharmed and increased in size from their departure from Asia until they finally reached Thermopylae. According to Herodotus, the Persian army and naval forces totaled around two million two hundred thousand fighting men. Based on recruiting strength gained from the northern countries and Greek city-states who submitted to Xerxes, the force had increased to over two million six hundred thousand.²⁶ Historians lately have disputed whether Herodotus was exaggerating his calculations of Xerxes’ numbers and have set them at around five hundred thousand.²⁷ Xerxes’ forces from Asia consisted of Persians, Medes, and Sacae while recruits from the various northern countries such as Thrace, Paeonia, Macedonia, Magnesia, and many others replenished his infantry, cavalry, and naval power. This great diversity among Xerxes’ warriors implied

22. Foundations of Leadership: MSL II, 160.

23. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle For The West*, 118.

24. Xenophon, “The Spartan War Machine,” in *A Source Book of Ancient Greek*, ed. Fred Fling (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1907), 73–75. See also Foundations of Leadership: MSL II, 171.

25. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.184–85.

26. Haskew, “Greco-Persian War: Xerxes’ Invasion.”

27. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.184–85.

that their weaponry was equally diverse among each soldier.

Hence, the Persians would have used almost every conceivable weapon available at their disposal, including bows, slings, spears, swords, javelins, and daggers.²⁸ Their primary weapon for both hunting and warfare was the bow, which the cavalry and infantry units used extensively.

The javelin, made for thrusting and throwing, was their next prime weapon. After this, they relied on simple daggers and short bladed swords if the fight came in close proximity.²⁹ Their choice of arms suggested they preferred to fight at longer ranges with support from their cavalry and mounted archer units. Such a fighting style required them to wear little or no body armor. An exception to this would apply to Xerxes' elite unit, the Immortals, who were about ten thousand strong at Thermopylae. While carrying a wickerwork or leather shield effective against projectile weapons, they wore leather corselets covered with bands of iron and bronze, but had no armor protection for their legs.³⁰ Unfortunately, little is known about their specific battle formations or organizations. The Persians managed to secure one of the largest empires ever by fighting in the open areas of Asia and Egypt, where mobility had been their primary advantage.³¹ Yet the narrow passageway at Thermopylae showed the ineffectiveness of this kind of warfare and proved hardly a match for the heavily armored Greek hoplite phalanx.

Even with a limited fighting force comprising around four thousand warriors, the Greeks' method of fighting with the hoplite phalanx proved ideal in such a restricted area as Thermopylae presented. The basic principle of the phalanx was to form a wall of armor with every soldier holding the shield in his left hand protecting the right side of the neighboring soldier. This presented a line of shields and armor able to deflect the onslaught of an oncoming assault.³² Appearance in battle was every bit as important to the Spartan warriors as their ability to fight. The Greek historian Xenophon, who served along with the Spartan army some years after the Persian war, describes the appearance of one of these elite Spartan hoplite warriors.

For the actual encounter under arms, the following inventions are attributed to Lycurgos: the soldier had a crimson-colored uniform and a heavy shield of bronze, his theory being that such equipment has masculine association and is altogether warrior-like. He further permitted those who were about the age of early manhood to wear their hair long. For so, he conceived, they would appear of larger stature, more free and indomitable, and of a more terrible aspect.³³

The appearance of just one of these heavily armored Spartan warriors

28. Jacob Abbott, *Makers of History: Xerxes* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1904), 131.

29. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 73.

30. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 73.

31. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 74.

32. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 69.

33. Xenophon, "The Spartan War Machine," 73–75.

must have looked intimidating indeed to the primitively clad Persians. The Greek hoplites generally used the Corinthian-style helmet of bronze or iron that protected the entire head, face, and collarbone, which was especially vulnerable to a sword slash. The torso and trunk were either protected by a composite corselet of leather covered with metal scales or two bronze plates covering the front and the back and laced together at the sides.³⁴ The armored hoplites were still vulnerable to archer and missile fire, which the Persians used heavily. The hoplites were able to advance quickly on the Persians before they could fire their arrows.³⁵ Yet the best strategy was to remain stationary and wait for the enemy to charge into them. The main source of protection came from the heavy shields the hoplites bore made of wood and covered in bronze. The shield's average diameter, depending upon personal preference, was between three to five feet, enough to protect the neck down to the thigh.³⁶ The hoplites also wore greaves carefully molded to fit their legs in case the shield missed a low sword slash. Being protected as thus, the hoplites stood prepared to slaughter the enemy close in with their simple but highly effective weaponry.

With a wall of hoplite shields positioned forward in the phalanx, the principle weapon in such a tight formation was the bronze-tipped ash-shafted spear measuring six feet long.³⁷ Such a weapon was not intended to be thrown like a javelin but to form a fence with the other spears, to impale the advancing enemy. As a thrusting weapon, the spear held in the hands of master warriors such as the Spartans had the advantage to overcome any adversary armed with the swords or shorter spears commonly used by the Persians.³⁸ But as the battle progressed and spears were splintered, the hoplites relied on a short sword with a curved blade representing that of an Indian Gurka knife.³⁹ The Greeks would have used the sword extensively within the final moments of fighting before the Persians finally overwhelmed them. Surprisingly at this period in Greek history, the hoplites never relied on the bow and arrow as a prominent weapon in combat.⁴⁰ Such would have been Xerxes' intent to first engage and attempt to reduce the armored Greek enemy from a distance prior to deploying his foot soldiers. Accordingly, Leonidas, his Spartan elite, and the rest of the Greek hoplites had to depend on Xerxes' troops to meet them head on in attempts to bypass the mountain pass. Luckily for Leonidas, Thermopylae served as the perfect setting for the Greeks to showcase their true fighting proficiency and capability.

The third principle of war that helped Leonidas in his defense was maneuvering ability. Maneuver in principle is the ability "to exploit your

34. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 70.

35. Tim Everson, *Warfare in Ancient Greece: Arms and Armour from the Heroes of Homer to Alexander The Great* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004), 130.

36. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 71.

37. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 71.

38. Everson, *Warfare in Ancient Greece*, 28.

39. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 72.

40. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 72.

successes, preserve your freedom of action, and reduce your vulnerability. It also implies in creating new problems for your enemy by thwarting their planning and actions.⁴¹ Leonidas' strategy of maneuver began as soon as his force arrived at the Hot Gates with a little over four thousand hoplites from a dozen different city-states.⁴² Upon arriving and wasting no time, Leonidas set about preparing the battlefield by denying the use of land to the enemy and securing his defensive position. He utilized the scorched-earth policy by burning the fertile plains lying between the pass and the northern city of Lamia where the Persians were expected to march to attack his positions.⁴³

Farms, livestock, buildings, and granaries denied to Xerxes helped supply the Greek soldiers repairing the defensive wall stretching out to the sea. The wall was intended to funnel the attacking Persians right into the Middle Gates, where the hoplites would stand, waiting eagerly to receive them. The village of Alpeni lying behind his defensive position provided the much-needed supply line for Leonidas and his men.⁴⁴ He next turned his attention to providing security for his chosen position and considered every possible route the Persians could use to outflank his force. Upon hearing of one such vulnerable route on the mountain of Kallidromos to his left, he sent a security force of one thousand Phocians to defend the mountain pass on his left flank.⁴⁵ It was now a question whether these Phocians would perform their duty effectively to deny Xerxes the advantage of a flanking assault around Leonidas's position, which could spell the Greeks' doom. Either way, the Greeks had prepared all they could with what they had to meet the Persians who were forming up on the other side of the valley near the town of Lamia. Xerxes had only known victory at practically every conquest up to this moment. As far as Leonidas was concerned, "it was a man, not a god invading Greece. No mortal man was ever born, or will ever be, without his allotted share of misfortune—the greatest misfortunes fall upon the greatest men."⁴⁶

Arriving on the other side of the valley was King Xerxes' innumerable force, which had proven themselves successful in battle by overwhelming and outmaneuvering any other previous army throughout their conquests. Upon arriving at Thermopylae, they now faced an enemy vastly inferior to their own in numbers, yet confident and competent enough to dare stand forth and block Xerxes' advance past the Hot Gates. While waiting for his delayed supply line on ship to arrive, King Xerxes asked a Greek defector named Demaratus to explain the bizarre report he received from one of his forward scouts sent to observe the Greeks.⁴⁷

Herodotus records that Demaratus, once a Spartan himself, explained to

41. *Foundations of Leadership: MSL II*, 172.

42. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:202.

43. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 115.

44. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 115.

45. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:217.

46. Herodotus, *The Persian War*, trans. William Shepherd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 54.

47. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle For The West*, 122.

Xerxes:

These men have come to fight us for the pass and they are getting ready to do just that. It is their custom to do their hair when they are about to risk their lives. But you can rest assure that if you defeat these men and the force that awaits you in Sparta, there is no other race on earth which will take up arms and stand up to you, my lord, because you are now up against the noblest and most royal city in Greece, and the bravest men.⁴⁸

Such a bold notion seemed preposterous to the self-proclaimed god king Xerxes. Having been expertly trained in warfare since childhood himself and claiming the special protection of the supreme god Ahura-Mazda,⁴⁹ Xerxes arrived at Thermopylae with the sense of divinity within him. His qualities as the great king indubitably “made him a leader of men and a supreme commander.”⁵⁰ Therefore, he expected his potential subjects, or the Spartans now as his opponents, to acknowledge such divine greatness and make way for his presence. When no such acknowledgment or retreat by the Greeks was made after four days of waiting, Xerxes determined that the time had come for the Greeks to pay for their apparent impudence in denying him access.

On the fifth day, Xerxes unleashed his assault and sent his Medes and Cissian forces forward in the initial attack.⁵¹ Taking up their formations in the phalanx with the Spartans at the front, Leonidas stood firm and ready in the opening phase of battle. The Medes and Cissians crashed against the hoplites’ shields and spears. Wave after wave came in but had little effect. Whenever the attacking troops turned and withdrew, the Greeks advanced slowly from the pass and broke into a fast march to overtake the Persians to keep control over the Thermopylae valley.⁵²

The attack continued throughout the day despite the heavy losses the Persians suffered with each failed attack.⁵³ If Xerxes had one element that surpassed Leonidas, it was the number of troops he had at his disposal. But the Greeks made it clear for everyone that though Xerxes had many men, he had few proficient enough to overcome the Greeks.⁵⁴ The Medes and Cissians, badly mauled by the Greeks, finally withdrew from their attack. The late hours of the first day of the battle wore on as the second phase commenced at nightfall.

When the night came, Xerxes decided to send in his own warrior elite, the ten-thousand-strong Immortals, to give them an equal match. They marched forth possessing almost the same military precision as the Spartans possessed,

48. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:209.

49. Pierre Briant, “The Achaemenid Empire,” in *War and Society in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, ed. Kurt Raaflaub and Nathan Rosenstein (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1998), 112.

50. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:210.

51. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:210.

52. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 69.

53. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:210.

54. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:210.

confident that they would breach the hoplite defense without much difficulty.⁵⁵ Yet their shorter spears and weapons failed to bypass the hoplites' bronze shields and longer spears. As the Medes and Cissians before them had experienced, their large numbers accounted for nothing in the restricted valley and Middle Gates.⁵⁶

Herodotus described one of the most memorable tactics the Spartans used to exploit the Immortal's confidence. A feint they used was to pretend flee all at once. Seeing them take to their heels, the barbarians would pursue with great clatter and shouting whereupon the Spartans would wheel and face them and inflict innumerable casualties. In doing this, the Spartans has some losses too, but only a few. In the end, since the Persians could make no headway towards winning the pass, whether they attacked in companies or whatever they did, they broke off the engagement and withdrew. It is said that Xerxes, who was watching the battle from his throne, three times sprang to his feet for his army.⁵⁷

Whatever tactics the Immortals tried on the Greeks, Leonidas' forces proved that they were the experts and that they were fighting against amateurs.⁵⁸ Perhaps the next day would see a change in fortune for the god king to crush the seemingly weakened and fatigued Greek defenders after the first full day of battle.

With the first day and night gone by without any progress in the attack, Xerxes expected the Greeks to be ineffective as they dressed their comrades' wounds, given that there were so few of them and that they had already taken so many casualties.⁵⁹ On the contrary, the Greeks continued to fight valiantly as Xerxes sent in another wave of crack troops who were supposedly forced under the whip to fight.⁵⁹ To an extent, Leonidas reduced his vulnerability of his lesser sized force by rotating his warriors with every chance he had. To compensate for any shortage of defenders due to casualties, the Greeks organized themselves in divisions based upon their nationality which took turns to fight.⁶⁰ Between attacks, the fresh ranks behind stepped up to replace the fighters up front in the phalanx. A steady wave of battleready hoplites met the bewildered Persians and the destruction of Xerxes' forces continued. The second day ended with the same results. Not one successful attack was made to dislodge the Greeks from the pass. It was not until treacherous measures were used on the third day of battle that Xerxes' success against Leonidas' impenetrable defense was realized.

It is unknown to any historian or speculator whether Leonidas and his defense had a chance to withstand the constant onslaught Xerxes continued to throw at them. It was at this phase of the battle that the Greek traitor Ephialties, seeking a handsome reward, came to Xerxes and revealed to him the vulnerable

55. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 129.

56. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:211.

57. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.211.

58. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:211.

59. Bradford, *Thermopylae: Battle for the West*, 132.

60. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:212.

mountain pass at Leonidas's left flank, which was guarded by the thousand-strong Phocians.⁶¹ On the third day, Xerxes sent the Immortals to the mountain pass, where they quickly overcame the astonished Phocians who were still arming themselves.⁶² Having scattered the Phocians with a volley of arrows, the Persians advanced quickly down the mountain to confront Leonidas on his left flank.

Having been warned of the Immortal's flanking move early on, Leonidas and his remaining hoplite band, advanced farther out of the narrow pass, much farther than they had previously ventured. The Greeks knew their fate was sealed "at the hands of the Persians who had come around the mountain, and so the Greeks spared none of their strength, but fought the enemy with reckless disregard for their lives."⁶³ Many Persians died in the closing moments of the battle as the hoplites pressed forward and fought on. At this time, most of their spears had been splintered, and they continued valiantly to kill the Persians with their swords. Leonidas fell at this point in battle, having "fought to the death with the utmost bravery."⁶⁴ Herodotus retells the last stand with the utmost fervor:

The Persians and Spartans grappled at length over the corpse of Leonidas, but the Greeks fought so well and so bravely that they eventually succeeded in dragging his body away. Four times they forced the Persians back, and the contest remained close until Ephialtes and the Immortals arrived. As soon as the Greeks realized they had come, they drew back again into the narrow neck of the Pass and formed themselves into a compact body. Here, the Greeks defended themselves with swords, if they still had them, and otherwise with hands and teeth. Then the Persians from in front and those who closed in from behind, overwhelmed them in a hail of missiles.⁶⁵

Their courageous last stand against Xerxes' horde prompted those who buried these brave hoplites to inscribe as their epitaph:

Here once were three million of the foe
Opposed by four thousand from the Peloponnese
Stranger, tell the people of Lacedaemon
That we who lie here obeyed their commands.⁶⁶

The manner in which Leonidas and his hoplites maneuvered and engaged the enemy within the narrow pass certainly prolonged the stand at Thermopylae that Xerxes was so confident to overthrow in the first skirmish. Xerxes' underestimation of the Spartan and Greek forces would have prolonged the engagement further had a traitor not stepped forward and offered the Greeks

61. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:213.

62. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:218.

63. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:223.

64. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:224.

65. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:225.

66. Herodotus, *Histories* 7:228.

into his hands.

How Leonidas and his Greek defenders managed to deny Xerxes' innumerable force access for three days is a testament to their proficient understanding and use of terrain, unity of command, mass, and maneuver throughout the battle. Though Leonidas and every Greek who stood by his side fell in the end, their example became a fanfare for the divided Greek nation to come together and resist the advance of Xerxes' innumerable host. In the end, Leonidas's sacrifice did not spell out the ultimate triumph of the Persians over the Greeks. It only strengthened the resolve for Greece to unite and eventually defeat the Persian aggressors. The inspiration from a valiant few, therefore, can become the greatest influence toward victory for a civilization.