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SALAMIS

SALAMIS, island west of Athens and site of a major naval battle in 480 BCE between the Greeks and the Persian fleet of Xerxes I. Salamis was the second of five battles of the Greco-Persian War of 480-79. After the fall of Thermopylae and the inconclusive engagements at Artemisium, Salamis provided the Greeks with their first victory. The subsequent withdrawal of Xerxes' fleet made eventual Persian success dependent upon the army left in Greece under Mardonius; and its rout at Plataea nearly a year later, along with the near-simultaneous defeat at Mycale of an amphibious force assembled in western Anatolia, ensured the freedom of European Greece from Achaemenid rule. All three victories were vital, but Salamis was a genuine turning point in Persian and Greek history.

Our knowledge of the battle, which was fought between Salamis and the Attic mainland, some 9 km west of the city of Athens, depends upon narratives in Herodotus (8.56-97), Aeschylus (*Persians* 250-471: formulated as the report of a messenger to the court in Susa), Diodorus (11.15-19), and Plutarch (*Themistocles* 11-16); none is wholly systematic or lucid, and all are touched by romance and hero-worship (this phenomenon reaches such a pitch in another poetic treatment in Timotheus' *Persians* that it has nothing to offer the military historian); exactly what occurred on that late September day remains a matter of disagreement among scholars. Xerxes certainly chose to fight in a limited space that negated his numerical and technical advantage. The question is why, and what tactical maneuvers preceded the fighting?

During the previous night the Persians moved from Phaleron to a position

closer to the Greeks, who were in sheltered bays to the west of Salamis. The sources permit two possibilities: either the fleet entered the Salamis channel and deployed along the Attic coast facing the Greek bases and the Cynosura peninsula, or the Egyptian contingent blocked the western exit from the Salamis channel on the far side of the island while the remainder blocked the eastern exit on a line east from Cynosura to the Attic coast. Under the first scenario, the battle was followed by a Greek dawn attack on the Persians opposite them (FIGURE 2: I). Under the second scenario, they were attacked either (i) where they were, the Greeks having sailed down the channel to find them (FIGURE 2: II), or (ii) after moving forward into the area north of Cynosura (FIGURE 1: III). The accounts of the fighting are too impressionistic and discontinuous, and those of the nighttime deployment too Delphic, to allow a firm conclusion; the subsequent erection of a commemorative trophy on Cynosura point proves nothing. On any view, there was apparently enough space for it to be primarily a ramming-battle (not one in which marines boarded enemy ships and fought it out on deck), but not for the greater numbers or combat-experience of the Persian fleet to have an impact, and on a psychological level the furious desperation of the Greeks clearly gave them an edge. The result was a rout in which the Persians sustained heavy losses of ships and men, the latter either drowned or butchered as they struggled ashore. A Persian infantry contingent stranded on Psyttaleia was also slaughtered.

Xerxes fought the wrong battle. Why? The sources highlight his belief that the Greek fleet was planning a panicky retreat to the Corinthian Isthmus, a situation that offered the opportunity for an easy knockout blow. This belief rested upon (mis)information from the Athenian Themistocles, who was desperate to prevent withdrawal and to force an engagement at Salamis; it is an improbable-sounding tale that was well-established by 472 BCE, is still widely credited, and may even be true. But the logistical and seasonal pressure imposed by the delay in Attica called for action in any case. His army was already on the march and, if the Greek fleet did not move, Xerxes had to force the issue either by launching a direct attack or by dispatching his fleet towards the Isthmus, a move to which the Greeks would have had to respond. But his numerical superiority (Aeschylus pits 300 Greeks against 1,000 Persians, and later sources affirm similar proportions; but the Persian figure is unreliable) was perhaps insufficient for the latter move to be entirely safe, and it is always tempting to fight the enemy in front of you even when circumvention is a better option. Time and lives had been wasted at Thermopylae for this reason.

Even without Themistoclean incitement Xerxes will, not unreasonably, have believed that Greek morale was bruised and Greek unity fragile, and the chance to engineer a clinical elimination of Greek sea-power and to view the operation from Mt. Aegaleos (with scribes on hand to annotate the details) was hard to resist; royal self-representation is not confined to monumental sculpture, and the Salamis channel would make a fine theatre for the performance of victory. The miscalculation would in due course make theatre of a rather different sort in the shape of Aeschylus' *Persians* (472 BCE).

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