

A LIST OF SOME OF THE MAJOR PLAYERS IN THE GRAECO-PERSIAN WAR

XERXES

CLAIM TO FAME

Ruled as Great King of Persia, King of Kings, from 486 BC until he was assassinated in 465 BC.

INTERESTING FACTS

He was probably only about 30 years old at the time he led in person a massive amphibious invasion of mainland Greece from Asia Minor.

Among his subjects were many Greeks living along the west coast of Asia Minor, whom he compelled to fight against their brothers—the Greeks.

DID YOU KNOW?

Officially the objective of the Greek invasion was to punish two Greek cities — Athens and Eretria — for having supported a major rebellion of Asiatic Greeks against his father (499-4 BC). However, the size of his forces—perhaps a quarter of a million land troops, perhaps 600 warships— indicates that his real objective was, having conquered the Greeks who were resisting him, to incorporate mainland Greece in the huge Persian Empire, which stretched as far as modern-day Afghanistan.



Xerxes Enthroned by A. Dovey

THEMISTOCLES

CLAIM TO FAME

A wealthy Athenian born about 525 BC, making him about 45 years old at the time of his greatest feat—to devise the strategy that destroyed Xerxes's navy at the battle of Salamis near Athens in August 480 BC.

INTERESTING FACTS

Unlike Persia, Athens was a democracy—the world's first, to be exact— where the chief executive officers of the state and the Generals (also Admirals) were elected by the People and responsible to the People of Athens. Themistocles was elected General several times, crucially in 480 BC.

Formally he was junior to Eurybiadas of Sparta, the Greek who was in overall command of the navy of the loyalist alliance formed to resist Xerxes' invasion, but no one was in any doubt that it was Themistocles who masterminded the naval strategy of resistance —which culminated in the shattering victory at Salamis.

DID YOU KNOW?

After the War of resistance against Persia, however, Themistocles decided that Sparta—not Xerxes—was Athens' chief enemy—mainly because Sparta was very hostile to the idea of democracy.

Less than a decade after Salamis, Themistocles found himself officially exiled from Athens for 10 years —and decided that he'd be better off serving as a local governor of a Greek city of Asia Minor, even though that meant formally becoming a subject of Xerxes! The Athenians considered him a traitor and refused to allow his remains to be reburied in his home soil when he died in about 465 BC — about the same time as Xerxes was assassinated.



Themistocles

GENERAL ARTAPHERNES

CLAIM TO FAME:

A nephew of Darius I, being the son of his younger brother who was also called Artaphernes.

INTERESTING FACTS:

The elder Artaphernes served as regional governor, also known as a viceroy, where he was appointed by his older brother the Great King, of the (non-Greek) region of Lydia in western Asia Minor with its capital at Sardis.

It was directly against him that the local Greeks of Asia had revolted in 499 BC. Darius launched the first attempt to punish the two Greek cities which had aided that revolt in 490 BC: Eretria was annihilated, but the democratic Athenians resisted so well that they won the famous battle of Marathon.

DID YOU KNOW?

Artaphernes Jr was one of the two commanders of that failed expedition in 490, but he was not killed at Marathon, and ten years later he turns up as governor of the same province as his father had been before him. It is unknown when and how he died.



Greek hoplite (right) and Persian warrior (left) depicted fighting, on an ancient kylix, 5th century BC

KING DARIUS I

CLAIM TO FAME

Reigned from about 522 BC until he died a natural death in 486 BC. He was the second Founder of the Persian Empire, after the original Founder, Cyrus II the Great, who died in 530/29 BC.

INTERESTING FACTS

Darius had to suppress a number of conspiracies against his life, as well as further revolts by discontented subjects, including the one by the Greeks of Asia.

DID YOU KNOW?

Darius was not a direct descendant of Cyrus. He achieved the throne by crushing a whole series of revolts in the empire and emerging as the empire's Strong Man.



King Darius I on a vase. Published in the US before 1923 and public domain in the US.

EPHIALTES

CLAIM TO FAME

An ordinary Greek from the region of central Greece called Malis which neighbors the pass of Thermopylae, so he knew the local topography.

Best known for—for a handsome monetary reward — betraying Leonidas, his Spartans and other loyalist Greeks defying the pass by telling the Persians of a route round the back through the mountains behind which would enable the Persians to cut off Leonidas and his army.

INTERESTING FACTS

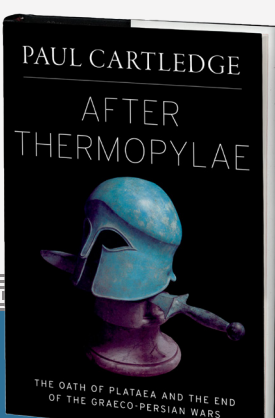
After the Wars were over, and the loyalist Greeks led by Sparta had repelled the invasion led by Xerxes, the Spartans put a price on Ephialtes's head and he was killed by a hitman.

ALSO OF INTEREST

His name has entered the vocabulary of modern Greek with the meaning of "nightmare" —that's what the Greeks today think of Ephialtes and his treachery!



Leonidas monument in Thermopylae, Greece



Read more about these and other key figures and their roles in the battles between the Persians and the Greeks in *After Thermopylae: The Oath of Plataea and the End of the Graeco-Persian Wars* by Paul Cartledge.

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