

# THE GREEKS AT WAR

FROM ATHENS TO ALEXANDER



**Philip de Souza,  
Waldemar Heckel  
& Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones**

*Foreword by* **Victor Davis Hanson**

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# Foreword

by *Victor Davis Hanson*

What we know about the Greek city-states at war mostly begins with their desperate struggle to hold off the Persians between 490 BC and 479 BC – the dramatic Hellenic victories at Marathon, Salamis and Plataea, the historic but failed defence of Thermopylae, and the final pursuit of the Persians across the Aegean at Mycale. From our exciting ancient accounts of these battles, there emerges a peculiar – and especially lethal – way of fighting embraced by these small Greek communities. War making based on shock tactics, group discipline, superior technology, and an audit of military operations by civilian governments trumps numbers and, in fact, presages the Western way of war as it evolved centuries hence.

Phalanxes of heavily-armed infantrymen (hoplites) proved unbeatable on level ground against the far more numerous but lighter-armed and less-disciplined Persians. At sea, victorious Greek triremes reflected not merely the excellence of Greek naval technology, but the empowerment of the lower classes who, from their brilliant seamanship at Salamis, won full participation in radical Athenian democracy.

However, the miracle of the Greek victory over Xerxes' Persians also soon led to an uneasy partnership between the land power Sparta and the maritime Athenians. True, their respective preeminent armies and navies kept Persia on its side of the Aegean for the next half-century, but the growing rivalry between them also turned fifth-century Greece into a bipolar world of Athenian democratic imperialism set against Sparta's coalition of rural oligarchic states.

Civil war broke out in 431 and then raged for the next 27 years. Sparta proved to be as incapable of drawing the Athenians into a hoplite battle as the Athenian fleet was in conquering the Laconian homeland.

The results of the subsequent three-decade-long war of attrition were the great plague at Athens that killed off over a quarter of the population, the Athenian catastrophe at Syracuse where 40,000 of Athens' imperial troops never returned home from Sicily, and a terrible last decade of naval warfare in which over 400 Spartan and Athenian triremes were lost in the eastern Aegean.

The defeat of Athens in 404 did not lead to a permanent Spartan empire, but instead to near constant fighting in the subsequent fourth century. Thebes, Sparta and Athens all learned the military lessons of the Peloponnesian War and increasingly broadened their armed forces to include mercenaries, light-armed and missile troops, and integrated cavalry forces. To the north King Philip II of Macedon was watching these developments eagerly, as he radically modified the old Greek phalanx of citizen soldiers into pike-yielding phalangites – hired professionals who, along with a crack heavy cavalry of landed aristocrats, formed the core of a new national Macedonian army. Along with such a novel and potent military, Philip and his young son Alexander also promoted a new propaganda: only Greek unification under Macedonian leadership could avenge Persia's invasion of Greece nearly 150 years earlier.

After the final defeat of the free Greek states at Chaeronea, and despite the murder of Philip himself, in 334 the 23-year-old Alexander led a small army of 40,000 into Asia Minor in a grand effort to 'liberate' the Greek city-states of Ionia and dismantle the Persian Empire. After three great battles at Granicus, Issus and Gaugamela, by 331 the empire of Dareios III was in Alexander's hands. But the 20-something prince kept pressing eastward, defeating an Indian royal army at the Hydaspes river, before meeting

near mutiny on the borders of India and then subsequently almost ruining his army in a disastrous trek back to Babylon through the unforgiving Gedrosian desert. Exhausted, sick and increasingly paranoid, Alexander died in 333, leaving his vast newly acquired, but hardly pacified empire to be fought over and divided by his surviving Macedonian marshals.

The small amateur armies that had once stopped Xerxes at Thermopylae had now come full circle, as Greek-speaking soldiers found themselves 3,500 miles to the east on the borders of India. If an empire of a million square miles and over 50 million subjects once threatened to make a tiny and squabbling Greece its westernmost satrapy, a century-and-a-half later it lay in ruins thanks to the rampage of Alexander and his lethal Macedonians.

These Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, and the conquest of Alexander the Great, are the themes of a new Osprey offering in its welcomed Essential Histories Specials series. The work of Philip de Souza and Waldemar Heckel offers far more than a narrative history but rather analyses how the Greeks fought on land and sea, in making sense of the seemingly impossible Greek achievement. Yet because it is often difficult to learn of Greek military practice from ancient historians alone, the authors also offer a variety of critical aids to enhance their scholarly analysis, itself based on an array of archaeological, epigraphical, and artistic evidence.

Coloured maps, plentiful photographs, and drawings augment time-lines, glossaries, mini-biographies, and excerpts from ancient historians. Of particular interest is the occasional focus on individual Greeks – Aristodemos and Demaratos, Hipparete, or Callisthenes – whose own private stories help us understand the radical events of the times. These biographical sketches remind us that history is made by real people.

More importantly, the Osprey history is not the usual bland retelling of events so often found in surveys of ancient military practice. Philip de Souza, for example, notes the irony that Sparta's victory over Athens did not liberate the Greeks, but instead substituted an arrogant and poorly run hegemony in place of a coercive but perhaps enlightened empire, leading to a peace imposed by Persia – the original common enemy that had earlier brought the two Greek powers together in the first place. And Waldemar Heckel ends his account of Alexander's startling conquest by emphasising the young conqueror's lack of foresight in establishing a clear succession, a lapse that meant his successor Generals would kill more of each other's armies than were lost to the Persians during Alexander's initial conquest.

The Osprey survey of classical military history is accessible, reliable, and a joy to read. These wars are really not so ancient after all, and will remind us that besides culture and politics, military dynamism is also part of our Hellenic heritage from those most remarkable ancient Greeks.

# Chronology

- 559** Kyros the Great becomes king of Anshan in Persia
- 550** Kyros takes control of the Median Empire
- 547** Kyros conquers Lydia and captures Kroisos
- 539** Kyros conquers Babylon
- 530** Death of Kyros and accession of Kambyses
- 527** Death of Peisistratos; Hippias becomes ruling tyrant of Athens
- 525** Kambyses invades Egypt
- 522** Death of Kambyses; assassination of Bardiya; Dareios becomes king of Persia; death of Polykrates, tyrant of Samos
- 520/19** Dareios campaigns against the Skythians
- 519–18** Dareios extends Persian control over Ionians
- 510** Hippias expelled from Athens
- 508/07** Reforms of Kleisthenes; popular democracy established in Athens
- 499** Persians attack island of Naxos; Aristagoras visits Athens and Sparta
- 498** Ionians, Eretrians and Athenians attack and burn Sardis
- 497** Unsuccessful attempt by Ionians to aid Greeks of Cyprus against Persians
- 497–96** Persian counter-offensive against Greeks in Asia Minor; death of Aristagoras
- 494** Persians defeat Ionians in the battle of Lade
- 493** Persian rule restored in Ionia and eastern Aegean; Themistokles elected archon at Athens
- 492** Persians remove tyrants from Ionian Greek states
- 491** Dareios demands that all Greek states submit to Persian rule
- 490** Aigina defeats Athens in sea battle; Persians capture Naxos; Persians defeated in the battle of Marathon
- 486** Death of Dareios; Xerxes becomes king of Persia
- 484** Birth of Herodotus
- 483/82** Ostracism of Aristides; Athenians begin building fleet of 200 triremes
- 481** Xerxes gathers forces at Sardis; Persian envoys sent to Greece; Hellenic League formed at Sparta; Athens and Aigina make peace
- 480** Xerxes invades Greece; battles of Artemision and Thermopylai; Xerxes captures Athens; battle of Salamis; Xerxes returns to Asia Minor
- 479** Battles of Plataia and Mykale; some Ionians join Hellenic League
- 478** Greek expeditions to Cyprus and Byzantion; recall of Pausanias to Sparta
- 478/77** Formation of the Delian League
- 465–64** Earthquake at Sparta; (Messenian) Helots revolt
- 462** Spartans appeal for Athenian help against Messenians; Kimon's forces sent away by Spartans; reforms of Ephialtes; Athenians form alliance with Megara, Argos and Thessaly
- 461** Ostracism of Kimon
- 459–54** Athenian expedition to Cyprus and Egypt
- 459** Athenians begin building their Long Walls