

In the **Battle of Thermopylae of 480 BC** an alliance of Greek city-states fought the invading Persian army in a mountain pass. Though vastly outnumbered (250,000 – 7000 w/ 300 Spartans), the



Greeks held back the Persian advance in order to buy time for the evacuation of Athens and the preparation of a greater Greek fighting force. Leonidas, the Spartan King commanding the army, held up the enemy in one of the most famous last stands of history.

Because of its defensible terrain, the mountain pass of Thermopylae, the "Hot Gates," was chosen as the site of battle. At the time it consisted of a pass so narrow two chariots could barely move abreast—one side stood the sheer side of the mountain, while the other was a cliff drop into the sea. Along the path was a series of three "gates," and at the center gate a short wall was hastily erected by the Greek army to aid in their defense. It was here in the August of 480 BC that an army of some 7000 Greeks, led by 300 Spartans, stood to receive the full force of the Persian army, numbering perhaps some forty times its size.



After the second day of fighting, a Greek, Ephialtes, defected to the Persians and informed Xerxes of a separate path through Thermopylae, which the Persians could use to outflank the Greeks. Leonidas realized that further fighting would be futile. On August 11 he dismissed the Greek force, except the surviving Spartans, who had already resigned themselves to fighting to the death, and the Thebans. However, a contingent of about 600 Thespians, led by Demophilus, refused to leave with the other Greeks.

Although the Greeks killed many Persians, including two of Xerxes' brothers, Leonidas was eventually killed, but rather than surrender the Spartans fought fanatically to defend his body. To avoid losing any more men the Persians killed the last of the Spartans with flights of arrows.

Cicero wrote about the battle in his *Tusculan Disputations* (1.42.101):

Pari animo Lacedaemonii in Thermopylis occiderunt, in quos Simonides:

*Dic, hospes, Spartae nos te hic vidisse iacentes,
dum sanctis patriae legibus obsequimur.*

E quibus unus, cum Perses hostis in colloquio dixisset glorians: "Solem prae iaculorum multitudine et sagittarum non videbitis," "In umbra igitur," inquit, "pugnabimus!"



Artist's Rendition of King Leonidas

Worksheet by Karl Ayers
Material from www.en.wikipedia.org