

A Great Athenian Naval Victory

Plutarch



OVERVIEW

The Greek biographer Plutarch here recounts the Battle of Salamis, in which a small Athenian fleet routed a huge Persian force of some 600 ships, commanded by Xerxes. Before the battle, Athenian leader Themistocles saw little choice but to fight the Persians. Unfortunately, Athens alone had little hope of winning—her allies ignored calls for help—and the people of Athens were at first unwilling to fight. As Plutarch shows, however, Themistocles managed to trick the Athenians into taking up the fight; then he tricked Xerxes into doing battle in a narrow strait. This tactic allowed the small but highly maneuverable Athenian fleet to cut the Persian flotilla to pieces.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- How does Themistocles use prodigies and oracles to trick the people of Athens into going to war?
 - What do Themistocles' actions say about his views of mysticism?
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Themistocles, perceiving that he could not by the force of human reason prevail with the multitude, set his machinery to work, as a poet would do in a tragedy, and had recourse to prodigies and oracles. The prodigy he availed himself of, was the disappearing of the dragon of Minerva, which at that time quitted the holy place; and the priests, finding the daily offerings set before it untouched, gave it out among the people, at the suggestion of Themistocles, that the goddess had forsaken the city, and that she offered to conduct them to sea. Moreover, by way of explaining to the people an oracle then received, he told them that, by *wooden walls*, there could not possibly be any thing meant but ships; and that Apollo, now calling Salamis *divine*, not *wretched* and *unfortunate*, as formerly, signified by such an epithet that it would be productive of some great advantage to Greece. His counsels prevailed, and he proposed a decree that the city should be left to the protection of Minerva, the tutelary goddess of the Athenians; that the young men should go on board the ships, and that every one should provide as well as he possibly could for the safety of the children, the women, and the slaves....

The embarkation of the people of Athens was a very affecting scene. What pity! what admiration of the firmness of those men, who, sending their parents and families to a distant place, unmoved with their cries, their tears, or embraces, had the fortitude to leave the city, and embark for Salamis! What greatly heightened the distress, was the number of citizens whom they were forced to leave behind, because of their extreme old age....

Eurybiades, by reason of the dignity of Sparta, had the command of the fleet; but, as he was apprehensive of the danger, he proposed to set sail for the Isthmus, and fix his station near the Peloponnesian army. Themistocles, however, opposed it.

While Themistocles was maintaining his arguments upon deck, some tell us an owl was seen flying to the right of the fleet,¹ which came and perched upon the shrouds. This omen determined the confederates to accede to his opinion, and to prepare for a sea fight. But no sooner did the enemy's fleet appear advancing toward the harbor of Phalerius in Attica, and covering all the neighboring coasts, while Xerxes himself was seen marching his land forces to the shore, than the Greeks, struck with the sight of such prodigious armaments, began to forget the counsel of Themistocles, and the Peloponnesians once more looked toward the Isthmus. Nay, they resolved to set sail that very night, and such orders were given to all the pilots. Themistocles, greatly concerned that the Greeks were going to give up the advantage of their station in the straits,² and to retire to their respective countries, contrived that stratagem which was put in execution by Sicinus. This Sicinus was of Persian extraction, and a captive, but much attached to Themistocles, and the tutor of his children. On this occasion Themistocles sent him privately to the King of Persia, with orders to tell him that the commander of the Athenians, having espoused his interest, was the first to inform him of the intended flight of the Greeks; and that he exhorted him not to suffer them to escape; but while they were in this confusion, and at a distance from their land forces, to attack and destroy their whole army.

Xerxes took this information kindly, supposing it to proceed from friendship, and immediately gave orders to his officers, with two hundred ships, to surround all the passages, and to inclose the islands, that none of the Greeks might escape, and then to follow with the rest of the ships at their leisure. Aristides, the son of Lysimachus, was the first that perceived this motion of the enemy; and though he was not in friendship with Themistocles, but had been banished by his means, he went to him, and told him they were surrounded by the enemy. Themistocles, knowing his probity, and charmed with his coming to give this intelligence, acquainted him with the affair of Sicinus, and entreated him to lend his assistance to keep the Greeks in their station; and, as they had a confidence in his honor, to persuade them to come to an engagement in the straits. Aristides approved the proceedings of Themistocles, and going to the other admirals and captains, encouraged them to engage.

As soon as it was day, Xerxes sat down on an eminence to view the fleet and its order of battle. He placed himself, as Phanodemus writes, above the temple of Hercules, where the isle of Salamis is separated from Attica by a narrow frith; but according to Acestorodorus, on the confines of Megara, upon a spot called Kerata, the horns. He was seated on a throne of gold, and had

many secretaries about him, whose business it was to write down the particulars of the action....

As to the number of the Persian ships, the poet Eschylus speaks of it, in his tragedy entitled *Persae*, as a matter he was well assured of:

A thousand ships (for well I know the number)
The Persian flag obey'd: two hundred more
And seven, o'erspread the seas.

The Athenians had only one hundred and eighty galleys; each carried eighteen men that fought upon deck, four of whom were archers, and the rest heavy armed.

If Themistocles was happy in choosing a place for action, he was no less so in taking advantage of a proper time for it; for he would not engage the enemy till that time of day when a brisk wind usually arises from the sea, which occasions a high surf in the channel. This was no inconvenience to the Grecian vessels, which were low built and well compacted; but a very great one to the Persian ships, which had high sterns and lofty decks, and were heavy and unwieldy; for it caused them to veer in such a manner that their sides were exposed to the Greeks, who attacked them furiously. During the whole dispute, great attention was given to the motions of Themistocles, as it was believed he knew best how to proceed. Ariamenes, the Persian admiral, a man of distinguished honor, and by far the bravest of the king's brothers, directed his manoeuvres chiefly against him. His ship was very tall, and from thence he threw darts and shot forth arrows as from the walls of a castle. But Aminias the Decelean, and Sosicles the Pedian, who sailed in one bottom, bore down upon him with their prow, and both ships meeting, they were fastened together by means of their brazen beaks; when Ariamenes boarding their galley, they received him with their pikes, and pushed him into the sea. Artemisia³ knew the body among others that were floating with the wreck, and carried it to Xerxes.

While the fight was thus raging, we are told a great light appeared, as from Eleusis; and loud sounds and voices were heard through all the plain of Thriasia to the sea, as of a great number of people carrying the mystic symbols of Bacchus in procession. A cloud, too, seemed to rise from among the crowd that made this noise, and to ascend by degrees, till it fell upon the galleys. Other phantoms also and apparitions of armed men, they thought they saw, stretching out their hands from Egina before the Grecian fleet. These they conjectured to be the Eacidæ, to whom, before the battle, they had addressed their prayers for succor.

The first man that took a ship was an Athenian named Lycomedes, captain of a galley, who cut down the ensigns from the enemy's ship, and consecrated them to the *laurelled* Apollo. As the Persians could come up in the straits but few at a time, and often put each other in confusion, the Greeks equalling them in the line, fought them till the evening, when they broke them entirely, and gained that signal and complete victory, than which (as Simonides says)

no other naval achievement, either of the Greeks or barbarians, ever was more glorious. This success was owing to the valor, indeed, of all the confederates, but chiefly to the sagacity and conduct of Themistocles.⁴

¹ The owl was sacred to Minerva, the protectress of the Athenians.

² If the confederates had quitted the Straits of Salamis, where they could equal the Persians in the line of battle, such of the Athenians as were on that island must have become an easy prey to the enemy, and the Persians would have found an open sea on the Peloponnesian coast, where they could act with all their force against the ships of the allies.

³ Artemisia, Queen of Halicarnassus, distinguished herself above all the rest of the Persian forces, her ships being the last that fled, which Xerxes observing, cried out that the men behaved like women, and the women with the courage and intrepidity of men. The Athenians were so incensed against her that they offered a reward of ten thousand drachmas to any one that should take her alive. This princess must not be confounded with that Artemisia who was the wife of Mausolas, king of Caria.

⁴ In this battle, which was one of the most memorable we find in history, the Grecians lost forty ships, and the Persians two hundred, besides a great many more that were taken.