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Leonidas the Spartan

Author Unknown, Originally Published by "14 Word Press"

8-10 minutes



THERE ARE heroes, and there are super-heroes, just as there are warriors, and super-warriors. These elite of the elite hold a place in history in the Hall of the Immortals, bridging the gap between mortal man and superman, between mortal man and the Gods. Some seem to change the course of history almost single-handedly; while for others it may be a display of courage, poised between myth and

destiny, of which legends are made.

One such legend, which remains a model of heroism for White people everywhere, was the great battle at Thermopylae, which took place in the year 480 BC. The man of the hour was Leonidas of Sparta, a selfless warrior-hero, a strategist king and fearless commander.

The Spartans are renowned to this day for their expert fighting skills and warrior prowess. Only the strong survived in the disciplined Spartan armies. Trained only for battle, a young soldier knew but one home — his barracks, one family — his unit. Physical training was the chief occupation, and each man's day was spent in exercise or on the drill-ground.

Absolute devotion

From the age of seven, Spartan boys no longer lived at home, but were brought up by the state. Training was often harsh, but effective, and each youth learned unwavering and absolute devotion to his country and his folk. Aside from combat training, they learned to swim, run, jump, wrestle and box, and, above all, to dance. For in Greece, rhythmical movement was considered good training, not for the body alone, but also for the character. War songs were chanted by bands of boys in a musical drill. Every Spartan was expected to be able to sing; great stress was laid on the cultivation of memory, and all learned by heart the ballads of

their patriot-poet Tyrtaeus.

By the age of twenty, each cadet became a fully-fledged warrior. On his thirtieth birthday, a Spartan was invested with the remainder of his civic rights and duties. Thenceforth he attended the Appela, the assembly of the people, and could vote on measures proposed by the two kings or by the Ephoroi, Sparta's five-man judiciary. At this time he was also allowed to marry and to establish his own household, although still bound to dine in common with his peers.

Uncompromising

Girls were also given rigorous physical training, so that they might become the mothers of healthy children. The Spartans practiced an uncompromising eugenics programme. New-born babies were raised only if healthy and perfectly formed, so as not to be a burden on the state, and to ensure genetic upbreeding.

Women in Sparta were accounted the most beautiful in all of Hellas, while at the same time they were known to be as tough in spirit as the men. It was common for mothers to order their warrior sons as they went off to battle: "Come back with your shield, or on it."

The men were encouraged rigorously to procreate. Just as cowardice was recognized as most despicable and abhorrent, so likewise was chastity among men. Celibacy

was a crime, and street gangs of women were known on occasion to beat up bachelors. “Sparta was hardly famous for chaste women,” commented Euripides. However, aside from their procreative responsibilities, the Spartans were recognized as the freest people in all of Greece. The citizens themselves were called ‘the equals’, and in theory all were equal in both war and government.



The states of Ancient Greece and the Persian Empire were separated by the Aegean Sea. By 500 BC, the Persians, led by King Darius, began to thrust westward, taking many of the cities which formed the outposts of Greek civilization. The conquered Ionian Greeks revolted in 499, and Athens and Eretria sent help. But Darius stamped out the uprising by 490 BC and, by 481 his son Xerxes had succeeded to his throne and was busy amassing a vast army to invade Greece proper.

The Greeks held a superb defensive position at the Pass of Thermopylae (“Hot Gates” — so named for its thermal springs). Flanked by mountains, the pass narrowed at one

point to a path just fifty feet wide. Leonidas, the Spartan King, who had command over the whole Greek army, held the pass with about 7,000 troops. They included his own royal guard, all the fathers of sons, chosen so that even if a guardsman fell his name and his blood would live on.

The studied fearlessness of the Spartans was illustrated by the reply one of them made when told that the Persian army was so vast that the arrows of its archers would darken the sky: "So much the better, we can fight in the shade."

Valiant

From a neighboring hill, seated on a throne of gold, Xerxes watched his men pour into the pass. At first, one of his scouts reported back that he had seen vain Greek soldiers bathing and preening themselves on the eve of battle. Xerxes laughed at this news, but a Greek in his service heard it and understood: The warriors were Spartans, ritualistically preparing to die. "Oh King!" he exclaimed, "Now are you face to face with the most valiant men in Hellas."

Confident in their abilities, the Spartans had no fear of confrontation with anyone, regardless of how vast an army approached. Xerxes felt certain that the sheer weight of numbers of his men would force the Spartans to decamp. He let four days pass with this notion. On the fifth day he concluded that his opponents must indeed be obstinate fools, and sent forth his men with orders to capture them and

bring them to his presence alive.



Hoplite killing a Persian, from a cup by the Triptolemos Painter

The attack proved both costly and futile. With his regular troops being butchered, Xerxes was forced to dispatch his best fighters, the ‘Immortals’. Again, however, the Spartans outfought the Persians. A written account from the Greek historian Herodotus records that: “The Spartans’ remarkable handling of the battle, too, showed the superiority of their tactics. Often they would feign flight and then, when the noisy rabble pursued, they would swing round and slaughter them in heaps. Three times, it is said, Xerxes leapt from his throne in terror for his army.”

The next day proved no better for the Persian hordes, whose casualties littered the field. As evening fell on the second day of battle, Xerxes was at a loss as to how the iron grip of the Spartans on the pass could be broken. A Greek traitor

came to his aid, informing him of a mountain top trail by way of which the Persians could outflank their hardy enemies.

Grim determination

Leonidas learned of this treachery in time to send away most of his men and all his allies. Then he swung his remaining force of 300 guardsmen against the enemy, with undaunted courage and grim determination worthy of their Gods.

Facing overwhelming numbers, the Spartans fell back, forming a compact body on a hillock. Herodotus would later recall this final stand: “They fought with their swords, if they had them, but if not, with their hands and teeth.”

Leonidas fell fighting bravely, and a fierce struggle raged over the body of the Spartan king. Four times the Persian advance was repulsed with heavy losses, including two of Xerxes’ brothers, until the Spartans were overwhelmed by the arrows they had mocked a few days before.

Xerxes himself did not set foot on the battlefield until it was all over, but he knew that he had just seen the most extraordinary fighting men in the world. Viewing the carnage before him, he turned to the Greek, Demaratus: “Now tell me, how many men of the Lacedaimon remain, and are they all such warriors as these fallen men?”

“Sire,” replied Demaratus, “there are many men and towns in Lacedaemon. But I will tell you what you really want to know:

Sparta alone boasts 8,000 men. All of them are the equals of the men who fought here.”

Xerxes had the body of Leonidas beheaded and crucified. But such an example was wasted on the remaining Spartans, only heightening their avenging anger. Indeed, only a few months later, they caught up with Xerxes and, in the climactic Battle of Plataea, drove the Persian horde forever from Hellenic soil.

History would repeat itself at Thermopylae, during World War Two. This time the British held the pass, only to be outflanked and overwhelmed by the Germans.

The place remains, however, best known for the earlier clash of arms. Following the defeat of Leonidas the Spartan, the Greeks built a monument to mark the spot where the heroes died. Upon it were carved no lofty words of praise, no boasts or laments, but one simple, concise verse:

Go tell the Spartans, passer-by,
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.

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