Even as democracy was taking its final shape in Athens in the early 400s BC, the city—and the rest of Greece—was plunged into war. The Greek city-states came into conflict with the vast Persian Empire, bringing Greece into war with a much larger and stronger opponent.

**Causes of the Conflict** The roots of the Persian Wars lay not in mainland Greece but in the region called Ionia, on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, what is now Turkey. Founded as Greek colonies, the Ionian city-states had become some of the largest and wealthiest Greek cities, but they had fallen under Persian rule in the 500s BC. The Greeks of Ionia, unhappy with Persian rule and wanting independence, rebelled in 499 BC in what was called the IONIAN REVOLT. Faced with a much larger Persian army, they asked their fellow Greeks for help. Among the cities that sent aid was Athens, who supplied ships to the Ionian rebels. Despite this assistance, the Persians put down the revolt. Furthermore, the revolt made Persian emperor Darius angry enough to seek revenge. He planned to punish the Ionians’ allies, especially Athens, by attacking the Greek mainland.

### Scene One: Ionian Revolt

**Darius:** Ah gentlemen, come in, come in.

**Bureaucrat 1:** Greetings your highness. How are you today?

**Darius:** I am feeling wonderful today, thank you for asking! I was just thinking about the amazing imperial expansion of our empire. How wonderful it is! With our powerful army, and our organized bureaucracy (points at bureaucrats), we have created the greatest empire the world has ever known! We have conquered all the way from the Indus Valley to the Ionian coast of Asia Minor!

**Bureaucrat 2:** Um yeah, about Asia Minor... You want to tell him?

**Darius:** Tell me what?

**Bureaucrat 1:** Why do I have to tell him? You tell him!

**Darius:** HEY! One of you better tell me what's going on!

**Bureaucrat 2:** OK, so, remember how you took over the Ionian Greeks, and you set up a puppet ruler to control them?

**Darius:** Yes of course, I placed into power one of the Greeks who was loyal to me to make sure order would be maintained and the tribute payments would be made on time.

**Bureaucrat 1:** Right, well, apparently the Ionian Greeks were not too happy about that. We just received word that the Ionian are revolting against Persian rule!

**Darius:** Hah! Those fools! They don't stand a chance against the might of the great Persian Empire. My cavalry armies will crush them in no time. (Bureaucrats look nervously and awkwardly at each other)

**Bureaucrat 2:** Actually, your highness, the Ionians are winning.

**Darius:** What?!! How is that possible?!

**Bureaucrat 1:** Well, apparently they are getting some naval support from some of the mainland Greeks. I think they're called the Aythians, or Athenes. Whatever, the people from Athens.

**Darius:** The Athenians?! How dare they! I'll teach them a lesson! Gentlemen, have our armies ready themselves. Greece has brought upon herself a war!

**Bureaucrats:** Yes sir!
The First Persian Invasion In 490 BC, the Persians set out to fulfill Darius’s plans for revenge. A huge fleet carrying tens of thousands of Persian troops set out for Greece. The fleet came ashore near a town called Marathon not far from Athens (see first map). Warned in advance of the Persians’ approach, some Athenians wanted to hide within the city walls of Athens, but the Athenian leader Miltiades convinced them to set out for Marathon to meet their foes in order to prevent them from ever reaching Athens. In the Battle of Marathon, the Athenians arrived at Marathon and encountered the Persian forces, which consisted of both cavalry (mounted soldiers) and infantry (foot soldiers). At first, neither side made a move, but after five days, the Persians, tired of waiting, decided to split up. They sent their cavalry on the ships to attack the city of Athens and left their infantry behind to prevent the Athenian soldiers from leaving. However, the Persian plan backfired. Now facing only lightly-armed infantry, the Athenians charged in a phalanx (FAY-lanks), a tight rectangle formation in which Greek heavy infantry soldiers called hoplites held long spears out ahead of a wall of shields. The Persians, caught by surprise, counterattacked, but more Greeks closed in on them from the sides. Though they were greater in number, the Persians retreated. According to legend, an Athenian messenger named Pheidippides ran from Marathon to Athens after the battle to announce the Greeks’ victory. He completed the 26-mile run but died from exhaustion after he delivered the message. This legend inspired the modern marathon race, a 26-mile run that commemorates the messenger’s dedication and athleticism.

Scene Two: Marathon

(Athenians and Miltiades stand toward the back of the room, looking toward the front)

Athenian 1: (Annoyed) Alright we’re here, we’re at Marathon. Where are the Persians?
Athenian 2: Yeah, and why haven’t we heard back from Sparta yet? Are they coming to help or what? Man, why didn’t we just stay in Athens behind the walls. We would have been safe there.
Miltiades: Be strong men. I know that many of you wanted to hide when we heard of the Persian advance, but such a course would be foolishness. We cannot wait for them to come to us. We must go out ahead to meet them! That is why we are here. We know the Persians ships will land at Marathon. That is our only chance to attack them before they reach Athens. Look, here they are! (Persian Infantry and Cavalry enter at the front)
Athenian 3: Wait, they have horses?! How are we going to compete with that? (Pheidippides runs over Miltiades)
Pheidippides: General Miltiades, I bring word from Sparta.
Miltiades: What word do you bring? Will the Spartans come to our aid?
Pheidippides: Um, they said they were busy this weekend, some kind of religious festival, and they were wondering if you could reschedule for another time?
Athenian 1: (Annoyed) Unbelievable.
Athenian 3: These Spartans are a joke man. I know they don’t have ships like Athens does, but they’re supposed to be so strong, why can’t they just toughen up and march themselves over here.
Athenian 2: We are definitely gonna get killed. (Cavalry leaves, retreating to their ships, leaving the Infantry alone)
Athenian 1: Wait look! The cavalry is leaving!
Athenian 3: They must be heading to Athens to try to attack while we are away.
Miltiades: Alright men, this is our one chance. Ready your shields. Attack!!!(Athenians and Miltiades charge toward the Persians to attack, and the scene ends before we see what happens)
Preparations for a Second Invasion  The Greek victory at Marathon shocked both Greeks and Persians. The Athenians could not believe that they had defeated a much stronger foe. The Persians, humiliated, were furious. Wanting revenge more than ever, Darius planned a second invasion of Greece, but he died in 486 BC, before he could launch that second invasion. His son Xerxes, vowing to get revenge for his father, continued planning another attack on Greece. In 480 BC, 10 years after the first invasion, Xerxes set out for Greece. His army included hundreds of thousands of soldiers and sailors together with all their animals, weapons, food, and other supplies. According to the accounts of the Greek historian Herodotus, the Persian army was so huge that it took them a week to cross a bridge they built into Greece, though this figure is certainly an exaggeration. Faced with another invasion, the Athenians called on other Greek city-states to help fight off the Persians. Among the states that responded to the call was Sparta. Though the two cities were bitter rivals, Athens and Sparta agreed to work together to fight the Persians. Athens, which had recently built a large and powerful navy, took charge of the Greeks’ fighting ships. Sparta took charge of the Greeks’ armies.

The Second Persian Invasion  As Persian forces marched into Greece, the Greeks worried that they would not have time to prepare their troops for battle. To slow down the Persians, a group of Spartans led by King Leonidas, along with their Greek allies, gathered in a narrow mountain pass at Thermopylae (thuhr-MAH- puh-lee), through which the Persians would have to pass through to get to Greece. There, at the BATTLE OF THERMOPYLAE, the Spartans held off the entire Persian army for several days. In the end, according to Herodotus, a local Greek resident named Ephialtes, hoping to be rewarded by the Persians, showed the, an alternate path through the mountains, which allowed them to surround and kill the Spartans. Nevertheless, the sacrifice of the Spartans bought the Greeks enough time to prepare their defense.

Scene Three: Thermopylae  
(Spartans stand in the front, readying for battle with their shields)  
Leonidas: Men of Sparta! It is time for us to defend all of Greece! We may only be 300 Spartans, and some other Greek hoplites, and we may be facing the most massive army the world has ever seen, but we have three advantages that they do not. First, we have the strength of the hoplite Phalanx. (Spartans demonstrate the Phalanx by lining up next to each other and holding up their shields) Using our superior formation, with each man’s shield protecting himself and the man next to him, we create an impenetrable wall the Persians shall not pass. Second, we have the pass of Thermopylae, where we now stand, to support us. This narrow mountain passage will make the Persian numbers meaningless! We will use it to funnel them towards us, and we will cut them down row by row, because Third, we have THREE HUNDRED SPARTANS!  
Spartans: HAOOH!!!  
Leonidas: Alright Spartans, take your positions!!!  
(Spartans line up in phalanx blocking the right side of the passage)  
Leonidas: Here they come men hold that formation!!!  
(Persians enter from the left side of the passage and battle the Spartans, trying to push through, but unable to break the Phalanx)  
Ephialtes: (walks up to one of the Persians) Hey dude, you know you could totally just go around the back, right?  
(Persians go around the other way and kill all the Spartans)
After Thermopylae, the Persians marched south to Athens, which the Greeks had evacuated. The Persians attacked and burned the city but needed their fleet to bring them additional supplies. Not wanting the Persians to get what they needed, a clever Athenian commander named Themistocles lured the Persian fleet into the narrow Strait of Salamis near Athens. Because the Persian ships were so much larger than the Greek vessels, they could not maneuver well in the strait. With their opponents virtually helpless, the BATTLE OF SALAMIS began, and the Greek warships cut them to pieces. They sank many ships and sent swarms of soldiers onto others. Xerxes, who had brought a throne to the shore to watch the battle from afar, saw his navy go down in defeat.

The Battle of Salamis changed the nature of the war. The Persian army was now stuck in Greece, far from home and short on supplies. Demoralized, they were no longer a match for the Greeks. The next year, in 479 BC, a huge Greek army led by the full might of Sparta crushed the Persians near Plataea. After Plataea, the Persians gave up on their invasion and agreed to a peace settlement. The Greeks had won the Persian Wars.

Scene Four: Salamis
(All Greeks stage right, all Persians stage left)

Themistocles: Men of Athens! Men of Corinth! Men of Sparta! All Greeks hear my words! There may come a day where all is lost. There may come a day when Greek freedom falls to Persian tyranny. But that will not be this day!

(Athenian, Corinthian, Spartan all cheer)

Athenian: But Commander Themistocles, what will we do? The Persians have already burned Athens to the ground, forcing us to seek refuge here at Salamis. Now they are ready to destroy us once and for all! We are weak and vulnerable, how can we stop them?

Themistocles: We are not weak. We are united as Greeks! (Athenian, Corinthian, Spartan all cheer)

But we must also act wisely. I have a plan. Greeks, bring your ships around behind that peninsula where you cannot be seen. (Greek ships hide offstage right)

Hide well. I have just sent a message to the Persian Emperor Xerxes, who has arrived with his Persian fleet ready to attack.

Xerxes: A letter from Themistocles? (Xerxes reads the letter, smiling and chuckling in satisfaction) “Dear Xerxes, Ok you got us. Basically, you guys are just too big and powerful, we have no chance against you. I am Themistocles, the Commander of the Athenians. I would like to make a deal with you. I am willing to join with you, and bring my men under your command, as long as you will spare us from your punishment. What you do to the other Greeks is of no concern to me. Do what you must. We will not interfere. Bring your ships into the Strait of Salamis, and we can discuss our plans. Sincerely, Themistocles. PS. This is totally not a trap. I promise.”

(To the Persian Ships)

Alright men, the Greeks have given up! Bring the ships into the Strait of Salamis. Time for a victory lap!

(When the Persian ships enter the middle of the stage, the Greek ships pop out and ram into them, and the Persian ships “sink,” falling down. Greeks cheer.)