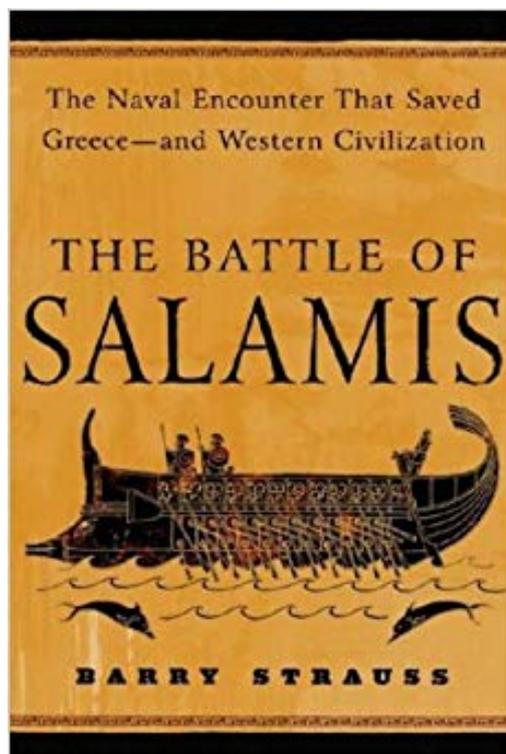


## The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter That Saved Greece -- and Western Civilization *by* Barry Strauss



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The battle of Salamis in 480 B.C. was the most important naval encounter of the ancient world. In the narrow strait between the island of Salamis and the Greek mainland, a heavily outnumbered Greek navy defeated the Persian armada in a brilliant victory that is still studied today. The Greek triumph at Salamis stopped the advancing Persians and saved the first democracy in history. It made Athens the dominant city in Greece, gave birth to the Athenian empire, and set the stage for the Age of Pericles. On the Persian side, the battle of Salamis also featured history's first female admiral and sailors from three continents.

*The Battle of Salamis* features some of the most fascinating figures in the ancient world: Themistocles, the Athenian commander who masterminded the victory (and tricked his fellow Greeks into fighting); Xerxes, the Persian king who understood land but not naval warfare; Aeschylus, the Greek playwright who took part at Salamis and later immortalized it in drama; and Artemisia, the half-Greek queen who was one of Xerxes' trusted commanders and who turned defeat into personal victory.

In his riveting story of this clash on the Greek seas, classicist and historian Barry Strauss offers a new in-depth account of the ancient battle. Drawing on recent work in archaeology, meteorology, and forensic science as well as on his own experience as a rower (both navies were oar powered), Strauss revises our understanding of one of history's pivotal wars and of Herodotus's classic if underrated account of it. But in addition to being exciting military history, *The Battle of Salamis* is also a vivid analysis of ancient culture.

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## Reviews of the **The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter That Saved Greece -- and Western Civilization** by Barry Strauss

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Barry Strauss is a world-class academic classicist, but "The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter that Saved Greece -- and Western Civilization" is geared for the more general reader. He tells the story of the Persian invasion of Greece in 490 BC and the decisive naval battle at Salamis with an easy style focused on character development and scene-setting. The end result is a book that could be a screenplay for the next original Netflix hit.

I've often thought that we, as a society, do ourselves a grave misfortune by neglecting the classics in our approach to public education. Kids love Star Wars, obviously. There are heroes and villains, empires and allies, bravery and treachery, faraway lands with fabulous palaces, epic battles, victories and defeats. Children are captivated by it all and remember the tiniest details. Herodotus

and Thucydides and Plutarch have bequeathed to us a treasure trove of similar content with which to entertain our children while educating them - and yet we do nothing with it.

There is much about the Persian War - and Salamis specifically - that is redolent of a Lucas Films production. Xerxes, The King of Kings, leader of the vast Persian empire of the fifth century BC, is an ideal villain. Headstrong, impetuous, and unbending, surrounded by a host of fawning lieutenants, the young monarch sought glory, vengeance, and affirmation in conquering the Greeks. But Xerxes was no blood-thirsty killer. On the contrary, he was more than willing to win without fighting.

Xerxes' plan was simple and not unreasonable: overawe and/or overpower the Greeks into submission, and then incorporate them into his sprawling empire. It had worked for Cyrus and Darius over the past half-century and the recent events against the Ionian Greeks in the 490s suggested it would work again against Athens, Sparta, and their relatively small band of allies.

The invading Persian army was enormous, perhaps 200,000 men from 47 different ethnic units from around the empire. The Persian navy, "a floating tower of Babel," according to Strauss, boasted nearly 1,400 triremes, four-times as many than what the allied Greeks could muster. The march from Sardis in modern-day western Turkey to the Greek mainland was slow and deliberate, what the author calls "the biggest pep rally in history." This massive combined force, easily the largest expeditionary unit in history up to that time, was designed for shock and awe. When a trio of Greek spies was apprehended, rather than torturing and killing them, Xerxes ensured that they got to see as much of his combined forces as possible, and then released them to tell the leaders of Greece what awaited them. He had his men build a bridge across the Hellespont to carry his army into Europe and then had them cut a canal straight through the peninsula at Mt Athos to facilitate the movement of his fleet. "Numbers, psychology, and politicking" were all part of Xerxes' master plan, Strauss says. It's difficult not to think of Darth Vader looking out from his fleet of star destroyers at the nearly operational Death Star.

The Greeks were vastly outnumbered on both land and sea. Like the flinty rebels in Star Wars, the Greeks would need to be imaginative in their strategy and lucky in their execution in order to have any chance of winning. However, also like the rebels, they possessed a powerful advantage over their imperial adversaries: they were fighting for their freedom.

The first few months of the naval campaign along the shores of mainland Greece and around Artemisium would prove crucial in thinning out the formidable Persian fleet. Storms and tactical defeats destroyed nearly half of the Persian triremes. Strauss estimates that the Persians arrived at Phaleron outside of Athens with only about 650 triremes left from their original armada. The allied Greek navy on Salamis possessed 368 from 23 city-states.

Strauss estimates that there were 150,000 total people in Attica in 480 BC. Nearly every man, woman, and child had fled to Troezen, Aegina, or Salamis. It was the controversial strategy of one man, the father of the Athenian navy, and perhaps one of the greatest grand strategists of all time, a man in his forties named Themistocles. As controversial as the decision to abandon their homeland to the Persians was, Strauss calls the evacuation "one of the supreme strategic retreats in the history of war." The Persians marched into undefended Athens and razed it. "Athens was occupied, Athens was burning, but the Athenians were unbowed," Strauss says. Yet, the other Greeks were growing impatient - and worried.

The Persian fleet was at Phaleron for about two weeks before the battle of Salamis. Strauss writes that Artemesia, "the half-Cretan widow of the petty ruler of a small Anatolian city [i.e. Halicarnasus] nearly two thousand miles away from the [Persian] imperial capital," was the only allied commander

who counseled avoiding a pitched naval battle with the Greeks, but instead focus Persian efforts on a land battle at the Corinthian Isthmus. Strauss claims that Xerxes dismissed Artemesia's counsel for understandable reasons. First, a mere 300 Spartans were nearly invincible at Thermopylae. What would it be like fighting 8,000 Spartan hoplites dug in behind trench works at the five-mile-wide Isthmus? Second, autumn was quickly approaching and with it the end of the sailing season in the Aegean. If he didn't use his fleet immediately he would need to sail back to Asia for the winter. Strauss calls Artemesia "the best naval strategist in Xerxes' service." He probably should have listened to her about avoiding a clash with the Greek navy.

The Battle of Salamis was no fortuitous accident for the Greeks. It was carefully and deliberately stage-managed by Themistocles. Again, it's like a page out of a Hollywood movie script and Strauss does an excellent job recreating the scene.

Themistocles, with the consent of his nominal superior, the Spartan admiral Eurybiades, dispatched one of his closest associates, a slave named Sicinnus, to deliver a message to Xerxes and the Persian fleet at anchor at Phaleron. The Greek fleet at Salamis, Sicinnus was instructed to say, was utterly demoralized and divided. The fleet was going to attempt a breakout at dawn. Themistocles and the Athenians were prepared to defect to the Persian side. Come sunrise it would be every man for himself. The Persians could pick-off the enemy triremes at will if they were in place before the Greek triremes had a chance to flee out of the narrow straits separating Salamis from the mainland. Strauss notes that the ruse was believable because so much of what Sicinnus said was true (i.e. the Greek council was at odds and wanted to withdraw to the isthmus), deception/defection had played a major part of earlier Persian victories over the Greeks (e.g. Thermopylae, Lade), and Xerxes had missed a similar opportunity just weeks ago when a Greek defector arrived in the middle of the night with news that the Greek navy was preparing to flee (Artemesium). Salamis would be one of the best-laid traps in the annals of military history. One can imagine Xerxes, sitting on his throne high above the battle, watching the Greek navy racing out to clash with his fleet, shouting, just like Admiral Akbar in Star Wars, "It's a trap!"

The Persian fleet at Salamis operated under several handicaps: 1) the fleet had rowed all night to get into position by dawn and were thus physically exhausted before the fighting had even started; 2) expecting a disorganized and undisciplined Greek navy in flight, they were shocked by the well-led and vigorous attack from the enemy triremes; 3) the numerical superiority of the Persian fleet was mitigated by the narrow waters separating Salamis from the mainland; 4) the lighter, more mobile Persian triremes were more susceptible to the winds that blew across the straits while the narrows erased their advantage in maneuverability; and 5) the Persian forces were strictly hierarchical, so that once a key leader was killed, such as Ariabignes, the Persian fleet admiral and half-brother to Xerxes, all cohesion and fighting spirit collapsed. "Themistocles had arranged the perfect battle," Strauss writes.

The Persian fleet was decimated, but not annihilated. The remnants of the once mighty fleet escaped the Greek pursuit. Salamis would be the Gettysburg of the Persian War, not its Appomattox Courthouse; its Stalingrad, not the Battle of Berlin.

Strauss sums up his narrative this way: "Defeat at Salamis would not have deprived the world of Greece's glory but of its guile and greed...Democracy was saved and the Athenian empire was born." That empire, the so-called Delian League, which grew out of the Greek's effort to band together to resist the mighty Persian invasion, was "a tyranny," as Pericles famously stated in his funeral oration of 430 BC. It would be the debate between democracy and its critics - men like Herodotus, Thucydides, Sophocles, and above all Socrates - "that is the true legacy of Salamis," according to the author, and the final reason it may have been "the greatest battle of the ancient world."

In closing, one must say a few words about the remarkable epilogue to the Battle of Salamis. Xerxes was murdered in a conspiracy at court in 465 BC. The following year, his former nemesis, Themistocles, exiled from his native Athens, came to Susa and prostrated himself before his son and successor, Artaxerxes. The King of Kings made Themistocles governor of Magnesia in what is today western Turkey and not far from Sardis, the city that Athens helped the Ionians sack in 499 BC, the very act that put the upstart city-state in the crosshairs Darius and his successor, Xerxes. It was a remarkable and improbable end to a truly fascinating story. Perhaps I'm naïve, but one-day American boys and girls may play with Xerxes and Themistocles action figures the way they once did with those of Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker. What a wonderful world that would be.

### **Legionstatic**

It seems unfortunate that the editors chose to add an overly dramatized subtitle for this otherwise serious and well researched work. The naval battle that took place at Salamis in 480 B.C. between Greece and Persia, as the author makes clear, was indeed a significant historical event. Due to clever tactics and considerable trickery, the Greek squadrons of oared ships were able to defeat the much larger Persian armada. But to suggest that this one battle saved Western civilization, or for that matter Greece, is a blatant exaggeration.

For one thing, only a handful of the more than 150 Greek city states took part. A number actually fought on the Persian side. The Greeks, a tough and resilient lot, were intensely rivalrous and constantly at war with one another. So even had they lost this particular battle they would certainly have survived and regrouped to fight another day. As it was, though the large Persian forces continued to occupy much of the Greek mainland, three years after Salamis - in 477 B.C. - a group of Greek city states led by Athens forged a new naval alliance known as the Delian League. The latter dominated the Aegean and many of its port cities, from which it extracted payments, for another 75 years.

Barry Strauss, a professor of history and classics at Cornell, has patched together as fine an account of the naval battle at Salamis as is possible given the sketchy material available. Virtually all sources wrote in later years and the accounts of poets and dramatists like Aeschylus or Sophocles are clearly biased or fictionalised. Strauss draws heavily on Herodotus, but even that excellent historian was born four years after the actual battle and so wrote on the basis of folklore and hearsay.

Strauss's narrative is thus inevitably filled with considerable speculation and guesswork, though a good deal of the latter is guided by work done by previous scholars on the Greek culture of the era. The vivid descriptions of the battle ships of the period, the so-called triremes, which consisted of three layers of rowers, are of particular interest. Altogether, a very readable and satisfying tale of a legendary battle at sea.

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