

arrived.

The defense of Thermopylae ranks with the battle of Marathon as one of those great confrontations between Greek and foreigner that became part of the mythology of European heroism against outsiders. Unlike Marathon, however, it was a Greek defeat. Xerxes first attacked the pass on the 17th September and hard fighting continued for two days, the Spartans proving adept at turning the Persian attacks. Xerxes then learned of an inland path which ran across the mountains alongside the pass. It was guarded by a small force from the city of Phocis but a carefully planned night march on the 18th September brought a crack Persian force above the Phocians by dawn and they were easily pushed aside. (Herodotus has an evocative account of how the Phocians heard the Persians rustling through fallen oak leaves.) Once the Greeks knew the pass was surrounded, most retreated but the Spartans remained to the end and were killed almost to the last man. (Two survivors are said to have reached Sparta but at least one of them later died from the humiliation of not having fought to death.)

The Persians were now free to stream down toward Attica. The Greek fleet had little option but to retreat from Artemisium. The Persian warships followed in pursuit through the narrow but sheltered waters between Euboea and the mainland. Athens was their target. Its territory was too large and exposed to be defended and the city itself had been abandoned, except for a few priests and defenders of the Acropolis, well before the Persians arrived on the 27th September. The so-called "Decree of Themistocles," a fourth-century copy of a decree, which may have been passed by the Assembly as early as the autumn of 481, shows where they had gone: the young men to train for the triremes, the old men to the island of Salamis, women and children to Troezen, a city across the Saronic Gulf which had ancient links with Athens. (The inscription including the decree was found at Troezen in 1959.) The deserted city was easily taken and the Acropolis with all its fine temples and sculpture sacked. The Persian fleet arrived in time to watch the flames from the beach at Phaleron. The Greek fleet, meanwhile, had retreated to shelter between the island of Salamis and the mainland.

The next target of the Persians would be the Peloponnese and