

UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF H.E. THE PRESIDENT OF THE
HELLENIC REPUBLIC MS. KATERINA SAKELLAROPOULOU

ANNIVERSARY YEAR



ΤHERMOPYLAE-SALAMIS

ΘΕΡΜΟΠΥΛΕΣ - ΣΑΛΑΜΙΝΑ

2020

Excerpt from Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis welcome speech at the opening of the cycle of events celebrating the 2,500th anniversary of the Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis, at the Zappeion Megaron on 16 October 2019.

¶ History is very important, and allow me to start my address by bringing to mind the words of the historian Vassilis Panagiotopoulos, who wrote that “In our era, the world is once again turning to the pages of the past, as History’s role is becoming therapeutic. And if this suggests an esoteric social trend towards seeking knowledge of ourselves, then it is something very positive.

I think that it is precisely through this prism that we need to view our distant past, which was so full of glory as well as reversals.

In other words, we need to dig and dig, down to our roots, to reconnect with this past. Not just to simply record events that are more or less well known, as we are taught about them in school, but to reacquaint ourselves with these events, reinterpreting their meaning. To transform the burden of the past into a resource for the future.

This is the only way to bring history ‘off the shelf’ and into the present. And it is transformed into a fruitful concept in the national consciousness and the continuity of peoples.

So, what does this important date, 480 BC, embody today? The battle of Thermopylae and, mainly, the Salamis Naval Battle of September 480 BC.

First of all, I think – and the President of the Hellenic Republic stressed this – it is a very important moment in national unity. The Greek city-states set aside their differences and came together to defend their most precious good: their freedom.

Today, as it was back then, there are very few of us if we are divided, and I stress this at every opportunity.

And this is the first great lesson – a lesson 25 centuries old.”

The Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis are two milestones in global history and in the shaping of Western civilization. Since 2001, our Foundation, in collaboration with the Salamis Foundation, has been preparing for the 2,500th anniversary of the Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis. Our goal is to make young people around the world aware of these battles and their importance.

We need to speak in modern terms about the age-old values that are the only values that can guarantee the future of Democracy, which is everyone’s responsibility.

Through targeted actions in the fields of education, science and sports, and by creating bridges to the Greek diaspora, our Foundation plans to honour this special anniversary in a measured, responsible manner.

Greece has always been a land of dialogue. I hope that our events open up a dialogue about Democracy that, with its foundations in the past, contributes to understanding today, with the aim of strengthening Democracy itself and building a better Tomorrow for all the peoples of the world.

Marianna V. Vardinoyannis

Goodwill Ambassador of UNESCO, President of the “Marianna V. Vardinoyannis Foundation”

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

BATTLE OF THERMOPYLAE

It took place in the beginning of September 480 BCE (along with the naval battle of Artemisium) between the Greeks and the Persians, during the second Persian invasion of Greece. The Persians, masters of Asia Minor and rulers of the Greek cities there, had been defeated ten years earlier (490 BCE) in Marathon, during the reign of the Persian King Darius, under the command of his generals Datis and Artaphernes. However, the plan of also subjugating the cities of the Greek mainland remained, therefore they prepared a second expedition to the Greek peninsula, this time led by the Persian King himself and son of Darius, Xerxes.

Xerxes' expeditionary force was immense and it consisted not only of Persians, but also of all peoples of the East subjugated to the Persian Empire. Ancient Greek sources estimate the force to come up to more than one million, while contemporary estimates claim it consisted of up to approximately 300,000 men (infantry and cavalry). At the same time, it was accompanied by a very powerful fleet which supported the development of the expedition conducted by land.

Against this threat and the invasion taking place, the free Greek cities, led by Sparta (traditionally more powerful on land) and Athens (already powerful at sea), managed to form an alliance. They met in Corinth and finally decided to resist the invaders in the defensively suitable area of Thermopylae, where in ancient times there was only one narrow passage between the Euboean Sea and the interior mountain range.

Following four days of waiting, the Persians attacked but the Greeks resisted successfully for two days. On the third day, Ephialtes led the Persians behind the lines of the Greeks. When the Spartan King Leonidas, who was in command, found out of the imminent encirclement, he probably chose to send the main allied forces further south and to keep only select and voluntary forces with him at Thermopylae, i.e. only the legendary 300 Spartans and 700 Thespians, in order to mount a last heroic resistance and delay for a strategically critical period of time the inevitable advance of the Persian army and fleet to the south. They defended themselves to the last, but also two of Xerxes' brothers fell on the final battlefield.

The self-sacrifice and bravery of the Thermopylae fighters turned their defeat into an unmatched moral victory, the significance and example of which remain deeply engraved in universal memory.

BATTLE OF SALAMIS

This naval battle, one of the most important in world history, took place toward the end of September 480 BCE at the southernmost strait between Salamis and Attica. The Greeks, with comparatively much smaller forces (approximately three hundred and fifty ships), but with a display of unity and intelligent tactics, crushed the numerically superior Persian fleet (over a thousand ships).

Following the final outcome of the battle of the Thermopylae, Xerxes' Persians moved toward Athens, which they seized easily since the Athenians had abandoned it. A prophecy by the Delphi oracle had stated that only "wooden walls" would save them.

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Themistocles' interpretation had considered that to mean their ships, and people fled there. Only a few elders, not convinced by Themistocles, stayed in Athens, created actual wooden walls around the Acropolis and enclosed themselves there. The Persians eliminated them easily and burned Athens. Almost simultaneously, the Persian fleet anchored in the bay of Faliro, after having sailed along the coast of Euboea and Sounion.

After transporting the women and children to Salamis, Aegina and Troezina for greater safety, the Athenians boarded their ships and prepared to confront the Persians. In the Greek commanders' council of war that took place in Salamis, the Spartan admiral Eurybiades suggested that they retreat toward the Isthmus of Corinth, so that in the event of failure they could take refuge in the Peloponnese and continue fighting from there. The Corinthians sided with him. The Athenian Themistocles insisted on the naval battle taking place in Salamis, and the Megarians and Aeginetans sided with him. He believed that defeat would be unavoidable if the Greek fleet fought in the open sea against the overwhelmingly larger Persian one, while in the Salamis strait the numerous Persian ships would be substantially inferior in terms of ease of movement. Themistocles' view was met with bitter opposition. In a moment of tension, the Spartan Evriviades, typically the leader of the Greek forces, tried to hit Themistocles who reacted with the famous phrase: "Smite, but hear me".

In order to bring forward the naval battle, Themistocles set up a ploy: He secretly sent Sikinos, the school escort of his sons, to inform the Persians that the Greeks are supposedly preparing to leave Salamis and that if they want to defeat them, they would have to speed up the clash. Xerxes fell for it and ordered the encirclement of the Greek fleet, by also blocking the northern passage to the Isthmus of Corinth. During those crucial hours, Aristides, Themistocles' political opponent who had been exiled to Aegina, took the risk of crossing the Persian lines, reached Themistocles' ship, informed him of the movements of the Persian fleet and accepted to fight under his command as a mere soldier.

On a dawn toward the end of September 480 BCE, the two fleets with the disproportionate forces above confronted each other at the southern strait of Salamis. Xerxes had set up a golden throne on Mount Aigaleo in order to enjoy the sight of his military victory.

The Greeks charged first, chanting the famous paean: "Forward, you sons of Hellas! Set your country free! Set free your sons, your wives, the tombs of your ancestors, and temples of your gods. All is at stake now, fight!" In the fierce clash that followed, the war chants of the Greeks, the trumpets, the cries of war, the crush of the mighty rams that were driven into the Persian ships and immobilised them, partially turning the naval battle into a battle by land, and in general the naval ability and bravery of the Greeks, particularly that of the more experienced Athenians and Aeginites, wore down the Persians and their Phoenician allies. At noon, the Greek victory was already in sight. The battle continued throughout the day and by night time the Persian fleet had suffered a debacle. It has been reported that the Persians lost 200 ships and the Greeks 40. In an operation launched while the battle was raging, Aristides along with a team of elite soldiers landed at Psyttaleia and eliminated the Persian garrison stationed there.

Xerxes, fled with the remnants of his fleet to Hellespont and from there to Persia. The battle of Salamis became later (472 BCE) the source of inspiration for Aeschylus, one of the combatants, to write the iconic tragedy "The Persians". The victory was mainly due to Themistocles' strategic skills, the superior seamanship and free spirit of the Greeks, who once again defied the logic of numbers and made history.

SIGNIFICANCE

Message of H.E. the President of the Hellenic Republic Ms. Katerina Sakellaropoulou

¶ The Greece of 2020 is a modern European democracy. It participates as an equal partner in the modern world, in all its forms and challenges. It faces all the adversity and risks of our era, striving firmly and persistently to overcome them in a rational and just manner. To the extent of its capabilities, it contributes to the progress of the wider region, advocating a creative, democratic and tolerant way of life.

But what constitutes an existential guide of the Greek State and a Foundation of our modern culture – as is clear from the way we responded to the coronavirus pandemic that is raging across the planet – is our commitment to the value of the Human Being. This absolute humanist priority is today shaping a path that has its beginnings deep in antiquity and on which the Battle of Thermopylae and especially the Battle of Salamis are milestones of enormous importance. It was then that the militarily outnumbered mustered their spirit and intelligence, their ingenuity and genius, to defend not only their territory, but also their ethos and world-view from the foreign invader. A universe of values and organizational practices for collective life that they had begun to shape and had to protect from the foreign invader at all costs.

At Thermopylae and Salamis, ancient Greece, at the dawn of its glory, came together, stood strong, fought for and saved its freedom, its independence and the humanist core of a civilization now recognized as universal. A core that already held what would later become the most precious historical legacy of Greek antiquity: democracy and the notion of the citizen, self-esteem and liberty, reason, the artistic mediation of tragedy in our very being, philosophy as a rigorous meeting of intellect, logic and the deepest human needs, and so much else that revolves around the value of Human Being.

As modern Greeks, we have a very heavy responsibility. The responsibility to preserve, protect and promote precisely this universal culture and its non-negotiable humanitarian identity. We are proud and honoured, as a society, as a State and as a scientific community to take responsibility for this heritage every day. The Greek State is celebrating the Thermopylae – Salamis 2020 anniversary year with due moderation and solemnity, without conceit or barren worship of our forebears, but with a genuine desire for a deeper and multifaceted knowledge of history.

I am certain that these anniversary events will contribute decisively to our self-knowledge, to promoting our homeland's historical wealth, to furthering scientific knowledge, and to protecting an invaluable and truly global heritage».

The Marianna V. Vardinoyannis Foundation, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Interior, and under the patronage of H.E. the President of the Hellenic Republic Ms. Katerina Sakellaropoulou, is creating the “Thermopylae-Salamis 2020” Anniversary framework. On this occasion it is taking initiatives in four areas of action to honour the 25th centennial of the Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis.

The Honorary Committee for the Anniversary Year brings together prominent figures from Greece and abroad, conveying the message of celebration throughout the world.

At the same time, distinguished scientists and artists, as well as some of the country's major organizations, are supporting this effort by participating in a wide range of events and initiatives.

In the education sector, the Foundation is hosting competitions designed to promote children's creativity through painting, creative writing and theatrical expression. It is also holding international conferences and scientific workshops that will highlight the historic importance of the battles.

Artists and athletes, the Greek diaspora and the Hellenic Navy will also be participating in the Anniversary cycle through major events. Moreover, in collaboration with local communities in the respective areas, the Foundation will create humanitarian projects for supporting citizens in their day-to-day lives.

