

## Thermopylae Lesson Plan

### Central Historical Question:

*How many Persians were at the Battle of Thermopylae?*

#### Materials:

- Copies of Documents A-D
- Copies of Graphic Organizer
- Battle of Thermopylae PowerPoint

#### Plan of Instruction:

1. Use PowerPoint to introduce the Battle of Thermopylae and the lesson's objectives.
  - a. Slide 2: Athens and Persia. *In the early 400s BCE, the Greek city-state of Athens came into conflict with the Persian Empire over Greek colonies in Ionia, which were located in Persia.*  
**Note:** Make sure students know that Sparta and Athens were both part of Greece.
  - b. Slide 3: Conflict Begins. *After Athens sent aid to Greeks living in Ionia, the Persian emperor Darius decided to invade Athens.*
  - c. Slide 4: Battle of Marathon. *The Persians and Greeks clashed at a town called Marathon. The Persians were defeated, which was unexpected as they outnumbered the Greeks. Furious at the defeat, Darius' son Xerxes aimed to get revenge and planned another attack ten years later in 480 BCE.*
  - d. Slide 5: The Battle of Thermopylae. *In one of the initial battles of the second invasion, a huge Persian force fought against a much smaller group of Spartans, who were aiding Athens. Although greatly outnumbered, the Spartans held the Persians back at the Battle of Thermopylae. This gave Athens valuable time to prepare for the Persian invasion and ultimately led to a Greek victory. The battle remains famous today for how the Spartans fought. Recently, this battle was the subject of the movie 300.*
  - e. Slide 6: Central Historical Question. *Over the past centuries, historians have argued over how many Persians participated in the Battle of Thermopylae. Our task today is to look at four different sources and address the question: How many Persians were at the Battle of Thermopylae?*
2. Review/introduce the work of historians.
  - a. In order to create accounts of the past, historians work with both primary and secondary sources. They investigate sources and find evidence to develop and support their claims. They also use sources to evaluate the claims of other historians. Part of this process involves looking at multiple sources and comparing and contrasting – or corroborating – and trying to determine the trustworthiness of evidence.

- b. Today we are going to look at how four different historians from different times made claims about the Battle of Thermopylae, explore the evidence they used, and try to figure out how many Persians were at the Battle of Thermopylae.
3. Pass out Document A and the Graphic Organizer.
  - a. Have students read the header individually.
    - i. Answer question #1 in the Graphic Organizer.
    - ii. Share out answers.
  - b. In groups of two, students read document and answer the remaining guiding questions.
  - c. Share out. Points to note:
    - *Herodotus was Greek and alive during the Battle of Thermopylae.*
    - *Although his methodology is unclear, historians believe that he relied on interviews for his history.*
    - *Would Herodotus have any reason to exaggerate these numbers? He might be trying to make the Greeks look more impressive by saying they beat more Persians than they really did.*
4. Pass out Document B.
  - a. Students read header individually.
    - i. Answer Question #1 in the Graphic Organizer.
    - ii. Share out answers.
  - b. In groups of two, students read document and answer remaining guiding questions.
  - c. Share out. Points to note:
    - *Ctesias offers much lower numbers than Herodotus along with greater detail about the Battle of Thermopylae.*
    - *Ctesias apparently had access to Persian archives, which may have provided a more accurate accounting than Herodotus's version of events. Push students here to consider what some of these archives might include (e.g., ship manifests, government records, census records, etc.).*
    - *However, Ctesias's account may have been biased by his relationship to the Persians. And, given that the original work was lost and that Photius recorded this version in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the reliability of this source is low.*
5. Pass out Document C.
  - a. Students read header individually.
    - i. Answer Question #1 in the Graphic Organizer.
    - ii. Share out answers.
  - b. In groups of two, students read Document C and answer remaining guiding questions.
  - c. Share out.  
Points to note:

- *Bradford is a modern-day historian and presumably knows the work of Herodotus, Ctesias, and other histories of Thermopylae well.*
- *Bradford relies on geographical evidence to support his claim.*

6. Pass out Document D.

- a. Students read header individually.
  - i. Answer Question #1 in the Graphic Organizer.
  - ii. Share out answers.
- b. In groups of two, students read document and answer remaining guiding questions.

c. Share out.

Points to note:

- *Matthews offers evidence that questions the claims of all the other historians.*
- *He relies on evidence similar to Bradford (and Maurice) but adds further evidence to contend that Maurice may have underestimated the size of the Persian army.*

7. Final claims: *After reading all four documents, how many Persians soldiers do you think there were at the Battle of Thermopylae? Make sure to use historical evidence to support your argument. What other types of evidence might you consult to further investigate this question?*

---

Citations:

Document A

The History of Herodotus, 4 vols. trans. George Rawlinson (New York: Tandy-Thomas Co., 1909). Retrieved from [http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1898&Itemid=27](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1898&Itemid=27)

Document B

Ctesias of Cnidus, *Persica*, retrieved from:

[http://www.livius.org/ct-cz/ctesias/photius\\_persica2.html](http://www.livius.org/ct-cz/ctesias/photius_persica2.html)

Document C

Ernie Bradford, *The Year of Thermopylae* (Macmillan: London, 1980).

Document D

Rupert Matthews, *The Battle of Thermopylae: A Campaign in Context* (Spellmount Limited Publishers: Gloucestershire, 2006).

## Document A: Herodotus

*Herodotus was an ancient Greek historian who lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. He was a young boy during the Persian War, and interviewed Greek veterans of the Persian War to get the information he needed for his history. The following is an excerpt from his book The Histories that describes the Persian army at the Battle of Thermopylae.*

---

Until they reached Thermopylae, Xerxes armament was free from misfortune. The king's sea forces amounted to 517,610 men. The number of foot soldiers was 1,700,000; that of the horsemen 80,000; to which must be added Arabs who rode on camels and the Libyans who fought in chariots, whom I reckon at 20,000. The whole number, therefore, of the land and sea forces added together amounts to 2,317,610 fighting men brought by Xerxes, the son of Darius, as far as Thermopylae.

**Source:** *From the book The Histories, written by Herodotus in the 450s-420s BCE.*

## Document B: Ctesias of Cnidus

*Ctesias was an ancient Greek physician and historian from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE who worked for the king of Persia. Ctesias claims to have had access to the official Persian archives, which he used to write his own history of the Persian War in 398 BCE. The following is an excerpt about the Persian army at the Battle of Thermopylae.*

---

Xerxes decided to make war upon Greece . . . having collected a Persian army, 800,000 men and 1,000 **triremes** set out against Greece. His general Artapanus, with 10,000 men, fought an engagement with Leonidas, the Spartan general, at Thermopylae. The Persian host was cut to pieces, while only two or three of the Spartans were slain.

**Source:** *From Ctesias of Cnidus's book Persica written in 398 BCE. This excerpt was included in a book by the scholar Photius in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.*

### Vocabulary

triremes: Greek warships

## Document C: Ernie Bradford

*Ernie Bradford is an English historian specializing in the ancient Mediterranean world. The following is an excerpt from his book The Year of Thermopylae, published in 1980.*

---

Although it is true that Herodotus . . . had access to all the records available, it is impossible to accept the figures that he gives for the size of the Persian army and of the fleet. . . .

General Sir Frederick Maurice, who had the opportunity of covering the area of the march of the Great King not long after the First World War, came up with the conclusion that the total of the Persian army was about 210,000. Unlike most desk-bound scholars he [Maurice] had the opportunity to travel the whole area, and had excellent military and logistical knowledge of the terrain. He based his conclusion particularly on his observation of the water supplies available. . . . It seems that there is no possibility of the army of Xerxes having exceeded 250,000 men. Even this number . . . would have been sufficient to exhaust the water resources at a number of places along their route.

**Source:** *Ernie Bradford, The Year of Thermopylae, 1980, p. 34.*

## Document D: Rupert Matthews

*Rupert Matthews is an English author and politician. He has written over 200 books on history. The following is an excerpt from his book The Battle of Thermopylae: A Campaign in Context, published in 2006.*

---

No aspect of the Thermopylae campaign has given rise to greater controversy than the size and composition of the army led by Xerxes into Greece. . . .

. . . Herodotus puts the strength of Xerxes' army at around two million men and says that they drank the rivers dry as they advanced. . . . As usual, Herodotus does not tell us where he got this information from, but it does bear all the hallmarks of being an official document. . . . Whatever the source of information given by Herodotus, it is quite clear that the list is not an accurate record of the army Xerxes led into Greece. It would have been physically impossible to march that many men along the roads available to them and keep them supplied.

We know that Xerxes sent an advance guard of laborers and engineers forward to prepare the route for his invasion. . . . While it is not recorded exactly what these men did, it is clear that they were undertaking construction work that would aid the army. If streams were dammed to create reservoirs of water, Xerxes would have been able to move an army considerably larger than the 210,000 men that General Maurice [see *Document C*] thought the land could support. Even so, it is unlikely that the increase could have been more than around 50%, say a total of 300,000 to 350,000.

**Source:** *Rupert Matthews, The Battle of Thermopylae: A Campaign in Context, 2006, p. 10-15.*

## Final Claim

*After reading all four documents, how many Persians do **you** think there were at the Battle of Thermopylae? Make sure to use **historical evidence** to support your argument. What other types of evidence might you consult to further investigate this question?*



Historian	Who is the historian? When was the account written?	How many Persian soldiers were at the Battle of Thermopylae?	What evidence does the historian use to back this claim?	Do you find this evidence reliable and convincing? Why or why not?
Herodotus				
Ctesias				
Bradford				
Matthews				