

## Explain the reasons for the Greek victory in the Persian Wars

### *Introduction*

In both the Persian invasions of 490 (the first invasion) and 480/79 (the second invasion), the Greeks met with victory for several reasons. Superiority of arms and armour played a decisive role in all battles. Furthermore, a greater need and, therefore, a greater desire for victory drove the Greeks to adopt a resolve previously unseen in Greek history, unity achieved by traditionally warring poleis. However, in both invasions it is clear that the deciding element in the Greek victory was the superior leadership, both in terms of battle tactics and overall war strategy.

### *Greek armour and weapons*

It is clear from the surviving archaeological evidence that the Greeks were well-equipped for the task of repelling what Aeschylus called in his play 'The Persians' a "horde" and "legions of infantry". The bronze helmet, cuirass, greaves and studded leather skirt, along with the hoplon (or shield) provided superior protection to the Greek hoplites, particularly effective against the Persian archers. A marble relief found in Athens (P. Bradley), dated to the fifth century BC is one of our best sources for this, as it clearly depicts each of these elements of a hoplite's armour. This is

supported by an Attic cup of Duris, dated to ca. 490 BC.

Furthermore, the sarissa (or javelin/spear) used by the Greek hoplite was suited perfectly to the close formation of interlinked shields, allowing the hoplite to attack the enemy by either attacking over the shield or under it, striking the head or groin respectively. There is also evidence that hoplites used slashing swords, but Anderson says that they were probably only used after the hoplite charge, after the ranks were broken.

*Persian arms  
and  
armour*

In contrast, the Persian soldiers were variously equipped, due to the number of different nationalities present in the Persian army. An attic cup by Triptolemus (P. Ducrey), dated between 480 and 470 BC shows the Persian armour and arms. The standard Persian equipment seems to have been leather armour with scales sewn onto it, no helmet and only a wicker shield. This is considered insufficient by Hignett, who claim that while we cannot be completely confident about each nationality within the Persian army's armour and weapons, it would have been insufficient and easily been pierced by the hoplite's sarissae. It must here be noted the way by which the Greek arms and armour complemented the

*Greek battle  
tactics:  
the hoplite  
charge*

fighting style adopted by the Greeks, developed over centuries of continuous warfare, which was so efficacious against the Persian army. The hoplite charge, reported by Herodotus to have been so effective at Marathon and Plataea, could not have had the same effect without their equipment. This tactic brought about success by disrupting the enemy ranks with a charge at full speed (Herodotus claims that the Athenian at Marathon were the first to do this), and won the day in these two separate battles. This type of tactic was common to all Greeks, and, according to Hignett, allowed unity of action in an army consisting of different nationalities.

*Greek unity  
stemming  
from desire of  
autonomia*

The need for the Greek army to defeat the Persians must be seen as stemming from the Greek political ideology regarding political autonomy – to be politically dominated by another and to lose this autonomia (self-government) is anathema to Greeks of all areas of the Aegean. Thus, for the whole of the Greek mainland to be dominated by a foreign power must have created an immense incentive for the Greeks to find a common cause, and to act jointly, rather than individually.

*Lack of Persian  
unity through  
plurality of  
nations in  
Persian army*

In contrast to the tight political unity of the Greeks, the Persian forces had no such unity. They were a combination of different cultures; Herodotus claims that they were forced to fight by the terms of their treaties of subjugation with the Persian Great King. They fought only through the desire of the Great King to expand and to punish several Greek cities, particularly Athens, for their involvement in the Ionian Revolt and the Burning of Sardis, and the murder of Persian heralds during the inter-war period. Herodotus rightly claims that Mardonius played an important role (albeit for selfish reasons) in convincing Xerxes to attack Greece; had not a pre-existing desire to attack Greece not existed, Xerxes would not have succumbed to Mardonius' intrigues. Thus, the Persians were fighting for the personal vendetta of Darius and, later, Xerxes. This added incentive to fight, and defeat, the Persians was no more clearly expressed in the unity of action, if not complete unity of thought. The Greek poleis achieved this unity through, initially, the foundation of the Hellenic League. Such unity of purpose was expressed by Herodotus, who claimed that, "...the Athenians waived their claim [of command at sea] in the interests of national survival....". This was a significant gesture of the Athenians,

*Persian attempts  
to break Greek  
unity*

but Herodotus may be emphasising Athens' magnanimity and self-sacrifice to make the Athenian contribution in the Persian Wars seem greater, an element of Herodotus of which we must be wary. Further evidence that there was a significant degree of unity achieved was that all wars of the time ceased. Herodotus says that, "...the first thing to be done was to patch up any quarrels....going on amongst the confederacy". This was a necessary prelude to any unified action. There were, however, events which threatened this unity. Persian attempts to buy off the Athenians, as recorded by Herodotus, did fail, but show that the Persians did believe that the Greek unity could be brought undone. However, it must be said that the common cause, driven by the desire of all Greeks to preserve the political autonomy of the Greek poleis, was the glue which held this (potentially, and historically fragile) alliance together.

*Unity evident in  
battles*

The unity of the Greeks was crucial to the final victory of the Greek forces. In the battles of Salamis and Plataea the Greek forces had to stay united under a common plan. At Salamis, the Greek fleet, under the command of the Spartan Eurybiades, opted to follow the battle-tactics of the Athenian,

Themistokles. Buckley rightly says that Eurybiades did this as he recognised Themistocles' plan as potentially effective. This compromise must have been necessitated by the proportion of Athenian triremes in the fleet, but unity of purpose drove all the Greek allies to support Themistokles' plan. At Plataea, through a common desire to end the Persian occupation of Greece, the Greeks (particularly the Spartans) fought gallantly against the cream of the Persian army, the archers and the cavalry. By the end of the battle, twenty three poleis had spent several weeks together in a particularly testing situation, but the strength of this unity ensured that the Serpent Column, the dedication set-up by the 31 cities which had fought against the Persians, did indeed represent a 'national alliance'. Unity, however strong, could not have been achieved without the strong, dedicated leadership of the alliance. With the Spartan commanders Leonidas, Pausanias and Eurybiades must be named the Athenians Miltiades and Themistocles.

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*Conclusion*