

Today we are going back to 29 September 480 BC, where a big battle at sea was fought between ATHENS (which was now a big and powerful city, unlike the way it was when I told you about THESEUS last weekend) and the PERSIANS, who came from the area now occupied by modern-day Iran, and who wanted to conquer the whole of GREECE. When the Greek cities and towns had heard that there was a huge Persian army coming to Greece, and that they would all live under the rule of Persia unless they did something about it, 300 brave warriors from the city of SPARTA (another big, powerful city in Greece) tried to slow down the advancing Persian army by fighting them at THERMOPYLAE (pronounced 'Fur - mop - ill - eye'), which in English means 'The Hot Gates'.



You would have thought that 300 men would stand no chance against an army of about 150,000 Persian warriors. But they were defending quite a narrow pass into southern Greece at Thermopylae (that's why Thermopylae was called 'The Gates'; and it was called 'The Hot Gates' because there were some springs of hot water there) and by blocking up the pass and fighting off any Persians who came close to them, they were able to hold off the Persian army for a couple of days. That may not sound much, but it was time the rest of Greece desperately needed to get ready to fight off the Persians. At first things did not go so well, with the Greeks losing a big land

battle to the Persian army after it broke through the Spartans at Thermopylae, but then on this day just over 1,500 years ago, the Athenian navy sailed out to battle the Persian ships at SALAMIS (pronounced 'Suh - lamb - ees') and they won a big victory, sinking the



Persian navy and creating a real danger that the Persian army might be cut off in Greece with

no way of getting home. Sensing the danger, the Persian king XERXES (pronounced 'Zurk - zees') went straight back to Persia, telling his generals 'Finish the job and conquer Greece'. But the Persians lost again, this time on land at PLATAEA (pronounced 'Plat - ay - ah') and Greece was made safe from the threat of Persian invasion.

The victory at Salamis is generally regarded as a pretty huge moment in the history of Western Europe. The reason is that the first ever democracy (where the people living in a country get to decide how it will be run) in the history of the world was Athens - and if Persia had conquered Greece, the idea of democracy would have been killed at birth, and it may well be that the idea of a people ruling themselves, rather than being ruled by a king like Xerxes, would never have occurred to anyone. So the future of democracy was on the line at Salamis, and democracy (which means 'rule by the people' - the demos (pronounced 'dem - oss') won out over monarchy (which means 'rule by one person' - mono). And we also would never have heard of all the brilliant Greeks who were born round about or after 480 BC - people like the mathematician ARCHIMEDES (who was born in 287 BC, and who I told you about on April 13), or the thinker SOCRATES (who was born in 470 BC, 10 years after the victory at Salamis, and who I told you about on July 22), or the writers SOPHOCLES (pronounced 'Soff - oh - kles' and born in 497 BC) or EURIPIDES (pronounced 'Yur - rip - ih - dees' and born in 480 BC). If they were born before 480 BC they would have either have been wiped out, or turned into slaves. If they were born after 480 BC they probably never would have existed.

And there is one more Greek person we would probably have never heard of had the Greeks not beaten the Persians at Salamis. And that is the historian HERODOTUS (pronounced 'Hur - rod - uh - toos', and born in 484 BC). He was the first ever historian - the first guy ever to go out and ask people 'What happened?' and write their stories - their history - down. And the history he wrote about was the history of the Persians invading Greece and being beaten back by the Greeks, with the Athenians and Spartans fighting together on the same side to ensure Greece would remain free. The Athenians and the Spartans soon fell out, however, and almost 50 years exactly after the Persians were defeated, they went to war with each other in 431 BC, dragging the whole of Greece into the conflict with them. The war was known as the PELOPONNESIAN (pronounced 'Pel - oh - pon - eez - ian') WAR and it lasted almost 30 years, with the Spartans eventually defeating the Athenians. And the reason we know all about that war is because another historian - inspired by Herodotus - wrote the history of the Peloponnesian War. His name was THUCYDIDES (pronounced 'Fuh - sid - id - deez') and I might tell you a bit more about him, and his history, some other time.

