

Trained to conquer or die

What makes the stories of Sparta's severity and military might survive the centuries, and how much of it is true?

» Society in Sparta, the polis that dominated much of the Peloponnese, was oriented towards the ruling warrior class. From birth, everything was directed at military and physical prowess, the importance of the state and courage in battle. If the elders deemed a newborn infant too weak, it was left to die or sent to be raised as a slave. At seven, boys entered the severe *agoge* system, in which they were taken away from their family and put into barracks. There they underwent brutal military training until the age of 18, by which time they were experts in self-survival, warfare and ambush. At 20 they began life as soldiers.

The Spartan army organised itself into tightly formed *phalanxes* ("fingers"). This famous heavy infantry battle formation theoretically made Spartans indestructible, as long as they were protected on the rear and flanks. Thucydides describes how they were arranged in rows eight men deep, forming a single line in battle. The Spartans exploited the tendency of all phalanxes, carrying heavy shields on their left arms, to drift to the right. By turning their right flank to the left enemy flank, they were able to exploit the weakness of the opposing phalanx.

Another tactic was the false retreat, tricking the enemy into losing discipline and cohesion as it charged in for the kill, before launching a devastating counter-attack. It was used to great effect at the battle of Thermopylae in 480BC, where

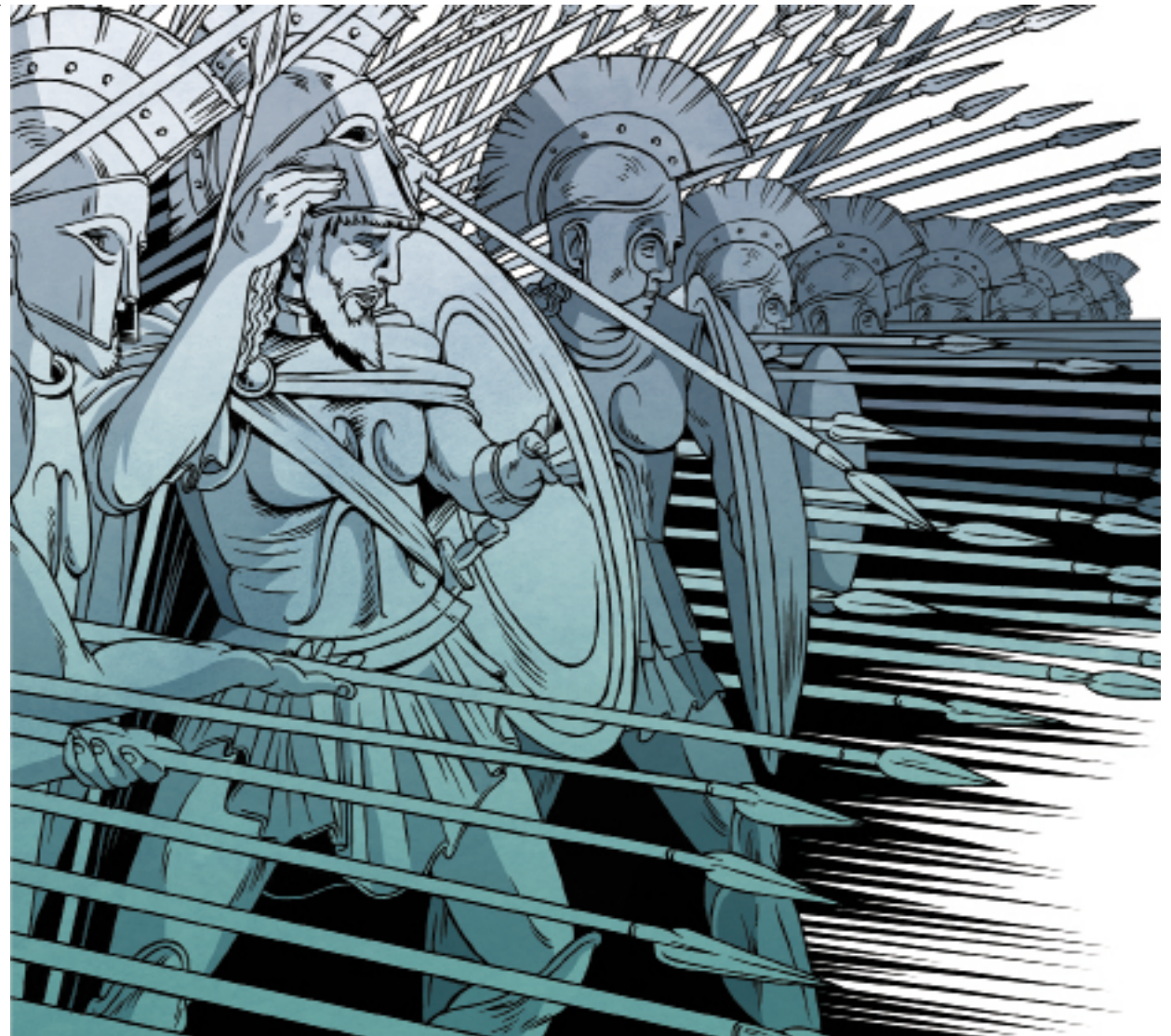
King Leonidas and his force of 300 Spartans confronted the might of the invading Persian army. In the end, the Spartans inevitably suffered defeat – but it was the most heroic defeat in history.

But it was less the tactics than the training that made Spartan soldiers near invincible. As Herodotus wrote: "Their law forbids them to flee in battle, whatever the number of their foes. It requires them to stand firm – to conquer or die". And it had a standing army of full-time career soldiers, rather than the citizen armies of other Greek citizen states. To supply that standing army, it developed a huge slave class, called *helots*, who had no

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legal rights and were treated with great brutality (not least because the Spartans lived in perpetual fear of *helot* revolts).

The Spartans were a people with a martial mindset so obsessive that it could border on paranoia. They were so suspicious of everything and everybody that the Athenians laughed at them for having not one king but two – so, they said, that one could keep an eye on the other. Where Athens was dynamic, outward-looking and culturally expansive, Sparta became conservative, inward-looking and culturally sterile. **SM/DH**



Above: Spartan warriors in the phalanx formation, famously employed against the Persian army at the battle of Thermopylae

Masters of the Aegean: Athens' feared navy

The Greeks were able to defeat the numerically far greater Persian army in the fifth century BC and usher in their period of greatness by combining the Spartan army with the Athenian navy. The Persians had no way of countering the latter, and were defeated in the battle of Salamis in 480BC. The Persian vessels

proved far less manoeuvrable than the Greek galleys, called *triremes*, which were fast and adaptable, though liable to sink easily if a storm blew up. Salamis proved to be the turning point in the war between the Greek states and the Persian empire, and thus did the prophecy of the Delphic Oracle come true –

"Though all else shall be taken, Zeus the all-seeing grants that the wooden wall shall not fail". Many had taken the wooden wall to be the palisades around the Acropolis, but the Athenian general Themistocles solved the riddle – the wooden wall was the city's fleet – and put his faith in naval power. **SM**