

Leonidas

c. ?–480 BC



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Leonidas was a king of Sparta in Ancient Greece. He is known for his heroic death during the Persian War at Thermopylae, where he and his soldiers were all killed defending their land.



As you read the biography below, think about the courage Leonidas must have had in facing his enemies at Thermopylae.



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Early details of the life of Leonidas (lee-ON-ih-duhs) are not known. The details we do know begin around 488 BC, when Leonidas succeeded his half-brother, Cleomenes I, to become King of Sparta. Leonidas married Cleomenes' daughter Gorgo.

In 480 BC, the Persian king Xerxes I invaded Greece. His large army could easily overpower the Greek army, but Leonidas, commander of the Greek army, was determined to save his country. Leonidas planned to stop the larger Persian army until the rest of the Greek army and the Greek navy could rally.

Leonidas went to Thermopylae (thuhr-MAH-puh-lee) with between 5,000 and 7,000 men to stop the Persians. The battle took place at a narrow valley between the mountains and the sea. This valley was the main pass from northern Greece into central Greece. Leonidas and his men held the valley for two days. But the Persians were shown a goat path around the valley and attacked Leonidas from behind. Leonidas sent most of his soldiers back, but remained at Thermopylae with about 300 Spartans and about 700 men from other city-states in Greece.

At Thermopylae, Leonidas and his men defended Greece from the Persians, but all were killed in the battle. However, Leonidas' sacrifice gave the Greeks enough time to prepare for battle at the straits of Salamis. Inspired by the bravery of Leonidas and his men, the Greeks were able to defeat the Persians.

It has been said that Leonidas knew he was going to his doom, which might have been why he sent so many men home. Whether that is true or not, Leonidas' heroic action made history, and his bravery is the main reason he is remembered today.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What is Leonidas most famous for?

2. **Make Judgments** What might have motivated Leonidas to fight to the death for his country?

ACTIVITY

Think about what you have learned about Leonidas in this passage. Make a list on scrap paper of a few facts about him. Use your list to make an epitaph for Leonidas.