

The Naval Historical Society of Australia Inc.



THE BATTLE OF SALAMIS 480 BC



The First Great Sea Battle

Salamis (480 BC) was to sea battles what Marathon was among land battles, a turning point in history. Carthage, the most famous of the colonies founded by the Phoenicians, inherited their naval skills and devoted itself, as they had done, to the conquest of the sea

V Fazio

THE BATTLE OF SALAMIS

480 BC

Over a long period, many famous sea battles have been discussed and described at Society meetings, all of which have been of great interest.

Tonight, I am going to give an account of the first recorded battle at sea. Not some minor skirmish between a few opposing ships, but one which for its' magnitude and for its' time, was awe inspiring, both for the number of ships engaged and the vast numbers of men involved and also, one well known woman who took part.

I refer to the Battle of Salamis, which took place in 480 B.C., some 2,473 years ago and was fought between the Persians, Egyptians and Phoenicians on one side and a combined fleet of Athenian, Spartan and Corinthian ships on the other.

The opposing leaders were Xerxes, the Persian King and Themistocles, the Chief Magistrate of Athens, who was the first man to have understood the importance of command at sea.

Those of us who heard Commander Carolyn Brand speak in November 1992, will recall her mentioning a woman in command at Salamis. She was Artemisia, Queen of Halicarnassus, who was fighting with Xerxes. Her efforts prompted him to remark "Today my men have become women and my women, men". More of that later.

THE ORIGINS OF THE BATTLE

The battle had its' origins in the reign of Darius, founder of the Persian Empire, who set out to conquer the world (has a familiar ring about it!). He had already made forays into Greece and showed the Persians to be hard masters to those whom they conquered. Some of the Greeks revolted, but as they were too weak to achieve victory, sought help from Athens. Darius got his nose out of joint and decided to teach the upstarts a lesson. He sent a mighty force against Athens, but a storm blew up, shattered his fleet and his army did not fare too well either. Of 600 ships, 300 were lost as a result. Those who have served in the Mediterranean and associated seas would know such weather. The survivors managed to limp home.

Nothing ventured etc., two years later Darius tried again. His second fleet achieved some success and landed his army at Marathon in 490 B.C. where his troops faced an Athenian army of 10,000 under Miltiades. Miltiades, seeing that he was outnumbered, sent a runner to Sparta to seek help to prevent the Greeks being overrun and reduced "to the level of barbarians". This herald, the original "marathon runner", covered 100 miles of rough country in two days. Some nine days later, by the time the Spartans arrived, the Persians had decided to leave as they had had little success in bringing the Athenians to battle. As they were embarking in their ships, Miltiades fell upon them and caught them between their ships and the the shore. The Persians fought bravely, but they were no match for the heavily armed Athenians, who routed them causing very heavy casualties. The Athenians were recorded as having lost 200 men for 4,600 Persians killed. The remaining Persians fled.

Five years later, Darius died, not having achieved his dream and was succeeded by Xerxes, his son, who became King of the mightiest empire the world at the time, had known. In 480 B.C.,

Xerxes' Campaign in Greece





Miltiades at Marathon - 490 BC



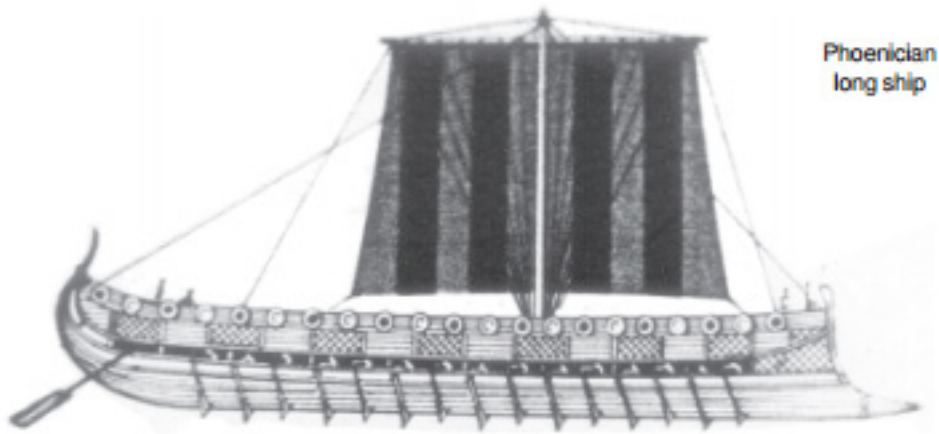
Note the difference in armour, etc.



Themistocles departs Athens for Salamis



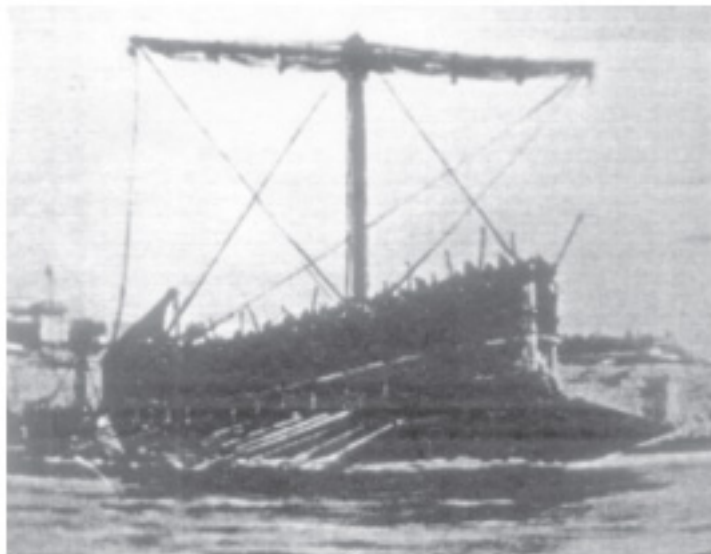
Mythological aspect of Salamis



Phoenician
long ship



Phoenicians attacking at Salamis - 480 BC



Xerxes decided to avenge his father's defeat. He sent messengers to the Greek cities demanding soil and water, which, to the Persians, were symbols of submission. Most cities complied for fear of the consequences if they were defeated, but the Athenians threw the messengers into a pit and the Spartans threw them into a well, telling them to get their own soil and water. Don't you just love it!

Consequently, Athens and Sparta combined. Leonidas, the Spartan Leader was given command of the land forces and Themistocles became Maritime Commander with some 300 ships at his disposal. These ships were untried in battle, but because of the tactical genius of Themistocles, were under no disadvantage against the combined fleets of Persia, Phoenicia and Egypt. Leonidas stationed his Spartan army of 1,400 against the 500,000 enemy troops. Fair odds from the Spartan point of view. The Persian army had crossed the Hesselpont (Dardanelles) on a bridge of boats and eventually arrived at the Pass of Thermopylae. At the same time, Themistocles was moving his fleet through the narrow channel between the island of Euboa and the mainland, to challenge the 1,300 ships of Xerxes' combined fleets.

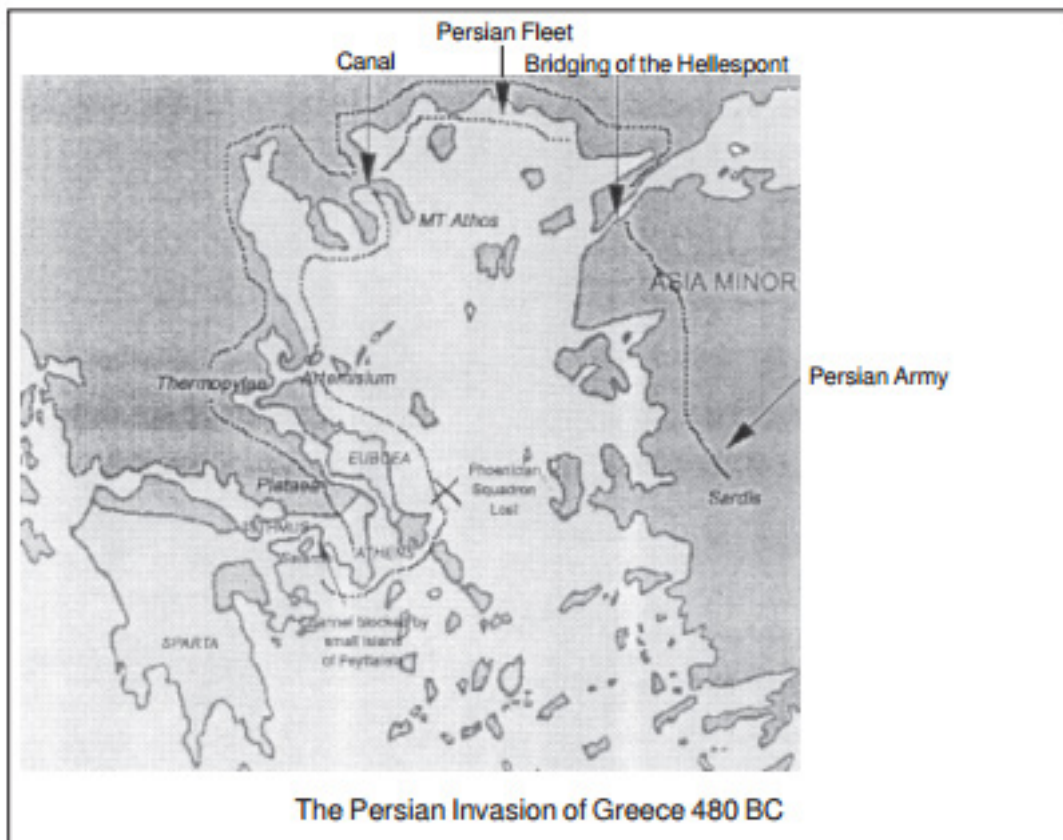
THE SCENE IS NOW SET

It is recorded that the Persian fleet was coming out of the Aegean sea into the narrow Trikiris channel (presumed to be in the region of Oreus, Larissa and Dium, at the northern end of Euboa). Themistocles decided to station his ships in this channel to bar the passage of the Persians. He received news that Xerxes was not as odd as his name and had sent 200 Triremes around the outside of the island in order to make a two pronged attack on the Greeks. Bear in mind folks, all this was done under limited sail and lots of oarsmen, at that time the principal and really, the only effective means of propulsion. Ahead and astern movements were achieved by the ridiculously simple means of pulling or backing on the oars to achieve the desired effect. The Triremes usually had 180 oarsmen, 90 per side in three banks of 30. These ships had been in use by the Greeks for quite a while, since 700 B.C., actually and by the time of the Battle of Salamis, were quite refined ships. They, like modern warships, were exclusively fighting ships, with underwater rams extending some 15 feet from the bows and covered with a heavy sheathing of bronze to ensure penetration of a ship's hull. Usually, about six feet above the waterline, a second ram shaped like a ram's head, hence the name, was fitted. This upper ram was designed to thrust the enemy ship onto its' beam ends once the lower spiked ram had done its' work. At the same time, the oarsmen backed water as hard as they could to pull their own ship clear. This was essentially the method of sinking an enemy, as no such refinements as guns, torpedoes or guided missiles existed those days.

Having the knowledge that he was in danger of being encircled, Themistocles retired his fleet to the Bay of Salamis to defend the Athenian populace. It appeared that Leonidas and his Spartans were capable of holding their line anyway, but that is another story in itself. He then sent a false message telling the enemy that the Greeks were about to leave harbour. The ruse worked and as a result, the Persian fleet attacked, their large ships were caught in confined waters due to the lack of sea room and in their confusion, many rammed and sank each other.

THE PRELUDE

Themistocles was a shrewd operator who knew he would have to convince the Athenian Elders to support his battle plans. He had always felt that the Persians would be looking for some way to avenge their previous defeats. He persuaded the Elders to send to Delphi to seek the advice of the Wise Women, the fabled Delphi Oracle.

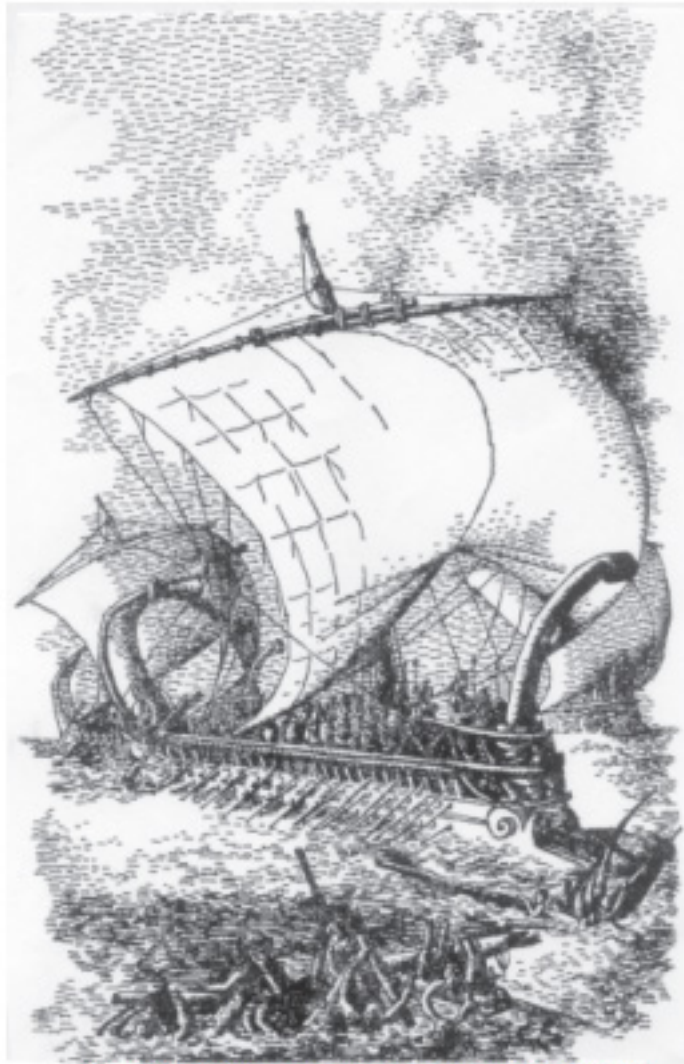


What the Elders did not know was that Themistocles had sent an earlier messenger with a bribe to tell the Oracle what he wanted said. The answer was as usual, in the form of a puzzle. Pythia, the Priestess, announcer of the will of Apollo at Delphi, gave this message *"Safe shall the Wooden Wall continue for thee and thy children. Wait not for the tramp of the horse, nor the footmen mightily moving over the land, but turn your back to the foe and retire ye. Yet shall a day arrive when ye shall meet him in battle. Holy Salamis though, shall destroy the offspring of women, when men scatter the seed, or when they gather the harvest"*.

The Athenians wondered! Wooden Walls? Did the Oracle mean the old wall around the Acropolis? There was not enough room within the wall for all of Athens. Why Salamis? Were they to leave Athens and flee to this bare and rocky place and await death?

Themistocles had the answer. By wooden walls, the Oracle meant ships! Even Horatio Nelson knew that, as did sailors for centuries! By Salamis, it was meant that there the enemy fleet would be met and destroyed. The Elders listened, so he obtained his ships and was now determined to face the enemy in the narrow channel by the island of Psyttaleia, where the rocky cliffs and coast would defend his flanks and he could meet the Persians at a place where the very size of their fleet would act against them.

Themistocles was now at sea and contemplating the forthcoming battle, when his Flag Captain drew his attention to the weather, saying "Look, there's a storm coming, look at the sky". Sure enough, one of those sudden NE gales, familiar to Aegean sailors was approaching. He signalled his fleet to beach and secure for the night. Triremes had to be beached stern to, to avoid damaging the rams or becoming stuck fast because of the length of the rams.



The Greek trimemes were a magnificent sight

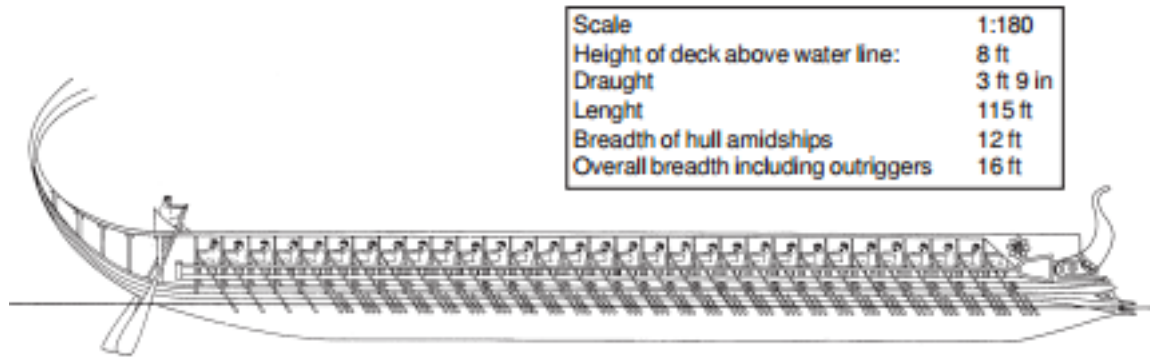
Three ranks of oarsman gave additional speed to the trireme but created seating problems



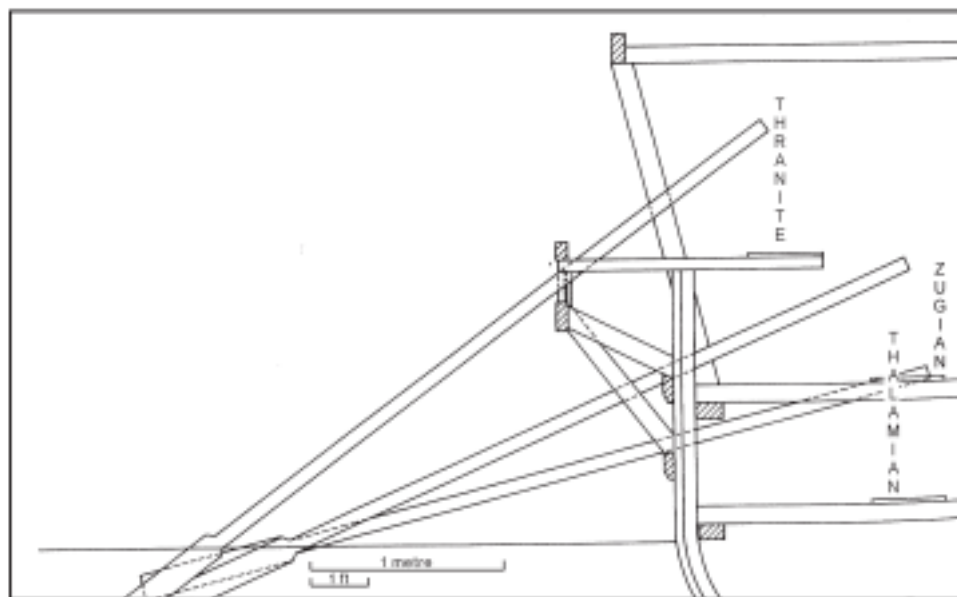
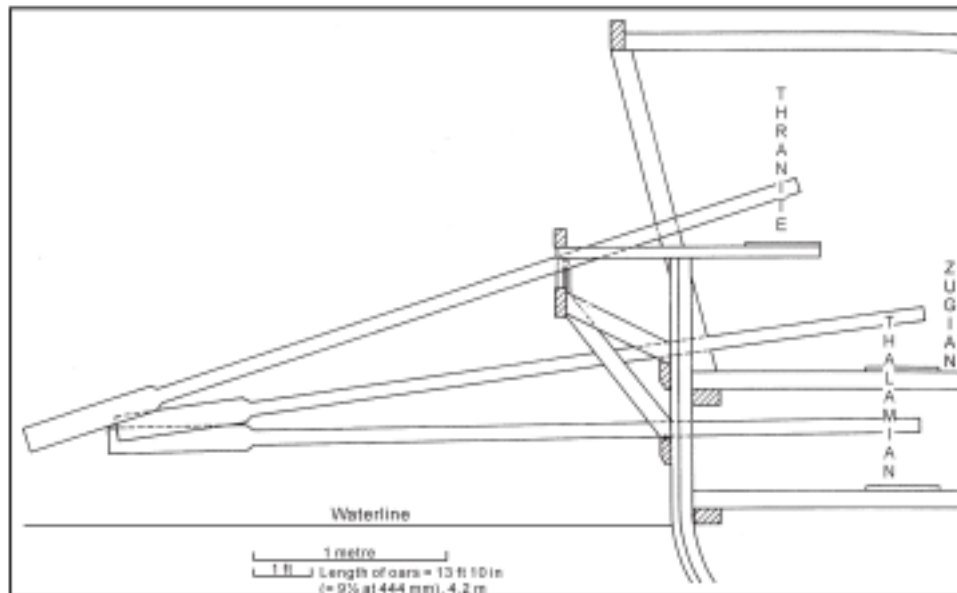
A trireme of the 4th Century BC with a fearsome ram, two stern rudders and full sail set.

Triremes were responsible for the Greek's stirring victory against the invading Persian fleet at Salamis





Drawing of a trieres
 (Based on Talos Vase stem, Lenormant relief, and bow on Cian coin.)



The Persians saw the danger and beached some of their ships, the remainder anchoring offshore. The type of anchor used by the Phoenicians was a large rounded stone with a hole drilled at the small end and secured with a heavy rope. It would have had no holding power at all in anything but calm conditions. At early dawn a fierce gale blew in from the east and smashed their ships onto the rocky shore like toy boats in a bath. The 200 ships I mentioned earlier as coming down around the seaward side of the island of Euboa, were caught in the open sea and all were lost. Three days later, all was calm again. The Athenian ships were refloated and were hardly under way when a 50-oared Galley arrived with the news that Leonidas and his Spartan troops had been defeated in an heroic and epic fight at the Pass of Thermopylae. The defeat now opened up all of southern Greece to Xerxes and his army. As a result, Themistocles decided to head for Salamis. His withdrawal was done so well, that when fishermen informed the Persians of it, they were not believed. Themistocles stopped at Athens to evacuate women, children and the aged, to prevent their slaughter. Some of the Athenian soldiers barricaded themselves behind the wooden wall around the Acropolis in the belief that this was what the Oracle had meant. They held out for three weeks, inflicting thousands of casualties on the Persians before succumbing. Meanwhile, Themistocles had his fleet boosted by ships from Corinth, Sparta, Seguria and other Greek cities and islands and it now numbered 370. Because of quarrelling, however, unity was hard to achieve. Themistocles appointed the Spartan, Eurybiades, as Admiral of the Fleet, but he found it difficult as none of the Captains appreciated the importance of sea power. (Things are not very different with modern-day leaders, are they!). Some even suggested that the ships be dragged ashore and the crews used to form a defensive barrier at Peloponnesus, the peninsular south of Greece.

Themistocles tried to convince his Captains that the fleet must be kept intact, even to the point of threatening to withdraw the Athenian fleet and proceed to Italy. He devised a plan whereby he sent his slave, Sicinnus, secretly to Xerxes to tell him that the Greeks intended to sail away from Salamis and, that he, Themistocles, would desert to the Persians. Xerxes was urged to come immediately to Salamis so that he could achieve a complete and incomparable victory.

THE TRAP IS SET

Xerxes knew of the discord and fell for the trap. He knew that the combined Greek fleet was lying in the Strait between Salamis and Attica, and once more, decided to bottle it up. He divided his fleet into three squadrons, two of which were to pass either side of the island of Psyttaleia, which he had captured earlier. At the same time, a fleet of 200 Egyptian ships were heading around from the south of Salamis to close the exit between Salamis and the mainland at Nisaea.

Themistocles' good fortune held, when a Persian deserter brought his ship alongside and informed him of Xerxes' plans. Themistocles split his fleet into three squadrons. The first, under Eurybiades, was to swing to the right of the island and with 120 ships, take on the Ionians. Themistocles would follow with 200 ships between Psyttaleia and Piraeus and take on 300 Phoenicians, whilst the Corinthians under Adeimantus with 50 ships, would stop the Egyptians at Nisaea.

At sunrise on 20th September 480 B.C. , the various squadrons began to move to battle. It was a magnificent sight and spectacle as the great Triremes, painted in brilliant colours and flashing with gold and bronze, with the steadily moving beat of thousands of oars flecking the calm blue waters of the Bay of Salamis.

Eurybiades was the first to sight the enemy. It was an incredible sight. The whole of the Strait



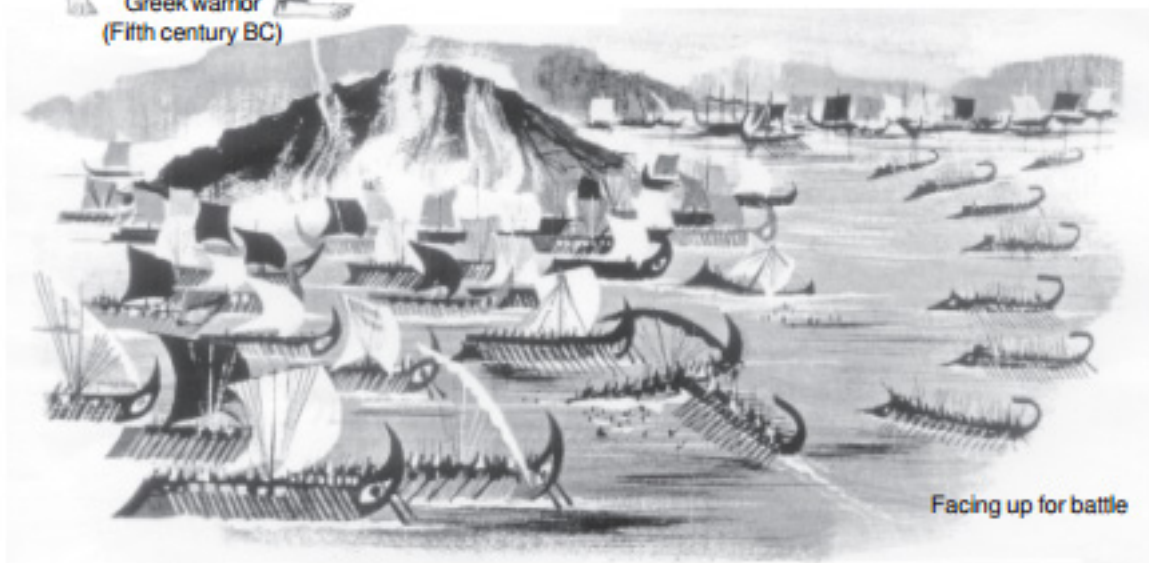


The Marathon Plain, from the summit of the Burial Mound (Soros). In the background (from left to right) : Mt. Agrelliki, Vrana, Avalona, and Mt Kotroni.

SALAMIS: The Megara Channel, looking eastward/ It was this channel that the Egyptian squadron blocked before the battle.



Greek warrior
(Fifth century BC)



Facing up for battle

was jammed from one shore to the other with the enemy's great oar-thrashing Triremes. Each was about 150 feet long and 18 feet in the beam (about the size of a TON Class Minesweeper). Their oars were between 20 and 30 feet long and the narrowness of the channel caused them to overlap. The accompanying noise grew louder as the ships moved on, line upon line. The shouting of the men calling the beat for the oarsmen grew to a crescendo. The noise was incredible!

Xerxes, to obtain a better view of the battle, was seated on a throne atop Mount Aegoleos, near Heracleum, with his chief advisers and Staff officers to point out which ship belonged to whom, etc., and to assess the progress of the battle.

Themistocles' ships followed in the wake of the Spartans and then swung to port to take on the Phoenician ships, these forming the larger group. The Phoenicians were commanded by Tetramnestus, the King of Sidon, whose sailors were reputed to be the greatest in the known world. The Phoenicians surged forward to clear the narrow channel, in 3 lines of 100 ships each and were preparing to spread out when the middle of the Greek line appeared to falter, then began to back water as if reluctant to face such a fleet, to the extent that that which was originally a straight line was now curved back like a bow. Tetramnestus was delighted, as he had heard that the Greeks had squabbled and took the withdrawal as a sign that the Greeks would not put up much of a fight. The Greek manoeuvre had been executed to coincide with the daily wind from the South which always rose at the same time each day and raised a heavy swell. As the Phoenicians struggled to keep station, a great cry was heard from the Greek fleet, "Men, how much further are you going to retreat?" The Athenians swore that it came from the apparition of a woman, their Goddess, Pallas Athene.

The Phoenicians bent to their oars and their ships picked up speed. The leading ships, although restricted by the channel, drew ahead in order to cut the Greek line and deal independently with both halves. The Athenians drew further back until it appeared that their fleet would run aground before commencing action.

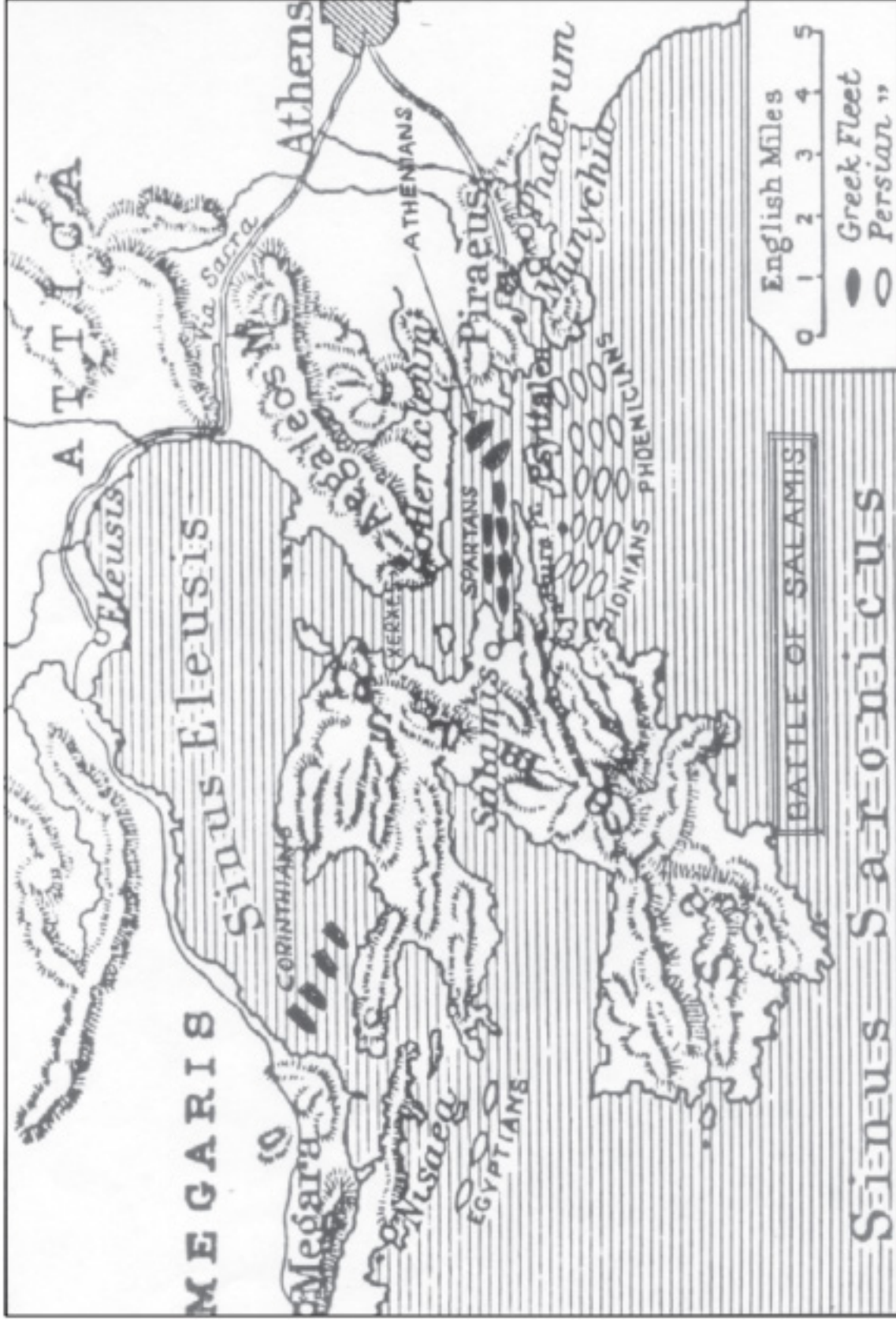
Themistocles, however, had not come down in the last shower and was keeping a watchful eye on proceedings. By this time, almost a third of the Phoenician ships were in the half circle formed by the Athenian squadron, whilst the remainder were trying to clear the Psyttaleian channel.

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH - BATTLE!

The moment had arrived. Themistocles gave the order to attack! Trumpets rang out and a great roar arose from the Athenians. The oars dug deep, the Triremes gathered way and hurtled at the flanks of the Phoenicians.

Tetramnestus realised he had fallen for the newest trick in the book. (It hadn't been done before folks, so it couldn't be the oldest, could it!) Some 80 ships were on either flank whilst another 40 were striking at his head. The first shock was not long in coming as the first Greek ship pulled out of line and with a grinding, sickening crash, rammed the first of the Phoenicians. The Athenian Captain was Aminias of Pallene; who has the distinction of striking the first blow in recorded Naval warfare. As the "upper" ram struck, Aminias backed off and cleared the Phoenician. The stricken ship recovered from its' initial list, then fell over on to its' shattered beam, rolled over and sank. The Athenian archers, having no love for their foe, picked off the survivors as fast as they could draw their bows.

Aeschylus, a Greek poet who served as a marine at Salamis, gave this as an eyewitness account in the form of a Persian messenger carrying the news of the defeat to Xerxes' mother. *"The first rammer was a Greek, which sheared away the great Sidonian Crest; then close one on another,*



charged the rest. At first, the long drawn Persian line was strong and held; but in those narrows, such a throng was crowded; ship to ship could bring no aid.

Nay, with their own bronze fanged beaks, they made destruction a whole length of oars on beak would shatter; and with purposed art, the Greek ringed us outside and pressed and struck;

And we - our oarless hulls went over, till the sea could scarce be seen, with wrecks and corpses spread".

By this time, the noise was incredible and indescribable. Ships rammed enemy ships and were in turn, rammed as they pulled free. By now, the Phoenicians had recovered and were striking back, causing many Athenian casualties, but taking much more themselves.

As the rams struck, oars were smashed, bodies broken and crushed under the iron studded boots of the opposing soldiers, as they boarded the enemy. The Phoenicians were handicapped by the very size of their fleet as the rear lines tried to overtake the leading line in order to get to grips with the enemy and in the confusion, many of their own ships were sunk by their compatriots. Eurybiades, the Spartan leader, on the Western side, did not have time for such clever tactics. His method was to ram, grapple and board. He closed his enemy and his troops, yelling their battle cry of "Eleleu", leapt aboard the enemy ships. A method of warfare still in vogue at Trafalgar, some hundreds of years later. Still if a tactic works well, why mess about with it!

The enemy in this case were Ionians, Greeks like themselves, but who had defected to the Persians. Their ships were packed so tightly together, that for the Spartans it was as though they were in their own element - land fighting! They had no real problem, as when their own ships were sunk, they commandeered an enemy ship and kept up the good work and although the Ionians were good fighters, their columns (get the pun?) were no match for the Spartans, who would take on up to six of the enemy at once and even when struck down, would continue to strike out at the enemy until they succumbed from their wounds.

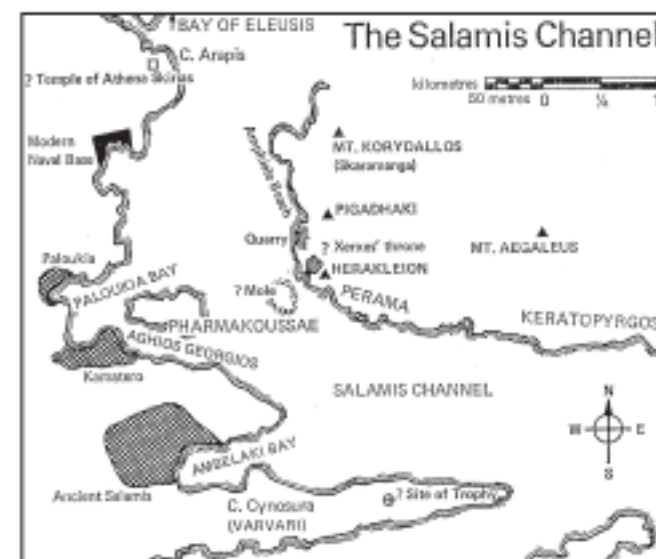
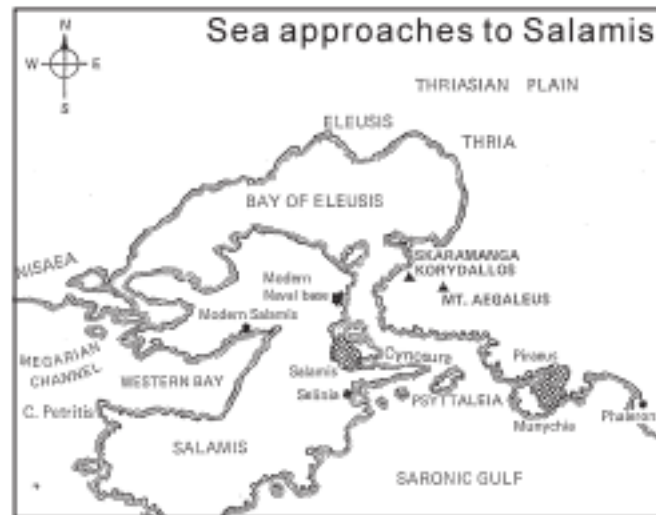
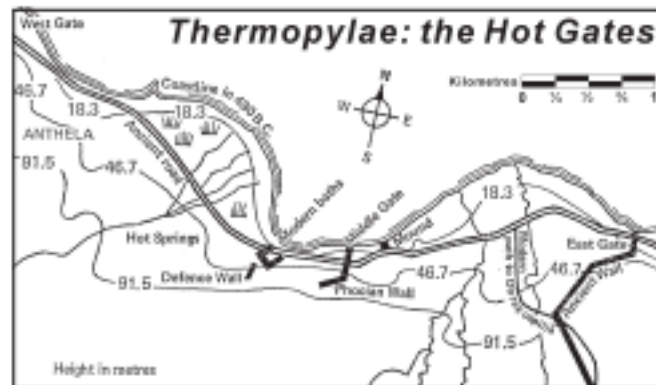
To the North, Adeimantus headed for the Egyptians, sails set to take advantage of the following winds. He then divided his fleet and at the last moment, struck and stowed his sails and rested his oarsmen, so that the Egyptians faced a long line of ships. Adeimantus had the task of blocking the narrow passage at Nisaea and protecting the rear of the Greek fleet. The bows of his ships were crowded with archers, who proceeded to pick off the Egyptian officers and helmsmen.

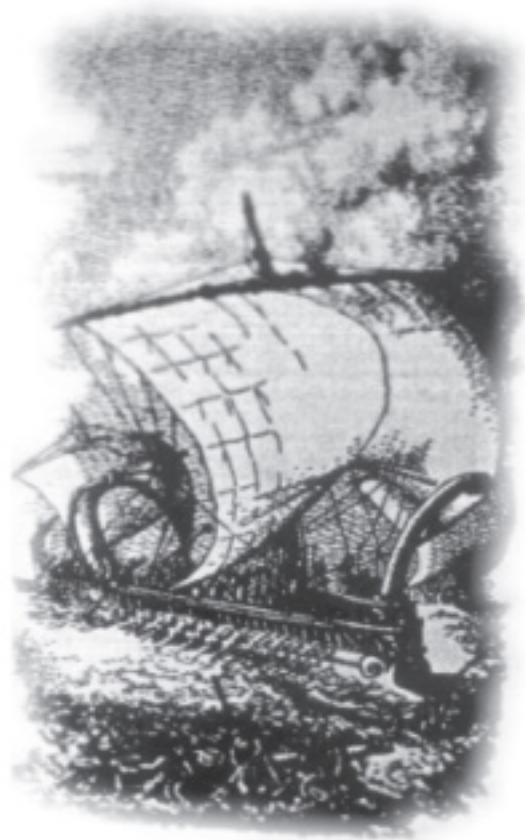
His own officers and men were poised for action, wearing their magnificent Corinthian helmets with horsehair crests and holding their long heavy spears and round shields.

The fight began. The air was thick with arrows and as the ships surged and locked together, the Corinthian columns (another pun) boarded the Egyptian ships.

The Egyptians were badly rattled. (not for the last time it would seem). Xerxes was puzzled as to their whereabouts as he could not see them from his vantage point, as they were not where they were supposed to be. This type of warfare was strange to them, as the enemy were more like rock walls instead of men. With the loss of ships on both sides, there was more sea room and although the ships could manoeuvre, the sheer ferocity of the Corinthian attack turned the tide. The Egyptians finally caved in at a time with the outcome in doubt and still in the balance, and those who could, fled the scene.

Those of the Egyptians remaining were soon disposed of and Adeimantus, although wounded





Themistocles' flagship - Salamis



The great ram of Aminias' ship tore into the hull of the Phoenician

The first blow in recorded naval warfare

and bleeding, ordered his ships about and pushed NE to the top of Salamis to aid the other Greek squadrons. When his ships arrived, having sailed past the dumbfounded Xerxes, they found that in the course of the battle, the Athenians, Spartans, Phoenicians and Ionians had drifted together, so that instead of two battles, there was now only one.

It was a scene of utter confusion. The sea was littered with broken oars, timber, spars and bodies, with men swimming desperately to get clear. The Persian force who had been landed on the Island of Psyttaleia on the previous evening, were overcome and killed by a Greek force who had set off from Salamis under cover of darkness in a merchant vessel and landed without being observed.

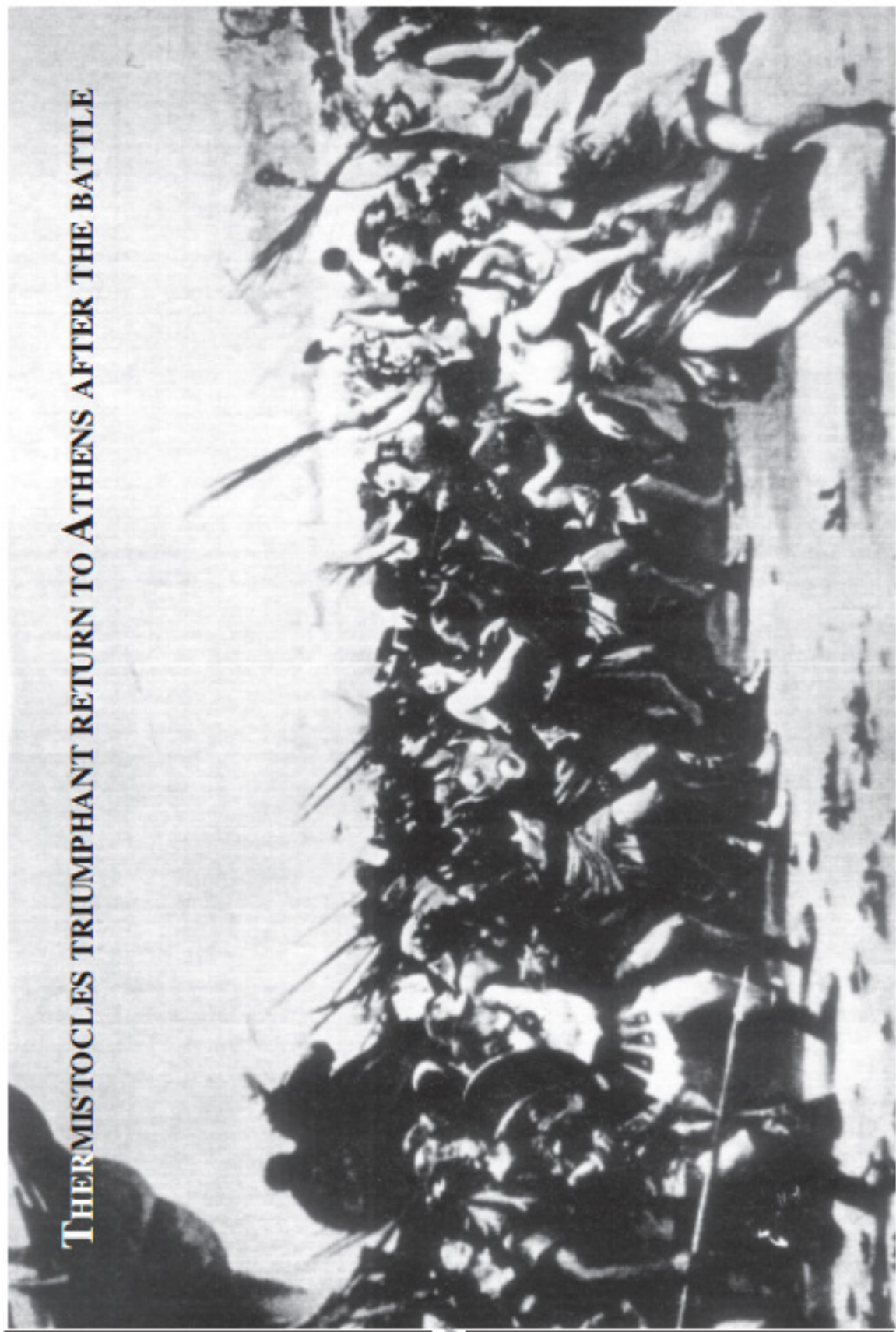
Some of the Persian ships had had enough and were fleeing the scene of battle, one, a large scarlet and gold ship was being followed by two Athenian ships, intent on capture. Artemisia, Queen of Halicarnassus, who was fighting for Xerxes, was in command. The great ship was speeding for safety, when another Persian ship crossed her bows. Without hesitation, Artemisia ran up a Greek banner and rammed and sank it, leaving it wallowing and sinking in her wake. Her pursuers broke off the chase, unaware that the ship they were after was highly prized and that a price of 10,000 drachmas had been offered by Themistocles for her capture. The ship which she rammed belonged to King Clamasithymus, an old enemy of hers, although a Persian. Seems it did not pay to cross a woman, even then! One of Xerxes' staff had noticed the incident and remarked on her skill in sinking an enemy ship, unaware of the true position. Xerxes then remarked "*Today my women have become men and my men, women*". A handful of Phoenician Captains complained to Xerxes that the Ionians had given them no support. Xerxes noted that the Ionians were still fighting and ordered his dissident Captains be executed "To put an end to their playing the cowards themselves and blaming their betters". That was all he could cope with, as it was now obvious that he had suffered a crushing defeat and although the battle was still raging, he mounted his horse and like Napoleon at Moscow, rode away, a bitter and defeated man.

The Persians lost 200 ships, with many more captured as opposed to a loss of 40 ships by the Greeks. Proof that Themistocles had got it right, first time.

At sunset on 20th September 480 B.C., it was all over. The surviving Persians and their allies fled the area, never to return.

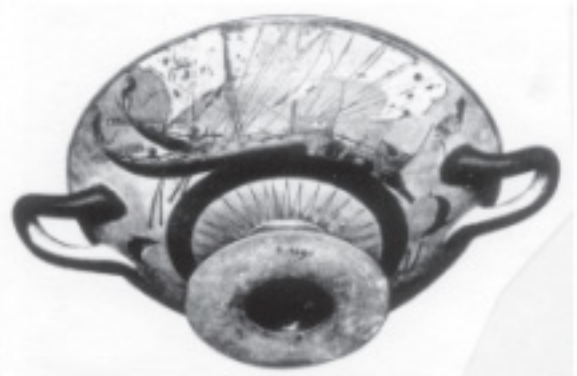
The Battle of Salamis was over.

THERMISTOCLES TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO ATHENS AFTER THE BATTLE





Themistocles: portrait-herm discovered near the theatre of Ostia in 1939. Roman copy of a Greek original which may have been executed during 'Themistocles' lifetime.



Greek vase: a race between galleys



Marble grave-stele from Salamis, bearing the names of Chaeredemus and Lynerus, plausibly identified as soldiers who took part in the battle.






NAVAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA INC

Patron: Chief of Navy

THE SOCIETY

On 25 May 1970, the 348th anniversary of the arrival of the first British ship on the Australian coast, some forty men and women attended a meeting at Garden Island, Sydney, New South Wales, with the common purpose of forming a Naval Historical Society. *The Naval Historical Society of Australia Inc.*, founded in 1970, is a cultural organisation which exists for the benefit of its members and the community to pursue these aims and objectives.

AIMS and OBJECTIVES

-  To research, record and collate the history of all Navies but, in particular, that of the ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY.
-  To encourage and support Naval Museums.
-  To promote and uphold the prestige, dignity and traditions of the NAVAL SERVICES.

Membership of the Society is open to all who subscribe to these aims and objectives.

The Society also extends its facilities to regional Naval and Maritime organisations throughout Australia. A number of Maritime and History organisations are affiliated with THE NAVAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY as well as some libraries and universities. History is enjoying a renaissance in Australia. Throughout the country people are tracing their ancestors, delving into the history of their houses and their towns, exploring the development of social institutions and recording their own stories for posterity. Many of these stories will have Naval connections. Naval History is an integral part of Australian history, and whatever your interest, the SOCIETY has something for you.

THE NAVAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY of AUSTRALIA Inc., PRESERVING NAVAL HISTORY

MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

As a member you will receive the March, June, September and December issue of Naval Historical Review, the magazine of The Naval Historical Society of Australia Inc., which is published quarterly. It provides information on the activities of the Society and its members, notices of coming events, articles of general historical interests and issues of concern to historians, news from the Chapters, affiliated societies' network and book reviews. The journal of the Naval Historical Society of Australia Inc., is the only published Australian journal of Naval history and is distributed internationally.

Members are entitled to the free use of The N H S library which contains both written and pictorial resources on all aspects of Naval history. The library specialises in Naval history, in particular the Australian Navy, and is developing a computerised data base. The Society has a good photographic collection which will be included in the data base. A program of events including lectures, excursions to sites of historical interest and visits to Naval establishments and ships is offered to members.

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