

Greece, prehistory and history of

Archaic age

Solon's reforms were critical for the longer-term development of Athens and indeed Greece, but in the short term they were a failure because Athens did after all succumb, for much of the second half of the 6th cent., to a tyranny, that of Pisistratus and his sons Hippias and Hipparchus. Under these rulers, Athenian naval power was built up, a vigorous foreign policy pursued, splendid buildings erected, and roads built. But the tyrants were driven out in 510 and Cleisthenes reformed the Athenian constitution in a democratic direction in 508/7.

Meanwhile Achaemenid Persia had been expanding since Cyrus the Great overthrew Croesus of Lydia in 546, and the new power had begun to encroach on the freedom of the East Greeks in Ionia and even islands like Samos. The Athenians, like other mainland Greeks, were insulated from immediate danger by their distance from geographical Ionia, but they were in the racial and religious senses Ionians too, and when in 499 the Ionian Revolt broke out, itself perhaps the result of restlessness induced by awareness of Cleisthenes' democratic reforms, Athens sent help to the rebels, who, however, were defeated at Lade (494).

How far this help provoked the Persian Wars, by drawing Darius I's vengeful attention to Athens, and how far they were simply an inevitable consequence of Persian dynamism, is not clear from the account of our main source Herodotus. A first expedition led by Datis and Mardonius failed at the battle of Marathon, in Attica (490); then at the battles of Thermopylae, Artemisium, Salamis (all 480), and Plataea (479) a far larger Persian invasion by Xerxes was beaten back. The Greek successes of the Persian Wars were of enormous importance in conditioning Greek attitudes to themselves, to each other, and to the 'barbarian' (as Persians were now more aggressively defined), for centuries to come. The victories were immediately commemorated by state dedications in the great sanctuaries (above all Delphi and Olympia, except that Nemea got no big dedication. Poetry by Aeschylus and Simonides, and the prose of Herodotus, signalled the Great Event in literature, as did buildings on the Athenian acropolis; only Thucydides and his speakers show some impatience with the theme.