

The Battle of Thermopylae

Leonidas marched into Thermopylae with about seven thousand men, a fairly small force. But for their dependence on the Athenian fleet, the Peloponnesians would have preferred to focus their defences on the Peloponnesus. Local Phocian forces were assigned to defend a secret path over the mountains leading to the rear of the Greek forces. Unfortunately, a Greek traitor betrayed the secret and guided Xerxes' personal guard, the so-called Immortals, over it. On learning the Persians were in his rear, Leonidas dismissed the bulk of his forces, and with only the Thebans, Thespians, and three hundred Spartans, fiercely defended the pass, killing many "Immortals" including two brothers of Xerxes before being killed themselves. On Xerxes' orders the body of Leonidas was decapitated and impaled. Throughout antiquity Greeks took inspiration from the epitaph composed for the Thermopylae dead attributed to Simonides:

Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by,
That here, obeying their commands, we lie.