



Plataea 479 BC: Greece's greatest victory (Campaign)

William Shepherd

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Plataea was one of the biggest and most important land battles of pre-20th century history. Close to 100,000 hoplite and light-armed Greeks took on an even larger barbarian army that included elite Asian cavalry and infantry from as far away as India, with thousands of Greek hoplites and cavalry also fighting on the Persian side. At points in the several days of battle, the Persians with their more fluid, missile tactics came close to breaking the Greek defensive line and cutting off their supplies. But, in a fatal misjudgement when he nearly had the battle won, their general Mardonius committed the cream of his infantry to close-quarters combat with the Spartans and their Peloponnesian allies. He died and his men were finally crushed by heavier weaponry and superior discipline. Meanwhile, 250 miles to the east, the Greek navy inflicted an equally decisive defeat on the Persians, neutralising Xerxes' seapower in the Aegean. The tiny minority of Greek city states that actually took up arms against the invading forces of the mightiest empire yet seen in the ancient world had halted its western expansion and driven it back.

The reconstruction of the battle of Plataea will draw on recent persuasive academic interpretations of the textual sources and visual evidence (mainly from near-contemporary vase paintings) for the early 5th-century method of hoplite fighting.

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