



# THANK YOU, THEMISTOKLES

By thinking outside the box, a Greek general and politician helped defeat the Persians and save democracy.

IN THE SECOND DECADE of the 5th century B.C., Athens and the rest of the Greek world were facing disaster, but few realized it. If not for one far-sighted politician and general named Themistokles (524-460 B.C.), Greece—and democracy itself—would have crumbled.

In 484 B.C., the Athenians discovered a large silver deposit in their mines at Laurion. The Athenian assembly leaned toward sharing the silver with its citizens, but Themistokles convinced them the metal should be coined and used to pay for the expansion of the navy. He knew the Persians were planning an invasion, although he disingenuously used a longtime local adversary, Aigina, as a more immediate and publicly acceptable motivation.

The coins struck from the Laurion silver were *tetradrachms* bearing a head of Athena on the obverse and an owl on the reverse, although he disingenuously used a longtime local adversary, Aigina, as a more immediate and publicly acceptable motivation.

mately 17.2g of pure silver. Thanks to their issuance, the Athenian navy acquired an additional 200 ships. Each *trireme* had three banks of oars and accommodated a crew of 200 men.

### Victory at Sea

In 480 B.C., under the command of Xerxes, the great king of the Persian Empire, an immense army and navy invaded the fiercely independent collection of city-states comprising ancient Greece. Many cities surrendered without a fight, but a few stood fast, allied with the Spartans and Athenians. At Thermopylai, the Persians destroyed a crack contingent of 300 Spartans commanded by Leonidas, though Xerxes was surprised by the Greeks' tenacity. As the Persians prepared to attack Athens, Themistokles again intervened. He convinced his fellow Athenians that a Delphic oracle's advice to the citizens to "seek refuge within wooden walls"



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meant they should flee to their wooden ships. According to the Greek historian Herodotus (7.141), the oracle declared:

Yet to Tritogenia [Athena] shall Zeus, loud-voiced, give a present,  
A wall of wood, which alone shall abide unsacked by the foemen;  
Well shall it serve yourselves and your children in days that shall be.  
Do not abide the charge of horse and foot that come on you,  
A mighty host from the landward side, but withdraw before it.  
Turn your back in retreat, on another day you shall face them.



PHOTOS: JOHN NEBEL

THIS ATHENIAN SILVER TETRADRACHM, struck in 484-480 B.C., shows Athena wearing a Corinthian helmet. On the reverse is her ever-present owl, with AOE to the right. (The "A" is off the flan.)

Actual Size: 21.2mm



Most Athenians took heed and abandoned the city. They were transported to safety by the triremes, primarily to Salamis and Troizen. Soon after, Athens was invaded and sacked by the Persians.

The Persian navy gave pursuit. The Greeks, fearing destruction after witnessing Athen's fate, voted to head toward open water. But Themistokles intervened yet again, persuading with trickery. As he worked to convince the Greeks they must fight, he simultaneously sent an envoy to the Persians and told them the Greeks planned to flee. The Persian navy maneuvered between the Athenian vessels and the open sea. The Greeks had no choice but to fight, which they did, resulting in a decisive naval victory over Persia after a single day's battle.

From a temporary throne situated on a nearby hilltop, Xerxes witnessed the scene. He had fully expected to view a bloody slaughter of the Greeks, thereby

demonstrating his absolute power. Instead, fearing for his life after his crushing naval defeat, he fled to Asia, leaving behind part of his army. The remaining men were commanded by Mardonius, who, along with much of the Persian force, was killed the following spring in a decisive infantry battle at Plataia.

The allied navy's victory at Salamis was the turning point in the conflict. The Persian invasion was stopped, and the Western world was saved from despotic Eastern domination. In his book *The Savior Generals*, Victor Davis Hanson wrote, "Perhaps more than eighty thousand imperial [Persian] sailors were killed, wounded, missing, or dispersed—which would make Salamis the most lethal one-day naval battle in history, more bloody than even an Ecnomus, Lepanto, Trafalgar, Jutland, or Midway."

Eight years after the battle, the famous playwright Aeschylus, who had fought at Salamis, wrote an astonishing play (wildly popular in Athens) called *The Persians*. Related from the Persian perspec-

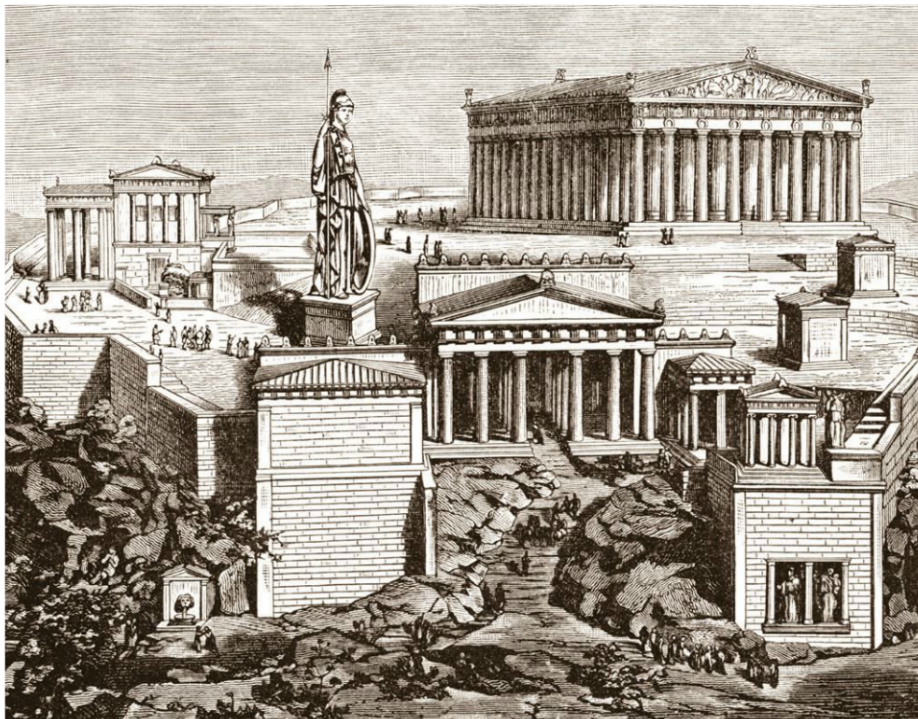
tive, it tells a gruesome story. In an unusual act of consideration for the enemy, Aeschylus shows sympathy and understanding for Persia's loss of men.

Dramatic license aside, the play also provides a valuable moral lesson and historic record. Aeschylus attributed Persia's loss to Xerxes' hubris. The latter essentially linked two continents with a bridge of ships across the Hellespont—an action straying beyond the human sphere and therefore deserving of severe punishment. The mortal agent for divine retribution was Themistokles, not directly named, but clearly known to the audience.

A herald returned to Persia, speaking to Xerxes' mother (lines 353-360):

Either an avenger or a wicked God, my Lady (whence it came I know not),  
Began the whole disaster. From Athenian  
Ranks a Greek approached, addressing Xerxes  
Thus: "When the gloom of blackest night  
Will fall, the Greeks will not remain, but leap  
To rowing-bench, and each by secret course  
Will save his life." And he your son, upon  
His hearing this, in ignorance of Greek  
Guile and the jealousy of gods ...

▼ AS PERSIA PREPARED to attack Athens (pictured), Themistokles intervened once again and convinced the citizens to evacuate and take refuge aboard the city's fleet of 200 vessels.



### Financing the Fleet

Returning to Themistokles' tetradrachms, studies by one Greek, two English and one American numismatist are representative of the arguments surrounding this coinage. In 1923 Jean Svoronos published a corpus of the ancient coinage of Athens from the earliest private issues to Roman Imperial coins, all arranged chronologically as a series of photographic plates, but with very little descriptive text. Stylistically, Themistokles' tetradrachms appear to

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belong in the group Svoronos calls “Period of Pisistratus, First Tyranny” (561-559 B.C.), more than a half century before the battle of Salamis, according to Svoronos’ numismatic chronology.

In 1924 Cambridge don Charles Seltman published a history of Athens and its coinage before the Persian invasion. His careful die study includes general descriptions of each of Seltman’s groupings; the coin illustrated here is a member of group “Gi” (546-527 B.C.). Like Svoronos, he ordered coins by style, but labeled the die pairings and described each die, relating it to its general group. However, Seltman took great exception with Svoronos’ looser approach, noting “how completely he has ignored dies...he has separated by a wide interval two pieces from the same obverse die T. Pl. 2, 39 and T. Pl. 5, 35; again he has illustrated the same specimen twice.” Seltman nevertheless gave an early, although different, date for his “Gi” group.

(Numismatics aside, Seltman had quite a reputation for his artistic eye. A smiling Seltman graced the cover of the September 20, 1943, issue of *Life* magazine, perhaps the only numismatist to receive such popular recognition.)

In the 1956 *Numismatic Chronicle*, Colin Kraay, while respecting Seltman’s groupings, revisited the dating. Kraay thought the second quarter of the 6th century B.C. was too early for the first Athenian owl coinage, and that the fourth quarter was more probable. He based his arguments on style and hoard evidence, although his thoughts about the former differed from Seltman’s. Kraay noticed that three of the groups—“Gi,” “Gii” and “M”—each listed 40 or more obverse dies. While he agreed the coins had an archaic style, Kraay reasoned that because of the large number of dies, the issuance logically coincided with the historic record as a large emergency coinage to pay for

Themistokles’ war preparations. The archaic style owes to the coins’ hasty production, hence the “Gi,” “Gii” and “M” groups should be placed after the Laurion silver discovery in 484 B.C. and before the war in 480 B.C.

In the 1999 *Revue Belge de Numismatique*, Ross Holloway revisited Kraay’s dating and agreed with his logic about the “Gi” and “Gii” groups: “These are the coins, in my opinion, of the opening of the fifth century and if production of the Laurion mines and the naval building program to meet the Persian menace are reflected in Athenian coinage, it is here.”

Holloway describes group “M” as small. However, according to Seltman’s die listings, it is the same size as groups “Gi” and “Gii,” hence Kraay might be correct to include group “M” with “Gi” and “Gii.” Holloway contradicts Kraay, probably rightly so, stating that barbaric owl coins were not struck by the Athenians, but had been produced by Persians in Athens, after they occupied the city, but before they were driven out.

In 2001 Rosemary Peck analyzed the costs of trireme production and operation. The expense of labor, materials and equipment was 10,100 *drachms* (or 2,525 tetradrachms) per ship, and the annual operating cost for pay and provisions was 97,090 *drachms* (24,272.5 tetradrachms). Her analysis can be used to show that the quantity of Themistokles’ coinage was large enough to build and operate the ships that repelled the Persians.

The 200 ships would have cost 505,000 tetradrachms to build; the annual operating expense would have been 4,854,500 tetradrachms. Assuming each obverse die could strike 20,000 tetradrachms, the “Gi,” “Gii” and “M” coinage, which consumed 120 obverse dies, could have produced 2.4 million tetradrachms. When you consider that the only money

## Sources & Further Reading

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spent outside Athens was for construction material not available within the city, the majority of Themistokles’ coinage remained and circulated in Athens and was spent several times over annually. Of the 2.4 million tetradrachms coined, perhaps 2.1 million remained in Athens, which could reasonably support more than 6 million tetradrachms’ worth of economic activity and thereby cover the incremental naval costs.

With his wit and tetradrachms, farsighted Themistokles saved democracy and the Western world from invading despots. The crews and ships that defeated the Persians were paid for with Athenian silver coins, some of which we can hold in our hands today.

**ancients@money.org**