

Artemisia I of Caria: The Naval Commander Who Dared to Battle Greece

A Queen Who Ruled the Waves

"Of all the subordinate commanders, Artemisia provided Xerxes with the best advice, but he did not always follow it." — Herodotus, The Histories

Early Life and Rise to Power

Born in the late 6th century BCE in Halicarnassus (modern-day Bodrum, Turkey), Artemisia I lived in a world dominated by two great powers: the expanding Persian Empire and the Greek city-states. Little is known about her early life, but she was likely born into the aristocracy of Caria, a region that had fallen under Persian control.

Artemisia's father, Lygdamis I, was the ruler of Halicarnassus, while her mother was from the island of Crete. The name 'Artemisia' derives from the Greek goddess Artemis, suggesting Hellenistic cultural influences in her upbringing, despite Halicarnassus being a Persian vassal state.

Upon her husband's death (whose name history has not preserved), Artemisia assumed the throne of Halicarnassus around 500 BCE as regent for her young son, Pisindelis. Unlike many female regents throughout history who merely served as caretakers until their sons came of age, Artemisia actively ruled and made her mark on history.

Her domain included not only Halicarnassus but also the nearby islands of Kos, Nisyros, and Kalymnos. Though technically a subject of the Persian Empire, she enjoyed considerable autonomy in local governance while remaining a loyal ally to the Persian king.

The Persian Wars and Xerxes' Invasion

The defining moment of Artemisia's life came during the second Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE. King Xerxes I, determined to avenge his father Darius's defeat at Marathon a decade earlier, assembled the largest army and navy the ancient world had ever seen.

As a Persian ally, Artemisia was called upon to contribute ships to the massive Persian fleet. She personally commanded five ships from Halicarnassus and its dependencies, an extraordinary role for a woman in ancient warfare. More remarkable still, according to Herodotus, she served as both a naval commander and a trusted advisor to Xerxes.

The Battle of Artemisium

The first major naval engagement in which Artemisia likely participated was the Battle of Artemisium in August 480 BCE, occurring simultaneously with the famous land battle at Thermopylae. While Herodotus does not specifically mention her actions in this battle, she would have been present with her five ships as part of the Persian fleet that fought against the Greek naval coalition.

The battle ended inconclusively, with both sides suffering heavy losses before withdrawing — the Persians due to storm damage to their fleet, and the Greeks upon learning of the defeat at Thermopylae, which made their position at Artemisium untenable.

Strategic Advisor to Xerxes

Following the Persian army's successful push through Thermopylae and occupation of Athens, Xerxes faced a crucial decision: should he engage the Greek fleet in the narrow waters of the Salamis strait, or avoid a naval battle and focus on land operations?

Herodotus reports that Xerxes called a council of his naval commanders to debate this question. While most of his advisors, eager to please the king, recommended immediate battle, Artemisia counselled caution. She argued that the Persian forces should avoid naval combat in the confined space, which would favour the more manoeuvrable Greek ships.

"Spare your ships and do not fight at sea. Their men are as much superior to your men at sea as men are to women... Why risk a naval battle? You have already taken Athens, which was the purpose of the campaign."

She suggested instead that Xerxes either wait for the Greek coalition to disband due to lack of supplies or use his overwhelming land forces to march into the Peloponnese.

Xerxes reportedly admired her wisdom but chose to proceed with the naval battle, influenced by the majority of his advisors and his own desire for a decisive engagement.

The Battle of Salamis: Daring Tactics

The Battle of Salamis in September 480 BCE would become one of history's most significant naval engagements — and the setting for Artemisia's most famous exploits.

As Artemisia had predicted, the narrow straits of Salamis nullified the Persian advantage in numbers and played to the Greeks' strengths. When the Persian fleet found itself being defeated, chaos ensued.

In the midst of this chaos, Artemisia found herself pursued by an Athenian trireme. With escape seemingly impossible, she employed a desperate and ingenious tactic: she deliberately rammed another ship — remarkably, one from her own Persian-allied fleet (specifically a ship from Calyndia, whose king, Damasithymus, was her regional rival).

When the Athenian captain saw Artemisia attack what appeared to be a Greek vessel (as he assumed no Persian would attack their own side), he broke off pursuit,

believing she must be an ally or a defector. This daring move saved Artemisia's ship and crew.

Witnessing this from his viewing point on Mount Aigaleo, Xerxes supposedly exclaimed, 'My men have become women, and my women men!' Unaware that she had sunk an allied vessel, he believed she had successfully destroyed an enemy ship and praised her courage.

Aftermath of Salamis

Following the Persian defeat at Salamis, Xerxes prepared to retreat to Asia with much of his force. According to Herodotus, he again sought Artemisia's counsel, this time about whether he should remain in Greece or return to Persia. She advised him to return home, stating that he could allow his general Mardonius to continue the campaign while avoiding personal risk.

Xerxes followed this advice, entrusting Artemisia with the care of his illegitimate sons, whom she safely escorted back to Ephesus. This responsibility demonstrates the high regard in which Xerxes held her, trusting her with his own children after she had proven her loyalty and wisdom.

Later Life and Legacy

After the Persian Wars, Artemisia's fate becomes unclear. Herodotus, our primary source for her life, does not mention her further, suggesting she returned to governing Halicarnassus. Some later, less reliable sources claim she died of a broken heart by throwing herself into the sea after falling in love with a man who did not return her affections, but this romantic tale likely belongs more to legend than history.

More plausibly, she continued ruling her territory within the Persian Empire until her son Pisindelis came of age. Halicarnassus remained under Persian control, later ruled by her grandson Lygdamis II, until its liberation by the Athenian general Cimon in the 460s BCE.

A century after Artemisia's time, Halicarnassus would become home to another famous ruler, Artemisia II, who was likely named after her illustrious predecessor. This later Artemisia is known for her grief at her husband's death and the construction of the Mausoleum, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Historical Significance

Artemisia I of Caria stands as one of the ancient world's most remarkable female military leaders. In an era when women were typically excluded from warfare and political leadership, she commanded her own ships in major naval battles and advised one of history's most powerful monarchs.

Her tactical acumen, demonstrated both in her advice to Xerxes and her quick thinking at Salamis, reveals an understanding of naval warfare that impressed even her enemies. The Athenians, despite their victory at Salamis, were reportedly so humiliated by the prospect of being defeated by a woman that they offered a substantial reward for her capture — which was never claimed.

Significantly, Herodotus, a native of Halicarnassus writing less than a century after these events, portrays Artemisia with evident admiration, despite being Greek himself and chronicling a Persian defeat. This positive portrayal from an 'enemy' historian lends credibility to accounts of her exceptional abilities.

Artemisia challenges our understanding of gender roles in the ancient world, demonstrating that exceptional women could occasionally transcend the severe limitations typically placed upon them. While her case was certainly unusual, it reveals that pathways to power and military command, however narrow, did exist for women of extraordinary capability and favourable circumstances.

In modern times, Artemisia has become a symbol of female leadership in male-dominated fields. Her story inspired the character of Artemisia in the 2014 film *300: Rise of an Empire*, though this highly fictionalised portrayal bears little resemblance to the historical figure described by Herodotus.

Perhaps Artemisia's most significant legacy is the reminder that historical reality often defies our simplified understanding of the past. In a world we typically imagine as uniformly patriarchal, she navigated the treacherous waters of ancient politics and warfare with a skill that earned her a place in history — not merely as a woman who ruled, but as a commander and strategist whose abilities were respected by friends and foes alike.

"I see no necessity for thee to risk a battle; for if thou wilt wait a while, thou mayest win all thou seekest without a fight." — Artemisia to Xerxes, advising patience over hasty battle, as recorded by Herodotus

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