

# Herodotus's *Histories*

## Book V: Terpsichore



**THRACE:**  
Unrest and  
Expansion



**ATHENS:** Democracy  
and Diplomatic Shifts



**SPARTA:**  
Military Isolation  
and Intrigue



The Unraveling Thread: How a series of disconnected events—in Thrace, Sparta, and Athens—all led to a single spark that would set the world on fire: The Ionian Revolt.

# The Empire's Edge

The Persian Empire Under King Darius, the Achaemenid Empire is the world's superpower—vast, wealthy, and expanding. Its western frontier is Ionia.



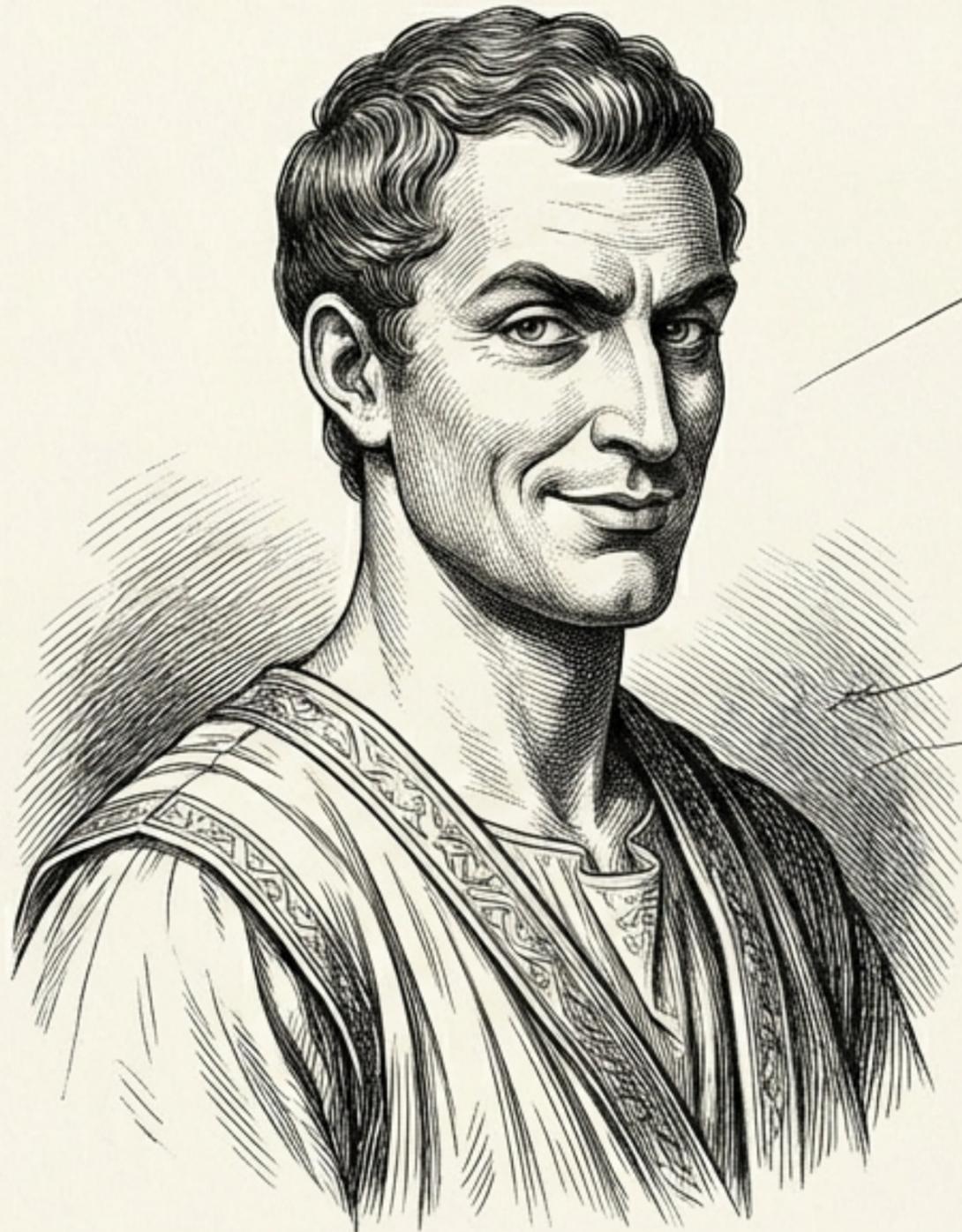
## The Ionian Greeks

Prosperous city-states on the Anatolian coast. Though Greek in culture, they are subjects of the Persian King, ruled by local tyrants loyal to the throne.

## Miletus

The richest and most powerful Ionian city, but two generations removed from "grievous civil disorders." Its regent is an ambitious man named Aristagoras.

# The Unlikely Catalyst



The story begins not with a grand design, but with a local ambition.

**Aristagoras of Miletus:** Nephew and son-in-law of the city's true ruler, Histiaeus, who is away at the Persian court. Aristagoras governs as regent.

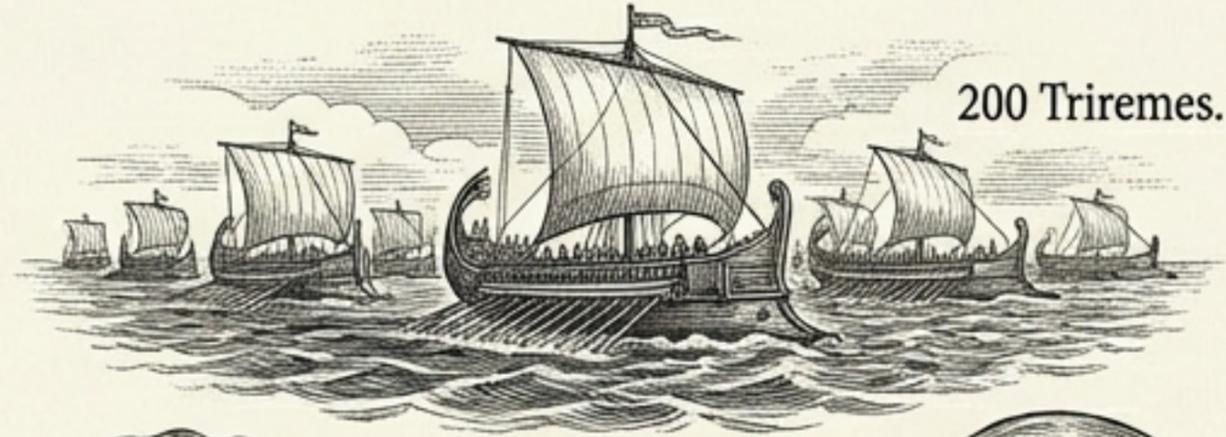
**The Opportunity:** Wealthy aristocrats, banished from the island of Naxos, arrive in Miletus seeking aid.

**The Plan:** Aristagoras sees a chance to become "lord of Naxos" himself. He tells the exiles: "I think I can manage it in this way. Artaphernes happens to be my friend... All the sea-coast of Asia is under him." He proposes a joint Persian-Ionian expedition to restore them.



# A Quarrel at Sea, A Warning in the Night

**The Grand Expedition:** Artaphernes, the Persian satrap, approves the plan. A fleet of 200 triremes and a vast army are assembled under the command of Megabates, a nephew of King Darius.



**The Betrayal:** In a "high dudgeon," Megabates waits until nightfall and dispatches a boat to Naxos, warning warning the islanders of the impending invasion.



**The Falling Out:** Off the island of Chios, Megabates punishes a negligent captain. Aristagoras, asserting his authority, frees the man, telling the Persian commander: "Wert thou not sent here by Artaphernes to obey me... Why dost meddle so?"

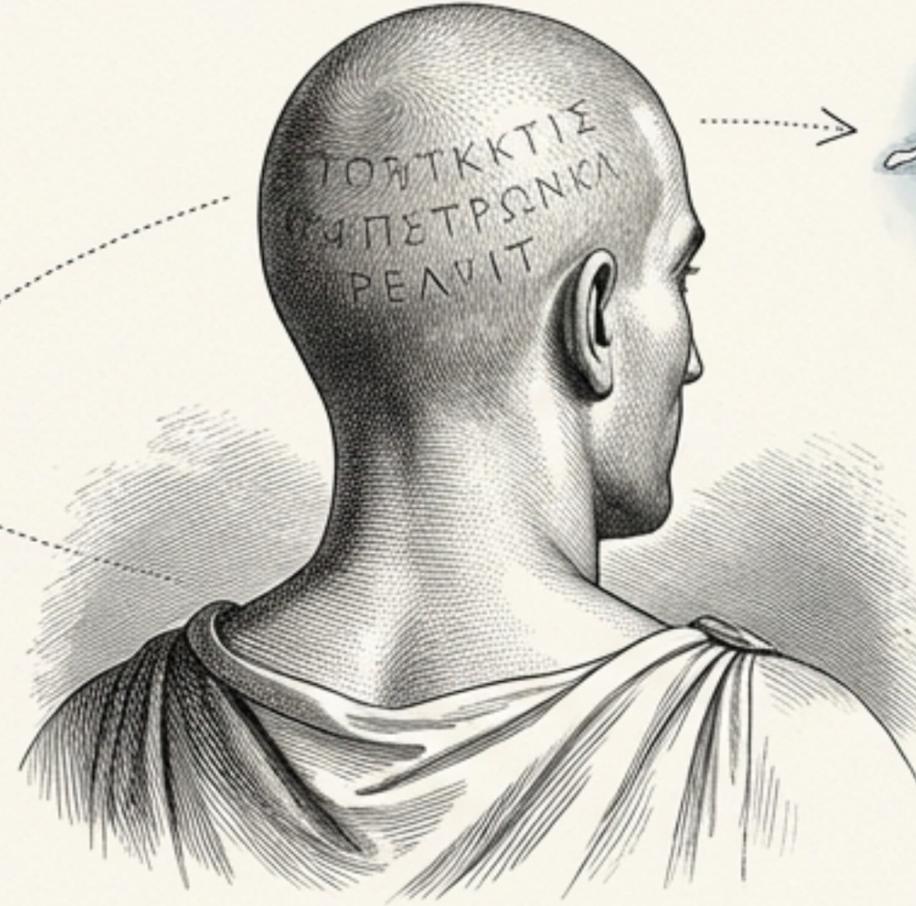


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# A Message from the Gilded Cage



As Aristagoras contemplates his doom, a strange messenger arrives from Susa. The message comes from his uncle, Histiaeus.

## The King's Counsellor:

Years earlier, King Darius "rewarded" Histiaeus for his loyalty by summoning him to the capital, Susa, as a permanent advisor. It was a comfortable but inescapable imprisonment, meant to keep the "wise man and a shrewd" Greek from causing trouble on the coast.

## The Secret Command:

"Histiaeus, when he was anxious to give Aristagoras orders to revolt, could find but one safe way... by taking the trustiest of his slaves, shaving all the hair from off his head, and then pricking letters upon the skin, and waiting till the hair grew again."

## The Instruction:

The slave is given one message: "When thou art come to Miletus, bid Aristagoras shave thy head, and look thereon." The marks on his head were a command to revolt.

# The Ionian Tinderbox Ignites



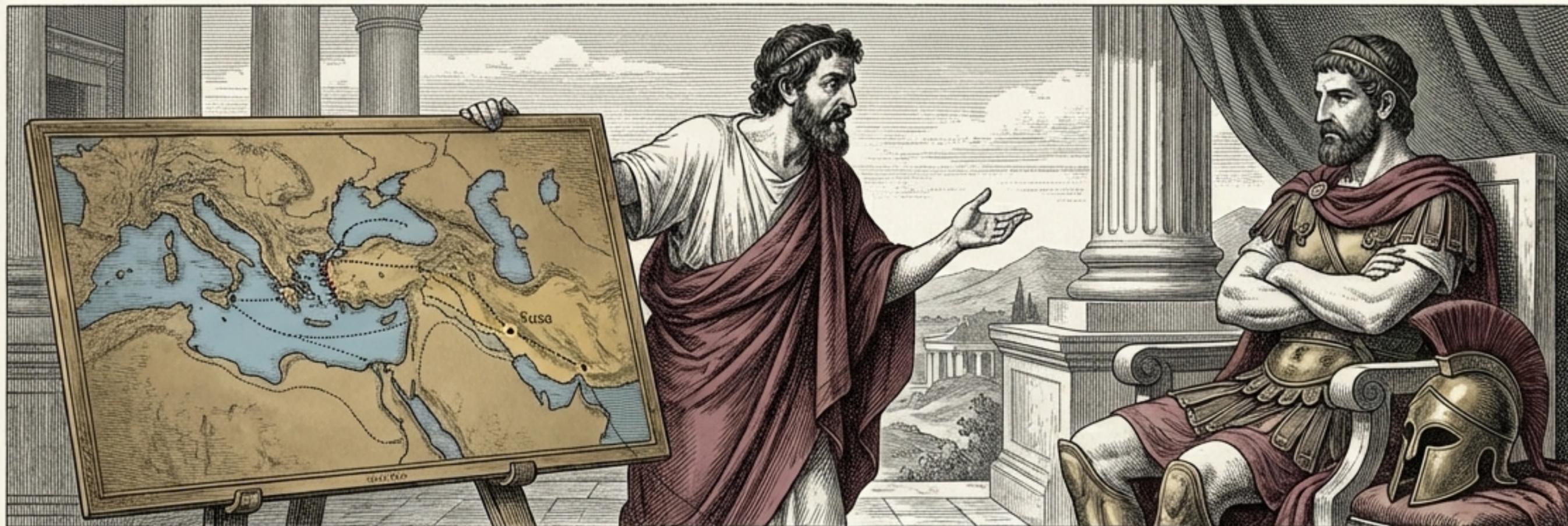
**A Calculated Move:** Spurred by fear and his uncle's message, Aristagoras acts. At a council of his friends, all recommend revolt except the historian Hecataeus, who warns against the king's might. His counsel is rejected.

**Unifying the Rebellion:** To win popular support, Aristagoras makes a radical promise:

1. He lays down his own lordship over Miletus and establishes a commonwealth.
2. He sails to the other Ionian cities, seizes their Persian-backed tyrants, and hands them over to the citizens to be deposed or exiled.

**The Result:** With tyranny abolished, Ionia is united in open rebellion against Darius. But Aristagoras knows they need powerful allies.

# A Tale of Two Cities, Part I: The Appeal to Sparta



## The Pitch:

Aristagoras travels to the Peloponnese to persuade Sparta, "the pre-eminence over all Greece appertains to you." He promises immense wealth: "gold, and silver, and brass, and embroidered garments... all which, if you only wish it, you may soon have for your own." He points to Susa on his map, where the Great King's treasuries are stored.

## The Critical Question:

Cleomenes is intrigued but asks a practical question: "How many days' journey it was from the sea of the Ionians to the king's residence?"

## The Fatal Answer:

Aristagoras, who had been so clever, "tripped in his speech and blundered." He tells the truth: it is a journey of three months.

# Garamond Premier Pro Display: “The stranger will certainly corrupt thee.”



**The King's Refusal:** Cleomenes immediately cuts him off: "Milesian stranger, quit Sparta before sunset. This is no good proposal that thou makest to the Lacedaemonians, to conduct them a distance of three months' journey from the sea."

**A Final Plea:** Aristagoras, carrying a suppliant's olive-bough, follows Cleomenes home and begins offering bribes, starting with ten talents and rising.

**A Child's Wisdom:** Cleomenes's only child, a girl of eight or nine named Gorgo, is present. As the bribe reaches fifty talents, she speaks: "Father, get up and go, or the stranger will certainly corrupt thee."

Pleased by his child's warning, Cleomenes withdraws. The appeal to Sparta has failed.

# A Tale of Two Cities, Part II: The Gamble on Athens



Dismissed from Sparta, Aristagoras travels to Athens, “the most powerful of the Grecian states” after Sparta.

## Why Athens Was Different:

- **Newly Free:** Athens had recently, with Spartan help, expelled its own tyrants, the Pisistratidae. Their new democracy, established by Clisthenes, had made the city’s power “greater than ever.”
- **Already Defiant:** The Persians, through the satrap Artaphernes, had recently sent a chilling message to Athens: “if they wished to remain safe, they must receive back Hippias” (the exiled tyrant). The Athenians had refused, effectively choosing “to be at open enmity enmity with the Persians.”

Aristagoras succeeds where he failed with one man. Herodotus notes: “It seems indeed to be easier to deceive a multitude than one man.”

# The Beginning of Mischief



- **The Decision:** Won over by Aristagoras's promises and their own anti-Persian sentiment, the thirty thousand citizens of the Athenian assembly vote to help.

- **The Fleet:** They dispatch a fleet of twenty ships. They are joined by five more from the city of Eretria, who were paying back a debt of alliance to Miletus.

- **Herodotus's Judgment:** The historian marks this moment with a chillingly prescient line:

“These ships were the beginning of mischief both to the Greeks and to the barbarians.”

# The Flames of Sardis



- **The Attack:** The combined Ionian and Athenian force lands at Ephesus, marches inland, and takes the city of Sardis, the seat of Persian power in the region. The satrap Artaphernes holds out in the citadel.

- **Accidental Destruction:** The city is not successfully plundered. A soldier sets fire to one house, and since “the houses in Sardis were most of them built of reeds... the flames ran speedily from house to house, and spread over the whole place.”

- **A Fateful Sacrilege:** In the blaze, a temple dedicated to the native goddess Cybele is destroyed. The Persians would later use this as a pretext for burning Greek temples in revenge.

# “Master, Remember the Athenians”



- **The News Reaches Susa:** When Darius learns of the burning of Sardis, he initially dismisses the Ionians, ‘who would, he was sure, pay dear for their rebellion.’

- **The King’s Question:** He asks a question that would echo through history: ‘Who the Athenians were?’
- **The Vow:** Upon being told, he calls for his bow. “And placing an arrow on the string, shot upward into the sky, saying, as he let fly the shaft—‘Grant me, Jupiter, to revenge myself on the Athenians!’”

- **The Daily Reminder:** He then commands one of his servants to repeat three times before him at every meal: ‘Master, remember the Athenians.’

# The Flame Gutters



**The Persian Response:** All Persian forces “on this side the Halys” river converge. They track the retreating Greek army and catch them near Ephesus.

**Defeat:** In the ensuing battle, the Greeks have “very greatly the worse.” Vast numbers are slain, including the Eretrian commander, Eualcidas.

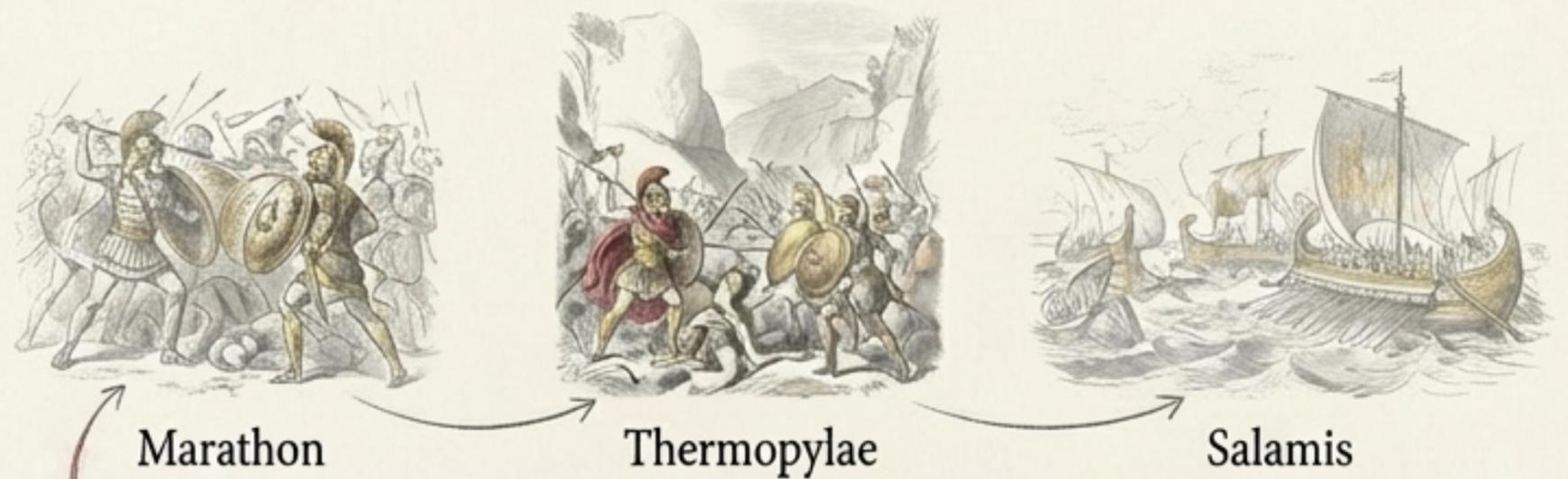
**The Athenian Withdrawal:** Sobered by the defeat, the Athenians abandon the cause completely. “Afterwards the Athenians quite forsook the Ionians, and, though Aristagoras besought them much by his ambassadors, refused to give him any further help.”

# The End of the Catalyst



- **An Inglorious Escape:** As Persian forces begin systematically retaking Ionian cities, Aristagoras, now showing himself to be 'a man of but little courage,' plans his escape.
- **Ignoring Good Counsel:** He rejects the advice of Hecataeus to build a fort on the island of Leros and bide his time.
- **A Pathetic End:** Instead, he flees to Myrcinus in Thrace (the very place Histiaeus had once coveted). There, while attacking a local Thracian town, Aristagoras and his entire army are cut off and killed. The man who had set the world on fire dies in a provincial squabble.

# The Notebook Closes, The Story Begins



The tragic thread of Aristagoras ends in Thrace. But in Herodotus's dynamic notebook, every ending is a new beginning.

- The Ionian Revolt he started would eventually be crushed.
- Histiaeus's cunning would lead to his own execution.
- But the fire lit at Sardis could not be extinguished. A king in Susa was now being reminded daily of a small city called Athens.
- The ships Athens sent were just the beginning. The great collision between Greece and Persia was now a matter of when, not if.