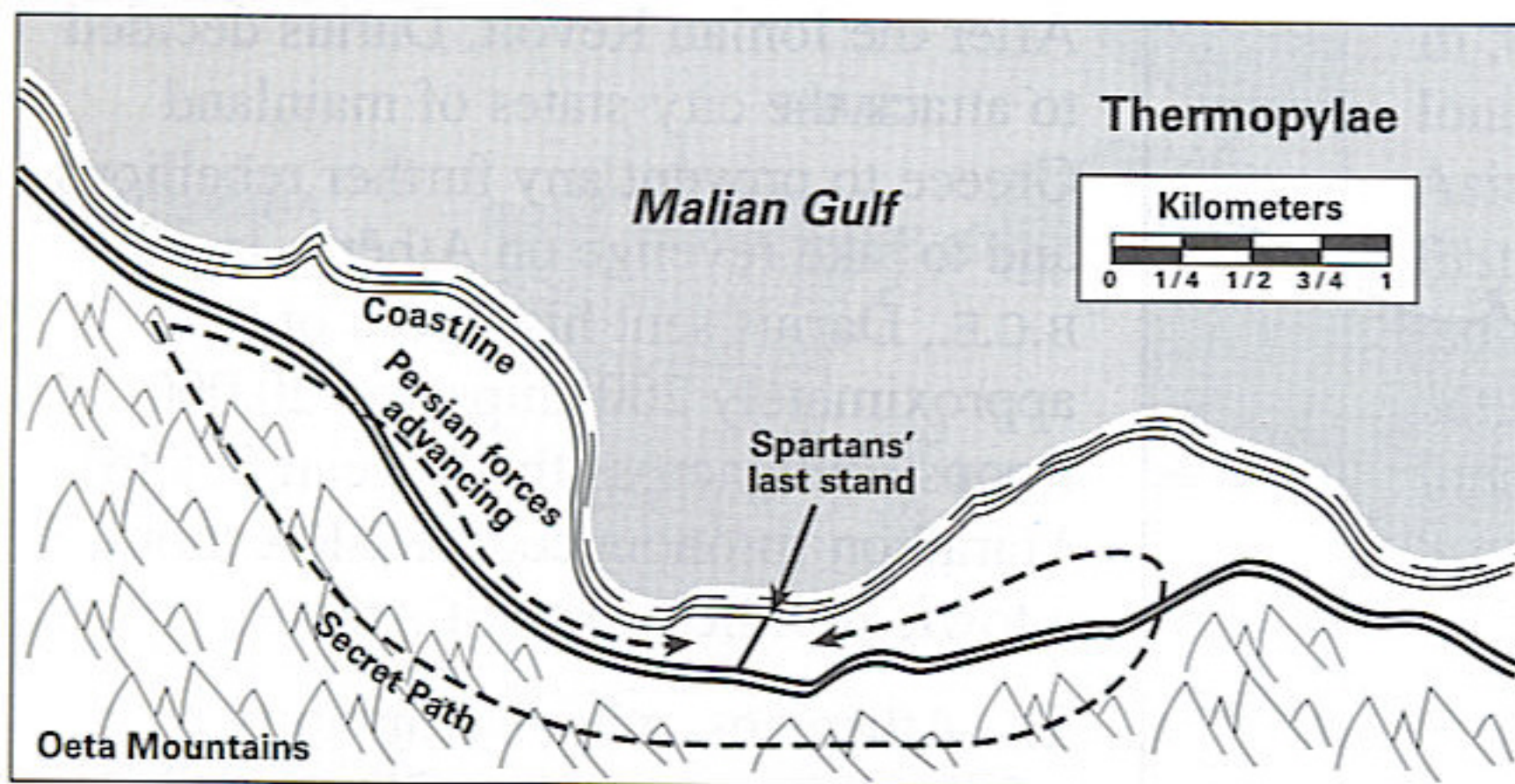


## Event D: The Battle of Thermopylae



While Darius was preparing his forces for another attack on Greece, he died. He was succeeded by his son Xerxes (pronounced ZERK-seez). Scholars often disagree about Xerxes' character and achievements. Some consider him a powerful and honorable military man, while others portray him as overly proud and

impatient. Despite his own unwillingness to attack mainland Greece, Xerxes was heavily influenced by a relative, who told him that if he conquered Athens, his name would be "held in honor all over the world."

Xerxes thus began to put together a huge army of 250,000 soldiers and a navy of 600 ships to attack mainland Greece. His army was made up of Persians, as well as the subjects of the Persian Empire, including Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Ionian-Greeks. Xerxes also constructed two bridges of boats roped together to span the Hellespont (pronounced heh-LISS-pont), a 33-mile-long sea channel that separates Europe from Asia. These bridges, which were an amazing feat of engineering, allowed the Persian army to easily march over the water and onto the Greek peninsula.

In 480 B.C.E., Xerxes led his army across the Hellespont and marched through northern Greece to Macedonia and Thrace. The northern and central Greek city-states quickly surrendered to the Persian forces. Sparta and Athens decided to work together to stop the Persians from advancing into central and southern Greece. The Athenian navy was given the responsibility of preventing the Persian navy from supplying reinforcements to its land forces. The Spartans, under their king Leonidas (pronounced lee-oh-NY-duss), agreed to set up defenses at Thermopylae (pronounced thur-MOP-ih-lay), a narrow pass between mountains and sea about 100 miles northwest of Athens.

Although Xerxes saw the Spartan defenses, he ordered his troops to advance south and push along the road and through the narrow pass. Unable to use their superior numbers in the narrow space, the Persian soldiers fell back repeatedly and suffered severe losses. After two days of fighting, a Greek traitor showed the Persians a secret path around the pass and through the mountains that allowed them to attack the Spartans from behind. When Leonidas discovered this, he asked for reinforcement troops. However, Sparta refused to send more soldiers because of a religious festival. Thus, Leonidas was left to defend Thermopylae against the Persians with only a small force. Outnumbered and surrounded, the Spartans nevertheless defended Thermopylae until their last man was dead. Supposedly, when Xerxes found the body of Leonidas after the bloody battle, he ordered his officers to cut off his head and fix it on a pole as revenge for the problems the Spartans had caused him.