

The Story of Scyllias and Hydna The Swimmers Who Saved Greece

Aegean Sea, 480 B.C.

In 480 B.C., while the Persian land forces were gathering at Thermopylae, Xerxes was making a bold move with his fleet. He dispatched a force of 200 ships with orders to proceed northeast through the Skiathos channel so as to give the impression to the watching Greeks that they were heading north. Once through the channel, they turned south making their way down the long and dangerous eastern flank of Euboea. It was a calculated risk, but one which would certainly pay dividends if they could block the Greek southern sea route, while the main body of their fleet, battle ready after its repairs, would come down on them from the north, this would leave the Greeks no escape and their route cut off from Athens.



On board one of the Persian ships were two Greeks, Scyllias and his daughter Hydna.

Scyllias was an expert swimmer and diver who had taught his daughter to swim and dive well into the deepest parts of the sea since infancy. Earlier, they had been hired by Xerxes to recover treasure from a shipwreck. After recovering for the Persians a great part of what had been lost, and at the same time being allowed to keep a good share of the treasure, father and daughter desired to return to Greece. But Xerxes wouldn't let them go, as they knew too much about the Persian plan of attack.

One day, as the ships were anchored and mustering for the attack, a violent storm arose giving Scyllias and Hydna the opportunity to make their escape. But before doing so, they wanted repay the Persians for their hospitality. With knives in hand, the pair dove into the sea and silently swam among the boats, cutting their moorings. Tossed about by the wind and waves, the ships crashed together; some sank and many were crippled.

In what way Scyllias and Hydna contrived to reach the Greeks, the historian Herodotus was not able to say for certain: "I marvel much if the tale that is commonly told be true. 'Tis said they dived into the sea at Aphetæ, and did not once come to the surface till they reached Artemisium, a distance of nearly eighty furlongs (15 kilometers). [One version claimed that they remained under water to avoid detection for so long by breathing through a snorkel-like device that is visible in this painting.] Now many things are related of this man Scyllias which are plainly false; but some of the stories seem to be true. My own opinion is that on this occasion he made the passage to Artemisium in a boat and upon reaching Artemisium, gave the Greek captains a full account of the damage done by the storm, and likewise told them of the (Persians plans).

Thanks to Scyllias and Hydna, the Greeks later defeated the Persian fleet at Salamis, saving western civilization from Persian domination. For their patriotism, statues were erected at Delphi and the statue of Hydna was regarded as one of the great works of ancient art. According to the historian Pausanias, Nero carried of the statue of Hydna to his palace in Rome, so he could enjoy her.