

The Persian Invasion and the Battle of Marathon, 490 BC



Prelude: The Persian Empire had been expanding steadily over the preceding 50-60 years and in 546 BC had conquered the Ionian (essentially Greek) cities of Asia Minor, on the shores of modern-day Turkey. In 538 BC, Cyrus took Babylon and in 525, conquered Egypt. In 521 BC, Darius became Emperor of all the Persians. In 512 BC, the first Persian expedition into Europe resulted in the conquest of Thrace.

The hereditary 'tyrant' of Athens, Hippias, was expelled in 510 BC by his people, with the assistance of Cleomenes I, King of Sparta. Hippias fled to the court of Darius to seek assistance, hoping to be reinstated in some way, or to seek revenge through betrayal of his countrymen. The Athenians then joined the Peloponnesian league, an alliance to try to prevent Persian dominance of all Greece. In 508 BC, the Spartans attacked Attica and besieged the Acropolis, but were repulsed, and an uneasy truce between the two states then reigned. In Athens, Cleisthenes reorganized the old 4 tribes, 12 brotherhoods, and 360 clans into 10 new tribes each with an 'Eponymous Hero' after whom it was named, and significantly these new tribes included large numbers of 'outsiders', previously disenfranchised. The number of Athenian "citizens" more than doubled from 10,000 to about 25,000. This was the real beginning of Athenian democracy.

However their adversary was very different. The Persian Empire then incorporated the northern Indians, the Assyrians, the Syrians, the Babylonians, the Chaldees, the Phoenicians, the nations of Palestine, the Armenians, the Bactrians, the Lydians, the Phrygians, the Parthians, and the Medes, and they all obeyed the cepter of the Great King, Darius. The Persian Empire had recently expanded to include Egypt and Cyrene; the previously Greek colonists in various cities in Asia Minor, and several islands in the Aegean: all were now Darius' subjects. The Scythian war, though unsuccessful in its immediate object, had also brought about the subjugation of Thrace and the submission of Macedonia.

In 499 BC, the confederation of Ionian Greek city-states in Asia Minor rebelled against Persia. Aristagoras of Miletus asked for support from all of the mainland Greek city-states, validly decrying the condition of the Greeks in Asia under the Persian yoke. However he had also just tried to subjugate the island of Naxos, populated by Greeks, using Persian troops, to curry favour with the Great King Darius. The citizens of Naxos had repelled the attack, and terrified of failure

in the eyes of the Great King, Aristagoras took advantage of an incident between Persian and Greek officers, and declared a revolt. After traveling through Greece, trolling for support, two years later, the Athenians sent one contingent, with support from Eretria, to burn the Persian-ruled city of Sardis, the capital city of Artaphernes, where Hippias had fled to. The Spartans had sent no support.

The Persian king, Darius, swore revenge and counter-attacked in 494 BC. The Ionians were defeated at Lade and Miletus was captured. With the failure of this Ionian Revolt against the Persian empire, Darius then became intent on subjugating all the Greeks, especially the Athenians, and punishing them for their part in the Asian revolt.

In 492 BC he dispatched an army under his son-in-law, Mardonius. This army again reduced Thrace and compelled Alexander I of Macedon to submit to Persia. However, in attempting to advance further into Greece much of the fleet was wrecked in a storm and Mardonius was forced to retreat back to Asia. The storm was believed by the Greeks to have been sent by the gods from Olympus to destroy the Persian fleet. It was only a temporary respite. Darius sent envoys to the Greek states in Spring 491 BC, demanding that each city-state send him the traditional earth and water of vassalage. This was accepted by many of the states, from the northern Aegean to the Dardanelles, but it was refused by Athens and Sparta. With so many of the city-states submitting to him, Darius once again felt that mainland Greece was ready to fall to his rule and that the key to the rebellion was the city-state of Athens.

The traitor Hippias' information on the politics within Athens proved to be considerably out of date, as, since his banishment as leader and 'tyrant' and during his 20 years of exile, the government in Athens had had many changes. The influence of the old ruling families was now broken and power was shared and more democratically elected. In time of war, the elected Commander in Chief, was called a Pole-March, new military officers were called Strategoi, and the new government was determined to maintain Athens' independence and governmental reforms. The elected Polemarch was currently Callimachus. The main planner and strategist was Miltiades, who had fought alongside the Persians in Sycthia and knew their tactics, but now served as a commander of one of the ten 'tribal' main infantry divisions (Lochoi).

Darius the King learned through Hippias, (who might have more than a vested interest in giving him this news) that the Alcmaeonidae, a powerful old Athenian family, were opposed to Miltiades (which was true) and were ready to help reinstate Hippias (which might have not been the case). Apparently, they were also ready to bow to Persian demands in exchange for being excused for their role in the Ionian Revolt. Darius wished to take advantage of this situation to conquer Athens, which would isolate Sparta and give him the remainder of the Greek mainland unopposed. In order for Athens to fall, in Hippias' mind, two things would need to happen: the populace would need encouragement to revolt, and the Athenian army would have to leave the security of Athens, an almost invincible city due to the impregnability of the Acropolis, and then be overwhelmingly defeated.

In order to accomplish the first, Darius planned to take Eretria, the capital of Euboea, a large peaceful island to the north of Attica, and conveniently on their way to Athens. This would offer little resistance to the Persians, and its fall would terrify the Athenian citizens. To accomplish the second aim, Darius's army, now led by Artaphernes, son of a satrap of Sardis, and Datis, a Median admiral (Mardonius had been injured in a prior attack) assembled near Tarsus in the spring of 490 BC, with a fleet of over 600 ships and a large army. The plan was to land at the Bay of Marathon and threaten an overland attack towards Athens. This army probably numbered at least 25,000 infantry and 1,000 cavalry, since it was transported entirely by sea, and probably at most 50,000 – 60,000, though it might have risen to 100,000 with conscripts and camp followers.

They had with them also the exiled & traitorous Athenian, Hippias, as a guide and advisor. There were many old scores to be settled.

The Persian transports, escorted by the fleet, sailed sometime in July 490 BC from Samos through the Cyclades to Naxos, which they assaulted and looted. The fleet then sailed from island to island, conscripting troops and taking hostages. Eventually it reached the north point of Euboea and sailed through the Euboean channel to Eretria, where their aims became clear to the Greeks.

Artaphernes, seeking revenge for the burning of his city of Sardis, took part of the Persian army ashore and laid siege to Eretria, and after a week of resistance, the city finally fell to a betrayal from inside. The city was pillaged and looted without mercy. Meanwhile, the rest of the fleet and army had already moved on towards the shores of Attica and Marathon.

The Athenians had already long been warned of the Persian assemblage and the sailing of the Persian invasion by a series of beacon fires and messengers the length of Greece. They realized that to repel an army of this size, they really needed some assistance and so had also warned the rest of Greece, in general terms, but the exact timing was unknown, the politics between the various city-states was ever changing, and the harvests had, of course, to be got in. Now the Eretrians sent an urgent message to Athens, giving more specific details and desperately asking for help. It was their last message. On receipt of the warning, the Athenians immediately sent a courier to the Spartans, a fair distance to the south, and also almost certainly a messenger also to their neighbours, the Plataeans who had not offered tribute to the Persians. The courier arrived in Sparta in early August, and whilst the Spartans, nominally also allies but also with a lot of ancient rivalry and a greatly differing culture, agreed to help, they (regretfully) pointed out that they were forbidden by their religious beliefs to send their troops into combat until after the full moon when their Carneian festival ended. The full moon would not be for at least another week and so, they replied, they unfortunately could not possibly arrive in Athens until the end of August or even early September.

This is the setting for the first poem.

By contrast, the neighboring city-state of Plataea had been helped by the Athenians a few years previously to resist the aggression of Thebes. They sent between 600 and 1,000 men immediately.

Hippias, the traitor, had previously advised the Persian military commanders, especially Artaphernes, that the Bay of Marathon was the most logical place for landing and disembarking the army for the attack on Athens. It had a sheltered bay, a long, firm, flat plain between the mountains and the sea, and was well protected from the north and east winds by a curving peninsular. It was also within an easy march of Athens, which was about thirty-six kilometers (about 22 miles) away to the south-west. The long and sandy beach could accommodate all of the Persians' 600 or more ships, also, the open plain of Marathon was perfect for the use of the Persian cavalry, against which it was thought the Athenian infantry would be ineffective. Sentinels were posted around the Attic peninsular to keep watch for the Persians. But the battlefield had been chosen already, long ago.

This is thus the point in history at which the second poem is written.

Having landed unopposed in Marathon Bay, the Persians situated their camp near the Makaria Spring, which provided a plentiful supply of water, and the nearby plain of Marathon had good grazing for their horses. The plain is in the form of a crescent and about six miles in length. It is about two miles broad in the center, where the space between the mountains and the sea is

greatest, but it narrows toward either end, with the mountains coming close down to the water at the horns of the bay. There is a valley leading inward from the middle of the plain, and a ravine comes down to it from the south, the road to Athens. Elsewhere it is closely girt round on the land side by rugged limestone mountains, which are thickly studded with pines, olive-trees and cedars, and overgrown with the myrtle, arbutus, and the other odoriferous shrubs that everywhere perfume the Attic air.

Reports differ, but the Persians had a massive army for those days, containing both infantry and cavalry (which the Greeks did not use), all of which totaled between at least 25,000 and 50,000 men, outnumbering the Athenian's total of 10,000 by a ratio of between three and five to one. The Persians also used archers extensively.



The Athenian army, under Callimachus the Polemarch, accompanied by his ten tribal generals marched north from Athens. When Callimachus heard that the Persians really had landed in the Bay of Marathon, he wheeled right and reached the valley of Avlona and encamped his army at the shrine of Heracles on the slopes of Mt. Agrieliki, overlooking the plain of Marathon. The Plataean soldiers joined them there. The first instructions for battle from the planner Miltiades were to try to contain the invading army and block its march on Athens. Since it was obvious from the Persians' disposition that they did not intend to march immediately to Athens, the Athenians decided to wait, hoping in vain, as it turned out, for the Spartan's arrival. The return prevaricating message had not yet arrived, Sparta being several days journey to the south.

Thus the combined Greek force totaling approximately 9,000 armed Athenians and about 1,000 Plataeans took up their position at the southern end of the Plain of Marathon with Mount Agrieliki on their left flank, the sea on their right flank, and the Brexisa Marsh protecting them. With this position, they had effectively blocked the road to Athens. The Athenian commanders also

ordered many trees to be cut down and manhandled into position with their branches facing the Persian line to create a defense against the Persian cavalry: the Greeks did not have any cavalry themselves. So, for eight days the armies peacefully confronted each other.

Until the 11th of August, the lines remained static, five kilometers apart, neither side willing to make the first move to attack the other. The Athenians did not wish to advance onto the plain where the advantage would lay with the Persian's overwhelming numbers, their mobile cavalry, and their deadly archers. The Persians on their part remained stationary, as they did not want to engage the Greek line where it had taken up a position that was very unfavorable to the Persian cavalry. The Persians were also hoping for a betrayal from people in Athens itself, the friends of Hippias: however this was also not forthcoming. Then, the news became known, to both the Greek and the Persian armies, that Eretria had fallen by treachery and had been sacked. Artaphernes with the rest of the Persian army arrived triumphant at Marathon.

With this news, Datis, being frustrated by the long stalemate, and perhaps not wishing to be superceded by the already successful Artaphernes, decided to put his secondary battle plan into action. During the night of the 11th-12th of August, he re-boarded most of the cavalry into his ships as well as with those infantry under his direct command, and, slipping away under cover of darkness, sailed for Phaleron Bay, close to Athens, leaving Artaphernes with a holding force facing the Athenians. There is often considerably rivalry between generals on the same side, and the Persian generals at that time were no exception and often acted quite independently.

This turned out, in retrospect, to be a serious mistake; however, at the time, it had a certain understandable logic to it. The Greeks were effectively stuck in their position, if they wished to prevent the main Persian army marching on towards Athens. The Persian army had just been reinforced and now outnumbered the Greeks by at least three-to-one. The Greeks did not have enough men to split their army, and this meant that the city itself was relatively, if not totally, undefended. Given the mobility of the ships, plus that of the cavalry, a significant Persian force could easily outflank the Greek army, sail around and land somewhere else (like Phaleron Bay, close to Athens) and then attack the city unimpeded. Victory was only a day or so away!

However Miltiades' scouts discovered their departure and quickly informed him of it. The Athenian leaders were summoned, and Miltiades' laid out the only possible chance of a Greek victory. Given the geography of the region, it would take the Persians a minimum of ten hours to sail around the Attic peninsular and reach Phaleron Bay by sea, and the disembarkation would then take a few hours more, so it would be very late afternoon or early evening before a Persian force would be ready to attack the city, assuming that the Gods would not intervene again and destroy the Persian fleet in another storm. Prayers were probably offered up. However, this gave the Athenians just one day's grace and a very slim chance for victory, compared to almost certain defeat and the destruction of their city, and thus the whole of Greece. They must try to defeat the remaining Persians immediately and then return to Athens (a five to six hour forced march through the hills) before Datis could arrive by sea and attack their almost undefended city. No-one really counted on the Spartan army arriving, let alone arriving in time.

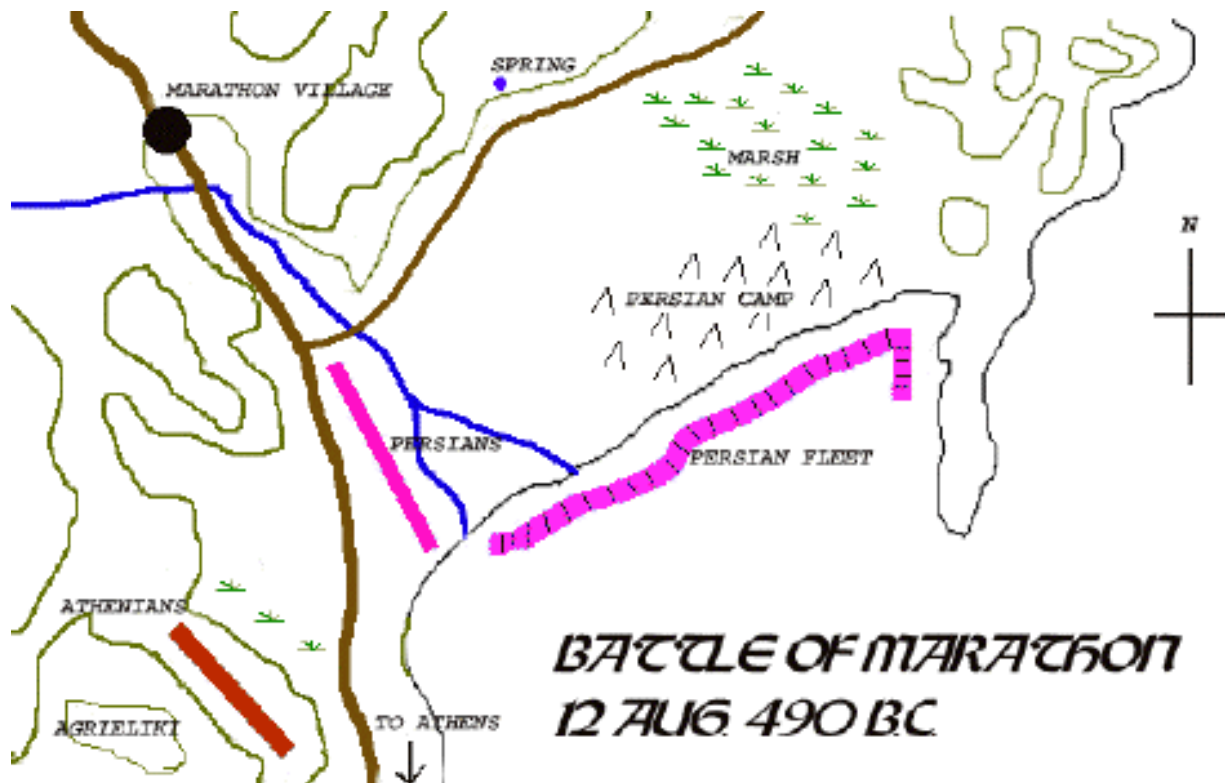
The third poem explores something of the dilemma of Miltiades at this point.

The Persian general left behind at Marathon, Artaphernes, was now without most of his cavalry, and a significantly large portion of infantry, but he still retained a large number of archers. With this in mind, Miltiades set forth a plan for attempting to defeat Artaphernes' forces quickly enough so that the Athenians would be able to return to Athens in time to meet Datis' outflanking force. This was a huge risk: the prospect of fighting a pitched battle against an enemy so superior in numbers and so formidable in military renown was daunting. Their own present position on the

heights was strong, and offered great advantages to a small defending force against the assailing masses. It was foolhardy to descend into the plain to be trampled down by the Asiatic hords, overwhelmed by their archery, or cut to pieces by the Persian veterans, known as The Invincibles.

The decision was made by all the 10 Greek generals, although Herodotus reports that they were rotating days of command and that Miltiades was in charge at this point, since he had the largest part in persuading the others to attack as well. According to Herodotus, out of the ten tribes, five Strategoi voted for the attack and five voted against it, with Callimachus, the Polemarch, casting the deciding vote in favor of attack. Democracy was in action! At 5:30 am, on 12th August, with time increasingly short, and only about three hours in which to win the battle, the order to attack was given.

The Battle of Marathon



Map of battlefield at 6:00 am

The Athenian army was drawn up in a battle order as planned by Miltiades. Callimachus, the Polemarch traditionally commanded the right flank, the left flank was held by the Plataeans, and the center of the army was commanded by Themistocles and Aristeides.

Despite the fact that the Persians were the invading army, their fighting style was traditionally defensive. Their armour was quite light, a form of mail with overlapping leaves. Their main weapon was the bow and arrow, and their key tactic was to wait until the enemy came close, at which time the Persians would “bury” them a heavy barrage of bows and arrows. Their cavalry would then ‘mop up’ any escapees and the main army would move forward inexorably and finish off any survivors. The much faster moving cavalry usually protected their flank, but these had all just been shipped out to sea. Up to the day of Marathon, the armies of the Medes (Persians) were reputed to be invincible.

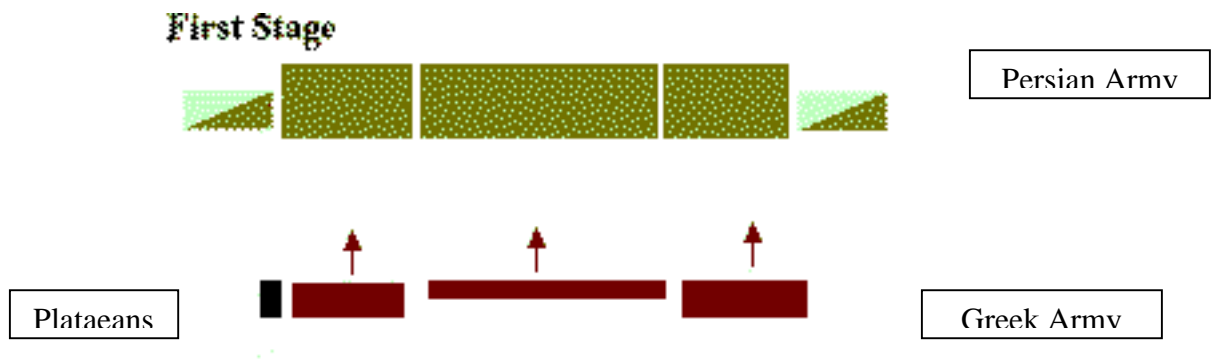
The Athenians, on the other hand, had a more offensive military doctrine. Their main weapon was the long, heavy spear and a leaf-shaped sword, often still made from bronze, and they shielded themselves with heavy armament including beaten metal helmets, shields, and breastplates. They favored close combat battle formations, lacking both cavalry and bows. The poorer citizens who went to war, were armed with javelins, cutlasses, and leather shields or targets, whilst each regular heavy-armed soldier was attended in the camp by one or more slaves, who were armed like the inferior freemen. The average Greek heavy infantryman, or hoplite, was thus much more heavily armored than their Persian counterparts, and the long pike that the Greeks carried gave them greater range than the shorter spears and swords of the Persian foot soldier. The Persian advantage from the bow that most of them carried was somewhat nullified by the heavy Greek armour) but mainly from their far vaster numbers.

Since the bulk of Persian infantry were now just archers, the Greek plan was to advance in close formation until they reached the limit of the archer's effectiveness, roughly 200 yards, then advance in double time through the "beaten zone" to engage the enemy as quickly as possible and bring their heavy infantry into play. This meant that they would almost certainly end up fighting in disordered ranks, but this was preferable to giving the Persian archers more time to pick them off at a distance.

Now, the accepted wisdom in military strategy at that time was that effectiveness of an army was in the 'weight' or solidity of the center of the army, which could be added to by more mobile side-sections or 'flanks', either on foot or, in the case of the Persians, sometimes on horseback, so as to outflank the slow-moving central 'body' of the enemy's army.

In this desperate attack, at Marathon, the Greek center was reduced to four ranks, from the normal eight, in order to extend their line and prevent the much larger Persian line from overlapping and encircling them. However the Greek wings maintained their eight ranks, because they were desperate and their only chance lay in their mobility and in striking a very heavy blow. The main strength would thus be in the massed formations on the two flanks or wings, which were to drive off the Persian flanks and then wheel in and attack the Persian center. So, this was planned in total contravention to all known tactics to date, and it was hoped that the Persians would not have anticipated anything like this. It was also very risky as, if the Persians center could advance, it would easily cut the Greek army in two and would still have enough numbers then to turn and face off each half.

The Persian force was deployed traditionally, with the center being formed from the crack troops and the flanks being held by inferior battalions drawn from the conscripts of the Persian Empire. There were mountaineers from Hyrcania and Afghanistan, wild horsemen from the steppes of Khorassan, the black archers of Ethiopia, swordsmen from the banks of the Indus, the Oxus, the Euphrates and the Nile, and these all made ready against the enemies of the Great King. But no national cause really inspired them; and in the large host there was no uniformity of language, creed, race, or military system. Still, amongst them there were many gallant men, under a veteran general, seeking revenge and glory; they were familiar with victory, and in contemptuous confidence, their infantry, which alone had time to form, awaited the Athenian charge. And this was exactly what Miltiades had predicted.

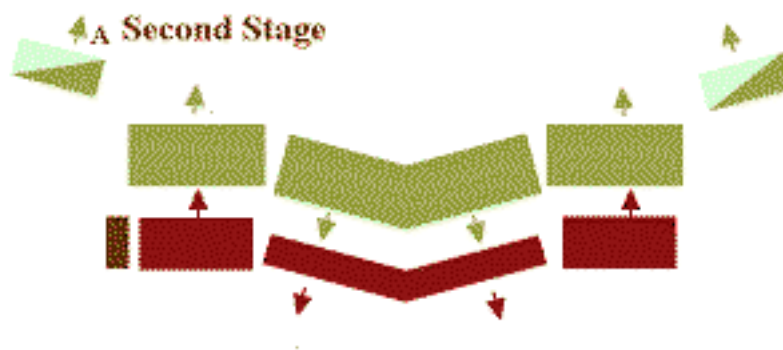


The Athenians were still at great risk, however, as they only had a little over one-third of the strength of the remaining Persian elite troops. They would also have to advance across an open plain while being fired upon by the deadly Persian archers. And their city, which lay behind them, with their wives & children, their wealth, and their life, was almost totally undefended. Thus the battle was started; the armies arrayed. Some sort of alarm must have been given; horns would have sounded; the movement of 10,000 men would not go unnoticed in the early dawn. The Persians were formed up, ready for the Greek attack.

The distance between the two armies was approximately fifteen hundred meters when the advance was sounded and the Athenian ranks moved quickly forward at 6:00 am, we are told. The advance started at a brisk walk, then developed into a trot, and then into double-time as they rushed the last 140-150 meters through the “beaten zone” and its deadly hail of arrows. This fast advance was the first double-time advance by Hoplites, and was done in hope of minimizing casualties from the arrows of the Persian troops.

“When the Persians saw the Athenians coming down on them without cavalry or archers and scanty in numbers, they thought them as an army of madmen running toward their certain destruction,” wrote the historian Herodotus.

As the Greeks advanced, their faster moving wings drew ahead of the center, which was under heavy fire from the Persian archers. As the two centers met in close-order battle, the massive numbers of Persian royal troops, made up of the Immortals and other elite units, began to tell and to force the already weakened Athenian center back: it cracked under their weight and began to retreat a little, but it did not break. As the two centers struggled, some Persians broke through the gaps and drove the main body of the center further back.



Meanwhile, on either side, the Athenians' fast attack and deeper formations of experienced troops had crushed and carried before them the lighter and less disciplined Persian flanks, putting them almost instantly to flight. With the Persian flanks destroyed or starting to disappear from the field, the Athenian and Plataean flanking forces methodically wheeled inward, hinging

themselves upon the retreating Athenian center, and catching the vast numbers of Persian elite troops in a classic pincer maneuver. The real killing then started.

The Greek retreat in the center, besides pulling the Persian elite units in, also brought the Greek wings further inwards, shortening the Greek line. The inadvertent result was a double envelopment, and the battle ended when the whole center of the Persian army, crowded into confusion, found itself being attacked from three sides. The Persians had no choice but to try to extricate their army out of the battle and fight their way back to their ships. Ultimately they broke in panic towards their ships and were pursued by the Greeks to the sea.

Third Stage



Many Persians died by drowning in the marshes where they had retreated. Others who tried to flee into the sea were also drowned: it is not advised to try to swim in battle armour. By 9:00 am, the Persian's beaten-up surviving royal troops that could get on board and such ships that could get away, were heading out to sea. They steered south and west toward Phaleron Bay and Athens.

In a mere three hours, according to Herodotus, the Persians had lost 6,400 troops, maybe about half of the army that remained at Marathon after Datis had sailed in the night, and an uncounted number of prisoners and wounded, along with at least seven ships. The really amazing statistic is that the Athenians had lost only 192 dead, including their Command in Chief, Callimachus.

The Greeks had won the battle of Marathon decisively; but now their city of Athens was still at serious risk and almost totally undefended. One fleet had set out in the night, now another, heavily mauled but still dangerous, followed.

Miltiades detached one division under Aristeides to guard the prisoners and all the captured arms and equipment, and then started his troops, in a quick-march, back to Athens, hoping against hope to be in time to defend the city against the threat of the Persian fleets. He set runners ahead.

Supposedly, one of these, a messenger called Pheidippides, ran the 22 miles from Marathon to Athens, in about three hours, in the heat of the morning, and after the stresses and exhaustions of the battle, to announce the defeat of the Persian army. Having given the good news and also warned the city of the impending threat by sea, he dropped dead of exhaustion and thus became a martyr. It is in celebration of this run, that the modern day race is given its name, and thus the battle has also been given its immortality.

These are the events that lead up to the fourth poem.

Maybe it has become apparent that the same character appears in all the four poems.

Aftermath

As soon as the remaining defeated Persians had put to sea in their reduced fleet, the Athenian forces left the battlefield and marched hurriedly towards Athens. They arrived just in time to prevent Datis from securing a landing at Phaleron Bay.

When the Persian invasion force sailed up close, they found the Athenian army had already taken up defensive positions at Cynosarges, south of the city. Datis thus found Athens now to be well defended, and calculated that another attempt to land would be useless, so he anchored and waited for Artaphernes to arrive with the news of the battle. When Artaphernes arrived with his battered and depleted forces and news of the staggering defeat at Marathon, there was only one course of action left for the Persians, and that was to return to Asia.

After the battle had been fought, but while the dead bodies were still on the ground, the promised re-enforcement from Sparta eventually arrived. Two thousand Lacedaemonians arrived, apologizing regretfully, of course, that they had been forced to delay their departure and so had missed the battle. They had started immediately after the full moon, had marched the hundred and fifty miles between Athens and Sparta in the wonderfully short time of three days, but there was nothing for them to do now on their arrival. They toured the battlefield at Marathon, viewed the spoils, and magnanimously agreed that the Athenians had won a great victory.

Conclusion

Marathon was in no sense a decisive victory over the Persians: it just marked the end of the first ten-year period of conflict between Greece and Persia. However, it was the first time that the Greeks had bested the vastly superior numbers of Persians on land, and *"their victory endowed the Greeks with a faith in their destiny which was to endure for three centuries, during which western culture was born."* (J.F.C. Fuller, A Military History of the Western World.)

It gave Greeks great faith in their newly established destiny as a democratic nation, and therefore this battle is considered one of the most important events marking the birth of European culture and Western civilization. Had not the various dimensions of geography, ignorance by a traitor, desire for revenge, impatience, desperation and inspired tactics (with maybe a little help from the Gods) combined together to give the Greeks the advantage, democracy, which was then only 20 years old, would have been swamped at its outset. Marathon was a battle in which tactics and morale triumphed over numbers, as the vastly outnumbered heroic Athenians defended their home and their heritage.

The Greek upset of the Persians, who had not been defeated on land for many decades, also caused great problems for the Persian dreams of an empire extending across the Bosphorus into Grecian lands. Seeing that the Persians were not now invincible, many other peoples subject to their rule rose up following the defeat of their overlords at Marathon and order was not restored for several years.

Another legacy of Marathon, was that the Athenians realized the threat that an armed fleet could bring upon them and began to diversify their limited resources and build a navy. This eventually gave them a huge trading advantage and wider political advantage over Sparta.

It was 10 years later, in 480 BC, that the successor of Darius, Xerxes, re-entered Greece with a huge land army across the Dardanelles and was eventually halted by 300 Spartans at Thermopylae (on land) and his fleet was defeated by the Athenians at Salamis (by sea).

"In this hour of national danger, the Lacedaemonians (Spartans) as being the strongest state, took command of the Greek confederate forces, and the Athenians, who had decided on the approach of the Persians, to break up their houses and leave their city, went on board ship and became sailors. The Confederates repulsed the barbarian; but not long afterwards they, and like Greeks who had thrown off the Persian yoke, grouped themselves into two parties; one around the Athenians, and one round the Lacedaemonians. For these two states had been shown to be

the most powerful; the strength of the one was on land, and that of the other in her ships.” (Thucydides, I, 18) This decision to focus on the sea had fateful consequences later, as the Athenians, increasingly now dependent on their ships, also needed to defend their port at Peireirus, about 4 miles from Athens, and that meant the building of the long walls between Athens and Peireirus, in 458 BC, which eventually proved to be indefensible to a determined seige.

Another Persian invasion in about 467 BC had to be stopped at the battle of Eurymedon, and peace between Athens and Persia was eventually declared in 448 BC. The existence of a common enemy, Persia, had helped the disunited & feuding Greek city-states by providing some initial solidarity. However, fractious wars between them continued to occur throughout the following century. Neither did the battle of Marathon do anything to improve relationships between Sparta and Athens. That is another very complex story, but let it be said here that the continual tension between these two city-states eventually broke out in the bitterly contested Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in 431 BC and lasted for about 28 years until the final defeat of Athens in 404 BC.

The Spartan culture, two kings, a council of *ephors*, and an assembly of a very few select families holding all power and honour, increasingly supported (or propped up) by many subservient Helots, could not last: it was demographically suicidal. Sparta was the dark side of Greek civilization: it carried its most triumphant glories (apart from Marathon) and it was also despised and feared by the rest of the Hellenes. However it also had certain fascinating and surprising aspects. Women had a dignity and freedom unimaginable in democratic Athens. Surprisingly, they could possess and bequeath property. Girls competed with boys equally in the gymnasium. Plutarch listed a series of “maxims of the Spartan women” that suggests a storehouse of female wisdom unheard of in other Mediterranean cultures. The Spartans saw themselves as a proud and austere race: and they were hard on themselves, as well as on others. Spartan warriors were told to come back with their shields (after honorable battle), or on their shields (dead): losing one’s shield was an intolerable disgrace. They were so confident of their strength, they did not wall their city: the chests of their warriors were sufficient. Within a few hundred years, they had disappeared.

The victory at Marathon had helped solidify the general cultural view that Greeks (Europeans) were “civilized” and that the Persians (Asiatics) were “barbarians”: a view that still holds some sway, even today, and a view which also totally ignores the incredible advances in mathematics and medicine (amongst other disciplines) as well as the amazingly rich cultural progressions made in the first millennium AD by descendants of these Persian ‘barbarians’.

It might also be said that the century after the battle of Marathon also contained Athens’ “golden period” with the rise and fall of Pericles, the plays of Aristophanes, Euripides and Sophocles, the teachings of Socrates, and the history of Thucydides to name a few, all giving such a rich impression of the life of the first democratic commonwealth and a heritage of civilization and democracy that has lasted nearly two and a half thousand years.

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Marathonas 1

I remember when that messenger first came to Sparta
He was called Pheidippides, the Olympic champion.
But he brought bad news: the Medes were coming
In their ships, with their armies
In their thousands, they were coming to Hellas
And the Athenians sent a messenger asking us for aid
Again

I remember speaking to him, the night he arrived in Sparta
He lodged in my house, ate my meat, drank my wine
I, Aristarkhos, of the Kleomenids, had that honour
He was very tired having run all the way from Athens
A week's journey in three days and two nights
Two hundred stadia
Incredible

I remember what he said to me
That the Persians were coming
That the Athenians needed all the help they can get
That the Persians would not stop at Athens
That they would take all Hellas
That Korinth and then Sparta would be next
Inevitably

Then I remember the reply of our kings and *ephors* the next day
“We are a war-like people; we train for war
Yet we choose carefully where and when we fight.”
“This war is of your making. You supported
The Greek cities in Asia when they rebelled
Against the Medes under Aristagoras
Futilely”

“Now your retribution comes. Yours, not ours,
And you ask us again for help and assistance,
For five thousand Spartan warriors: for our whole army.
You would leave us defenceless!
Our *Spartiates* are the flower of our people
If they are gone, Sparta will be gone
Forever”

“We cannot and will not send the full army.
Our neighbours might attack
When our soldiers are gone:
The Messenians, the Arcadians.
And then there are the Helots!
We cannot leave our women and children
Defenceless.”

“There are old alliances and rivalries between our cities
We have fought wars with and against each other
Maybe there will be more wars to come.
By asking for help from us now,
Maybe you are also looking to the future.
We must consider all these matters
Carefully”

“We make decisions in ways that may seem strange to you.
We have two kings: one goes to war, the other stays;
We have the five *ephors*, and their voices must be heard.
There is the *Apella*, the assembly of the people,
You think that we do not listen to our people
But you are wrong, my democratic friend,
Indubitably”

“And then there are the Gods!
A decision to go to war can only be made
After the Festival of Artemis is over
And the full moon is a week or so away.
The Assembly of Warriors and
The Families of Equals will decide then
Legally”

The Athenian messenger was shaken. All could see that.
He was not a “man who trembles”
An Olympic Champion, but his hope had gone.
These words were as the sentence of death
On his city, on their trust, for their survival,
The decision had broken his heart
Completely.

He would not stay another day to rest
“I must get back” he said
“If I cannot bring hope of a thousand arms,
Then I will bring my arms, to fight the Mede.”
“You say you are the descendants of Herakles,
But I cannot see that a spark of him is left in you
Distinctly”

He left then, to run all the way back to Athens, and
We never saw him again. He had died.
When a small force of soldiers
Arrived in Athens three weeks later,
The battle was over, the Athenians had won,
And we carried back our shame, in silence,
Completely

Marathonas 2

Walking on the beach, as a sentinel,
 Early one morning
I saw a white shape rise over the horizon
 Then another,
And another, and a hundred more,
 Not gulls, not just sails,
A nightmare.

Six hundred ships
 Fifty thousand Illyrians
Drifted over that horizon
 As vultures drift across the sky
Towards a carcass
 They drifted across the sea
Towards the white hills of Attica

I hid and watched them come land in the bay
 Crabs scuttled across the shore
They came out of the wine dark sea
 Bees swarm in a tree branch
Their army and horses turned the sand black
 Littering the beach
The smoke of their fires darkened the day.

Then I turned to carry the news
 A sentinel cannot guard against
The rising of the sea,
 A black human tide
I am now a messenger. So I left my hiding place
 I put down my helmet, spear and shield
And I started to run
 Towards Athens
 From Marathon.

Marathonas 3

What to do? What to do?

Oh, ye Gods of Olympus, tell me what to do.

We are trapped here.

We are in despair

We have been stuck here now for eight days

At least we are safe for the moment

Waiting for the accursed Spartans to arrive

Waiting for that thrice-accursed hoard

Of stinking barbarians

To make a move off that damned beach

And we are stuck on this fucking hillside

And the city lies undefended behind us

Like a women with bare breasts

Our women and children

Our homes, our treasures

Our lives are there

And we are stuck here.

Thousands more Persians arrived today

With news of the destruction of Eretria

Oh, my cousins!

Your beautiful city is gone

A white jewel by the sea

And peaceful Euboea

Is now war-torn.

We can see the smoke

You were betrayed from within

Pillaged by these barbarians

I mourn for you

I would weep and rent my clothes

But I have an army to fight and my city to save

We will be next

What can stop this invasion

And still the Gods do nothing

They have deserted us.

What is that you say, Pheidippides!

Part of their army is going back on board their ships

You have seen them

You crept close in the dark of the night

What can this mean?

It is that slimy trickster Datis

I know it is

He can't stand Artaphernes' success

I know him of old

Where is he going?

What next?

He's suddenly decided to do something sneaky

The scout says it is mostly the cavalry

Where can he be taking all those horses?

And in the middle of the night?

What is he planning?

Oh, my Goddess, my Pallas Athena

Give me a morsel of your wisdom.

If he is going to attack the city, your city, our home
It will take him all day to sail round
And then he's got to land

We are lost!
There is no time
There is no time

What to do? What to do?
What to do?

It is my day of command
We have to act now

Oh, Pallas Athena,
Help me, Miltiades, I have always prayed to you.

We must attack!
It is the only chance

But how can we win?

They still have 30,000 men

Without the Spartans, we have a mere 10,000
Oh Athena! Help me!
Tell me what to do!

We have to be tricky
We will have to do something different.

Catch them unawares

And I have to convince the others
I can count on Themistocles and Aristides
Some of them hate me, or envy me
Some others will support me

But what of the other eight?
How do I convince the others?

We are safe on this mountain side
But we are now stuck here, like a butterfly on a pin

How do I convince the Pole-March? The General
Which way will he vote?
What do I say?

It is a choice between slavery or death, or just a chance of honour.
And how Darius would like to get hold of me
After so many years.
And the smile on the face of Hippias, that traitor ...

Will Callimachus decide not to fight?
Can he see that would be a worse betrayal?
Which way will the Gods decide?
Glorious Athena will fight with us

But what of Appollo, or Zeus?
The odds are overwhelming
How to break their Invincibles?
We cannot push through them like a spear head.

Athena! Help me!
Please don't maintain this silence.

So much is at stake

I feel caught, trapped
Like a nut between the claws of a crab
Like a nut ... between the claws ... of a crab!

Marathonas 4

How to go on running
This is the third, or fourth time
I have covered this ground
I went there, I first saw the fleet
And then brought the news

Then we marched
We waited
We fought
And then I'm told
Go tell the news – again

Don't kill the messenger
He'll kill himself
I was up all night –
Then I fought –
Now I've got to run

40,000 paces all told
I counted them whilst marching here
Kept my thoughts from my girl
She's back there in the city
Maybe I'll get to see her

Maybe they will get there first
I saw them leave
Like jackals in the night
I pray to Hermes
Let me get there first

My feet hurt: my lungs hurt
My legs are like lead
My head hurts from the sun
And that arrow wound
Still hurts in my shoulder

At least I fought, what a fight!
Even though they kept me back
I am a messenger: a scout
Trustworthy, valuable
But those arrows were everywhere

Now I am running again
I have to get them the news
We won – and it's not over
There's a fleet; I saw it leave,
And now there is another

I have to keep going
I have to get through
They have to be warned
I have to tell them
The others won't get there in time

Maybe I'll see my girl there
If I get there in time
I *have* to get there in time
The Persian ships left so long ago
And then we fought the rest

Good battle, inspired tactics
But we lost the Commander
How to tell them?
Good news and bad news
Will they believe me?

What can they do?
The damn Spartans won't help
I went there as well.
There is no one else
They must hold on

I was up all night
I must keep going, I am so tired
And we fought all morning
Now the sun is up
I am dying of thirst in this heat

The arrows came
Like dark clouds across the sun
Some of us died
As we ran across
That killing ground

I can't go on running
I can't see where I am going
The sun is blinding me
The heat is killing me
What's this? Am I there?

"I have great news"
"Let me through"
"We won at Marathon"
"But a Persian fleet coming"
"And ... it grows dark."