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THE BATTLE OF MARATHON: THE STUNNING VICTORY AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE RISE OF ATHENS

DOUG MARSH

ATHENS had never before been faced with so great a threat as the approach of Persian forces to the Greek mainland in 490 B.C.E. Angered by the insolence of Athens and Eretria, which had recently supplied aid to rebelling Ionian cities, the Persian king Darius dispatched his generals Datis and Ataphernes “with the charge to reduce Athens and Eretria to slavery and to bring the slaves back into his presence.” Both Herodotus and Plato saw this dispatch as a mere pretext to accomplish his true aim: to enslave all of Greece and Europe.¹ He moved first against the Eretrians, “reputed to be amongst the noblest and most warlike of the Hellenes of that day (and they were numerous); but he conquered them all in three days.”² Having accomplished his objective against Eretria, Darius next turned his gaze to Athens, leaving it and its citizens to decide whether they ought to attempt to resist their seemingly inevitable defeat.³

Faced with almost certain ruin, many Athenian generals did not wish to fight, “seeing that they were too few to fight with the army of the Medes.” With the voting generals evenly split between those for and against fighting, the deciding vote was to be cast by Callimachos, the polemarch. Miltiades, one of the ten Athenian strategoi at the time, urged Callimachos to vote to resist the invading Persians:

With thee now it rests, Callimachos, either to bring Athens under slavery, or by making her free to leave behind thee for all the time that men shall live a memorial such as not even Harmodios and Aristogeiton have left. For now the Athenians have come to a danger the greatest to which they have ever come since they were a people; and on the one hand, if they submit to the Medes, it is determined what they shall suffer, being delivered

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1. Plato, *Menexenus*, 239d; Herodotus, *Histories* 6.94

2. Plato, *Menexenus*, 240b.

3. Herodotus, *Histories* 6.101–02.

over to Hippias, while on the other hand, if this city shall gain the victory, it may become the first of the cities of Hellas.⁴

Callimachos was persuaded by this argument and cast his vote in favor of the proposal of Miltiades, and the Athenian and Platean forces engaged the Persians at Marathon. The result of the battle was a victory so stunning and so complete that the Persian army, though they greatly outnumbered their Greek opponents, fled to their ships and returned to Asia. “Than this battle,” eulogized the Roman Nepos, “there has hitherto been none more glorious; for never did so small a band overthrow so numerous a host.”⁵ With this spectacular victory, the invasion had been foiled.⁶

As time passed, the predictions made by Miltiades proved to be correct. Once Persia had been effectively repulsed from Greece, not only was Athens left free from foreign tyranny, but it would also soon enter its golden age as the foremost of the Greek poleis. Nevertheless, the Battle of Marathon was not necessarily the definitive moment that it is implied to be by Herodotus’s history. It is important to recognize that the remarkable victory at Marathon was but one episode in a series of events that would affect the future of Greece. Even so, the success achieved on the plains of Marathon was a crucial moment that helped catalyze the Athenian ascent to prominence, not only as a tactically important moment, but as a psychologically critical victory.

For all of its significance, the Battle of Marathon admittedly did little more than delay the encroaching invaders. Persia hardly regarded the humiliating loss at Marathon as a definitive defeat—as the Persian commander Mardonios stated, the net result of the Battle of Marathon was that Persia “fell but little short of coming to Athens itself.”⁷ Far from discouraging the great empire from its aims, the defeat only heightened Persian ambition to subjugate the Hellenes to Persian power. When word of the defeat reached King Darius, who was already angered by the assistance Athens had given during the Ionic revolt, he was doubly infuriated, and “then far more than before displayed indignation, and was far more desirous of making a march against Hellas.”⁸ Within ten years of their defeat at Marathon, the Persian Empire would return with its army and navy, this time under the command of Darius’s son Xerxes, with increased resolve and determination to subdue Greece. It was the 480 B.C.E. Battle of Salamis and the 479 B.C.E. Battle of Plataea, not the Battle of Marathon, which would ultimately remove the Persian threat from the Greek mainland for good. Clearly, the victory at

4. Herodotus, *Histories* 6.109.

5. Cornelius Nepos, *Lives of Eminent Commanders*, “Miltiades,” 312.

6. Herodotus, *Histories* 6.116–17.

7. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.9.

8. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.1.

Marathon was not the immediate cause of all the gains that Miltiades had foreseen.⁹

Nevertheless, the Battle of Marathon was strategically crucial to Greece's survival. More than simply delaying the inevitable, it gave Athens, and the rest of Greece along with it, ten additional years to prepare for the invading Persians. The time bought by the victory was well spent. Before the second Persian invasion of 480 B.C.E, the oracle at Delphi famously directed that Athens be defended by a "bulwark of wood." As urged by the Athenian archon Themistocles, Athens built its "bulwark," which proved to be the critical factor in victory against the Persians: the Athenian navy.¹⁰ In a stroke of luck, funding for this navy was found in the rich veins of silver that had been newly discovered at nearby Laureion. The Athenians had planned to divide this wealth among its citizens; Themistocles, not trusting other Athenians to appreciate the proximity of the Persian threat, shrewdly—if not deviously—proposed instead "that with the money ships should be built to make war against the Æginetans, who were the most flourishing people in all Greece, and by the number of their ships held the sovereignty of the sea." In so proposing, he "avoiding all mention of danger from Darius or the Persians, who were at a great distance, and their coming very uncertain . . . but by a seasonable employment of the emulation and anger felt by the Athenians against the Æginetans, he induced them to preparation."¹¹ Through this sleight of hand, Themistocles induced Athens to build up its fleet and make ready (whether its citizens realized it or not) for the coming Persian invasion.

The importance of Athens's navy in the conflict to come is not to be underestimated. In a rare aside, Herodotus offers his opinion that if Athens had not opposed the Persians, and especially with its navy, all of Greece would have fallen under Persian power; even the Spartans, as capable as they were in the arts of war, "would have been isolated and then have performed great deeds and died bravely."¹² Even that most lauded demonstration of Spartan bravery, the battle of Thermopylae, was made possible only by Greek naval superiority at Artemision, where the fleet under the command of Themistocles prevented the Persian navy from sailing around the fortified pass and out-flanking the Spartans.¹³ The factor that ultimately forced Xerxes to retreat from his objective was the victory of the Greek navy under Themistocles during the naval battle at Salamis, which shattered the Persian navy. Nor was the victory by sea at Salamis any less remarkable or impressive than the victory by land at Marathon. In fact, Nepos claimed that the battle of Salamis "may be compared

9. Herodotus, *Histories* 8.84–97; 9.25–89.

10. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.140–45.

11. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.140–45.

12. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.139.

13. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.192–95.

with the triumph at Marathon; for the greatest fleet in the memory of man was conquered in like manner at Salamis by a small number of ships.”¹⁴ Without naval support for his infantry, Xerxes’ isolated troops could not long remain in the Hellenic mainland. Herodotus emphasized Athens’s resistance by sea was a determining factor of the war, such that “if a man should say that the Athenians proved to be the saviors of Hellas, he would not fail to hit the truth.”¹⁵ Plutarch, defending Themistocles against any charges of deception, concurred with this opinion:

Whether or not he hereby injured the purity and true balance of government, may be a question for philosophers, but that the deliverance of Greece came at that time from the sea, and that these galleys restored Athens again after it was destroyed, were others wanting, Xerxes himself would be sufficient evidence, who, though his land-forces were still entire, after his defeat at sea, fled away, and thought himself no longer able to encounter the Greeks; and, as it seems to me, left Mardonius behind him, not out of any hopes he could have to bring them into subjection, but to hinder them from pursuing him.¹⁶

This buildup of naval power that proved the salvation of Greece would not have been possible without the extra time afforded by the victory at Marathon. With the Athenian navy, Greece was able to withstand the Persian assault. Furthermore, after the fight with Persia had ended, Athenian naval superiority resulted in its hegemony of the Delian league, a key component which allowed Athens to enjoy its golden age.

Though its tactical importance was significant, the greatest contribution that the Battle of Marathon made towards to rise of Athens and Greece was not so much strategic as it was psychological. Persia was the largest empire in the world at the time, and according to Plato, the Persian king Darius was the world’s most eminent figure: “None presumed to be his equal; the minds of all men were enthralled by him—so many and mighty and warlike nations had the power of Persia subdued.”¹⁷ Nepos claimed that Persia had brought an army of two hundred thousand men to the field at Marathon.¹⁸ Persia planned to strike quickly before Athens could gather friendly forces, “thinking that in this way [Athens] would be most deserted of allies, if they posed the danger when Greece was still at odds over how to repel the invaders.”¹⁹ A band of nine thousand Athenian men, with the help of no other Greek polis except for a mere thousand men sent from the Plataeans, were forced to oppose Persia

14. Nepos, “Themistocles,” 318.

15. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.139.

16. Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, “Themistocles,” 6.

17. Plato, *Menexenus*, 240a.

18. Nepos, “Miltiades,” 311.

19. Lysias, *Funeral Oration*, 21.

almost single-handedly.²⁰ Two thousand Spartans, though willing to render assistance, arrived at the scene too late to do anything but congratulate the Athenians for their victory and return home.²¹ No other polis, according to Plato, dared to bring men to the field: “The rest were panic-stricken and kept quiet, too happy in having escaped for a time.”²² These few forces were all the assistance they had with which they fought the mightiest military power on Earth; a power so terrifying, Herodotus informs his readers, that “up to this time the very name of the Medes was to the Hellenes a terror to hear.”²³ What is more, the Persians outnumbered them nearly twenty to one.²⁴ Clearly, the odds were against Athens.

In spite of these odds, Athens did have important advantages. One crucial element of Hellenic superiority was the heavy bronze armor of the Greek hoplite. The now-famous “Corinthian” style helmet was forged from a single sheet of bronze, covering “almost the whole head from the collar-bone upwards,” and leaving “only a small, roughly T-shaped aperture for the eyes, nose, and mouth.”²⁵ This design was so effective that it was used and copied for more than 2,000 years.²⁶ The shield, or *hoplon*, from which the Greek hoplite derived his name, was a wooden convex disk three feet in diameter, and reinforced with bronze—the rims were always given a bronze facing, and often the entire shield was likewise covered.²⁷ The left arm was inserted through a bronze strip on the inner side of the shield, and then the left hand grabbed a leather strap on the right edge. This innovative design made the

20. Nepos, “Miltiades,” 312.

21. Herodotus, *Histories* 6.120.

22. Plato, *Menexenus*, 240c.

23. Herodotus, *Histories* 6.112.

24. This according to the numbers supplied by Nepos. These numbers may immediately appear suspicious, given the tendency of ancient writers to inflate numbers. Nevertheless, Nepos is actually among the most conservative of ancient writers in giving the figure of 200,000 for the number of Persian troops. Herodotus himself does not give a number, but Plutarch and Pausanias both claim there were 300,000 Persian troops, while Plato and Lysias give the number of 500,000 (Plutarch, *Ethics*, 305b; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 4.22.5; Plato, *Menexenus*, 240a; Lysias, *Funeral Oration*, 21.)

25. A. M. Snodgrass, *Arms and Armour of the Greeks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 51. Herodotus makes reference to a Corinthian helmet in 4.180. Historian Tim Everson writes that “since the helmet about to be described appeared first and most frequently on Corinthian vases, most scholars agree that it is one and the same with Herodotus’s Corinthian helmet” (Tim Everson, *Warfare in Ancient Greece: Arms and Armour from the Heroes of Homer to Alexander the Great* [Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004], 80).

26. Snodgrass, *Arms and Armour*, 51.

27. The word *hoplon* more loosely translated means “tools” or “weapons,” of which the shield, also called the *aspis*, was among the most important. That the shield, of all other weapons and armor, should be most commonly linked to this epithet is evidence of its importance and regard by Greek soldiers.

weight of the shield easier to bear and offered greater control and leverage.²⁸ Bronze plate armor protected the hoplite's chest, belly, thighs, shins, feet, upper arms, and forearms.²⁹ Greek hoplites were closely packed in a phalanx, wherein each man's shield would partially overlap so that approaching enemies would be faced with a solid wall of bronze.

These armaments offered a particularly significant advantage over Persia, whose troops were much more lightly armored—as Aristagoras, the tyrant of Miletos, said to the Spartan king Cleomenes, “They wear trousers in the field, and cover their heads with turbans. So easy are they to vanquish!”³⁰ Heavy armor would have been very unusual for an Oriental army of that age, as historian A. M. Snodgrass notes: “The great civilizations of the east . . . apparently never adopted bronze plate-armor. Probably the hot climate is an adequate explanation of this. At all events, the Egyptians, Assyrians, and other Oriental peoples seem to have been content with scale-armor, or simply linen or leather.”³¹ The prohibitive cost of bronze armor would also have kept men from the field, thus negating one of Persia's greatest advantages. The net result of such armory was that, man for man, the average Persian warrior was no match for the Greek hoplite.

The second advantage held by Athens was her commander, Miltiades, and the superior tactics he employed. According to Herodotus, the Greek army was deployed in a line “equal in length of front to that of the Medes,” but “drawn up in the middle with a depth of but few ranks, and here their army was weakest, while each wing was strengthened with numbers.”³² Thus arranged, they ran to meet the Persian army, which was in and of itself a revolutionary tactic, according to Herodotus: “For they were the first of all the Hellenes about whom we know who went to attack the enemy at a run.”³³ Such a show of bravado by a foe so vastly outnumbered was so shocking that the Persians “charged the Athenians with madness which must be fatal, seeing that they were few and yet were pressing forwards at a run.”³⁴ After lengthy fighting, the center of the Greek line failed, and the Persians ran to the middle in pursuit.

Nevertheless, the two wings of the Greek army held firm and drew together, apparently in the space vacated by the Persian advance, allowing them to attack the Persian army in the exposed flanks and rear. By this maneuver, the Persians were surrounded and began to suffer heavy losses. The defeated Persians were thrown “into such a consternation, that the Persians betook

28. Snodgrass, *Arms and Armour*, 53; Everson, *Warfare in Ancient Greece*, 80.

29. Everson, *Warfare in Ancient Greece*, 87–108.

30. Herodotus, *Histories* 5.49.

31. Snodgrass, *Arms and Armour*, 50.

32. Herodotus, *Histories* 6.III.

33. Herodotus, *Histories* 6.II2.

34. Herodotus, *Histories* 6.II2.

themselves, not to their camp, but to their ships.”³⁵ The result of their “madness,” which must have seemed little more than a suicidal rush towards a certain doom, was an overwhelming Hellenic victory. Casualties were equally one-sided: Herodotus claims that 6,400 Persians were slain, while only 192 Athenians and 11 Plataeans died.³⁶ At Marathon, Athens stunned the world by taking on a superior force, thought by some to be invincible, and handing them a sound defeat. As Plato extolled, it was at Marathon that the Hellenes “first taught other men that the power of the Persians was not invincible, but that hosts of men and the multitude of riches alike yield to valor.”³⁷ For the first time, it seems, the realization dawned that Persia could actually be defeated.

The effect that this defeat had on the image of Persia’s military force can be seen in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, which describes events that took place less than a century after the battle of Marathon. The Persian Cyrus, in his attempt to overthrow his brother, King Artaxerxes II, procured the aid of 10,000 Greek troops. As Cyrus prepared the Greek troops for the coming battle, he revealed to them that “it is not because I have not barbarians enough that I have brought you hither to fight for me; but because I believe that you are braver and stronger than many barbarians.” Not only did he consider the Greek’s numerical disadvantage to be insignificant, but Cyrus was actually somewhat embarrassed by the incompetence of his own nation’s military strength: “Our enemies have great numbers and they will come on with a great outcry; for the rest, however, if you can hold out against these things, I am ashamed, I assure you, to think what sorry fellows you will find the people of our country to be.”³⁸ The events that later transpired showed his reticence to be quite justified. During a military review before battle, a spontaneous charge of the Greek hoplites terrified the barbarian troops, causing Cyrus’s guest, the Cilician queen, as well as the people in the market, to flee in terror.³⁹ When the armies of Cyrus and Artaxerxes finally met at Cunaxa, the Greeks under Cyrus immediately threw the Persian chariots into disarray merely by beating their spears against their shields and frightening their horses. With another spontaneous charge, they then proceeded to scatter the barbarians in front of them before they were even within range of their arrows.⁴⁰ Whatever aura of invincibility Persia had attained before its defeat at Marathon had been clearly and completely dispelled—the army whose very name once struck fear into its enemies was now exposed.

The Battle of Marathon showed not only that Persia could be defeated, but how to employ tactics by which one would go about accomplishing the

35. Herodotus, *Histories* 6.113; Nepos, “Miltiades,” 312.

36. Herodotus, *Histories* 6.117.

37. Plato, *Menexenus*, 240d.

38. Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.7.3.

39. Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.2.18.

40. Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.8.18–19.

feat. The Battle of Marathon is perhaps the first recorded instance in history of the pincer movement or double envelopment, wherein an opponent's flanks are surrounded after he has advanced to the center. The skillful deployment of the Hellenic troops shows that the stunning results of the battle were not accidental: "It is obvious," writes Dr. N. G. L. Hammond, "that the action of the Athenians and the Plataeans on the wings . . . had been preconcerted; for Miltiades, having thinned his center and packed his wings, must have anticipated the actual developments in the fighting and issued orders in advance."⁴¹ From the description of the battle, it can be seen that the victory achieved at Marathon was no mere trick of fate, but a result of careful planning and remarkable foresight by the Greek generals.

The Battle of Marathon is not likely to have been the first time a double envelopment took place, as it is a fairly basic and even universal military tactic—it is apparently described, for example, in Sun Tzu's *Art of War*.⁴² Nevertheless, its occurrence during the Battle of Marathon made it an important lesson for future Greek military leaders and tacticians; the battle was, as Plato wrote, "the action to which the Hellenes looked back when they ventured to fight for their own safety in the battles which ensued: they became disciples of the men of Marathon."⁴³ Importantly, the Battle of Marathon exposed Persian susceptibility to tactical warfare. In spite of Persia's usually greater numbers, Greek generals thenceforth almost always managed to find and exploit Persian weaknesses through superior strategy, resulting in Persia's expulsion from Greece in 480 B.C.E., the later embarrassment at Cunaxa, and their ultimate defeat at the hands of the tactically superior Alexander the Great. Furthermore, it is evident that tactics similar to the double envelopment used by Miltiades at Marathon were used against other opponents, and not just by the Greeks, but by many of the greatest generals in history. The strategy of Epaminodas at Leuctra, Phillip and Alexander at Chaeronea, Hannibal at Cannae, Scipio Africanus at Ilipa and Zama, and even battles of recent history seem to mimic the Greeks on the Marathon plain. This influence shows the Battle of Marathon to have been an important schoolmaster not only to Greece in its struggle against the barbarians, but to military leaders throughout all time.

The claims made by Miltiades, as reported by Herodotus, were not immediately realized after the Athenian victory at Marathon; it would be

41. N. G. L. Hammond, "The Campaign and the Battle of Marathon," *Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 88 (1968): 29.

42. "Thus one who is skillful at keeping the enemy on the move maintains deceitful appearances, according to which the enemy will act. He sacrifices something, that the enemy may snatch at it. By holding out baits, he keeps him on the march; then with a body of picked men he lies in wait for him" (Sun Tzu, *Art of War* 5.19–20).

43. Plato, *Menexenus*, 240c.

after a number of years and a series of other critical events that his predictions would come to full fruition. It is nevertheless indisputable that without the victory at Marathon, Athens would have been reduced to servitude, and the rest of Greece along with it. Because of the strategic importance of the victory, which afforded ten more years for the Hellenic poleis to prepare for the Persian invasion, and the psychological victory by which the Hellenic world first understood that Persia could be defeated, the Battle of Marathon made possible both the freedom of the Hellenes and the eminence and Golden Age of Athens.