**Re-running Marathon**

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**The Battle of Marathon has long been presented as the decisive moment at which Greeks led by the newly democratic Athenians gained the upper hand over the despotic Persians. Barry Baldwin reappraises the battle, and explains why it is still a byword for endurance.**

*The mountains look on Marathon,   
And Marathon looks on the sea.   
And musing there an hour alone,   
I dreamed that Greece might still be free,   
For standing on the Persian’s grave,   
I could not deem myself a slave.   
(Lord Byron, The Isles of Greece)*

To Greeks and Romans, the battle of Marathon in 490 BC tended to be the ultimate proof of courage, patriotism, and that the gods (despite Napoleon) are not always on the side of the big battalions. Traditionally it has been seen as a turning-point, not just in ancient history. Had Marathon gone the other way, classical Greek civilisation would have been stifled, and we would not have the pleasures and profits of Greek art, literature and thought.

In his Histories, written a generation or so after the Persian Wars, Herodotus produced the classic account of the campaign, but, in the words of the classicist and novelist Frederic Raphael, ‘Herodotus contributed hugely to the swelling of Greek heads. He enjoyed a breakthrough success when he recited his work at Athens. Paid ten talents and made an honorary citizen for his PR work on behalf of the Athenians, he was the first man to prove that history had a market, if you told the right stories.’

Herodotus traced the origin of the Graeco-Persian conflicts back to the Trojan War. We shall not here follow him all that distance, but to the reign of Cyrus, founder and first ruler (559-530 BC) of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. After his conquests of Lydia (in western Asia Minor) and Babylonia and the capture of their respective capitals Sardis (546 BC) and Babylon (539 BC), Cyrus had within twenty years acquired an empire the largest the world had yet seen. He spent his last eight years organising these new possessions into an efficient working order. He carved the empire into twenty provinces, each governed by a local plenipotentiary known as a satrap. Two of these districts contained Greek subjects: Lydia subsumed the Ionian coastline, whilst Phrygia embraced the Dardanelles, the Propontis and the Black Sea’s southern littoral – all areas colonised by Greek cities. For many Greeks, rule by Persia rather than Lydia made no difference to their lives. Herodotus reports Cyrus’ death with brisk neutrality and never assails him as a despot. By the fourth century, he was idealised by the pro-Spartan military adventurer Xenophon, who had sold his own mercenary sword to a later Cyrus in a dynastic civil war.

Nevertheless, when Cyrus attempted to drive a wedge between the powerful Miletus and the other Ionian islands, the latter Greeks appealed to Sparta for help. Not for the last time, the Spartans refused assistance to their overseas compatriots. But they did send a single ship to see what was going on; also an ambassador was dispatched to Sardis to warn the king to keep his hands off the Greek cities or risk Spartan displeasure. An astonished Cyrus asked who these impudent Spartans were and how many men did they have to back up such a demand. Upon being informed, he made a crisp response: ‘I have never yet been afraid of men who have a special meeting-place in the centre of their city where they swear this and that and cheat each other’. Herodotus took this to be scorn of the free market and barter systems of the Greek agora; but it may also reflect a king’s suspicion of incipient democracy.

The short reign (530-522 BC) of Cambyses was mainly concentrated on the Persian conquest of Egypt, but when Cyprus and Phoenician states submitted to him the Persians inherited a much-needed navy. It was the ambition and drive of his successor Darius I (522-486 BC) that generated the conflicts that would lead to Marathon. He had in mind the conquest of the Pontic-Caspian steppes from the Danube to the river Jaxartes. The execution of Polycrates, tyrant of the Ionian city of Samos, was followed by a large Persian army crossing the Danube in 513 BC, invading the northern steppes of Scythia. It also swept through Thrace and took control of the vital ports of Byzantium and Chalcedon at the Black Sea entrance to the Propontis. Darius was now a threat both to the military security and grain supplies of mainland Greece.

By 499 BC Miletus and the other Ionians who had helped Darius cross the Danube now broke out into armed revolt against him, with Miletus’ exiled ruler Aristagoras appealing both to Sparta and Athens for help. The reactions of these two cities were complicated by the recent military and political involvements of Sparta in Athenian domestic politics, the outcomes of which had been the expulsion of the tyrant Hippias and the implementation of Cleisthenes’ democratic reforms in Athens. The Spartan King Cleomenes (who had ousted Hippias) laughed the suppliant Aristagoras out of the room when he unwisely confessed that armed assistance would take the Spartans a good three months march inland. Aristagoras had learned his lesson. He moved on to Athens and by a combination of wild promises and economy with the truth (claiming the Persians would be easily beaten since they fought without shields and spears) persuaded the Assembly to send help. Herodotus commented wryly: ‘apparently it is easier to dupe a crowd than an individual’, adding ‘the sailing of the Athenian fleet was the beginning of trouble, not only for Greece, but for the rest of the world’.

The twenty ships sent by Athens were joined by five from the small city of Eretria which felt it owed a debt of honour to Miletus for having taken their side in a previous local war. By 494 BC Darius had crushed the uprising. A good measure of Athenian alarm is what happened to the playwright Phrynichus when in the following year he presented what was probably the first-ever historical drama on the Athenian stage, The Capture Of Miletus. The audience was reduced to tears of grief and shame, the play was banned, and its author heavily fined ‘for reminding the Athenians of their misfortunes’ – a far cry from the reception accorded some twenty years later to Aeschylus’ triumphalist The Persians. However, their capture and burning of Sardis in 498 BC had been a great coup for the Greeks and a major embarrassment for the Persians.

Early in the summer of 490 BC, Darius launched his invasion of Greece. Under the command of his nephew Artaphernes and the Median admiral Datis, this armada allegedly consisted of 600 ships (troop and transport, provided and manned by subject allies) and an unspecified number of Persian infantry and cavalry, described by Herodotus as ‘powerful and well-equipped’. Despite the fibs of Aristagoras, the Persian infantry did have proper weapons. As to cavalry, the Persians had developed the then novelty of special horse-transport vessels to get them across the sea.

The ostensible targets were Athens and Eretria – a reprisal for their role in the Ionian Revolt – but few doubted that all of Greece was the ultimate ambition. Darius had indeed already sent to individual cities his demands for earth and water, the traditional tokens of surrender. Many complied, but when the Persian ambassadors came to Athens they were gaoled; at Sparta they were flung down a well, the inhabitants remarking that if they wanted earth and water that was the place to find them.

Having captured a number of other Greek cities and islands en route, the Persians besieged Eretria which succumbed after six days, weakened from within by party political strife and a pro-Persian faction which betrayed the city. A few days later, the Persians sailed for Attica, ‘in high spirits and confident’ (Herodotus). Marathon was selected as the best spot to invade, being closest to Eretria and also the most suitable for cavalry manoeuvres. At least, such was the advice of Hippias who was with this Persian force which he hoped would restore him to power. It was here that his father Pisistratus had landed in 546 for his successful bid for the tyranny in Athens.

Hippias was also buoyed up by a dream in which he was in bed with his mother. He took this to mean he would return to Athens, regain power, and die peacefully at home in his old age. Alas, poor Hippias! As he was superintending the Persian disembarkation at Marathon, he was seized with a violent fit of coughing and sneezing which dislodged one of his many loose teeth. Having failed to find it in the sand, Hippias sadly remarked that this was the only part of him fated to lie in native soil.

Athenian resistance was led by ten generals. The outstanding personality among them was Miltiades. He was connected to Athens through family, though he had been a tyrant elsewhere, in the Chersonese area of Greece. Miltiades’ own father had been banished from Athens by Hippias’ father, Pisistratus. Further cachet accrued to him from his father’s triple Olympic chariot-racing victories, a feat otherwise accomplished only by the Spartan Evagoras.

Despite this, an ex-tyrant was out of place in the new democratic atmosphere of Athens after Cleisthenes. Indeed, Miltiades’ personal enemies managed to launch a prosecution against him for ‘past crimes’ in the Chersonese, but under the looming threat of invasion, proceedings were quashed and he was elected to the board of generals. No doubt Miltiades drew heavily on the fact that back in 513 BC he had tried to thwart Darius by destroying his bridge across the Danube while the king was cut off in Scythia. The plan had failed, thanks to opposition from the top Ionian leaders. Still, according to his admiring Roman biographer Nepos, the scheme had won him the reputation of being ‘a friend of liberty’.

As a democratic reformer, Cleisthenes himself has been seen by some to be more of an opportunist than an ideologue. He had been restored from exile to Athens by Spartan arms and he rushed some spokesmen off to Sardis to gain Persian recognition and a formal alliance to keep himself in power. Still, up to a point, this can be excused: he knew the exiled Hippias was already bidding for the same support.

In 490 BC, Athenian democracy introduced by Cleisthenes in 509-7 still looked like a frail bloom. Though both fought at Marathon with distinction, Aristides and Themistocles, the men most associated with Athenian democracy, would not have their brightest days in the sun until the next war, against Xerxes. Herodotus’ says nothing about civilian politicians or the Assembly during the Marathon crisis: everything is decided by the generals.

A message for help was sent from Athens to Sparta with the runner Pheidippides. According to Herodotus, Pheidippides covered the 156 miles in one day, being a professional long-distance runner. This probably means that he carried messages for a living. In a recent re-creation, an amateur Greek runner, a nightwatchman, won by completing the distance in twenty-one hours, fifty-three minutes, suitably crossing a finishing-line marked by the statue of an ancient Spartan king. A version by the satirist Lucian (second century AD) had Pheidippides run straight back to Marathon to join the battle, then immediately to Athens (twenty-six miles and a bit, hence the modern marathon distance) to announce the victory before – suitably – dropping dead.

The Spartans were impressed by Pheidippides’ running, his bad news, and his stirring appeal, reported verbatim by Herodotus:

*Men of Sparta, the Athenians ask you to help them, and not to stand by while the most ancient city of Greece is crushed and subdued by a foreign invader; for even now Eretria has been enslaved, and Greece is the weaker by the loss of one noble city.*

But they refused to help, at least immediately, on religious grounds: they had to wait until the next full moon to complete an important local ceremony (the Carneia) in honour of Apollo. A question rarely asked, but surely obvious in the light of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, is: did the Persians know of this, via Hippias, and time their invasion accordingly?

Plato, in The Laws, attributes the Spartan delay either to their being distracted by a war with Messene ‘or some other reason – I’m not aware of any information being given on the point’. Is this just dramatic persiflage, or veiled ridicule of the lunar explanation? It is inconceivable that Plato would not know Herodotus’ version. But lunar superstitions were not restricted to the Spartans – an Athenian army in Sicily fatally delayed because of one – and there was the awkward truth that virtually all of the Greeks stayed out of the campaign. This national disgrace would be largely repeated in the second and much bigger war a decade later. Of the 700 or so independent city states that made up Greece at the time, only thirty-one have their names inscribed on the war memorial set up to honour the victory over Xerxes in 480 BC.

Athens, however, did not stand by herself. In gratitude for previous services rendered, the little central Greek town of Plataea came to her help – Plataea was to be ruthlessly destroyed sixty years later in the Peloponnesian civil war.

The generals were divided over strategy. Five opposed any offensive, urging a waiting game. They knew the enemy had chosen the site; to attack might play into Persian hands. There was also the chance of eventual help from Sparta. But the others were swayed by a fiery Death or Glory speech from Miltiades, including the War Archon (Minister) Callimachus who gave his support. In the battle Callimachus, commanded (by tradition) the right wing, the Plataeans held the left, leaving – as often in ancient engagement – a deliberately weak centre.

According to Herodotus, the Greeks charged ‘at a run’ (dromo is his operative word) from just over a mile away from the Persians, a first in their military history. And a stupid move, to judge from a recent American re-enactment: the cardiovascular strain and energy requirements make such a run impossible. No wonder Herodotus reports the Persians were delighted to see the Greek charge, calling it ‘lunacy’. Still, in terms of metabolic energy cost, a jog-trot could have been feasible: the heroic story would grow in the telling and dromo may be more a technical term than a literal one.

The struggle was protracted in this ‘never to be forgotten’ fight (Herodotus). The weak Athenian-Plataean centre fell back, but both wings prevailed. The Persians were driven back towards their ships, seven of which were captured, at the cost of Callimachus’ life. Herodotus says he died in the last phase of the battle, fighting bravely. The memory of Callimachus, dimmed over the centuries, has been refurbished by the recent discovery of the victory statue with an inscription commemorating his role.

Another distinguished casualty was Cynegeirus, brother of the playwright Aeschylus. Cynegeirus clung to a Persian ship until one hand was severed by an axe blow.

A famous puzzle attends the battle. Why are Persian cavalry not mentioned in Herodotus’ account? Some think the horses were kept on, or returned to, the ships, ready for a dash on Athens. Others have them grazing up on the northern part of the plain, thus missing the conflict. A Byzantine encyclopaedia, compiled around AD 1000, explains the proverb ‘The Cavalry Aren’t Here’ by saying that just before dawn some Ionian Greeks from the Persian side slipped across to the Athenian camp, and told their compatriots that the Persian horses were away, so this was the moment to attack. Nepos mentions that the Greeks were camped where the terrain was broken by bushes and trees, hence the Persians may simply have decided against using them. This rather invalidates Hippias’ reason for choosing Marathon. Another possibility is that the horses, never good travellers on water, were ill from the voyage and so unusable. A final theory is simplest of all: the horses were there, and took part, but Herodotus did not consider it worth mentioning.

The Persians then sailed fast around Cape Sunion, hoping to capture Athens itself. Some said they were drawn by a flashing shield signal from within the city by a group of pro-tyrant sympathisers, namely the Alcmaeonidae family of political aristocrats. Herodotus accepts the incident, but not the explanation, going out of his way to acquit the Alcmaeonidae of treason. Assuming such a signal could even be seen and deciphered, we are better employed asking what it meant: Invade Now? or The Plot Has Failed? Whatever the truth, after lingering a few days, the Persian fleet withdrew. Artaphernes and Datis returned to the Persian capital of Susa with little to show for their expedition but some prisoners-of-war from Eretria whom Darius treated with mercy, settling them in new homes within his empire. The king, in Herodotus’ words, was dismayed but not deterred by his setback and spent the next three years preparing a second, bigger armada. Death, however, cut him off, and it was left to his son and successor Xerxes to mount the second invasion. But that is another story.

Some Greek artistic depictions and later legends ascribed a role and personal appearances upon the battlefield to the Olympian gods, a theophanous tradition that extends from Homer’s Iliad to the Angel of Mons in the First World War. Pausanias claimed that the plain of Marathon echoes every night with the sound of horses whinnying and men fighting. There is none of this in Herodotus, but he does relate one fine tale:

During the action, a very strange thing happened. Epizelus, the son of Cuphagoras, an Athenian soldier, was fighting gallantly when he suddenly lost the sight of both eyes, though nothing had touched him at all – neither sword nor spear nor missile. From that time he remained blind for the rest of his life. I am told that he used to say, when talking about what had happened to him, that he thought he was opposed by a huge man in heavy armour whose beard overshadowed his shield; but this phantom passed by him and struck down the soldier at his side.

The full moon came, and with it the Spartans, marching 140 miles in three days in full armour. They observed the Persian dead, remarked ‘the Athenians have done well’, and marched back home again. Shortly afterwards, the Athenians rewarded Miltiades by fining him fifty talents (an enormous sum of money) for ‘defrauding the people’ – he had failed in a subsequent military operation. The hero of Marathon was prosecuted as he lay in court on a stretcher, thanks to a leg smashed in action and turned gangrenous. His prosecutor was Xanthippus, father of Pericles. This shameful (not a word found in Herodotus’ cool account – I prefer the indignation of Nepos) episode is well glossed by the cynical remark of the father of Themistocles who was himself destined to be distinguished in, then disgraced after, the war against Xerxes. Pointing out to his son some old ships rotting on the beach, he observed that the Athenians treated their leaders in the same way, dumping them when they had served their purpose.

Herodotus viewed the battle more as the end of the Ionian Revolt than the beginning of the Persian Wars proper. Although unstinting with his praise, he does not pile up superlatives on the scale of his accounts of Salamis (a sea victory for which Athens provided half the fleet, but Sparta the commander), or Thermopylae and Plataea – victories on land against Xerxes redounding most to the glory of Sparta. Similarly, Themistocles refused to celebrate the result says Plutarch, warning his fellow-Athenians that Marathon was not the end but only a prelude to a far greater struggle. Such a linkage is implicit in the mini-epic poem written between 478 and 468 BC by Simonides, fragments of which were found and published as recently as 1992, incorporating both invasions. It is explicit in The Persians of Aeschylus, in an exchange between Darius’ widow, Atossa, and a Persian councillor who attributes the Athenian victory to their democratic system – free men versus vassals. Aeschylus reduces the Spartan contribution to Xerxes’ defeat to a single mention of Dorian spears.

Aristophanes has a couple of set-pieces (Acharnians and Clouds) on the men of Marathon. In his Laws, Plato makes an Athenian interlocutor claim that although the sea battles of Artemisium and Salamis saved the Greeks, it was the land battles of Marathon and Plataea that improved them. He, too, sees Marathon as a link in a chain of events: it got the Greeks out of danger, Plataea finally saved them. For his part, Aristotle (Politics) maintains that their sea victories over the Persians gave the Athenian people an inflated view of themselves, and this came to impair their judgement when choosing leaders.

During the Roman period, Marathon became more rather than less exalted. Pausanias asserts that the local people of Attica worshipped its battle heroes as divine. He is one of several later writers to claim that Aeschylus at the end of his life preferred to commemorate his presence at Marathon rather than that at Salamis or his poetic fame, leaving an epigram which boasts that the witnesses of his manhood were the trees of Marathon and the Persians who landed there. Nepos, the Roman biographer of Miltiades, commented that: ‘the battle of Marathon is a great monument to valour; never have so few performed so well in the face of so many’.

Samuel Johnson later observed, ‘that man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon’. To John Stuart Mill, ‘the battle of Marathon, even as an event in English history, is more important than the battle of Hastings’. In Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Byron wrote of the day ‘when Marathon became a magic word’. Sir Edward Creasey in 1851 (Fifteen Decisive Battles Of The World, Extending From Marathon to Waterloo) thought that Marathon ‘secured for mankind the intellectual treasures of Athens, the liberal enlightenment, the great principles of European civilisation’.

Some of this is overheated. Assuming the Greeks went on to win the final conflict it is probably fair to say that the men of Marathon would have been almost as celebrated had they lost the battle. The best synthesis of the various verdicts, ancient and modern, is this one by Peter Green:

*Marathon, practically speaking, was no kind of final solution: it merely postponed the day of reckoning. On the other hand, this unprecedented victory gave an enormous boost to Athenian morale. It showed that a well-trained Greek army could beat the Persians on land – something the Ionians had never contrived to do. Psychologically speaking, the legend became almost more important than the actual battle.*