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# THE BATTLE OF MARATHON

Peter Krentz

*Foreword by Donald Kagan and Dennis Showalter*

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF

Major David Taylor

(1969–2006)

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Age shakes Athena's tower, but spares gray Marathon.  
The sun, the soil, but not the slave, the same;  
Unchanged in all except its foreign lord—  
Preserves alike its bounds and boundless fame.  
The Battle-field, where Persia's victim horde  
First bow'd beneath the brunt of Hellas' sword,  
As on the morn to distant Glory dear,  
When Marathon became a magic word;  
Which utter'd, to the hearer's eye appear  
The camp, the host, the fight, the conqueror's career,  
The flying Mede, his shaftless broken bow;  
The fiery Greek, his red pursuing spear;  
Mountains above, Earth's, Ocean's plain below;  
Death in the front, Destruction in the rear!

—Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

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## Foreword

War has been a subject of intense interest across the ages. Very early literary works like Homer's *Iliad* and the Rigvedic hymns of ancient India talk of war. Few can fail to be stirred by such questions: How and why do wars come about? How and why do they end? Why did the winners win and the losers lose? How do leaders make life-and-death decisions? Why do combatants follow orders that put their lives at risk? How do individuals and societies behave in war, and how are they affected by it? Recent events have raised the study of war from one of intellectual interest to a matter of vital importance to America and the world. Ordinary citizens must understand war in order to choose their leaders wisely, and leaders must understand it if they are to prevent wars where possible and win them when necessary.

This series, therefore, seeks to present the keenest analyses of war in its different aspects, the sharpest evaluations of political and military decision making, and descriptive accounts of military activity that illuminate its human elements. It will do so drawing on the full range of military history from ancient times to the present and in every part of the globe in order to make available to the general public readable and accurate scholarly accounts of this most fascinating and dangerous of human activities.

More than any other battle of classical antiquity, even Thermopylae, Marathon holds iconic status. Sir Edward Creasy describes the future of Western civilization as having rested on its outcome. The Athenians were no less certain of its implications. From Marathon's immediate

aftermath they honored their dead and memorialized their victory. Monuments and festivals celebrated liberation not merely from tyranny, but from fear: fear of a universal military empire that bestrode the world like a colossus—until the free men of Greece showed its feet of clay.

The myth endured, revitalized in the nineteenth century by a synergy of classical education, liberal thought, and democratic politics. It survived a revisionist backlash arguing that Marathon settled nothing and encouraged Athenian imperialism. But what is the face of that battle in the light of contemporary developments in archaeology and anthropology? What is Marathon's place in the context of a surge in Achaemenid studies that has fundamentally altered our understanding of the Persian Empire? Above all, where does Marathon stand in the changing matrices structuring approaches to the interaction, military and otherwise, of "the West and the Rest"?

Peter Krentz begins by contextualizing Marathon. He describes the Athenians' deposition of the last of their tyrants, and the new democracy's successful search for a Persian alliance to counter what seemed an overwhelming threat from a Spartan-led coalition of rival city-states. He argues convincingly that the alliance was enough to destabilize the coalition even without direct Persian involvement. And he describes the "flight forward" in which Athens, refusing to accept the submission required of a Persian connection, instead supported a rebellion of the Greek city-states of Asia Minor against their Persian overlords.

After six years of seesaw fighting, the revolt was defeated and the rebels tamed. Persia looked across the Hellespont. Great King Darius, ruler of 70 million people, dispatched an expedition. Its commander was charged with bringing Athens to submission. The price of failure was his head.

The rest is history—or is it? Krentz effectively establishes the site of the battle despite significant changes to the geography of the coastal plain. He convincingly reconstructs the Greeks' decision to fight. And he successfully restores in general terms the often-challenged credibility of the account Herodotus gave. His major contribution, however, is a consequence of addressing one of Marathon's major anomalies: the eight-stadia run.

Eight stadia equals about nine-tenths of a mile. Herodotus insists that the Athenians charged that distance at a run. Military historians since Hans Delbrück have dismissed this as hyperbole: a physical impossibility for fully equipped men without collapsing from exhaustion or falling into disorder. Krentz begins by establishing the maneuver's necessity. The Athenians, he shows, had to reach the Persian infantry before their cavalry, a devastatingly effective force built around horse archers, could deploy in the plain and shoot the vaunted hoplite phalanx to pieces. At close quarters the Greeks could fight on equal terms. And the charge succeeded because the hoplite phalanx as generally understood did not exist.

Contemporary scholars like Victor Davis Hanson hold that a Greek hoplite carried about 70 pounds of armor and weapons: almost half his body weight. They deployed in close formation, with about three feet of space per man, advanced to contact, and pushed forward like "a rugby scrum on steroids." Light-armed men, archers and slingers, played peripheral roles compared with the panoplied citizens.

Krentz makes a contradictory argument. He points out that Greeks were tough: physically active, used to hard work and systematic exercise. He then carefully reconstructs the weight carried by a hoplite, reducing it to a maximum of about fifty pounds. He goes further, arguing that not every hoplite was fully equipped, that from choice or necessity many carried no more than helmet, shield, and spear. The phalanx in the era of Marathon might have included archers and slingers, who sought targets of opportunity under cover of the hoplites. It might even have included dismounted horsemen.

The broken nature of Greek terrain meant that any charge at any pace was likely to scatter or bunch—more like the cavalry charges in an old Western than the clockwork movements of eighteenth-century regiments. The Greeks attacked not in close order, but together. The "push" (*othismos*) was not literal, but a description of hand-to-hand combat resulting in step-by-step retreat.

That is what happened at Marathon. According to Krentz's reconstruction, the Athenians broke camp, fell into line of battle, and marched forward until they were less than a mile from the Persians, who believed

they had plenty of time. No Greek army had ever charged a Persian one, and the Athenians seemed to have neither cavalry nor archers in support. Then Miltiades shouted, “Rush them!” The rush, actually more of a jog, took ten or twelve minutes to reach the Persian line through a hail of arrows. In heavy close-quarters fighting the Persians broke through the Athenian center, but the Greeks prevailed on the flanks, then closed in the center as temporarily victorious Persians tried to escape the suddenly formed pocket. As they fought toward the ships, the rest of the now-defeated army had time to board. Approximately 6,400 Persians fell in the battle. The Athenian dead, carefully numbered, totaled 192.

Krentz’s case for his scenario and its surrounding context is sufficiently plausible that the hoplite origins of the “Western way of war” will benefit from reexamination. What this work validates is a wider truth: that Marathon challenged and broke the aura of invincibility that enveloped the Persian army and the Persian Empire. To build on Krentz’s words, the confidence born on that day in 490 BC made Salamis conceivable, made Plataea possible, and foreshadowed the victories of Alexander the Great.

Donald Kagan and Dennis Showalter

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# Chronology

All three-figure dates are BC unless otherwise indicated. Many dates go back to a list of Athenian officials whose annual terms began in the summer, resulting in dates such as 511/10, meaning the second half of 511 and the first half of 510. See Appendix B for the date of the battle.

522	Darius (522–486) becomes king of the Persian Empire
c. 513	Darius invades Scythia
510	Spartans expel Hippias from Athens
508/7	Kleisthenes institutes democracy in Athens
507/6	Athenians give earth and water to Persians
506	Spartan invasion of Attica aborts Athenians defeat Thebans and Chalcidians
505?	Thebes allies with Aegina “Undeclared war” begins between Athens and Aegina
499	Persians besiege Naxos Ionian Revolt begins
498?	Greeks attack and burn Sardis
495	Battle of Lade
494	Persians take Miletus and recapture Caria
493/2	Artaphrenes’ settlement in Ionia Darius’ heralds visit Greece
492	Mardonios’ settlement in Ionia and campaign in Europe

492/1	Darius sends ultimatum to Thasos and orders shipbuilding	
491/0	Datis and Artaphrenes appointed to command	
490	March	Persian army and fleet gather in the Aleian Plain
	April	Persians advance to Rhodes, Samos, Icaria
	May	Persians take Naxos, Paros, Delos
	June	Persians take other Aegean islands
	July	Persians take Karystos and Eretria
	August/ September	Battle of Marathon
480	Battles of Thermopylae, Artemision, and Salamis	
479	Battles of Plataea and Mycale	

## Introduction

Miltiades squinted as he walked directly toward the Persians. The morning sun was rising behind them as they deployed. Miltiades had served with the Persians in the past and knew what to expect: row upon row of infantry archers who specialized in raining arrows down on their enemies, and mounted archers, riding sturdy Iranian horses, who threatened to disrupt the Athenian charge. If the Greeks broke and ran for their lives, the Persian cavalry would ride them down and shoot them at little risk to themselves. After all, every Persian learned to ride, to shoot a bow, and to tell the truth. The mounted archers knew their business.

Miltiades walked among his relatives and neighbors. As one of ten generals elected by the Athenian assembly, he led one of ten Athenian tribes. Each one comprised fathers and sons, brothers and cousins, neighbors and drinking buddies. They did not march in step wearing government-issue uniforms. Rather, each man supplied his own battle rattle: one or two spears, a short sword, a bronze helmet (perhaps one inherited from his grandfather), a round wooden shield, a corslet made of linen and leather to protect his chest, shin guards, and sandals. Some had all of these items; others were more lightly equipped. They walked with determination, most of them, and not a little trepidation.

After a week of watching the Persians ravaging and burning the fertile plain of Marathon, Miltiades had decided that he would fight today.

It was a bold decision. Aside from a contingent from Plataea, the Athenians had no allies present. Though the Spartans had promised to help, they had not arrived. The Athenians had no archers or horsemen capable of matching the Persians, who had chosen to land at Marathon partly because it was good ground for horses.

Miltiades had a plan. When he saw what he was looking for, he raised his arm, pointed at the Persians, and shouted *Hormate kat' auton* (Rush at them). The trumpet blew and the Greeks started to run. Before reaching the Persians they had to cover eight lengths of a Greek stadium, a total of 0.9 miles.<sup>1</sup>

The Persians heard them advancing like Homer's Trojans, who

came on with clamour and shouting, like wildfowl,  
as when the clamour of cranes goes high to the heavens,  
when the cranes escape the winter time and the rains unceasing  
and clamorously wing their way to the streaming Ocean,  
bringing to the Pygmaian men bloodshed and destruction.

Astonished to see the Greeks charging without archers or cavalry, the Persians thought they were crazy.<sup>2</sup>

### The Significance of the Battle

The outcome of that charge at Marathon on a late summer day in 490 shocked most everyone who heard about it. Over the previous two generations, through one brutal conquest after another, the dynamic Achae-menid dynasty had built the first world empire, extending from Ionia in the west to India in the east (Figure 1). The Great King Darius ruled some 70 million people. When he put Datis the Mede in command of a new expedition to add the Aegean islands to his empire, he told the general to bring the Athenians back in chains, if he wanted to keep his head.

I doubt that Datis worried much. No reason to. After suppressing the Asian Greeks' revolt in the 490s, the Persians controlled the sea. No Greek ships would oppose their fleet of 300 or more triremes, the biggest and best warships of the day, so expensive that the Athenians had only a handful of them. No Greek force had ever defeated a Persian land army.

Though Athens was large by Greek standards, it had only 30,000 adult male citizens. Given the competitive, quarrelsome nature of the fiercely independent Greek city-states, Athens was not likely to have many allies.

Moreover, Datis had right on his side. The Athenians had reneged on their initial submission to Darius, sent ships to support the Greek revolt, and participated in a surprise attack on Sardis, the wealthy capital of the Persian province in Asia Minor. They had burned the temple of Kybele, god the mother, whose indigenous ancient cult the Persians had not disturbed. The gods would surely be with the Persians, who respected the religious traditions of all their loyal subjects.

Datis had achieved all of his objectives but one. He had taken the Cycladic islands with little difficulty. He faced resistance at Eretria, the largest city on the island of Euboea, for barely a week. He had every expectation that he would take Athens too. The former tyrant (dictator) of Athens, Hippias, accompanied him and assured him that his friends would rally to the Persians' side. The chains were ready.

Then came Marathon. In one of the great upsets in world history, the Athenians killed 6,400 Persians while losing only 192 of their own men. They even managed to board and capture seven Persian ships before they could escape to deep water. Datis sailed back to Asia with empty chains.

Almost immediately, the Athenians heroized their dead and monumentalized their victory. The fallen were cremated on the battlefield. Over their ashes the Athenians erected the burial mound known today as the Soros (heap). Gravestones listed the warriors who died; duplicate gravestones were erected in the public cemetery just outside the Dipylon Gate at Athens. An Ionic column went up on the Acropolis with an inscription honoring Kallimachos, the titular commander of the army who died in the battle. Another Ionic column marked the battle's turning point. On the plain, the Athenians erected a separate monument to Miltiades, the general credited with the victory. Appropriate offerings went to Olympia and Delphi, the major panhellenic sanctuaries of Zeus and Apollo, where such dedications would impress the visitors who came to watch the Olympic games or to consult the Delphic oracle. New sanctuaries were created for Pan and Artemis in Athens, honoring them for their help in the battle.



1. Map of the Persian Empire under Darius



