

The Battle Of Marathon

September 490 BC

by [Major General Dimitris Gedeon, HEAR](#)

Note: The term "Greek" and "Greece" are generally used when quoting other sources. In my own text I use, when appropriate, the terms "Hellas" for Greece and "Hellenes" for Greeks.

The period of Greek history between 492 - 479 BC is marked by «The Persian Wars». This was a period of contest between the city-states of Greece and the powerful Persian Empire. The Persian Wars had their roots in the expansion policy of the Persians. It was impossible for them to expand their empire eastwards (towards India) or beyond Egypt (because of the Libyan Desert) or towards the inhospitable land of the Scythes (northwards); therefore, their only choice was to advance westwards, towards the European Continent. Greece formed the main barrier the Persians had to overcome in order to achieve their objective, with Athens being their most decisive opponent in Greece.

The Persians were in need only of a pretext and Athens provided it in 500 BC when the Greek city-states of Ionia in Asia Minor, being part of the Persian Empire, revolted against the Persian rule. Athens sent twenty ships to their assistance while the small city of Eretria of Euboea island contributed with five ships. Initially, their efforts met with success and the insurgents managed to burn down Sardis, the capital of the Persian satrapy of Ionia, but they were soon defeated by the Persians. The news of some unknown city-states of mainland Greece providing their assistance to the insurgents made the Persian King, Darius, wonder "what kind of a city Athens was"! When he was briefed on those insolent Athenians, he became so angry that he fired an arrow skywards and vowed to punish them. His anger was such that every night, he had a servant repeat to him "**Lord, do not forget the Athenians!**"

Thereby, the Athenians gave the Great King the pretext which he needed to invade Greece and make his way towards Europe. To invade Greece, Darius had to choose between two routes: one by sea and one by land, each one bearing advantages and disadvantages. He chose the sea route which proved disastrous. His first expedition in 492 BC failed because of a storm, sent by the Gods of Olympus which destroyed his fleet. Two years later, he launched his second assault, again by sea, but through a more southern route. This expedition resulted in the battle of Marathon.

Following the failure of the expedition of 492 BC, Darius ordered new preparations and according to the practices of the times, he sent heralds to the Greek cities and asked for "**earth and water**" as a token of their submission. Many cities were subjugated but many were not, Athens and Sparta being the first among them. The Athenians considered this demand being as a mortal insult that they precipitated the heralds from Acropolis and even condemned the unfortunate interpreters to death for reviling the Greek language while translating the Persian demand. The Spartans cast the heralds into the nearest well where they could find "earth and water" in great abundance! After that, war was inevitable. In the spring of 490 BC, the Persian army and fleet were ready. Their leaders were Datis, a Median, and Artaphernes, the King's nephew. Their mission was to force all the other Greek cities who had refused to offer "earth and water" to become vassals to the Great King, but also to destroy Eretria and Athens and «**bring all their inhabitants before him as slaves**».

The Persian fleet, transporting an Infantry and Cavalry force, sailed across the Aegean Sea in late August or early September 490 BC. Most of the islands along their route yielded to the Persian rule. The siege of Eretria lasted for six days until some of its citizens helped the Persians enter the city walls. The city was pillaged and the inhabitants who survived the massacre were taken as prisoners. Leaving Eretria, the Persian fleet sailed to Marathon bay where it anchored off and disembarked its troops. The location of their disembarkation is 35 km northeast of Athens. The force of the Persian army must have been some 48.000 men,

although this number varies according to different historians who have described the battle. But why did they choose Marathon? There is a story behind this decision. The Athenians at that time had just exiled Hippias, son of their last tyrant, Peisistratus. Hippias, who - along with his remaining supporters in Athens - wished to regain power, was at the time an adviser to the Persian Army. It was he who said to Datis and Artabernis to disembark in Marathon. They could hope, he argued, on drawing the Athenians away from the city of Athens, facilitating thus the seizure of power by his followers. It also seems that Hippias had in mind the battle between his father's army and the army of his political opponents in that same plain, forty seven years earlier. Peisistratus's victory won him the political power, as tyrant of Athens.

To quote Liddell Hart, if this was the reason for the disembarkation in Marathon, then this came off in success, for the Athenians finally decided to rush to Marathon to confront the enemy. But was that decision the right one? It seems that Hippias did not know his compatriots very well. The Athenians would have gone there anyway. As soon as they were informed of the Persian disembarkation, they sent a messenger to Sparta to ask for help and at the same time, they examined the following three possible courses of action against the Persian threat.

- Confront the Persians at Marathon (the most daring out of the three)
- Wait for the Persians at the Pallene pass (15 km eastwards of Athens)
- Face the Persians through the City walls (the worst out of the three)

The first solution prevailed due to the insistence of Miltiades, one of the ten Athenian generals. Miltiades persuaded the Athenians, by underlining that their arrival in Marathon would greatly surprise the Persians.

It seems that the surveillance system of the Athenians was so efficient that it immediately detected the enemy disembarkation. One must bear in mind that at that time the Athenian army could reach Marathon in 8 hours through the Pallene pass.

The Athenian messenger arrived in Sparta 48 hours later. The Spartans were willing to help, but not break their established law that prohibited leaving Sparta before the moon was full. So, they waited for the full moon before they sent a force in assistance of the Athenians which arrived after the battle of Marathon. But the Athenians had a most welcome surprise when they arrived at Marathon: a force of 1.000 Plataeans joined them to fight against the common enemy. Athens would never forget this brave act on behalf of the Plataeans.

It would be necessary to address the subjects of organisation, command, doctrine and way of fighting of the Athenian and Persian Armies.

The Persian Army consisted of Infantry and excellent Cavalry forces. Their doctrine was of defensive nature due to their main weapon which was the bow. Their usual tactics consisted in waiting for the enemy's approach and then "burying" them under a cloud of arrows. In 480 BC, King Xerxes spoke the truth when mentioning to King Leonidas at Thermopile that the Persian arrows would hide the sun (only to receive the Spartan reply "**Which is good, because we shall fight in the shade!**"). The weapons and armament of the Persian Infantry could not render them able for close combat, particularly against the heavily armed Greek Hoplites. Regarding their deployment, the Persians put their best troops, the Persians and the Sacae, in the middle of their battle formation, while in the wings they used to deploy the soldiers provided by their vassal states. The Cavalry was deployed in the flanks so that they could cover the wings and envelop the enemy, as required.

The Greek army's doctrine on the other hand was of offensive nature. Their main armament, that is the long, heavy spear, their heavy armour (helmet, breastplate, greave and shield) as well as their battle formation, the phalanx, favoured close combat. The phalanx was deployed uniformly, characterised by a depth of eight files. At that time, the Athenian army had neither Cavalry nor Archers. The Athenians were divided into ten "tribes" (phylae). Each tribe had to mobilise 1.000 hoplites (soldiers) and appoint one general as their leader. Thus, the Athenian army consisted of 10.000 hoplites and 10 generals. To that force one must add a number of

slaves and a Light Infantry force, armed with small spears. When the army was assembled for war, one of the ten generals was alternately appointed as head of the whole army throughout the day. Due to the fact that voting was required for any decision to be made, another general, bearing the title of "Polemarch" (literally "War lord") and having the right to vote as well, was appointed by the city. Thus, the number of voters being eleven, the case of parity during the voting procedure was eliminated.

As to the spirit of the Athenians, who enjoyed a recently founded democratic state, I had better let Herodotus, the contemporary historian and Father of History, to speak about it: ***"Freedom is an excellent thing since even the Athenians, who, while they continued under the rule of tyrants, were not a whit more valiant than any of their neighbours, no sooner shook off the yoke than they became decidedly the first of all. These things show that, while undergoing oppression, they let themselves be beaten, since then they worked for a master; but so soon as they got their freedom, each man was eager to do the best he could for himself."***

Miltiades, one of the ten generals, belonged to one of the noblest families of Athens. He was a wealthy man. About twenty eight years before Marathon, Miltiades had moved to Thrace as ruler of the Chersonese (Dardanelles) and lived there up to 494 BC. When the Persian Empire expanded to that territory, Miltiades was submitted to the Great King Darius and watched closely the Persian Army during its expedition against Scythia. Thus, he managed to obtain a good idea of their tactics. During his stay in the Chersonese, Miltiades conquered and placed under the authority of Athens the islands of Lemnos and Imbros and therefore, the public were very favourable to him. So, when the invasion of the Persians became a fact, he was elected as one of the ten generals of the Athenian army. The names of five of the generals are known. Among them were two generals who played a vital role in the last invasion of the Persians, ten years after: Themistocles and Aristides. The first would be the leader of Greeks during the naval battle of Salamis (480 B.C) and the latter would lead the battle of Plataea (479 BC). The name of the Polemarch is also known: Callimachus.

The plain of Marathon has the form of a crescent, with a length of about 10 km and a maximum width of 3 km in its centre. The plain becomes narrower towards its two ends where marshes, flooded during the period the battle were formed, therefore rendering it unsuitable for Cavalry operations. The Persians moved their ships ashore and camped on flat, levelled ground. They were greatly surprised to see the Athenian army arriving at Marathon and camping at the valley of Aulon (see map). The position was impregnable, offering full view to the Persian camp. The Athenians soon realized that the enemy did not intend to make an overland advance towards Athens since they had not occupied the two passes leading to Athens. Thus, the fear of treason became a decisive factor for the conduct of the battle. In the war council that was held, there was a parity of votes: five generals, with Miltiades first and foremost, were in favour of an immediate attack while the other five voted to attack after the arrival of the Spartans. Then, Miltiades turned to Callimachus, the man whose vote would be decisive and said, in the words of Herodotus: ***"With thee it rests, Callimachus, either to bring Athens to slavery, or, by securing her freedom, to leave behind thee to all future generations a memory beyond even Harmodius and Aristogeiton. For never since the time that the Athenians became a people were they in so great a danger as now"***. After this address, Callimachus voted for an immediate battle.

For eight days the two armies stood opposite each other. During the ninth day, the Persians started embarking on their ships and it became apparent that a covering force would keep the Athenian army at Marathon while the rest of the army would sail to Athens in order to seize the defenceless city. The situation demanded immediate action and Miltiades whose turn had come to be commander in chief, ordered the army of 10.000 Athenians and 1.000 Plataeans to deploy for battle.

Miltiades was facing two difficult problems and in order to solve them, he implemented new tactics, totally deviating from the ones the Greeks used to apply so far:

- Taking into account the fact that the deployment of the Persian army was 30 men deep (as described by Xenophon in his work *Cyropaedia*), 48.000 thousand men would form a front-line of 1.600 meters. To equal that front-line, Miltiades had to array

his army in a thin line. If the 10.000 Athenians formed a line of 8 men deep, the front would be only 1.250 meters wide, and thus the flanks would be dangerously exposed. But Miltiades's previous experience helped him assess the way the Persians would deploy their army: their best troops (Persians and Sacae) would deploy in the centre while their vassal forces (whose motivation usually was just "**fight or else....**" since no national cause inspired them) would be placed in the flanks. He also noticed that the Persian Cavalry had already embarked, offering him two advantages: first they were no threat to his flanks and second, they left the Persian flanks uncovered. This led him apply totally new tactics, which were to be repeated by Hannibal in the battle of Cannes 3 centuries later, as well as by the Germans during the battle of Tannenberg, 24 centuries later. He deliberately weakened his own centre, forming a line of two Phylae in a depth of only four men (i.e. since each one of the Phylae had 1.000 men, the front of the centre would be 500 meters wide). In each of the two flanks he deployed four more Phylae in the usual depth of 8 men, thus forming a front of 500 meters wide in each flank. (Thus the total front had a width of 500+500+500 = 1.500 meters). Finally, to the left of the left flank of the Athenians he deployed the army of the Plataeans with a depth of 8 men, and thus the front had a total width of 1.625 meters. Callimachus occupied the honorary position in the right flank. The two centre Phylae were led by two men that would become famous ten years after: the first one was Aristides (the Righteous), leader of the Athenian army during the battle of Plataea in 479 BC and the other was Themistocles, the victor of Salamis in 480 BC.

- The Persian army would try to exterminate the Athenian army with the use of arrows. The range of the bows was about 150-200 meters. Therefore, this critical distance, before the heavily armed hoplites could engage the Persians in close combat, had to be covered in the shortest possible time, and this could only be done by running. To this end, he applied the technique of assault. As soon as the phalanx of his hoplites would be within the range of the Persian arrows, they would run so that they could cross the endangered zone in the shortest possible time and fall against the enemy with the greatest possible momentum.

Therefore, the dawn of 17th September 490 BC, in perfect timing, Miltiades gave the order and the 11.000 Athenians and Plataeans formed their phalanx and marched against the enemy, while the hills of Marathon were resounding the hymn that the great tragic poet Aeschylus, who fought in all the battles of the Persian Wars, brought to our days through his famous tragedy "Persians":

"Advance, ye sons of Greece, from thralldom save

***Your country, save your wives, your children save,
The temples of your gods, the sacred tomb
Where rest your honour'd ancestors; this day
The common cause of all demands your valour."***

Herodotus tells us that "***When they saw the Greeks coming on at speed, made ready to receive them, although it seemed to them that the Athenians were bereft of their senses, and bent upon their own destruction; for they saw a mere handful of men coming on at a run without either horsemen or archers. Such was the opinion of the barbarians***". Nearing the "endangered zone", the Athenians launched their assault. The engagement developed exactly as planned. In the centre, the Phylae of Aristides and Themistocles fought bravely, but the numbers of the Persians obliged them redeploy towards higher grounds where the terrain gave them the possibility to regroup and continue the fighting. In the flanks, the Athenians and Plataeans had routed the opposing forces. Then Miltiades gave the order: they had to ignore the fleeing enemy and turn against the backs of the Persians of the victorious, so far, centre. And so they did. The Persians surrounded by their opponents, with their short lances, small swords and their knitted shields in hand, stood no chance against the Hellenic spears. They fought hard, but finally the formerly invincible Persians turned their backs and fled while the Athenians followed them to the ships. This is where the hardest battle took place and where the Athenians suffered the heaviest casualties.

Cynaegirus, the brother of Aeschylus, the noble and brave warlord Callimachus and many other Athenians fell in action. Following an intense combat, the Persians succeeded in saving all of their ships except for seven which were captured. The casualties of the Hellenes amounted to 192 Athenians and an unrecorded number of Plataeans and slaves, as it is obvious by the fact that the Athenians buried the dead in three tombs (mounts). In the first tomb were buried the Athenian citizens, the Plataeans in the second and the slaves in the third tomb. The tomb of the Athenians still exists in the plain of Marathon and it is the starting point of the Marathon race. It is believed that the tomb of the Plataeans is found at the foot of Pentele mountain. The tomb of the slaves has not yet been discovered. Among the dead slaves was a little boy, killed by a Persian arrow while giving water to the fighters of the battle. The Persians lost 6.400 men, but in these casualties one must also include a large number of prisoners. For Herodotus tells us that when Miltiades perceived that the Persian fleet could sail and attack the defenceless city of Athens, he left the Phylae of Aristides and Themistocles, who fought in the centre of the line, to secure the spoils and the prisoners. Then he and the rest of the army headed for Athens. It is also known that when the battle was nearing towards its end, a person standing at the summit of Pentele mountain lifted a shield towards the sky, in an effort to convey an optical message. It is assumed that this was a signal for the Persians by one of the followers of Hippias, implying that the City remained defenceless, or more possibly, for the Athenians by some special observer in Pentele who could easily see the Persian fleet sailing towards the shores of Athens.

The Persian leaders had indeed sailed for Athens and reached at the bay of Phaleron where yet another surprise awaited them: in the distant hills they saw the shields of the Athenians glistening in the sun. So they set about their fleet and left for Persia. That same evening, the Spartans arrived. They asked for permission to inspect the battlefield and when they were granted permission, they expressed their admiration for the feat of the Athenians.

In this way ended the first great conflict between Greece and Persia, but it did not end the fight. Ten years later a huge Persian Army, under King Xerxes himself, would invade Greece only to be defeated in Salamis and Plataea.

Was the battle of Marathon a "decisive" one? Two distinguished historians, Fuller in his *"Military History of the Western World"* and Creasy in *"Fifteen Decisive Battles"* have different opinions. According to Fuller ***"The Battle of Marathon was a remarkable battle both from the point of view of the Persian Strategy which was admirable, and of Greek tactics, which were no less so. For the first time in their history, the Greeks had defeated the Persians on their own element, that is land operations, and Marathon endowed the victors with faith in their destiny which was to endure for three centuries during which western culture was born. Marathon was the birth cry of Europe."***

Creasy agrees more with the Greek opinion when stating that the battle of Marathon was a decisive one for the world history. According to him: ***"The battle of Marathon dissolved once and for all the myth of Persian invincibility which paralyzed men's minds. It generated among the Greeks the spirit which repelled Xerxes and led Xenophon, Agesilaus and Alexander in terrible retaliation during their campaigns in Asia. It offered mankind the intellectual treasure of Athens, the establishment of free institutions, the liberal enlightenment of the western world and the gradual ascendancy for many ages of the great principles of European civilization."***

What was most important for the Greeks is epitomized in the inscription that was written over the tomb of the Athenians: ***"The Athenians, as defenders of the Hellenes in Marathon destroyed the might of the golden-dressed Medes"***. The Athenians were the first to realize that **UNITY** of all the Greek City-States was necessary to confront the Persian threat.

What are the conclusions we can draw from the battle of Marathon, in which courage triumphed over numbers and close combat over shooting arrows?

The most important conclusion is that the battle was a triumph of the forces of morale over the numerous ones. The Athenian citizen at Marathon was well aware of what he was fighting for: he was defending his land, his family, his home. On the other hand, the Asian and African troops, except for the Persian ones, did not know what they were fighting for and many of them had merely to choose who would kill them: the Athenians or the Persians!

As to the principles of war, it can be stated that Miltiades applied for the first time in recorded history, and without having graduated any Military Academy, the following:

- Offensive: He took the initiative and ordered a prompt attack against the Persians, even though his forces were inferior in number.
- Economy of force and mass: He deployed his line of battle in such a way that he could attack the weakest section of the Persian line with the strongest section of his order of battle. In other words, he applied strong combat power at the right place, at the right time. In this way, he did what few generals could have done: he broke a «taboo», that is he changed the long applied tactics, risking an anathema against him in case of failure.
- Unity of command. Herodotus states that the Athenian generals offered their turn of command to Miltiades, but he decided to attack during the day of his command. Thus, he ensured that all Phylae were under the command of one responsible commander.
- Surprise: Initially, he persuaded the Athenians to go to Marathon and later on, at the critical moment, he attacked the enemy, applying the new tactics in such a way that the Persians thought the Athenians « were bereft of their senses».
- Manoeuvre. During the battle of Marathon, Miltiades applied the manoeuvre of double envelopment. It did not matter that the front was not very extended. That was the way battles were fought back in those days. What matters is that this magnificent manoeuvre, often repeated by posterior great generals, was conceived and directed successfully for the first time by Miltiades who had not had any previous knowledge or example.

Finally, it would be right to quote the opinion of one distinguished historian, Hans Delbruck, on Miltiades, depicted in his classic work **«History of the Art of War, Warfare in Antiquity»**:

The figure of Miltiades as a battlefield commander stands giant-like in the early annals of world military history. In this battle one can find the most complete and rare form of leadership provided by warfare art up to nowadays; that is the combination of defence – attack, right within the artistic lines of the first major military event. One cannot but admire the perspicacity with regards to the choice of the battlefield, the self-control before the enemy attack, the authority over the masses, over an army made of proud, free citizens that enabled them to be steadily maintained in the position chosen and to be led to a rigorous attack at the right moment! Everything had been settled for this moment – not a minute earlier, since the Athenians would reach the enemy lines exhausted and disorganized, not a minute later, since the enemy arrows would find their target and the majority of men who would fall and hesitate would destroy the momentum of the assault which should come down as an avalanche right upon the enemy lines, if it meant to come off victorious. We shall have the opportunity to analyze this and other similar cases, but never one greater than this!

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