

Journal of History and Classics: The struggle for Greece: Marathon and Artemision

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Additional authors: If you have suggestions, please place them on the discussion page. If you want to be a co-author of this article, feel free to request that I designate you as a co-author. I wrote this some time ago and I am not wishing to study the subject again to expand it, so any help revising or writing the Abstract would be greatly helpful.

Notes: originally written as an essay over the period April 19-May 6, 2004. I originally got an A- for this essay so decided it would be a good "flagship" work to launch the Journal of History and Classics. The downside of this is that I did not have to produce an Abstract, so the one below is very rough and not quite up to the standard I aimed for in the rest of the essay.

Abstract. In 491 BC, King Darius of Persia decided to take control of the Aegean. The battles that resulted took place at various locations on land, such as Marathon, and at sea, such as Artemision. These two battles and others marked a turning-point in the histories of both the Greeks and the Persians, for it was here that the mighty Darius overreached himself; he sent only part of the force he would have mustered, had he realised the serious threat the Greeks posed to his armies. Though outnumbered, they fought bravely for their homeland and for freedom, whereas his men only fought for money. This article explores the causes of conflict, the process of the battle, and the reasons for its resolution.

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Introduction

In 491 BC, King Darius of Persia decided to take control of the Aegean. To demonstrate that he was not unjust, he first demanded the usual tokens of submission, the symbolic earth and water.^[3] Most city-states agreed, but Athens and Sparta indicated their answer by executing the heralds in the manner traditionally reserved for dispatching common criminals!^[4] This led to confrontation—first on the plain of Marathon, and later, ordered by his son Xerxes, a large sea-battle off the coast from Artemision in 480 BC. The classical writer Herodotus provides the most comprehensive source on the Greco-Persian wars, if not necessarily the best. He wrote "history" that in the modern-day sense would be called historical fiction—if he didn't know why a particular decision was made, he improvised.

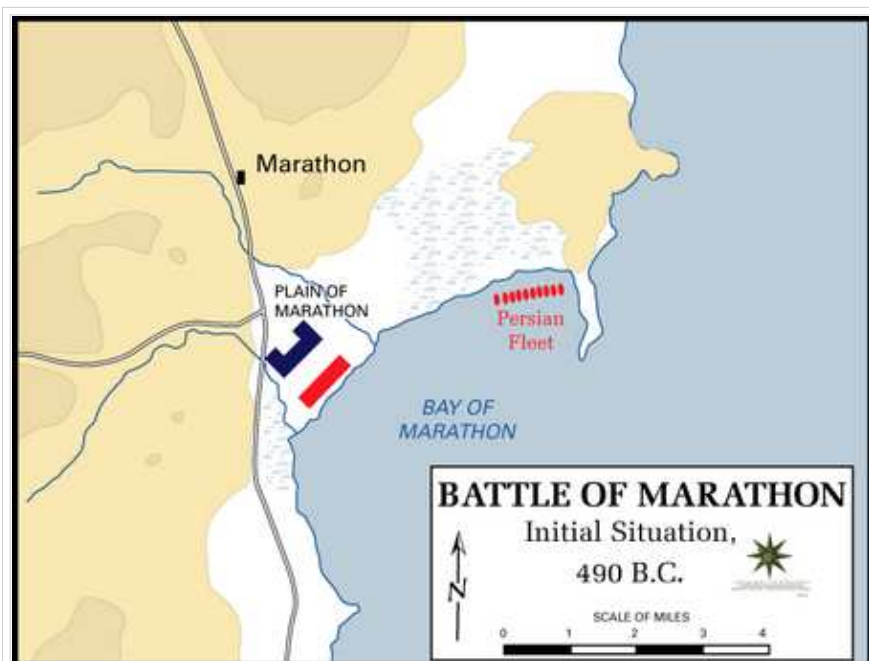
When he received news of his messengers' demise, Darius was understandably angered. According to Herodotus, the Persians sent 600 triremes,^[5] which could carry around 24,000 soldiers;^[6] 30 or 40 of these ships were turned into horse

transports,^[7] which collectively might have carried around 1000 cavalry.^[8] He wanted to punish them and restore the feared tyrant Hippias as dictator in Athens once more.

Darius chose the plain of Marathon because it was suitable for deployment of his cavalry.^[9] But politics may have also been involved: years before, Hippias arrived with his father Pisistratus, a fellow tyrant; they then gained help from the locals and took over Athens. Hippias may have believed he could give a repeat performance with Persian assistance. He had seen Eretria fall to treachery, and Greeks on a whole were known for their disloyalty. "Some modern commentators even suggest (there is no evidence) that Persian strategy was to draw the Athenians out of Athens so that either ... the city could fall by treachery, or ... part of the Persian force could be transported to Athens while the rest of it pinned the Athenian force down at Marathon."^[10]

The Athenians played right into their hands, as their traditional response to invasion was always to confront the enemy head-on in the field rather than try to withstand a siege. Not only was this more honourable, it was sensible, as the Persians were known experts at siege warfare, but the Athenians' hoplites had the superior armour. Before heading off to Marathon, Athens desperately sent a runner to Sparta to ask for aid; this enormous distance he covered is the origin of the concept and name of modern marathon races.^[11] Unfortunately, the Spartans were forbidden to do any military activities until the full moon due to religious purposes.^[12] However, after this period they marched for Marathon at once.^[13] The Persians feared the arrival of the Spartans, who were renowned even overseas for their military prowess. Interestingly, Hippias' presence didn't bring the support they had hoped for, and didn't seem to be helping to betray the city.

THE PLAIN OF MARATHON

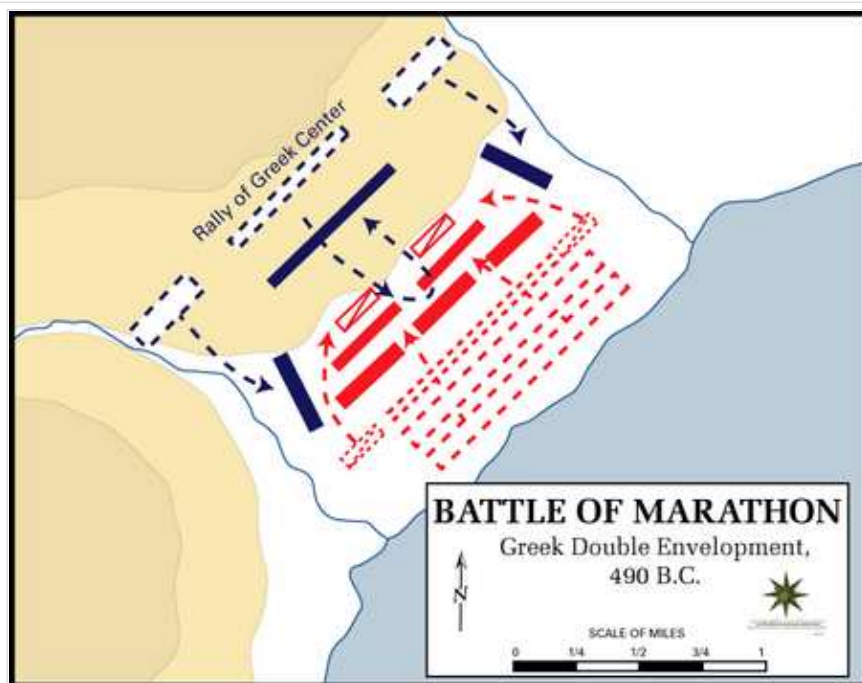


The initial positions of the troops before the clash. The Greeks (blue) thinned their centre to match the length of the Persians' superior force, but left their wings at full strength, resulting in the illustrated] shape. The Persian fleet (red) waits some way off to the east. This great distance to the ships played a crucial role in the later stages of the battle.^[1]

Some sources (not Herodotus) tell of a combined force of 9000 Athenians and 1000 Plataians on the battlefield.^[14] Despite this, the combined Greek forces still had inferior numbers to those of the Persians. The Athenians countered the Persians' superior numbers by thinning and thus weakening the middle ranks to about four men deep, but leaving the wings at the proper strength of eight deep; by doing this they were able to spread their men out over the same length as the enemy.^[15] This prevented the Persian ranks, with their greater length, from wrapping around them and penning them in. While some historians believe this to be a ground-breaking strategy, it could be that it was purely a logical solution to

avoid being outflanked.^[16]

The skirmishing at Marathon was lengthy; eventually, the Persian centre began gaining ground. The Greek wings were also successful, then turned and focussed their thrust on those who broke through their ranks.^[17] They chased after the fleeing Persians and picked them off; when the Persians made it to the coast, the Greeks began burning the ships.^[18]



The Greek wings (blue) envelop the Persian wings (red) while their strategically-thinned centre filled the gap made between them.^[2]

It is hard to believe that the Persians, while chasing the Greek centre and eventually moving further inland, could then turn and flee back *to* the sea when they were attacked from the rear! It is possible that the centre force, "realising that its wings had broken and fled, also tried to return across the battlefield, and was thus taken in *both* flanks by the victorious Greek wings."^[19] Fleeing was a monumental task in itself; the Persians likely had to go about 5 km to get to the ships. Despite the Greeks' attempts, the Persians managed to sail after losing only seven of their ships.^[20] But rather than fleeing altogether, they had a double purpose: not only were they saving themselves from being wiped out, they were going to attempt to sail back to Athens and take the city before the Athenians could reach it on foot.^[21] If they beat the Athenian troops home, they would still have won, regardless of the outcome on the battlefield.

There was apparently a signal from Athens of a raised shield on the shore, which showed them the city would be theirs. But Herodotus' story is flawed: how could a single, small shield be seen from such a distance, or distinguished from other shields held up incidentally? They could have simply send a messenger during the night; indeed, under these circumstances it seems likely that the shield signal was Herodotus' fabrication, perhaps to make the story more dramatic. Regardless, sailing back to Athens was a 100 km trip that would take 10 hours—about the same length of time it would take the land forces to march there. It was a neck-in-neck race. However, the indomitable Athenians arrived first; the Persians, already weakened by the Greek forces, had no choice—they didn't even attempt a landing and sailed home.^[22] As for the religiously disqualified Spartans, they arrived after a lengthy three-day march, saw nothing but dead Persians piled in a heap, praised the Athenians' prowess, and promptly went back home.^[23] According to Herodotus, "the losses were 6400 Persians for 192 Athenians"^[24]—an incredible feat.

Unlike the Spartans, the Athenians did not train a dedicated fighting force; they were no more skilled at combat than the Persians. However, the horrific thought of what would happen if they lost probably drove them to great acts of bravery.^[25] Not only would the Persians have set up Hippias in Athens as tyrant once more, they would have demanded tribute, and forced Athenians to serve in the army of their hated conquerors.^[26] After this victory, Themistocles, the Athenian statesman, promoted building a larger navy. If Darius sent a superior force they might have to evacuate the people by

sea—and that would require a great number of ships. Sure enough, even after this stunning defeat, Darius was only more determined to conquer Athens and Sparta. Perhaps he saw it as a challenge, or merely wanted to avenge his honour as they had made a mockery of his armies. Regardless, he sought to organise a full-scale invasion. However a few matters delayed him, namely an uprising in Egypt, a quarrel among his sons about the succession, and finally his death. It was now up to his son Xerxes to finish the job.

ARTEMISION

Xerxes built bridges, dug a canal through the Athos peninsula, and overall prepared the routes so his troops could travel unimpeded. He was planning a dual land and sea invasion: his men would march to Thermopylae, while the ships sailed around the coastline towards Artemision.

The actual figures for these forces given by ancient sources cannot be fully trusted. Nonetheless, the logistical preparations were of a grand scale perhaps matching such figures. Food was stored in Thrace in preparation for the troops; when they left this stockpile, they would have to carry their own food or raid local farming villages. For a very large army, such food supplies wouldn't go far.

It was not until 481 that the Athenians learned of this impending attack; when they did, they turned to the famous oracle of Apollo at Delphi. The response was that they were to flee before the Persians—but despite this they made up their minds to attempt a sea battle. They formed a league with the other states willing to resist, and made them vow not to abandon their allies. They put the Spartans in charge of the whole operation. This was the obvious choice to make; as the Spartans had a dedicated, well-trained army, they were the closest the Greeks had to professionals in this field. They called for help from Argos, Syracuse, Corcyra and Crete, but it was a futile effort, no help ever came. The spies sent to Sardis were caught, but Xerxes merely showed them the grandeur of his army (hoping to scare them) and let them go.

The Greek land and sea forces moved together so that each could support the other; this prevented the Persians landing men and wiping out the land forces, and simultaneously prevented the Persian navy from merely avoiding the Greek fleet and sailing around the coast to rejoin the army. Through this method of double blockading, both the army and navy of their enemy became significantly reduced.^[27] "Herodotus implies that the fleet of 271 triremes (127 of which were Athenian) ... reached its station during the eleven days between Xerxes departure from Therma [with his army] and the departure of his fleet."^[28]

Herodotus depicted Xerxes' advisor Artabanus as being pessimistic, and had him oppose the planned sea battle. As Herodotus' dramatisation depicts, there was no harbour anywhere large enough to possibly hold such a fleet if there was a storm brewing. And indeed (with the power of Herodotus' hindsight) a storm turned out to be their undoing; when the Persians finally made an appearance, 400 warships and a myriad of other craft were missing. Herodotus says that the sentinels on Euboea reported the vessels were wrecked on the Magnesian coast, where a storm caught them off-guard in a poor anchorage. However, they could not have physically seen the wreck, as that location was out of sight further along the coast. They must have just assumed that the ships were wrecked due to the recent weather and the fact that the ships were fewer in number than reports had indicated.

The Greeks assumed that the ships were wrecked due to the recent weather and the fact that the ships were fewer in number than reports had indicated. A deserter informed them that 200 Persian ships were being sent down the coast; it was decided that at midnight they would send their entire fleet off after them, as they had the greater force. The Greeks chose to launch a head-on attack simultaneously, perhaps to prevent the rest of the Persian fleet from realising where they were going and penning them between their two fleets—and they probably didn't want to lose face by appearing to flee. Herodotus says it was also to learn how the Persian *diekplous*, a special warship, would affect future naval confrontations.^[29]

Logically, to the Persians a direct attack sounded crazy, so they eagerly went out to fight when they saw the enemy approaching. Herodotus says the Greeks used a defensive formation; however he did not specify, so *what* formation it was is open to debate. It could be that they grouped themselves stern-to-stern (much like buffaloes do in the wild), arrayed in such a way that the enemy ships couldn't find a gap to target. In this way the Persians would be forced to ram, meaning

that "the speed and manoeuvrability of ... [the *diekplous* was] of no advantage."^[30]

The Greeks managed to commandeer 30 ships, and the Persians were left to retreat in amazement. Meanwhile another storm dissuaded the Greeks from following the other 200; the gods intervened, and the ships were destroyed in the storm. On top of this, an additional 53 Athenian ships arrived.^[31] However, despite these lucky victories, the Persians still had superior numbers, which in the end won the day for them. A mere 324 Greek ships^[32] were no match for the Persians' fleet of 653.^[33] In the final clash, the Greeks were getting the upper hand, but damages prompted them to flee the battle.

The Greeks won an early victory against incredible odds on land at Marathon, where they had slaughtered 6400 Persians at the cost of only 192 of their own men.^[34] Darius' small punishment force had been beaten off, and Greece was safe for a few years due to Darius dealing with his own troubles back home. When his son Xerxes took up the kingship, he attacked with greater strength. The Greeks reached little more than a stalemate at Artemision. Their amazing luck at Marathon ran out here—indeed the god Apollo had advised against a sea battle, and they had foolishly ignored him. Sunken and defeated, the Greeks limped off to desperately prepare for the imminent invasion. The battle for Marathon had been won, but the crippling defeat at Artemision negated this gain.

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1. ^ **Source:** Map courtesy of the Department of History, United States Military Academy.
2. ^ **Source:** Map courtesy of the Department of History, United States Military Academy.
3. ^ Peter Green, *The Greco-Persian Wars*, 2nd ed., Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, p.66
4. ^ Green, p.66
5. ^ Herodotus, *The Histories*, ed. and trans. A.D. Godley, retrieved 19 April 2004 from <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Hdt.+6.95> now located at <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0126&loc=6.95>
6. ^ Stuart Lawrence, *201.117 Warfare in Ancient Greece and Rome Study Guide I*, Palmerston North: Massey University, 2004, p.45
7. ^ Herodotus, 6.48.
8. ^ Lawrence, p.45.
9. ^ Herodotus, 6.102.
10. ^ Lawrence, p.46.
11. ^ Herodotus, 6.105-106.
12. ^ Herodotus, 6.106.3.
13. ^ Lawrence, p.47.
14. ^ Lawrence, p.47.
15. ^ A.R. Burn, *Persia & the Greeks*, 2nd ed., London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1984, p.249.
16. ^ J.F. Lazenby, *The Defence of Greece 490-479 B.C.*, Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1993, p.64.
17. ^ Herodotus, 6.113.
18. ^ Herodotus, 6.113.
19. ^ Lazenby, p.69.
20. ^ Herodotus, 6.115.
21. ^ Lawrence, p.49.
22. ^ Herodotus-6.116.
23. ^ Herodotus, 6.120.
24. ^ Herodotus, 6.117.
25. ^ Lazenby, p.80.
26. ^ Lawrence, p.50.
27. ^ Lawrence, p.56.
28. ^ Lawrence, p.56.
29. ^ Herodotus, 8.9.
30. ^ Lazenby, p.140.
31. ^ Lawrence, p.58.
32. ^ Lawrence, p.58.
33. ^ Green, p.62.

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External links

- Battle of Marathon at Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia
- Battle of Artemisium at Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia

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