

ANALYTICAL STUDY OF BATTLE STRATEGIES USED AT MARATHON (490 BCE)

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This battle analysis examines the function of strategic leadership in the defeat of the Persians at the battle of Marathon. Development of a victorious strategy depends upon a clear understanding of the objective(s) and must include an accurate appraisal of your assets and limitation and those of the enemy. Ultimately, a strategy must exploit your strengths against an opponent's limitations by incorporating historical knowledge and adjusting to changes for current circumstances. Political and military leaders occupied with formulating strategy, operate in a world devoid of absolute knowledge, forced to make assumptions on how their adversary will act or react. They understand completely the numerous factors that will affect a strategic performance. To accomplish a desired strategic result from a selected strategy requires visionary leadership. When countries go to war, strategic leadership is the one true thing that can unite a country and hold it together.

The Athenian actions at Marathon are most notable. Against the Persians, they lacked power to negotiate and were at a significant strategic disadvantage. Superior leadership was directly responsibility for the Athenian victory. Despite her strategic limitations, Athens would defy an Empire and furnish the Persians a crushing defeat.

ANALYTICAL STUDY OF BATTLE STRATEGIES USED AT MARATHON (490 BCE)

War is a grave concern of the state; it must be thoroughly studied.

—Sun Tzu¹

This analysis examines the role strategic leadership played in the successes and failures at the battle of Marathon (490 BCE). Furthermore, it will compare and contrast the Athenian and Persian strategies that were employed.

The Historical Background Leading to War

To understand what the Greeks were up against at Marathon you must look back to the year 522 BCE and study the events that led up to the battle. The Persian ruler was Cambyses II. At the time of his death in 522 BCE his empire stretched from the borders of India to the Aegean Sea, from Nubia to the Black Sea, and from the Indian Ocean to the Caspian Sea.² Over the next thirty years two Persians kings (Hystaspes (522-521BCE) and Darius I (521-483 BCE)) would expand the empire conquering four great kingdoms – Media, Babylonia, Lydia, and Egypt.³ In 512 BCE Darius recognized a weakness along his empire's Western border with the Aegean Sea.⁴ To secure this, he moved his Army across the Bosphorus and sailed north up the Danube pushing his empire boundary further westward.⁵ In 510 BCE the Athenians expelled the tyrant ruler of Athens, Hippias who fled across the Aegean Sea to Sardis.⁶

After his conquest, Darius returned to Sardis but left the trusted lieutenant Megabazus behind in charge with a large force. Megabazus made an unsuccessful effort to conquer Macedonia.⁷ King Alexander of Macedonia (Grandfather of Phillip II and great grandfather of Alexander the Great) eventually established allegiance to Darius.⁸

Prince Miltiades, the ruler of Chersonese, came under Persian rule once Darius consolidated control in the Hellespont.⁹ After years of fighting for the Persian Army, Prince Miltiades was forced to flee his home in 494 BCE due to a failed plot to rid Ionia of Darius' control.

With the revolt in Ionia completely suppressed Darius turned his attention back to European Greece, determined to exact punishment.¹⁰ In 492 BCE Darius ordered his forces, under command of his son-in-law Mardonius, to punish Athens and Eretria. Within a year Mardonius captured Thrace and quickly annexed Macedonia, compelling Alexander to resubmit to Persian authority. As he pressed on toward Athens his expedition fleet was destroyed during a great storm off the coast of Acte, near Mount Athos and he was forced back.¹¹ By this time the Athenians knew what lay in store for them as the Persian forces controlled the overland approaches to mainland Greece.

Undeterred from his strategic goal to punish and enslave the Athenian Greeks for supporting the Ionian revolt, Darius sent envoys in early 491 BCE to demand ships from every Persian seafaring city in preparation to transport a massive invasion force.¹² By the summer of 490 BCE, Darius started to amass his invasion force comprised of infantry, archers and cavalry at Susa in the interior of the Persian empire. Darius placed two generals in joint command of the expedition force, Datis (a Median) & Artaphernes (son of the governor of Sardis). Datis (senior commander) was given special instructions; capture Athens and Eretria and bring back all surviving residents as slaves. Once ready they marched from Susa to the port city of Cilicia and boarded ships destined for Eretria and Athens.¹³

Upon receiving word of the Persian invasion, a council of Athenian officers was summoned on the mountain slopes that overlook the fields outside of Marathon.¹⁴ From their vantage point the Athenian generals could see the vast armada and the prisoners left by the Persians on the island of Aegilia. If the Athenian forces failed, it was clear to them what their fate would be.

Geographic Analysis



Figure 1: Classical Greece 490 BCE¹⁵

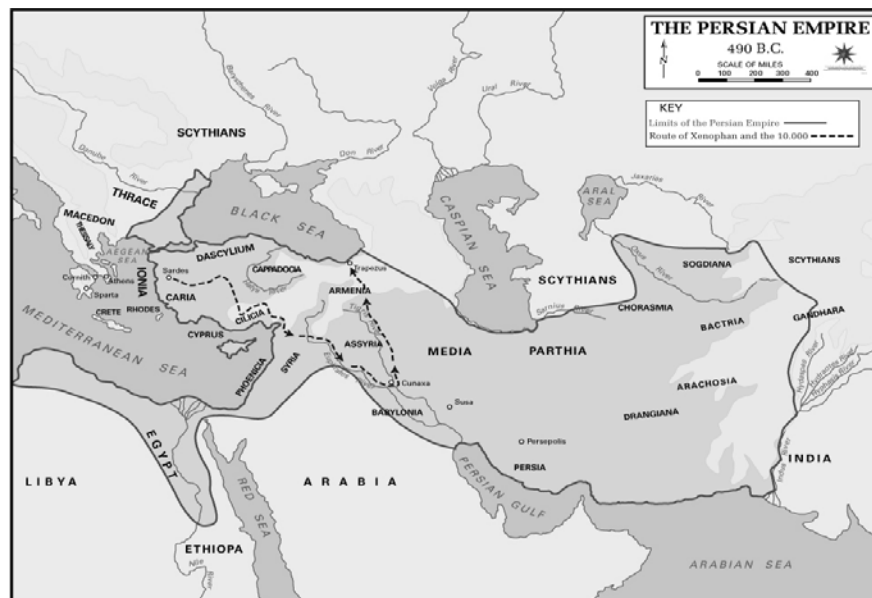


Figure 2: Persian Empire 490 BCE¹⁶



Figure 3: The First and Second Persian Invasions, 492 -490 BCE¹⁷

Battlefield Terrain Analysis

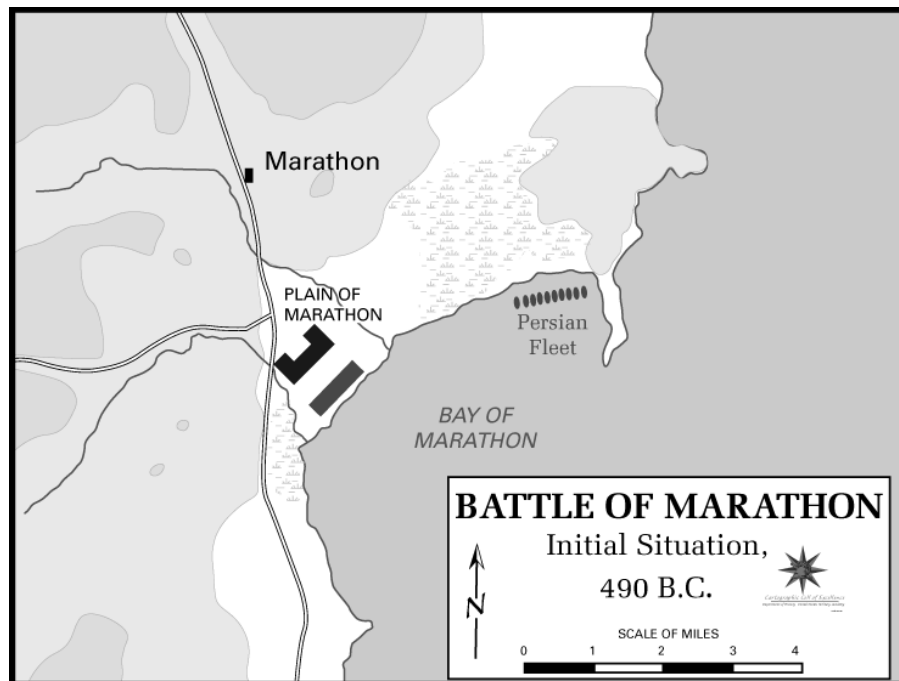


Figure 4: Initial Situation¹⁸

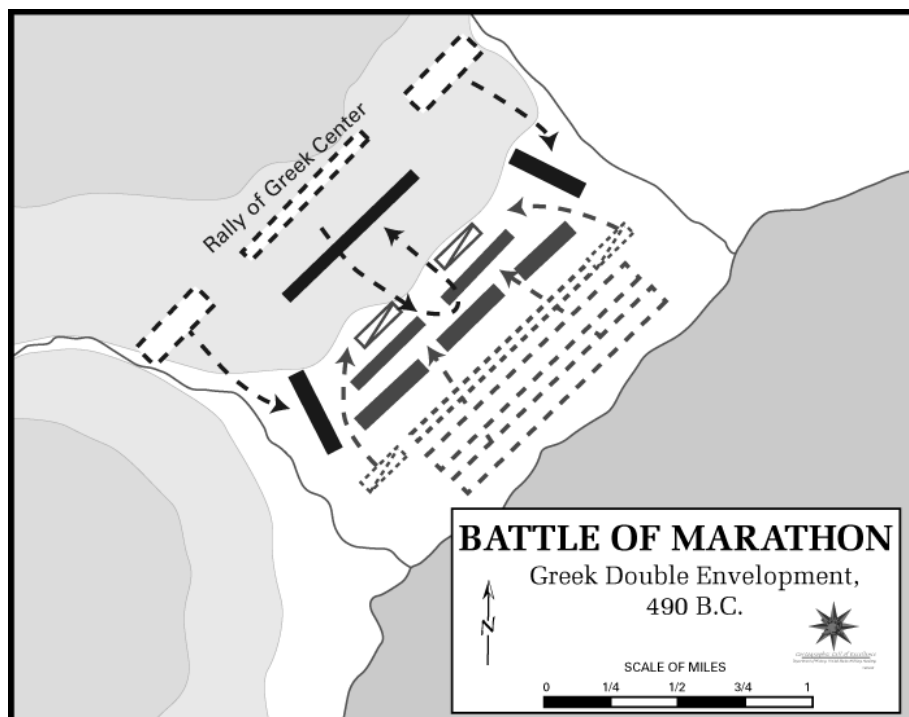


Figure 5: Greek Double Envelopment¹⁹

Persian Background

In 546 BCE, the Achaemenid (Persian) King, Cyrus II (the Great) (559 BCE – 529 BCE), began a campaign to enlarge his empire and captured Sardis. In 553 BCE the Persians attacked the Medes and by 550 BCE the Mede King Astyages, was captured and overthrown by his own grandson, Cyrus II. From that point on the Medes were subjects of their Persian relatives. In the new empire the Medes retained prominent roles. Many noble Medes held positions as senior officials, governors and generals in the Empire. Greek historians sometime even referred to the early Achaemenid Empire as the “Median” Empire.

In approximately 521 BCE, Darius I, son of Hystaspes, together with several other noblemen seized power by assassinating the man who had temporarily deposed his father.²⁰ Upon gaining the throne, Darius decided to consolidate and systematize the empire. Additionally, he was determined to suppress the troublesome Greeks who had rebelled along the western edge of the empire. Darius arranged his Empire into twenty regions, each controlled by a governor or satrap.²¹ Anticipating the need for rapid lines of communication he ordered a network of roads be constructed to link each region with his capitol Susa (Suster/Shushan). Darius also built posting stations/inns every 14 miles along the roads enabling messengers to cover the 1600 miles from Sardis to Susa in less than a week.

Darius restructured the Persian military. He rebuilt the Persian Navy with a stronger fleet of Triremes, to better control the eastern Mediterranean. The Army was consolidated into divisions, each consisting of 10,000 men. Divisions were based on a system of ten; ten battalions comprised of ten companies, each company having ten sections. The senior military leadership consisted mostly of Persians or Medes and his

10,000 royal bodyguards, known as “Immortals”, were solely Persian as well as most of the cavalry.²² Additionally, he tasked his generals (led by Mardonius) with conquering the Ionians and crushing any further uprising.

Persian Military Leadership

General Mardonius (d. 479 BCE). Mardonius was appointed general of the Persian military by his father-in-law, Darius I. He was the son of Gobryas, a Persian nobleman and close family friend of Darius. This alliance and friendship between Darius and Gobryas was reinforced through arranged marriages, typical of the age. Darius was wedded to Gobryas' daughter and Gobryas was wedded Darius' sister.

In 492 BCE, Darius sent general Mardonius to discipline the Greeks of Athens for supporting the Ionian revolt. His invasion force advanced across the Hellespont, first conquering the Greek island Thasos followed by Macedonia on the Greek mainland. Both were annexed into the Empire. Soon after his initial successes Mardonius' fleet was wrecked during a storm off the Acte Peninsula near Mount Athos.²³ According to Herodotus, because of the storm, Mardonius lost nearly 300 ships and 20,000 men.²⁴ About the same time as the storm, Mardonius was wounded while commanding the army at the battle of Thrace.²⁵ Losing the majority of his fleet during a storm and suffering from wounds, Mardonius was forced to retreat back to Persia. Due to his injuries, Darius relieved Mardonius of command and appointed Admiral Datis and General Artaphernes to lead the second invasion of Greece in 490 BCE. Mardonius was later killed by a Spartan, Arimnestus, at the Battle of Plataea in September 479 BCE.

Admiral Datis (or Datus). Datis was a Mede Admiral, of the Persian Empire, who served Darius I (the Great).²⁶ Datis was called to duty, with Artaphernes, for the second Greek invasion because Darius decided to temporarily relieve his son-in-law Mardonius

of military service due to injuries suffered during the first invasion.²⁷ Datis is credited with leading the Persian assault force during the Battle of Marathon. There are differing accounts as to the fate of Datis. Herodotus' wrote that Datis survived the battle but Ctesias of Cnidus claimed Datis was killed and the Athenians kept/refused to hand over his body:

Datis, the commander of the Persian fleet, on his return from Pontus, ravaged Greece and the islands. At Marathon he was met by Miltiades; the barbarians were defeated and Datis himself slain, the Athenians afterwards refusing to give up his body at the request of the Persians.²⁸

General Artaphernes. General Artaphernes of the Persian Empire was the son of Darius Hystaspis of Lydia, the younger brother of Darius I (the Great).²⁹ Artaphernes was appointed co-commander with Datis to lead the expedition sent by Darius I to punish Athens and Eretria for their support in the Ionian revolt.³⁰ A decade after the battle of Marathon, Artaphernes would command the Lydians and Mysians under Xerxes I.³¹

Persian Equipment

Persian infantry normally fought with a short lance/spear, sword or dagger.³² Some in the Persian Army fought with Cimeters (scimitar) – a highly curved, single-edged saber, used for slicing or hacking.³³ For protection they would carry a wicker shield and might wear a leather jerkin/gerrhes.³⁴ Exceptions to this would have been ethnic Persian troops who wore a corslet of scaled armor.³⁵ Archers were armed with a re-curved bow and also carried a short spear and sword.³⁶ Herodotus wrote about Axmen from Saka being present at Marathon.³⁷ He also wrote about the Immortals carrying wicker shields, short spears, swords or large daggers, with a bow and arrows.³⁸ Armament is distinct from that of the Greek hoplite warrior.

Persian Forces

Army. Datis and Artaphernes commanded between 100,000 to 150,000 warriors comprised of Persians, Bactrians Medians, Kissians and Sakas.³⁹ At the Battle of Marathon there were most likely no more that 20,000-25,000 troops brought ashore for battle.⁴⁰ It is a logical supposition this force was comprised of two myriads of infantry (20,000), two regiments of cavalry (2,000), two regiments of archers (2,000) and some supporting light infantry (1,000).⁴¹

Navy. According to Herodotus, the fleet sent by Darius had 600 triremes, a huge fleet.⁴² An additional 30–40 transport ships would have been necessary to move the cavalry.⁴³

Persian Campaign Strategy

Darius' strategic vision was straightforward; crush the Greek states in retaliation for supporting the Ionian revolt against Persian rule. To accomplish this, Datis and Artaphernes formed their amphibious assault force from roughly 100,000 warriors comprised of infantry, archers, cavalry and over 600 triremes plus support ships.⁴⁴ Datis and Artaphernes then devised a complex campaign strategy. They would cross the Aegean Sea by island hopping; establishing a Sea Line of Communication (SLOC). Landings would be made on the Islands of Rhodes (to besiege the city of Lindos), then Naxos, Delos, and Euboea (off the southern tip at near the city of Karystos).⁴⁵ After capturing the city of Karystos, the Persians would consolidate logistics bases along the chain of captured islands. Once the SLOC was established they could accomplish their first objective, destroy the city of Eretria and enslave its populace.⁴⁶ After Datis and Artaphernes finished off Eretria they would execute the second phase, attack Athens.⁴⁷

In an attempt to subvert the Greeks, the Persians brought the exiled tyrant Hippias with them, hopeful he might provoke political unrest to gain access to the city.⁴⁸ He also acted as a guide, providing crucial intelligence on landing sites.⁴⁹ On the advice of Hippias, Datis opted against a direct assault on the walled city of Athens and put his forces ashore at Marathon, approximately 25 miles north of Athens.⁵⁰ Landing the assault force at Marathon was intended to draw the Athenians out, away from the defensive fortifications of Athens, to provide, if necessary, optimal terrain to maneuver ground forces against the Greeks.⁵¹ At some point, Datis and Artaphernes planned to secretly divide their force. While a contingent stayed behind to distract and hold the Greeks assembled at Marathon, others would re-embark on their ships and sail around the cape at Sunium to attack the undefended city of Athens.⁵²

Athenian Background

The Athenians were a collection of ten tribes. Each of the ten tribes had equal authority. By Athenian law every year a general was elected to lead his respective tribe. Additionally the ten tribes would elect nine Archons (árkhon = ruler/regent/commander) (a term still in use today): The first, for whom the year was named in honor, was called Eponymous archon. The second, who succeeded to the religious duties of the original Kings of Athens was called King (basileús) archon, the third was the war leader, Polemarch (polémarkhos) archon, and the last/lower six (6) were Thesmothetae, elected citizens who comprised the judicial system.⁵³ In 490 BCE the Eponymous Archon of Athens was Phainippos.⁵⁴

A council of war was comprised of eleven members. The eleventh member was one of the nine (9) Archons, the Polemarch (the general in command of the Army).⁵⁵ General Callimachus happened to be the elected Polemarch for that year.⁵⁶ As Athenian

law directed the ten tribes' generals plus the Polemarch would go to council before any military action to elect a magistrate/Polemarch (War Ruler/Commanding General). This Polemarch would determine the battle strategy and command the military during the ensuing battle.⁵⁷

As the Persian invasion force began establishing their beachhead, the Athenian war council, assembled in the hills overlooking Marathon, was split in its opinion. Five generals were against risking battle, because they felt the Persians' numerical superiority was too overwhelming. Five other generals were for taking immediate action against the Persians. General Miltiades was among these five who pushed for battle. This left General Callimachus to cast the deciding vote.⁵⁸

Herodotus wrote about what transpired a few years after the battle of Marathon. From his account General Miltiades gave a fervent appeal to the Polemarch (General Callimachus):

It now rests with you, Callimachus, either to enslave Athens, or, by assuring her freedom, to win yourself immortality of fame, such as not even Harmodius and Aristogiton have acquired; for never, since the Athenians were a people, were they in such danger as they are in at this moment. If they bow the knee to these Medes they are to be given up to Hippias, and you know what they then will have to suffer. But if Athens comes victorious out of this contest, she has it in her to become the first city of Greece. Your vote is to decide whether we are to join battle or not. If we do not bring on a battle presently, some factious intrigue will disunite the Athenians, and the city will be betrayed to the Medes. But if we fight, before there is anything rotten in the state of Athens, I believe that, provided the gods will give fair play and no favor, we are able to get the best of it in an engagement.⁵⁹

Callimachus voted in favor of battle and Miltiades was elected Polemarch Archon.

Fearful of creating any jealousy, Miltiades decided to wait several days until the normal rotation of command fell to him before he led the troops into battle. Two other

notable leaders were also present during the war council at Marathon; Themistocles, architect of the Athenian Navy and destined victor of Salamis, and Aristides, who would lead the Athenians to victory at Plataea.

Greek Military Leadership

Miltiades (550 BCE – 489 BCE). Miltiades was the step-nephew of a very wealthy and prominent Greek, Miltiades the Elder.⁶⁰ He was known as the tyrant of the Greek colonies after taking control of the Thracian Chersonese in approximately 516 BCE and then imprisoning his rivals there.⁶¹ He was married to Hegesipyle, the daughter of king Olorus of Thrace.⁶² Coincidentally, Olorus was also the name of Thucydides' father.

Miltiades had at one time been an officer of the Persian Empire and fought for Darius in the expedition against Scythians in 513 BCE.⁶³ This provided him with invaluable experience and inside knowledge on Persian battle tactics and capabilities.⁶⁴

Miltiades was a key participant in the Ionian Revolt of 499 BCE against the Persians. During the revolt Miltiades' forces captured the islands of Lemnos and Imbros.⁶⁵ He relinquished them to the Athenians for their support. His actions drew favor from the mainland Greeks strengthening his bond with Athens. In 494 BCE the revolt faltered and in 492 BCE Miltiades was forced to escape to Athens.⁶⁶ During the getaway, his son Metiochus was captured by the Persians and taken back to Darius.⁶⁷

Once in Athens, Miltiades initially faced a hostile reception from his family's enemies for his tyrannical rule of the Thracian Chersonese.⁶⁸ The Athenians tried him for the crime of tyranny, but, at trial, Miltiades successfully argued that he was a defender of Greek freedoms against Persian oppression, and evaded punishment.⁶⁹

In 489 BCE, one year after the Athenian victory at Marathon, Miltiades used his political capital to gain command of an expedition force comprised of 70 ships, with an armed force and financial support.⁷⁰ He intended to seek retribution upon the Greek island of Paros because a Parian, Lysagoras, had several years earlier endeavored to destroy his reputation.⁷¹ The inhabitants of Paros were labeled collaborators for sending a trireme to support the Persians at the battle of Marathon.⁷²

Miltiades' expedition fleet attacked Paros, but was forced to withdraw after 26 days.⁷³ During this campaign Miltiades was wounded in the leg and incapacitated, forcing him to leave the fight.⁷⁴ His failure at Paros incited severe public outcry, especially from his rivals. When he returned to Athens, his political adversaries seized the opportunity and Miltiades was tried once more.⁷⁵ This time he was convicted of treason and his sentence was transmuted to a fine of 50 talents.⁷⁶

Miltiades, soon after his trial, succumbed to his injuries he sustained on the island of Paros and died in 489 BCE.⁷⁷ His debt was eventually paid by his son, Cimon.⁷⁸

Callimachus (d. 490 BCE). Callimachus from Aphidnre, was an honored dignitary of Athens and the chosen Polemarch for the year.⁷⁹ As war ruler, he commanded the right wing of the Athenian Army at Marathon. Although triumphant, Callimachus was killed during the struggle.⁸⁰

Themistocles (524 BCE – 459 BCE). Themistocles was a native Athenian who grew to be a politician and general of Athens.⁸¹ Athenian nobility were frequently at odds with Themistocles because he was a populist but he was well liked and carried the support of the lower class in Athens. He rose to power in 493 BCE after being elected

Archon. He was a firm believer in naval power (he is known as a naval commander) and continually sought to increase the size and strength of the Athenian Navy throughout his political life.⁸²

Themistocles was one of the ten generals who fought at the battle of Marathon.⁸³ Due to the Athenians' success at the battle, he earned great respect from the people and became a prominent political figure in Athens. Themistocles, as a politician, continuously pushed for a robust Navy. In 483 BCE his wishes were realized, when he successfully convinced the government to build 200 triremes.⁸⁴ Later, when Persia invades Greece for a second time, these ships, along with Themistocles brilliant seamanship and skill at deception, would prove pivotal in turning back the onslaught.⁸⁵

In 471 BCE, Themistocles was implicated in a treasonous plot and went into exile. He eventually was forced to flee to Asia Minor and offered his services to the Persian King Artaxerxes I.⁸⁶ The king made Themistocles governor of Magnesia where he resided until his death in 459 BCE.⁸⁷

Themistocles naval strategies established the Athenian Navy as a formidable maritime force, marking it as the foundation of the Athenian Empire. Thucydides wrote of Themistocles – “Indeed, Themistocles was a man who showed an unmistakable natural genius; in this respect he was quite exceptional, and beyond all others deserves our admiration.”⁸⁸

Aristides (530 BCE – 467 BCE). Aristides, nicknamed "the Just", was the son of Lysimachus.⁸⁹ He first achieved notoriety as one of the ten generals in command of his native tribe Antiochis at the Battle of Marathon.⁹⁰ Because of his reputation acquired in combat, he was elected Archon the following year (489 BCE – 488 BCE).

Aristides was a firm believer in land power, and as such, he opposed the naval policies put forth by Themistocles.⁹¹ Aristide was eventually expelled (ostracized) from Athens for ten years because of the feud between the two statesmen.⁹²

Aristides was recalled from exile to help defend Athens against the second Persian invasion and elected general for the year 480 BCE - 479 BCE.⁹³ During the Battle of Salamis he loyally supported Themistocles, and ensured Athenian victory by successfully invading the island of Psyttaleia and destroying the Persian stronghold garrisoned there.⁹⁴

In 479 he was once again chosen general, and given special powers as commander of the Athenian forces during the Battle of Plataea.⁹⁵ His opinion was, on the whole, accepted as fair and reasonable and he benefited from a leading status in Athens. He remained on good terms with Themistocles, whom he helped to outsmart the Spartans in rebuilding the walls of Athens.⁹⁶ Before he died in 467 BCE, he witnessed the extradition of his long time comrade and occasional rival, Themistocles.⁹⁷

Greek Equipment

The armament of a Greek hoplite (heavy infantrymen) consisted of a Dory (long spear), Aspis (shield), helmet, breastplate or Linothorax, greaves (shin armor) and Xiphos (short sword).⁹⁸

A Dory (Spear) measured about 2.4 meters (9 feet) long, it usually had a curved leaf shape head, and was the primary weapon of a hoplite.⁹⁹ The butt of the spear also had a spiked tip known as a sauroter. The sauroter was normally used to stand the spear up in the ground. During combat it was used as a secondary weapon if/when the wooden-shaft broke or shattered.¹⁰⁰ This broken shaft was a common problem for hoplites engaged in the initial clash with the enemy lines.

An Aspis, sometimes referred to as a Hoplon (Shield), was round and roughly 1 meter (36 inches) in diameter, made from wood (oak planks) and covered in bronze.¹⁰¹ It spanned from chin to knee and weighed approximately 8–15 kg (25-30 lbs).¹⁰² This medium-sized shield with its dish-like shape made it possible for hoplites to partially support its weight by hanging the rim on their shoulder. This was an important feature of the Aspis especially for the hoplites that were in the last ranks.¹⁰³ While these soldiers continued to help press forward they did not have the added burden of holding up their shield. But the circular shield was not without its disadvantages. Despite its mobility, protective curve, and double straps, the circular shape created gaps in the shield wall at both its top and bottom. These gaps left parts of the hoplite exposed to potentially lethal spear thrusts and were always an area of concern for hoplites in the front lines.¹⁰⁴

A hoplite's body armor typically consisted of a helmet with cheek-plates, a breastplate (or linen corslet) weighing between 22-27 kilograms (50-60 pounds), and greaves (shin armor).¹⁰⁵ Most Greeks wore body armor cast of bronze. Hoplites who could afford it typically had their bronze breastplate formed in either the bell or muscled type and some form of supplementary armor.¹⁰⁶ Linen corslet armor was composed of stitched/laminated/glued linen fabrics that were sometimes reinforced with animal skins/bronze scales.¹⁰⁷ The linen corslet was the most popular armor worn by the hoplites since it was cost effective and provided decent protection.¹⁰⁸ A complete set of armor was called "panoply" and weighed between 85 and 90 pounds.¹⁰⁹

Xiphos (swords) were normally 50-60 cm (2 ft) in length, double sided and characteristically wielded in either a slashing or thrusting movement.¹¹⁰ This short sword was a backup weapon, used if the spear was broken or lost in combat.¹¹¹

Greek Forces

Army. Present at the battle of Marathon were approximately 11,000 well-disciplined heavy infantry made up of 10,000 Athenians and 1,000 Plataeans.¹¹² There is no mention made of any archers or cavalry supporting the Greek forces, which was typical of the period.

Navy. No Greek naval forces were known to be present during the battle.

Athenian Campaign Strategy

The Greeks had no professional military schools to educate officers but they were the first known society to produce “systematic military treatises on tactics and strategy.”¹¹³ Most (all) Greek military officers/leadership came from the upper classes.¹¹⁴ Miltiades, Callimachus, Themistocles, and Aristides were no exception, each one emerging from prominent wealthy Greek families. A key difference between Greek and Persian leadership; Greek officers led their men from the front and fought battles at the head of the formation, setting the example for all to see.¹¹⁵

Command and control of the Athenian Army was based on a daily rotating construct between the ten tribes of Athens.¹¹⁶ Annual command of the Army fell to the Polemarch, elected for a one-year term. Prior to any battle, field command and strategy was decided at War Council. At Marathon the War Council chose Miltiades to lead them as commanding general. Based on his background, it was sure to anger the Persians.

Many Greeks favored staying behind the walls of Athens to avoid a decisive battle, but those who favored deploying the Army to avoid a protracted siege or traitors opening the gates for Hippias won the vote.¹¹⁷

Realizing they would need more troops, to stop the Persian invasion force which was rapidly approaching Greece, before the generals departed Athens, they dispatched

a herald to request help from Sparta.¹¹⁸ Another was most likely sent to Plataea.¹¹⁹ With Miltiades' keen knowledge of Persian tactics, strategy, and use of espionage, he knew the Persians would try deception to draw them into the open to maximize the effect of their archers and cavalry on his small force.¹²⁰

Most Greek armies structured themselves primarily in the same manner. Hoplites formed for battle into compact formation called a phalanx. A *lochos* (or standard phalanx) was 8 men in depth.¹²¹ *Enomotia* (the smallest phalanx formation) were three files of 12 men; it normally deployed as a 6-man front by 6 men deep.¹²² *Pentekostyes* were two *enomotia* formed as one (72 men).¹²³ When two *pentekostyes* joined ranks they formed the *lochos*, led by a company commander.¹²⁴ Four *lochi* combined comprised a *mora*. *Moras* were commanded by a regimental commander and had approximately 576 warriors.¹²⁵ Greek custom dictated that the best hoplites form an elite *mora* on the right wing of the formation; and be led by the polemarch.¹²⁶

The topography found in Greece tends to restrict maneuvering battlefield formations. Due to the varied and, in some circumstances, impassable conditions, commanders would design campaign strategies to integrate geographic conditions.

Phalanxes were highly disciplined but also very limited in maneuver techniques. Commanders moved in mass, aligned in simple rectangles extending hundreds of feet; or in the case at Marathon almost a mile long; and 30 feet deep.¹²⁷ Battle formations marched toward each other until the front ranks collided.¹²⁸ Upon initial contact the formation would surge forward; hoplites in the front two ranks thrust their spears overhead into the enemy ranks arrayed before them, the men in the rear ranks would press forward pushing with their shields forcing enemy formations to fracture.¹²⁹

Miltiades was an expert field commander, skilled in the art of maneuver warfare.¹³⁰ His defensive battle positions were near the mouth of the valley at the southwestern end that opened up to the plain of Marathon.¹³¹ Terrain there was restrictive and opened up approximately one kilometer wide, 100 meters from the mouth of the valley.¹³² To strengthen his combat power, Miltiades deployed his formations close to the mouth, on the high ground, in blocking positions.¹³³ The flanks were anchored in the rocky hills on either side.¹³⁴ To cover their partially exposed right flank they built an abatis.¹³⁵

After three days, Miltiades determined the Persians were not going to attack, but had intended to fix and hold the Greeks in place, while the rest of Datis' forces made its way to Athens.¹³⁶ He realized they would have to attack them, and soon, if he were to have any chance of stopping the Persians from sailing around and attacking Athens. Miltiades altered his strategy. To prevent a flanking of the Greek formation, he would form the phalanxes, along a wide front, matching that of the Persians' lines. To achieve this he thinned his lines in the center formations and strengthened the wings. Marching his forces toward the Persians at a run or trot would prevent the archers from massing arrows on his exposed troops. Upon initial contact the Greek center would either fix the Persian center, or give ground allowing the Greek wings to push forward. Using a double envelopment strategy, the left and right wings would pivot and attack inwards toward the middle crushing the Persians in between them.¹³⁷

The Battle

Before marching out of Athens, the generals sent a herald, Pheidippides, off to Sparta to ask for reinforcements. He covered the roughly 225km (140 miles) between

Athens and Sparta in under two days.¹³⁸ Upon his arrival he relayed the following message:

Men of Lacedaemon, the Athenians beseech you to hasten to their aid, and not allow that state, which is the most ancient in all Greece, to be enslaved by the barbarians. Eretria, look you, is already carried away captive; and Greece weakened by the loss of no mean city.¹³⁹

The Spartans wanted to help the Athenians but were unable due to an established law forbidding them to march out during their holiest of festivals, the Carneia.¹⁴⁰ Sparta promised help but would have to wait for the full moon, about ten days time.¹⁴¹ From this remark by Herodotus, astronomers have ascertained that August 12, 490 BCE was the day the battle took place.

During Pheidippides' run back to Athens he had a vision, most likely caused from exhaustion or heatstroke.¹⁴² He envisioned that Pan (a minor god) told him, that he (Pan) would be of use to them very soon, giving Pheidippides hope.¹⁴³ In this culture Pan was believed to be a mischievous god inducing panic. Upon his arrival back at Athens, Pheidippides found the city's mood optimistic. The Athenians hoplites had secured the roads to Marathon before the Persians could muster and were blocking the two approaches to Athens. Pheidippides delivered the Spartan response and then continued on to the generals at Marathon.¹⁴⁴ When he arrived at the Athenian camp overlooking Marathon vast numbers of Asian warriors were already assembled; mile after mile of ships, men and cavalry.¹⁴⁵ Miltiades determined how long his force would have to hold out, approximately one week, before Spartan reinforcements arrived.¹⁴⁶

The Persians were unable to dislodge the Greeks. This stalemate continued for almost a week, leaving Datis with only one option, attack Athens by sea.¹⁴⁷ Miltiades was in a race against time. If Datis began to embark his troops, he would be forced to

make a strategic decision: Hold their ground, while the Persians sailed around to attack undefended Athens or advance from his defensive positions and attack them.¹⁴⁸ Three days passed, both sides locked in a stalemate.¹⁴⁹

Ionian spies reported that the Persians were clandestinely splitting their forces; a holding force was left behind and advancing, while the cavalry embarked to attack Athens.¹⁵⁰ Datis had split his force in an attempt to prevent the Greeks from departing to allow his seaborne force time to sail around Attica and sack Athens.¹⁵¹ This was the opportunity Miltiades was hoping for.¹⁵²

A council of war was convened, Miltiades made his case for immediate attack and Callimachus cast the deciding vote, they would attack at dawn.¹⁵³ The Greek lines began to assemble, comprised solely of heavy infantry. Consistent with Greek custom, warriors of each tribe were formed collectively; neighbor beside neighbor, friend by friend to stimulate unity and dependability and capitalize on camaraderie. Themistocles and Aristides were in command of the center.¹⁵⁴ Callimachus commanded the right wing and the Plataeans the far left flank.¹⁵⁵ Miltiades, worried of being outflanked by the Persian light infantry, ordered the center formations thinned and the wings reinforced, so as to match the length of the Persian lines.¹⁵⁶

Normally, an assembled phalanx advanced at a slow deliberate pace. Miltiades advanced the formation toward the Persians at a run or trot.¹⁵⁷ All Greek warriors were physically fit so there were no worries of the charge falling apart resulting in chaos.¹⁵⁸ It was critical for them to cross the mile between them as swiftly as possible.¹⁵⁹ Miltiades had to close the distance, and commence his attack on the Persian outposts to limit their exposure to the long range of the archers.¹⁶⁰ Once the archers assembled, they

would fire their arrows in mass to disrupt the Greek battle formations. Additionally, Miltiades needed to prevent the Persian Cavalry (comprised of Asiatics) from mounting their horses and forming to launch a counter attack.¹⁶¹ If successful, he might even be able to catch them off guard and thwart the Persian generals from deploying in mass.

Herodotus wrote in his book:

The Persians therefore, 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.¹⁶²

This was the first known account of any Greek Army charging an enemy at a run or trot, it is in fact quite unusual but a brilliant strategy.

The Persians force was comprised of men from many various regions, mountain warriors from Hyrcania and Afghanistan, horsemen from Khorassan, archers from Ethiopia, and swordsmen from the Euphrates, Indus, Oxus, and the Nile.¹⁶³ This presented a strategic challenge for the Persian leadership; there was no homogenous language or military standardization between the formations.¹⁶⁴ Though the Persians had successfully deployed in previous battles, only the infantry assembled in time to face the Athenian charge.¹⁶⁵ The Persian front ranks were comprised of Asiatics; their short lances and cimeters posed little threat to the charging Greek formation.¹⁶⁶ After the initial clash between the front lines, many Asiatics had fallen.¹⁶⁷ Due to sheer size, mass, and individual courage, the Persian formations held their ground. Herodotus wrote the following about the engagement:

The two armies fought together on the plain of Marathon for a length of time; and in mid battle, where the Persians themselves and the Sacae had their place, the barbarians were victorious, and broke and pursued the Greeks into the inner country; but on the wings the Athenians and the Platæans defeated the enemy.¹⁶⁸

Due to the thinning of the lines by Miltiades, the Athenian formation led by Aristides and Themistocles were driven back over the plain and pursued up the valley by the Persians.¹⁶⁹ The Greek wings, led by Callimachus on the right and the Plataeans on the far left, defeated the Asiatics opposite to them.¹⁷⁰ Instead of pursuing the fleeing Persian lines, Callimachus and Plataean officers wheeled their troops around and formed the two wings together.¹⁷¹ Upon seeing this reversal, Miltiades led these men against the Persian center; Aristides and Themistocles rallied their troops and brought the full force of the Greek formations to bear upon the Persian and Sacian divisions.¹⁷²

Datis' routed force began fleeing for their ships. The Greeks pursued them all the way to the shoreline.¹⁷³ The Persians attempted to board their triremes while the Athenians physically held on to the ships and called for fire to destroy them.¹⁷⁴ The Greeks suffered their most significant casualties during this phase of the assault.¹⁷⁵

Herodotus recorded the following about the fighting:

It was in the struggle here that Callimachus the Polemarch, after greatly distinguishing himself, lost his life; Stesilaüs too, the son of Thrasilaüs, one of the generals, was slain; and Cynægirus, the son Euphorion, having seized on a vessel of the enemy's by the ornament at the stern, had his hand cut off by the blow of an axe, and so perished; as likewise did many other Athenians of note and name.¹⁷⁶

Seven Persian triremes were captured or destroyed; but the majority of the fleet succeeded in escaping, and taking aboard their Eritrean prisoners from the island where they had been deposited earlier.¹⁷⁷

While the land battle was being fought, Datis sailed around the Cape of Sunium (western coast of Attica), hoping to find Athens unprotected and before the Greeks could return from Marathon.¹⁷⁸ Leaving Aristides and a rear guard under his command

to command the battlefield, Miltiades departed for Athens with the rest of the Army and made a forced night-march, at best possible speed.¹⁷⁹

The Persian fleet sailed all night and arrived in the morning at the place where the sea comes nearest to Athens, Phalerum (Athens Harbor).¹⁸⁰ The troops commanded by Miltiades were assembled on the heights above the city.¹⁸¹ Datis' realized no hope of further conquest and abandoned the mission in Greece and returned to Asia.¹⁸²

A second account of what happened at Marathon was confirmed by the Spartans in a quote from Herodotus:

After the full of the moon two thousand Lacedæmonians came to Athens. So eager had they been to arrive in time, that they took but three days to reach Attica from Sparta." (over 150 miles) "They came, however, too late for the battle; yet, as they had a longing to behold the Medes, they continued their march to Marathon and there viewed the slain. Then, after giving the Athenians all praise for their achievement, they departed and returned home."¹⁸³

Casualties

Herodotus wrote – "There fell in this battle of Marathon on the side of the barbarians, about six thousand and four hundred men; on that of the Athenians, one hundred and ninety-two. Such was the number of slain on the one side and the other."¹⁸⁴

- Persians – 6,400 warriors and 7 triremes
- Athenians – 192 hoplites

Conclusion

Many questions remain regarding the Battle of Marathon; where was the dreaded Persian cavalry; why did the Greeks charge the Persians at a run; why did the Greeks initiate the attack? Based on Herodotus' writings, the battle of Marathon took place in

the heat of summer (August 12, 490 BCE). This would explain Pheidippides' visions (encounter with the god Pan), which were most likely caused by dehydration.

Because of the proximity to the water, the terrain would have prevented any cavalry charge on Miltiades' right flank and the marshes would have provided some protection on his left flank. Based on the deception theory presented by many historians, and the fact that Herodotus never mentions the use of Persian cavalry during the battle, it is plausible that Datis split his forces, taking the cavalry with him to sail around Sunium, land at Athens, and then attack the Greek formation from behind.

Herodotus wrote that the Greek charge was made at a run. Taking into account; the battlefield terrain, magnitude of the Persian battle formations, distance between the Greek and Persian lines and Miltiades' knowledge of Persian battle strategies, it makes complete sense then that they would want to close with and engage the enemy before archers could mass arrows and disperse the formations. Odds are, Miltiades started the attack marching, then broke into a steady run or trot, crashing into the Persian formations. The momentum of the charge would have permitted the wings to penetrate more quickly thus allowing for the double envelopment maneuver.

What does it tell us about the enduring nature of war? Even today we find the same types of trickery being played out as the Persians tried on the Greeks. If you look at the principles of Diplomacy, Information, Military and Economic Power (DIME) all were brought to bear by the Persians against the Greeks. Persia sent emissaries to Greece in an attempt to avoid conflict then used Hippias as a lure to try and get the people of Athens to overthrow their government; demanded tributes (taxes) to the Persian Empire to build up a 600 ship naval fleet and larger Army; establishing secure

lines of communication and constructing forward supply points before attacking distant countries/armies; and used joint warfare (naval and land forces) to attack the enemy.

In combat numerical superiority is typically crucial for achieving victory. During the Battle of Marathon it accounted for very little. The Persians outnumbered their opponents more than two to one, but it was honed battle skills, discipline, personal bravery, honor and keen military strategy that won the battle for the Greeks.

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