

# The West's First Stand: Marathon



**Cradle of liberty:** Ancient Athens as it may have appeared in the early 5th century B.C., when the infant city-state first came into conflict with the Persian superpower.

At the dawn of what was to become Western Civilization, the Athenians won an amazing victory over the Persians at Marathon.

by *Charles Scaliger*

**T**he man ran along the dusty road, mile after mile in the blazing late summer Mediterranean sun. Past groves of olives and fields of wheat, past farms and villages, his body soaked with perspiration, his runner's frame never flagging, he ran without pause toward Athens, which lay more than 20 mountainous miles ahead. Even when curious knots of onlookers tried to stop him, the man ran on, his eyes riveted to the road. The news he bore was for the ears of Athenians alone, the greatest tidings that had ever sounded in any ears in Attic Greece since the legendary Theseus had founded the city of Athens untold centuries before.

Most of the onlookers that September afternoon probably guessed the runner's business, if not his message. For almost a week, a gigantic invasion force had been

encamped on the narrow plain along nearby Marathon Bay, preparing to march on Athens. In that year, 490 B.C., the Persian Empire was the world's superpower, and for the past several decades had been relentlessly subjugating the Greeks. The founder of the Achaemenid Persian dynasty, Cyrus, had conquered most of Ionia, that portion of the Greek world that lay across the Aegean Sea from Athens on the peninsula of Asia Minor. His son and successor, the monstrous Cambyses, had annexed Egypt. The emperor Darius had conquered the northern Greek territories of Thrace and Macedonia two years before, and now had his sights set on Athens which, along with Sparta, represented the last major holdouts of Greek civilization on the Aegean.

## **Coming Collision**

The collision between Athens and Persia had been building for many years. Ever since the Athenians had expelled the tyrant Hippias, in 511 B.C., the former despot

had been making the rounds in the Persian court, seeking patrons who would reinstall him in Athens in return for a pledge of submission to the Persian "King of kings."

In 499 B.C., the Ionian Greek cities, led by the city of Miletus and its somewhat erratic leader Aristagorus, revolted against their Persian overlords. Aristagorus resigned his position as tyrant of the city and instituted popular rule. Other Ionian cities followed Miletus' example, and the cities of Athens and Eretria, impressed by what they perceived as a genuine attempt to replace autocracy with popular rule, sent ships and men to support the revolt.

At first, things went well for the Ionians and their allies. The combined Greek forces marched to Sardis, at the western terminus of the Persian Royal Road that ran all the way to Susa and Persepolis, and took the great city, burning it to the ground in the process. But in a subsequent battle near Ephesus, the Greeks suffered a humiliating defeat. The Athenians de-

The onset: Athenian and Plataean hoplites at Marathon ran full tilt into the waiting Persian ranks, probably to minimize the effect of Persia's formidable archers.



cided to return home, leaving the Ionians to their fate.

But the seeds for Persian-Athenian enmity had been sown. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, when the emperor Darius was informed of the Athenians' role in the burning of Sardis, he replied contemptuously, "The Athenians? Who are they?" He called for a bow and ceremonially shot an arrow into the air, invoking the powers of heaven to help him punish the upstart Athenians. He even allegedly commanded one of his slaves to remind him thrice at every dinner to "remember the Athenians."

But before Darius could exact retribution from the Athenians, he needed to quell the revolt in Asia Minor. During the next several years, the valiant Ionians bore the terrible consequences of the Persian emperor's wrath. In 494 B.C., the city of Miletus, ringleader of the rebels, came to a terrible end. A Persian navy numbering 600 vessels besieged the city and took it by storm. No mercy was shown during the pillage that followed, the Persians wishing to make an example of Miletus for the rest of Greece and, indeed, all of the other Persian vassal states. Accordingly, the men of Miletus were slaughtered and the women and children carried off into bondage into Susa, at the easternmost extremity of the vast empire.

The only mistake Darius made during the campaign was in allowing the escape of Miltiades, the tyrant of the Thracian Chersonese, a Greek state occupying a peninsula forming the north side of the Hellespont or Dardanelles. Miltiades, a longtime vassal of Persia, had been friendly to Darius and had even served, years before, in the Persian army in a campaign against the Scythians. But in the climate of a general revolt, all Greeks were suspect and Miltiades, although he had taken no part against the Persians, was obliged to flee for safety to Athens, where he received a warm welcome. Miltiades' knowledge of Persian battle tactics would prove to be invaluable.

With the Ionian revolt suppressed, Darius turned his attention to the rest of Greece. Intending, like his successor Xerxes a decade later, to invade Attic Greece from the north, Darius dispatched his most trusted general, his son-in-law Mardonius, to cross from Asia Minor into Thrace and subdue the rest of the Greek states. Mardonius' army had little difficulty obtaining the submission of both Thrace and Macedonia, but a large part of his army was destroyed when his fleet, while sailing south toward Athens, was shipwrecked in the unpredictable waters off the peninsula of Mount Athos. His forces crippled by the disaster, Mardonius returned to Persia

with the remnants of the invasion force.

The former Athenian tyrant Hippias, however, continued to goad Darius to move against Athens, swearing fealty if he were restored to what he regarded as his rightful office. Two years after the disaster of Athos, Darius was ready for a second attempt. Possibly on the advice of Hippias, and chastened by the experience of his prior invasion, Darius decided to attempt a direct sea assault on Athens, and assembled another immense task force to do the job.

Like the force that had put down the Ionian Revolt, this armada numbered around 600 superbly equipped war vessels. Setting out from the coast of Asia Minor, Darius' fleet, led by Persian generals Datis and Artaphernes (with Hippias along for the ride), made for the Cyclades, an archipelago that included roughly 20 major inhabited islands east of mainland Attic Greece. They first attacked the notable island of Naxos and burned the city. Then they swept through the rest of the archipelago, subduing as they went. Eretria, which had aided the Ionians alongside Athens, was reduced after seven days and given no quarter. The city was burned in revenge for Sardis and the few survivors enslaved.

With the fall of Eretria, the Persians at last turned their attention to the Athenians. The massive fleet sailed to Marathon Bay, a little over 20 miles from the city, and most of the Persian army — probably between 20- and 60-thousand strong — came ashore and began preparing to march on Athens.

In the meantime, the Athenians had not been idle. When the terrible news of the fall of Eretria had arrived, Athens lost no time dispatching a runner to Sparta to beg for military assistance. The Spartans, cognizant of the danger but, as always, wary of

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hastily conceived military commitments, replied that they would send aid eventually. Because of religious scruples, however, they would have to wait until after the full moon, which was still more than a week away. But the Athenians, realizing they could not wait, convened in haste to determine a course of action.

### War Preparations

In all her history, Athens had never faced a comparable peril. The great city, having no wall and no means to defend against a siege, was vulnerable to attack. Aware of this, Hippias and the Persians doubtless anticipated a quick and easy victory.

But the Athens that Hippias remembered — submissive, easily dictated to by overweening tyrants — no longer existed. The same nascent desire for self-rule that had kindled the Ionian Revolt had also transformed Athenian society. Athenians had become accustomed to taking a hand in their own governance, however imperfect their pioneering constitution was, and regarded with horror any prospect of returning to her old despotic ways. It was now Miltiades who convinced the Athenians to go on the offensive against Persia. To allow the Persians to advance unchallenged on Athens was to invite a speedy defeat, he argued, while surrendering without

a fight would mean a restoration of the hated and vindictive tyrant Hippias. Callimachus, the Athenian polemarch or commander-in-chief, agreed and preparations were made to resist the mighty Persian invaders with every available resource.

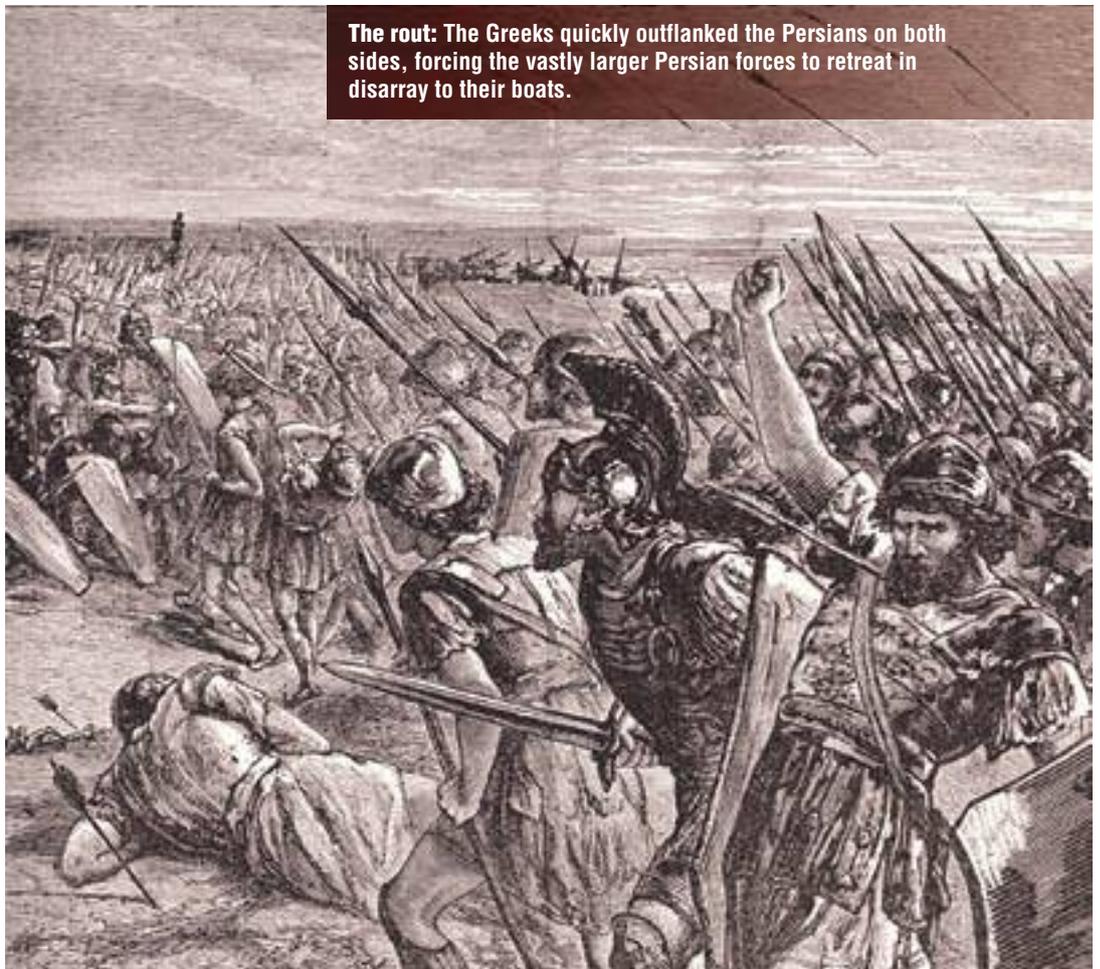
The Athenian citizenry were divided into 10 tribes, each of which elected a strategos or leader, and battlefield leadership traditionally was determined by a day-to-day rotation of the strategoi. Miltiades was made a strategos, and so were Themistocles and Aristides, men destined to play heroic roles in the next Persian war as well. In a critical break with Athenian tradition, Miltiades was given sole command over the fighting force, presumably both because of his vigor in exhorting the Athenians to fight for their liberty and for his experience with Persian military tactics.

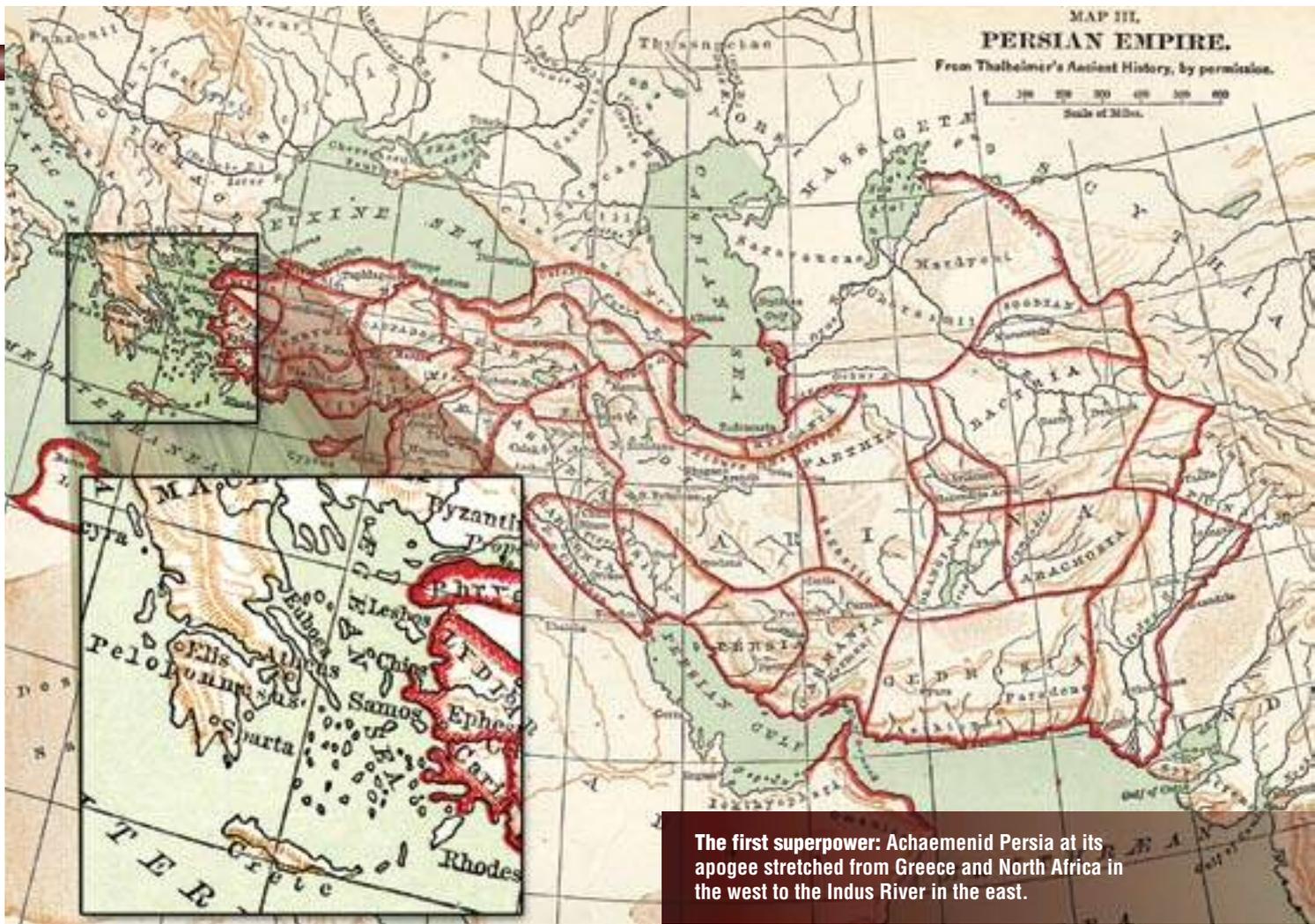
Every able-bodied Athenian male citi-

zen also prepared for war. Athens, like the rest of free Greece, relied exclusively on militia fighters known as hoplites, all of whom furnished their own battle gear. Every hoplite carried a circular shield — an aspis — as well as a long spear called a doru. Most also bore a short sword, the xiphos. Hoplites generally wore a breastplate, bronze helmet, and greaves, enough armor to protect certain vital areas but not so much as to limit mobility too severely.

The force that marched forth from Athens to confront the Persians was perhaps 10,000 strong, a true citizen army representing the flower of Athenian manhood. Aeschylus the poet was among them, along with hundreds of other statesmen, merchants, philosophers, and literati. Certain personalities — Callimachus and Miltiades preeminent among them — took leading roles, but for the most part, there were no distinctions in rank or privilege, the men of letters marching alongside the tradesmen, the less-educated and indigent beside the learned and the wealthy.

**The rout:** The Greeks quickly outflanked the Persians on both sides, forcing the vastly larger Persian forces to retreat in disarray to their boats.





**The first superpower: Achaemenid Persia at its apogee stretched from Greece and North Africa in the west to the Indus River in the east.**

The Athenians covered as quickly as possible the more than 20 miles to Marathon and encamped in a strategic pass, Avlona, overlooking the plain. Somewhere along the way, 1,000 soldiers from the nearby city of Plataea joined them, grateful to Athens for an old alliance against Thebes.

**Clash of Arms**

Controlling as they did the best route to Athens, the Athenians and their Plataean allies decided, rather than attack a foe that vastly outnumbered them, to wait. The Persian supply chain, after all, was limited, and the longer they forced the Persians to wait, the more likely the Athenians would receive reinforcements, especially the much-anticipated Spartans (who, unlike the Athenians, already had an unmatched reputation for battlefield valor). Miltiades, moreover, wished to honor Athenian tradition by not leading his men into battle until the day when his command by rotation would have occurred.

For five days the two hosts regarded

each other across the narrow plain of Marathon. On the sixth, the day of Miltiades' legitimate command, the great general decided that the moment of decision had come. In the early morning, he readied his men for battle.

As heavily outnumbered as they were, the Athenians modified their usual phalanx formation to avoid being outflanked. A thin center line only four deep was protected by two wings eight men deep. Callimachus himself led the right wing and the Plataeans the left.

On the Persian side, the strength was concentrated in the center. The elite Persian Immortals, exactly 10,000 in number, probably to match the number of eyes the Persian god Mithra was said to possess, were each armed with a shield of leather and wicker, a short spear, a bow and quiver of arrows, and a dagger and short sword. They each wore a metal coat and a light tunic and trousers, and typically blunted enemy attacks by a well-coordinated salvo of arrows.

Anticipating this, the Greek hoplites

advanced at a run across the plain of Marathon — the first time, according to Herodotus, that they had ever confronted an enemy in such a manner — sprinting to close with the Persians before arrows could inflict their deadly toll. As they ran, the Greeks shouted their peculiar battle cry, “Elefe! Elefe!” which, together with the unexpected sight of the puny force of attacking Athenians, probably bewildered the confident Persians.

As expected, the well-trained Persian center withstood the initial shock and drove the weak Greek lines backward. But on the wings, the Greeks carried the day. The hoplites typically fought with the first rank locking shields to provide cover for the spears wielded by men in the second and third ranks. With their much longer spears, larger and stronger shields, and better armor, the Greeks man to man were probably more than a match for the average Persian soldier. Within a very short time, the superior Persian forces were caught in a double encirclement, and their lines broke. The Persian host,

including the vaunted Immortals, fled in disarray to their boats with the victorious Greeks in hot pursuit. Many of them were hewn down on the sands of Marathon Bay, while others stumbled in desperation into fens and bogs and were drowned. The remainder swarmed aboard their boats as best they could. In one celebrated incident, Cynegirus, a brother of Aeschylus the poet, was reported to have seized one of the Persian galleys with his hands to prevent it from escaping. He clung dog-

gedly to the enemy vessel until the Persians finally cut off his arms.

The beaten Persians left behind 6,400 slain on the field of Marathon, while the Greeks lost only 11 Plataeans and 192 Athenians, among them Callimachus, their noble commander-in-chief.

The Persians, however, were not finished. The fleet, bearing a still very formidable army, sailed along the coast toward Phaleron, the port closest to Athens. Miltiades and the rest of the Greek army, leav-

ing a token force to guard the battlefield and its hallowed dead, marched back as fast as they could to defend their city.

Ahead of them, so the story goes, they sent a runner, Phidippides, to bear the message of victory. After covering the roughly 26 miles with almost superhuman speed, Phidippides delivered the momentous news by breathing a single word — “*Nenikéamen*” (“We have won”) — and died on the spot of exhaustion.

Miltiades and the rest of the Greek force reached Phaleron in time to prevent Artaphernes and the Persians from landing. Within a short time the Persians weighed anchor and sailed back to Asia. Perhaps, having taken time to weigh the gravity of their defeat at Marathon, the Persians wanted no more of the Athenian hoplites. Perhaps tidings had reached their spies of a Spartan relief force, 2,000 strong, that was finally approaching Athens. Whatever the reason for the final Persian withdrawal, the outmanned Athenians had won a stunning and utterly unanticipated victory at Marathon, at the dawn of what was to become Western civilization. Liberal West had triumphed over despotic East for the first, but by no means the last, time, suggesting to a Classical culture in its infancy the superiority of self-government over despotism.

The Athenians, it is said, took the Spartans, who arrived the next day, on a tour of the battlefield, where the latter congratulated them on their great victory. Over the grave of the 192 Athenian fallen — who alone of all Athenians, in honor of their unexampled heroism, were buried where they fell instead of in the immense city cemetery — the Greeks erected an honorary mound, which stands to this day, to commemorate the heroes who vanquished the “golden-dressed Medes.”

Ten years after Marathon, the Persians would return to Greece, in far greater numbers and led by their emperor Xerxes in person, to attempt anew the conquest of Athens and the rest of Greece. But it was Marathon that first advertised to the world the vigor of liberty, and instilled in the Greeks a confidence in their destiny. As the historian J. B. Bury admiringly put it, “The Athenians always looked back to Marathon as marking an epoch. It was as if on that day the gods had said to them, Go on and prosper.” ■

**Father of History:** Herodotus' *Histories*, part history, part geography, part natural history, and part charming fancy, are the primary source for the Greco-Persian wars, including the Battle of Marathon, and is considered (aside from portions of the Old Testament) to be the first book of history ever written.

