



On This Day in History: The Battle of Marathon

In the annals of ancient warfare, one battle stands out as a turning point that shaped the course of history: the Battle of Marathon. Fought in 490 B.C., this clash between the Athenians and the Persians marked a critical moment in the struggle for dominance in the Mediterranean. Its repercussions rippled through the ages, influencing military tactics, politics, and even the development of democracy.



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Prelude to Battle

To understand the significance of the Battle of Marathon, we must first delve into the historical context of the time. The Persian Empire, under the rule of King Darius I, was expanding its reach into the Greek world. In 490 B.C., Darius sought to punish the city-states of Athens and Eretria for their support of the Ionian Revolt against Persian rule. He dispatched a formidable force, estimated to be around 25,000 strong, to bring these rebellious Greek cities to heel.

In Athens, the citizens faced a daunting choice. They could either submit to the Persians, which would mean subjugation and the loss of their newfound democratic ideals, or they could stand and fight for their freedom. They chose the latter.

The Persian Advance

As the Persian army landed on the plains of Marathon, the Athenians had to act swiftly. They sent a plea for assistance to their ally, the city-state of Plataea, but help was not guaranteed. The Athenians, led by their ten generals, devised a bold strategy. Miltiades, one of the most experienced generals, advocated for an immediate attack on the Persians before they could receive reinforcements from their navy.

Athens' former tyrant, Hippias, guided the Persians to Marathon. Herodotus's account includes the following story of the Persian fleet's arrival in Marathon and the literally teeth-rattling effect on Hippias:

The barbarians were conducted to Marathon by Hippias, the son of Pisistratus, who the night before had seen a strange vision in his sleep. He dreamt of lying in his mother's arms, and conjectured the dream to mean that he would be restored to Athens, recover the power which he had lost, and afterwards live to a good old age in his native country. Such was the sense in which he interpreted the vision. He now proceeded to act as guide to the Persians; and, in the first place, he landed the prisoners taken from Eretria upon the island that is called Aegileia, a tract belonging to the Styreans, after which he brought the fleet to anchor



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off Marathon, and marshalled the bands of the barbarians as they disembarked. As he was thus employed it chanced that he sneezed and at the same time coughed with more violence than was his wont. Now, as he was a man advanced in years, and the greater number of his teeth were loose, it so happened that one of them was driven out with the force of the cough, and fell down into the sand. Hippias took all the pains he could to find it; but the tooth was nowhere to be seen: whereupon he fetched a deep sigh, and said to the bystanders:

“After all, the land is not ours; and we shall never be able to bring it under. All my share in it is the portion of which my tooth has possession.”

So Hippias believed that in this way his dream was fulfilled.

Sic semper tyrannis, eh?

The Marathon Strategy

The Athenian hoplites, heavily armored infantry soldiers, were up against a vastly superior force in terms of numbers. However, their discipline, training, and knowledge of the local terrain would prove to be decisive. The Athenians formed a phalanx, a tight formation where soldiers shielded each other with their large round shields, creating a solid wall of spears and bronze.

The Persians, in contrast, were lightly armored and relied on archers and light infantry. The Athenian strategy was to close the gap as quickly as possible, minimizing the effectiveness of the Persian archers. In a daring move, they charged across the open plain of Marathon toward the enemy lines.

The Triumph at Marathon

The battle that ensued was fierce and intense. Despite their numerical disadvantage, the Athenians managed to break through the Persian lines, creating chaos and confusion. Their superior tactics, as well as the bravery of individual warriors such as Callimachus, who sacrificed his life to topple the Persian standard, turned the tide of the battle.

The Persians, caught off guard by the ferocity of the Athenian assault, began to retreat toward their ships. The Athenians pursued them relentlessly, managing to capture seven Persian ships and thwarting the Persian plan to sail around the coast to attack Athens itself. The Persian defeat at Marathon was a testament to the effectiveness of Greek hoplite warfare and the resolve of the Athenian citizen-soldiers.

The Marathon Run

One of the most enduring legends associated with the Battle of Marathon is the marathon run itself. According to tradition, a messenger named Pheidippides was dispatched from the battlefield to Athens to bring news of the victory. He is said to have run the approximately 26 miles (42 kilometers) without stopping, arriving in Athens to proclaim, “Rejoice, we conquer!” before collapsing from exhaustion and dying.

This tale later inspired the modern marathon race, which made its debut at the 1896 Athens Olympics. The marathon’s endurance challenge and its connection to this historic battle have since become iconic in the world of sports.

It is worth noting that this mistaken version of the story began with Plutarch, writing some 500 years after the event. Herodotus records, however, that Pheidippides ran not to Athens to announce victory,



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but rather toward Sparta, in a futile effort to enlist the relief of that city's renowned army of citizen-soldiers. The Spartans were celebrating a religious holiday and refused to leave their city. Their force ultimately arrived at Marathon in time to congratulate the Athenians on an impressive victory.

Impacts and Implications

The Battle of Marathon had profound consequences that resonated throughout history. First and foremost, it preserved the fledgling Athenian democracy. Had the Persians succeeded in subjugating Athens, the democratic experiment might have been crushed in its infancy.

Additionally, the victory at Marathon bolstered Greek morale and demonstrated the efficacy of hoplite warfare. This would prove crucial in the subsequent conflicts with the Persian Empire, most notably during the Persian Wars, where Greek city-states united to repel the Persian invasions.

Furthermore, Marathon became a symbol of heroism and sacrifice in Greek culture. The fallen Athenian soldiers were celebrated as national heroes, and their memory was honored with grand monuments and memorials.

Conclusion

The Battle of Marathon, fought in 490 B.C., stands as a pivotal moment in history. Against overwhelming odds, the Athenians' courage, discipline, and strategic acumen secured a victory that had far-reaching implications. It preserved democracy, inspired the marathon race, and set the stage for the broader conflict between Greece and Persia. The legacy of this battle endures, a testament to the enduring power of human determination and the profound impact of historical events.



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