

The Medean Wars - Part II

The second Persian Expedition against Hellas

After gaining control of the rebellious Ionian Hellenes (in Asia Minor) in 495 BC, Darius I of Persia realized that they would be a perpetual bother as long as they could gain help and encouragement from the Hellenic mainland so he determined to conquer Hellas proper, secure his western frontier and lay the groundwork for Persia's expansion into Europe.

He was also outraged that during the Ionian rebellion an obscure (to him) city-state (Athens) from mainland Hellas had assisted in the expulsion of the Persians from Sardes, the capitol of the Ionian Greek city-states. His anger was such that he vowed to punish them and every night at dinner he had a servant repeat to him "Lord, don't forget the Athenians".



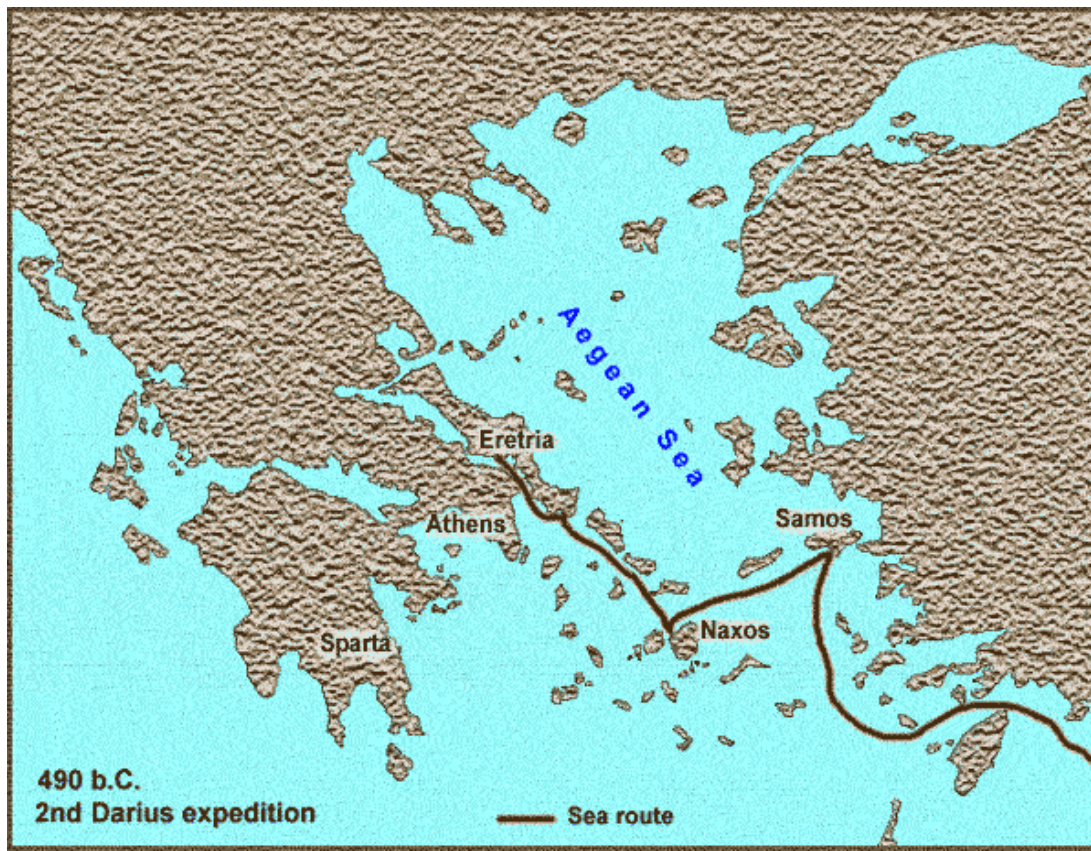
-- Darius I

Darius had two routes to invade Greece, one by land and one by sea. He chose them both and in 492 BC began his expedition. However, his first attempt failed shortly after he conquered parts of northern Hellas because a terrible storm destroyed his fleet (see end of Part I).



Blue line marks the route the Persian navy took. The red cross marks the place where most of the fleet sank. The green line marks the route the Persian army took. Those days the ships avoided open seas for many obvious reasons. In the case of military expeditions they also provided support for the advancing army and therefore needed to stay close to the coast.

Two years later he launched his second attempt, again by sea but with a more southerly route.



This expedition resulted in the Battle of Marathon. During the two year interval he sent heralds to the Greek city-states. The heralds, as was the custom, asked for "earth and water" as a token of submission. Many of the Greek city-states acquiesced but many did not, including the two most important, Sparta and Athens.

The Medean Wars - Part II

The Athenians threw the heralds off the Acropolis and the Spartans threw them down a well where there was plenty of "earth and water". The Spartans in particular had a thing about throwing people down wells; they threw their own babies (when born sickly or deformed) down a well called "Keadas".



The Athenians even executed the unfortunate translator of the Persian demand for defiling the Hellenic language (to Hellenes their language was not just a means of communication; they believed their language and alphabet came straight from the domain of Ideas and Gods). War was now certain.

Most of the islands along the route of the Persian force submitted but Eretria did not and was under siege for six days. The city was finally sacked, its buildings destroyed and its inhabitants who survived the massacre that followed were taken prisoners. This was in retaliation for the part that Eretria played in assisting Athens in the destruction of Sardis in the Ionian rebellion. This was a clear indication to the Athenians that theirs would be the same fate.

After the sacking of Eretria the Persian army sailed to Marathon Bay and landed there about 26 miles away from Athens.



The Athenians had sent to Sparta for help but Spartans were unwilling to leave until the moon was full (because of a Spartan religious festival that was taking place at the time) and they were also reluctant to fight beyond the borders of their general area of Peloponnese; therefore Athens stood alone (however the Spartans eventually did arrive but the battle was just finished).

The story of Phidippides

One of the most famous runners in Ancient Greece was the Athenian Phidippides. Herodotus mentions Phidippides and he says he was the one who was sent to Sparta to ask for help (at the time there was no systematic horse-riding in Greece nor is it certain that a horse would be able to deal with certain difficult paths over the very mountainous terrain of Greece).

Sparta is about 140 miles away from Athens. It took Phidippides about 30 hours to run this distance (note that he had to go over mountains along the way). After delivering the message, he was told that because of a religious restriction, the Spartans would not be able to help until the full moon. Knowing that the Athenians could not expect any help, that they were on their own, Phidippides ran the 140 miles back to bring the bad news.

Since they had to live or die by themselves, the Athenian army marched out to the plains of Marathon (a distance of 26 miles) to face the Persians in a surprise attack. Although they were outnumbered 3 to 1, they managed to win the battle and put the Persians to flight.

Once the battle was over, the Greek Army ran back to Athens (another 26 miles, this time running) as fast as they could because they feared that the Persians may go around Attica and attack the city of Athens which was virtually unprotected. The Athenians made it there in a few hours and in fact the next morning the Persian fleet was seen approaching from the sea. Once the Persians saw that the army had returned they made a 180 and returned home.

So, in a time period of about a week, poor Phidippides had run 280 miles in three days, marched 26 miles the next day, fought in the battle of Marathon about 3-4 days later and then run back to Athens overnight (another 26 miles).

Phidippides name, over the next few centuries, became almost mythical and a folklore story (that is probably untrue) was fabricated in order to make the whole story of the battle of Marathon more dramatic. Specifically, it is said, that the Persians fled to their country immediately after their defeat at Marathon and that Phidippides was sent to Athens in order to deliver the good news while the rest of the army took their time to return. Phidippides, although exhausted by the whole ordeal, as described above, was so excited that he not only left for Athens immediately but he run as fast as he could. Once he reached Athens he was so weak that all he managed to do was to shout "Nenikamen" (= "we have won") at the first bunch of Athenians he saw and then die of exhaustion.

Herodotus, of course, tells a different story (the one I have mentioned earlier) and most scholars agree that the story of the dying Phidippides is a fable born out of the excitement of story-tellers over the centuries.

Today's Marathon runs basically commemorate the run from Marathon to Athens. However, it is more probable that this run was done by the whole Athenian army and not just Phidippides.

Besides runners, whole Greek armies used to run (carrying full armour) from place to place when there was an emergency. It was not uncommon for an army to run say 50 miles a day for 2-3 days and then fight on the fourth. These were very tough people and during those times those who were not tough enough to keep up simply died.

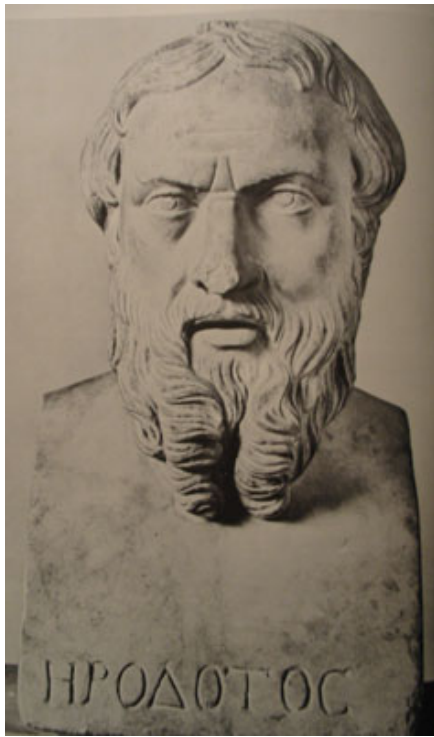


Phidippides, the lonely runner.

Today, the long runs of such messengers as Phidippides the Athenian, inspire and are commemorated by such runs as the Spartathlon and the various super-Marathon runs.

Still, the Athenians had a most welcome surprise when they arrived at Marathon for they were joined by a force of 1000 Plataeans (the entire army of their city which is pretty close to the larger city of Thebes) to fight against the common enemy. Athens was eternally grateful for that brave act of the Plataeans Together they would face the mighty Medes. No one had ever been able to stand up against them till then.

The story of this conflict (as well as many other stories) is mainly told by Herodotus.



Herodotus was a Greek and the first author who wrote narrative history and applied critical evaluation on the given information while also recording divergent opinions. However he did not escape the temptation of being partial to the Greeks or mixing anecdotal information with actual facts. For these reasons he has been called "father of History" and, anecdotically, "father of lies".

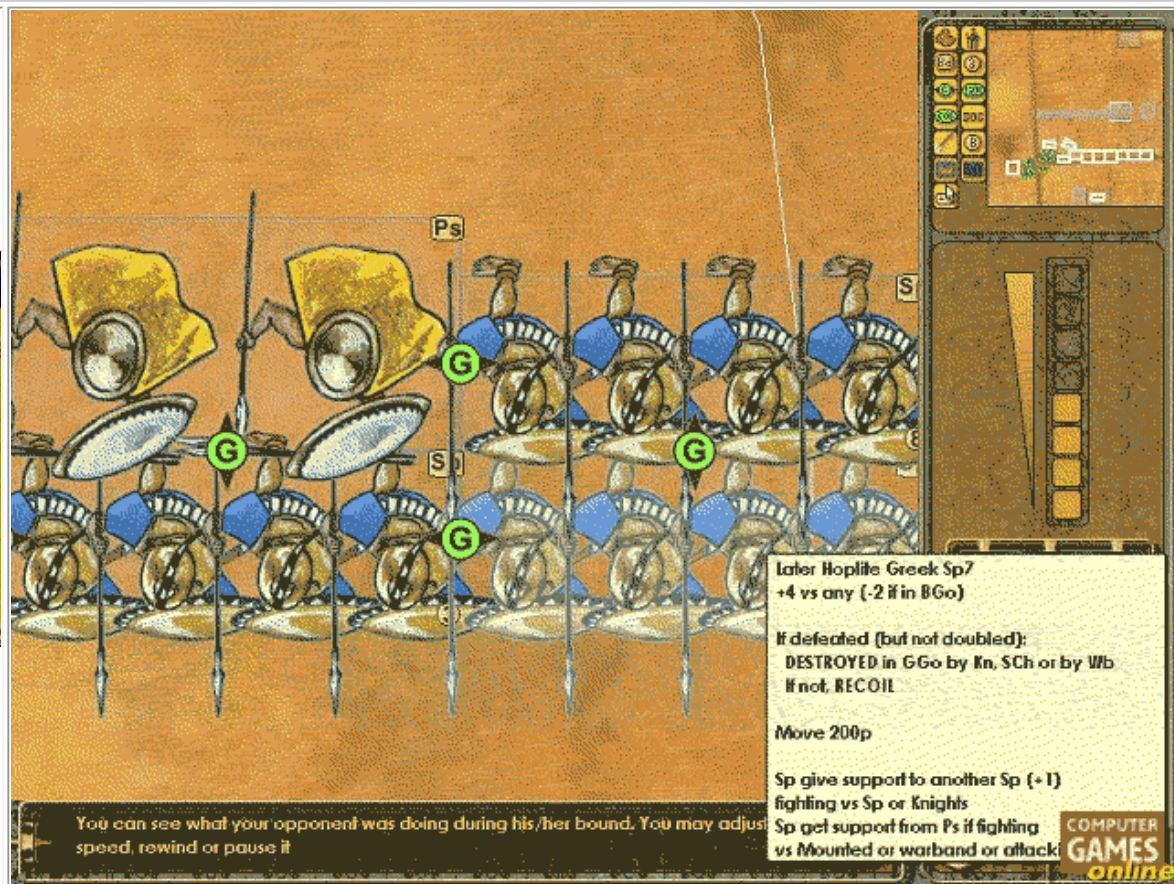
Some military and cultural background on the two opposing sides

The Persian army consisted of light and heavy infantry (archers, spearmen and swordsmen) and excellent calvary (the cavalry did not take part in the battle of Marathon however - reason is explained later on). Their armament was relatively light in favor of agility. Their tactics were of a defensive nature since their main weapon was the bow. Their usual tactic was to wait for the enemy to come close, "bury" them under a barrage of arrows and then finish them off in close combat.

The Greek army doctrine on the other hand was of an offensive nature. Their main weapon, the long, heavy spear, their heavy armament (helmet, shield, breastplate, greaves) and their battle formation, **the phalanx**, favored close combat. The Greeks used neither bow nor calvary at this time. There was light infantry (the Peltasts) that often fought in the nude holding just a spear and a light shield made of wood (and sometimes a light helmet) and there was the heavy infantry (the mighty Hoplites).



Greek phalanx quick-marching at the rhythm of a double flute



Greek phalanx in attack formation



-- Princeton Classics students doing the Phalanx thing

The hoplites

The kind of fighter that Tyrtaeus addresses in his poems (see Spartan poetry below) was the hoplite – an infantryman armed with an 8ft (2.4m) spear and a round shield. By the end of the 7th century, practically all Greek cities had their own contingents of hoplites. They were not full-time professional soldiers. They were generally farmers, who swapped ploughs and spades for spears and shields in defense of their communities. By standing side by side with their neighbors and taking part in the fight, these militia-men demonstrated not just their courage but their status as citizens.

Like the Minutemen of the American Revolutionary War who forged a republic on the ends of their rifles, hoplites were more than just fighters: they were agents of profound social change.

Olympia was home of the famous Olympic games. It was also the unofficial shrine of the hoplite fighter – for this was where he would come to dedicate his arms to the gods in thanks for a victory. The 'House of Bronze' must have been thick with the stuff, judging from the number of shields, helmets and breastplates found here, and now on display in the museum.

The round shield – hoplon – was the cardinal item of equipment, and it was from this that the hoplite probably derived his name. He held it by thrusting his left arm through the central armband – the porpax – and gripping the antilabe, a leather thong attached to the rim, in his fist. It was made mainly of wood, and weighed around 20lb (9 kilograms), which was quite a weight to carry through a day's fighting. But to let your shield drop or fall during battle was the ultimate disgrace.

The phalanx

Hoplite fighting was a team effort: half your shield was for you, the other half for the man to your left. The hoplites would form into densely packed ranks, collectively called a phalanx, seven or eight deep and perhaps 50 shields across. Co-ordination and discipline were important, but most important of all was trust: if your neighbour broke and ran, you would be left exposed to the spear-points of the enemy.

When two phalanxes met, there was a natural tendency for each line to edge to the right as the men tucked themselves behind their neighbours' shields. It was at moments like this that the discipline of the phalanx threatened to collapse. To be effective, you had to hold your ground.

Tyrtaeus had some helpful advice for Sparta's nerve-wracked hoplites:

"Those who dare to stand fast at one another's side and to advance towards the front ranks in hand-to-hand conflict, they die in smaller numbers and they keep the troops behind safe."

There wasn't much in the way of tactics once the shield walls came together. The battlefield all but disappeared in a dust cloud as the two opposing masses of bronze and muscle heaved against each other. The rear ranks provided the traction, pushing forward like rugby players in a scrum.

It was in the front three ranks, within range of the enemy's spear points, that things got deadly. It was there that a hoplite would come face to face with the snake-haired gorgon (see Medusa), emblazoned on the shield of the enemy just inches away. The goddess's stare was said to have the power to petrify people, and in the stabbing frenzy of battle, many must have felt as if their limbs were turning to stone.

Acts of citizenship

Crude it may have been, but hoplite fighting had far-reaching consequences. In the heaving sweaty, noisy mêlée, neighbours chose to stand together in support of the common good. It was an act of citizenship, and to take part in it was as much a privilege as an obligation.

To fight as a hoplite, you had to have the kit, and while few could manage a magnificent outfit, the basic panoply – shield, spear and helmet – was within reach of around a third of the city-state's able-bodied male population. Being able to afford to fight was terribly important. Aristotle said: "Those who do the fighting wield absolute power." In other words, if you didn't fight for your community, you couldn't expect to have a stake in it.

So, on the day of battle, while well-to-do land-owners paraded in the front rank in their bespoke armour, a dirt farmer's eldest boy, taking his place somewhere in the back with his grandfather's dented helmet and his uncle's battered shield, would be determined at all costs to maintain his family's standing as citizens.

War music

The battlefields on which hoplites clashed were once memorably described as the 'dancing floors of war'. A phalanx that was able to move together in a coordinated way made for a formidable dancing partner.

So the Spartans spent many hours perfecting what was known as 'war music', a kind of rhythmic drill in which changes in direction and pace were communicated musically. The Spartans earned the reputation for being 'the most musical and the most war-like of people'.

Hoplite Warfare

Tactics at this time were rudimentary. The Greek historian Herodotus quotes the dry observation of the Persian general Mardonius (who led the unlucky 1st Persian expeditionary force against Greece) that in normal circumstances, when the Greeks declared war on each other, they found the best and flattest piece of ground and had their battle on that. Opposing armies would each form up in a solid block of men called a phalanx, then advance until contact was made. Even this simple maneuver was complicated by the tendency of the phalanx to drift to its right, as each man sought the protection of his neighbor's shield. This meant that opposing phalanxes often overlapped each other's left flank, and victory went to the army that could best exploit this advantage. There is anecdotal evidence of two phalanxes actually missing each other due to excessive rightwards drift. One can imagine the astonishment of the men on the left wing of each phalanx as they watched their opponents thunder past in the opposite direction!

The initial shock of impact between the phalanxes was followed by what the Greeks called "the shoving" (othismos). Both sides would push as hard as they could, with the men behind adding weight to the effort of those in front. The front ranks would, of course, also be trying to stab one another over their shield rims. Eventually one side would tire and break, and this was when most of the fatalities occurred. The victors would pursue their fleeing enemies, striking at their unprotected backs. The heavy hoplite shield was a liability in this situation, and many men jettisoned their shields in order to outrun their pursuers. Even in Modern Greek, the term "ripsaspis" (= "one who throws away his shield") is used to describe a deserter.

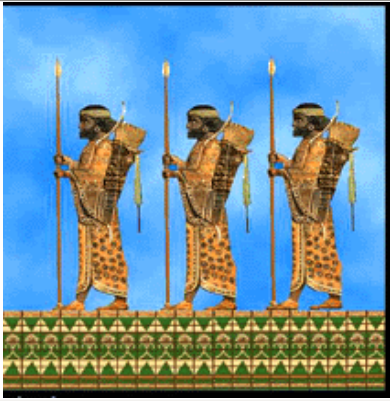
Every so often, an echo of the old "heroic" style of warfare could still be heard. Herodotus describes the so-called "Battle of the Champions", fought in about 546 BC. Argos and Sparta were contesting the territory of Thyrea, and agreed that a token force of 300 hoplites from each army should resolve the dispute. When the dust settled only three men remained standing, two Argives and one Spartan. The Argives immediately decamped, claiming victory, but matters are rarely that simple in war. The Spartan survivor staked a rival claim, pointing out that he had been left in possession of the field. This new disagreement resulted in a full-scale battle, which the Spartans won.

Hoplite armies were in effect trained militias who served in time of need, the sole exception being the Spartans. These men were full-time professionals who lived in barracks from an early age and were not allowed to marry until they were thirty. Spartan training gave their armies a distinct edge in battle, and they were remarkably well organized. Spartans broke their forces down into manageable tactical units and practiced complex battlefield maneuvers. Other armies imitated them, but the Spartans were the masters of hoplite fighting. At the battle of Sepea, the Argive army was so afraid of being outmaneuvered that it was ordered to conform to all the trumpet signals given to the nearby Spartans. When the Spartan commander observed this, he ordered his men to attack when the "fall out for breakfast" signal was given, achieving complete tactical surprise.

In many ways the Persian armed forces were more advanced than the Hellenic forces (they used cavalry, they used archers and they had greater variety of weapons and types of fighters). However, the Persians lacked in the following important ways:

- Their military planning was done in a dictatorial and arrogant way that did not allow full and realistic appraisal of the situation.
- Their military tactics lacked in vigor and originality.
- In close combat, the Persian infantry was no match at all for the heavily armed and well trained Hellenic hoplite. This fact especially was to be proven many times over in the future.
- The Hellenes were protecting their home while for the Persian soldiers this was just another conquest expedition.

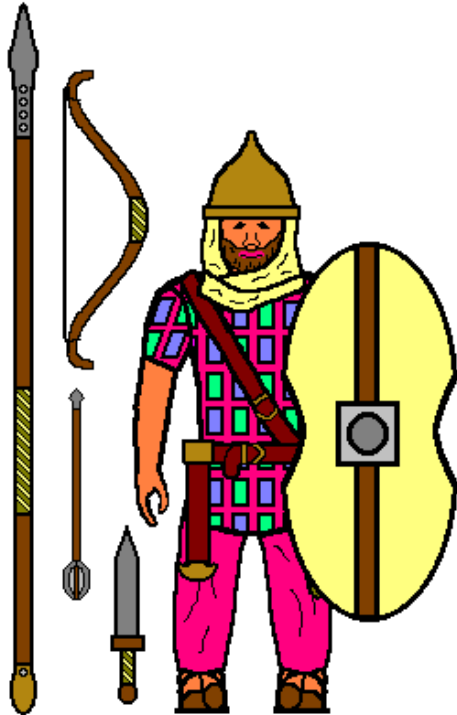
Persian Armed Forces



Persian Infantrymen



Parthian Cavalryman. Parthians were probably the world's finest cavalry at the time. Parthia was part of the immense Persian empire.



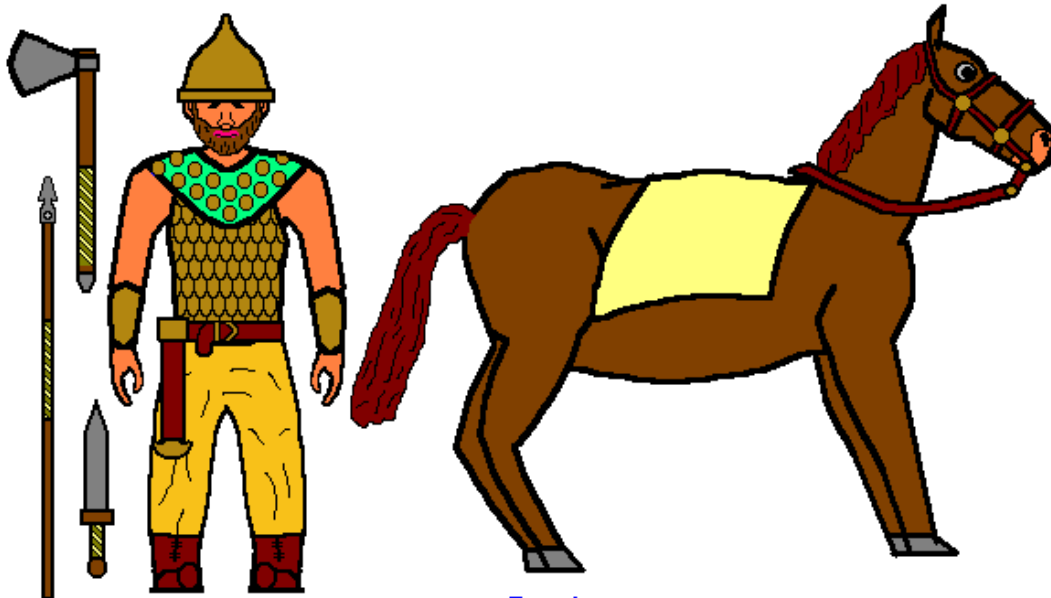
Persian Immortal
Heavy Infantryman

The Persian immortals were part of the Persian heavy infantry. They were the most elite forces of the Persian military machine. They were called "immortals" because their number (even during battle) would remain constant at all times (with the use of reserves that were kept for this purpose). This, on its own, says something about the huge resources that the Persian empire had at its disposal.



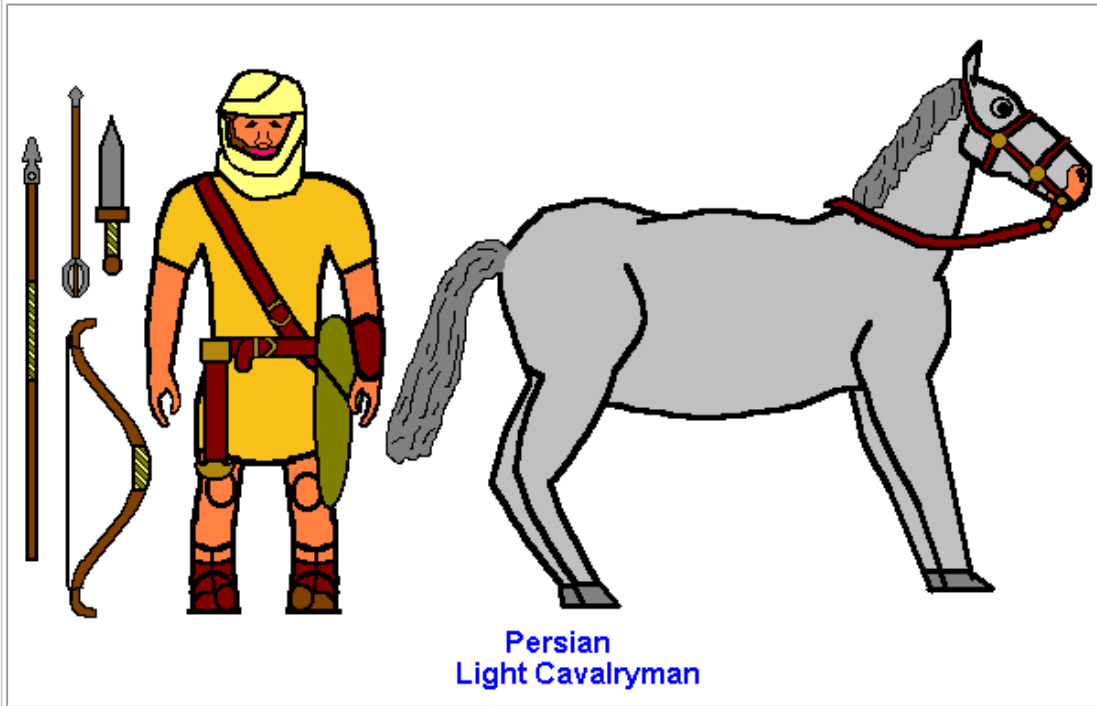
Persian Archer
Light Infantryman

The Persian archers were very lightly armored as you can see. They relied on the accuracy of their arrows and their agility and speed.



Persian
Heavy Cavalryman

The Persian cavalry was heavily armored and relied on the unforgiving blade of the battle axe and the spear as their main weapons.



Persian light cavalry would circle around the enemy and cause casualties using the bow from a safe distance and while the horse was on the move.



-- Reproduced Persian spears of the era

Persian warrior education and military training

Information on the daily life, habits, education and military training of the ancient Persians is scant.

It seems that warriors lived under an climate of oppression and fear (that stemmed from the tyrannical rule of the Emperor) and that although they trained hard they did not have a proper military education from an early age. Further it seems that they did not fight on principle but rather because they had to.

Persian soldiers were just that; soldiers. They did not do anything else. This was in stark contrast to what was happening in the Hellenic city-states, where the soldiers were the citizens and even most important people of the city.

Hellenic Armed Forces

In the olden days of classical Greece the nobles alone could afford the expensive armour and horses needed for warfare and so society depended on them for defense and protection, and the population lacked the military capacity to seize power, even if they had wanted to.

This situation changed with an increase of population and the resulting colonization and trade, the introduction of a money economy, and the emergence of a new type of warfare, the hoplite phalanx.

With colonization went trade, a general increase in prosperity, and a market for goods from other cities and countries. Production became more specialized and increasingly more sensitive to the demands of the market. Inevitably this social and economic disruption caused the breakdown of the static agrarian society. Pottery and other wares were produced in greater quantity; the landless thetes could find occupations at sea. It was now possible to acquire wealth in forms other than land, thereby undermining the old aristocratic basis for power.

Trade also contributed to the decline of the aristocrats because it increased the availability of metal. Increased supply decreased cost, so more people could afford armour. Any citizen who could furnish his own armour could become a knight, regardless of birth, and with this new status came more political power. This brought on the era of the hoplite.

The introduction of the money economy in the seventh century also weakened the old aristocracy. Before money there was little a non-aristocratic landowner could do if he produced a surplus. Without more land he couldn't maintain more animals and he couldn't keep his crops. With a money economy he could sell off his surplus each year and gradually accumulate capital. Theognis of Megara, a sixth-century poet, said that "money mixes the classes".

The hoplite phalanx was introduced into Greece about 700 B.C. revolutionizing warfare and further destroying aristocratic power. In contrast to the disorganized individual fighting of the Dark Ages, the hoplite phalanx was a well-organised weapon of destruction. The soldiers stood with locked shields and lumbered, like a tank bristling with spears, across the field of battle.

The panoply of the hoplite consisted of a helmet, corselet, greaves, round hoplon or shield, short sword and thrusting spear. This can be seen in the illustrations below.

The old-style army had no hope against its advance. Every Greek state was forced to adopt this new type of warfare. Since the phalanx had to move with precision, it required constant drilling and training and the participation of many citizens. Since a horse was no longer needed and metal armour was now cheaper, more citizens could become soldiers.

Aristotle says that the earliest Greek cities based their military power on the cavalry and only the wealthy could afford horses (horses were not in abundance in Greece and it was hard to get one and sustain it). With the hoplite, however, the military power base was widened and hoplites demanded and obtained a greater share in ruling the state.

Thus during the time of the Medean wars, the Greeks used no cavalry. Cavalry was largely reintroduced by Alexander the Great, especially after the horsemanship experience the Greeks gained from their contact with the Persians. In fact, Xenophon wrote the first horsemanship manual about a century after the battle of Marathon. This book can still be bought today in bookstores (and sites like amazon.com) and is still considered current.

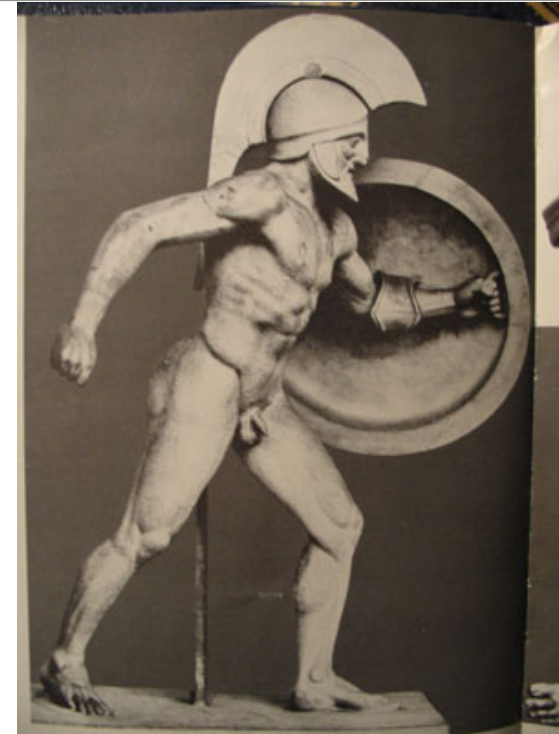


Athenian Hoplite



You can see some Hellenic peltasts (light infantrymen) at the bottom right (nude and lightly dressed). General Miltiades can be seen in the middle commanding the Greek hoplites (heavy infantrymen). Ancient Greeks exercised in the nude as well, so this was nothing new to the peltasts. In fact the word "gymnastics" comes from the Greek "gymnon" which means nude. "Gymnastics" literally means "the things you do in the nude" and in the ancient Greek mind association number one was "physical exercise".

Spartan Hoplite



Rugged Greek hoplite, with long pointy beard, fighting in the nude. He is supposed to be holding a spear that is alas missing.

Spartan hoplites were the best and most fearsome Hellenic land warriors. They started military training at the age of 7 and lived in barracks till the age of 60. They remained undefeated on land till the time of Alexander the Great at which time Sparta was already on decline because of internal reasons.

Other Hellenes knew too well not to mess with Spartans unless absolutely necessary. The Spartans were very intimidating persons. A lifetime of training had made their bodies and souls steel-hard and it was customary for them to speak little and do a lot. This is where the expression "Laconically speaking" came from and it means "concisely speaking" or "avoiding blabbering". They also had long hair and long beards that they used to comb before battle because they wanted to look handsome when fighting (see Housman's poem about how "the Spartans, on the sea-wet rock / sat, and combed their hair"). They usually greeted battle smiling (to understand the Spartan psychology please keep reading - especially, read the Spartan poetry and take a look at Leonidas' statue with a smiling face in part III). The experience of going against smiling muscle-men with long hair and beards and in full armor must have been frightening to many of their enemies.



-- Leonidas, King of Sparta, smiling before battle.

Laconia was the general area of Sparta (just like Attica was to Athens) and the Lambda (the letter that appears on their shields) is basically the Greek "L" which is the first letter of the word "Laconia". Lambda is basically the letter where the English "L" came from; if you open its legs to an angle of 90 degrees and rotate it counterclockwise you get an English "L". In fact to Ancient Greeks an English "L" could pass as a lambda as they were pretty liberal in rotating at various angles or even flipping (horizontally and vertically) their letters (especially in paintings). They even wrote from right to left if needed. This tendency underlies a general philosophical belief of theirs that the letters were ideas that could (and should) be recognizable even if their scripted symbols were seen from various angles and even inverted or flipped.

The Spartans did not fight in the battle of Marathon or at any time during the 2nd Medean expedition to Hellas.

The Athenians were also mighty warriors but they could not match the strength and skill of Spartans. Athens was much stronger than Sparta when it came to naval battle however.

The Athenians paid more attention to science, philosophy and the arts than the Spartans did (in fact the Spartans did not want to do anything that was not even remotely related to war and fighting). Athens had matured into a democracy during the 6th century BC while Sparta had always remained an aristocracy.

The basic elements of a hoplite's body armor consisted of:

- Circular shield (called "hoplon", from which comes the name hoplite for the Greek heavy infantryman, or "aspis"). Wooden with bronze layer. About 80cm in diameter.
- Helmet (with or without horsehair crest). Bronze.
- Bronze cuirass or bronze breastplate or linothorax (a corselet of several layers of linen strips glued together). The linothorax was usually worn by the light infantry (peltasts) but some hoplites wore it as well.
- Separate arm, thigh, lower leg and foot protectors (greaves and vambraces). Bronze. Not always worn.
- Iron sword. Blade length of about 60cm.
- Bronze or iron spear (2 to 2.5 meters long)

As time went on, the arm and leg protectors were discarded in order to permit greater mobility. The word for an individual soldier's equipment of weapons and armor is "panoply" (= "all armor").

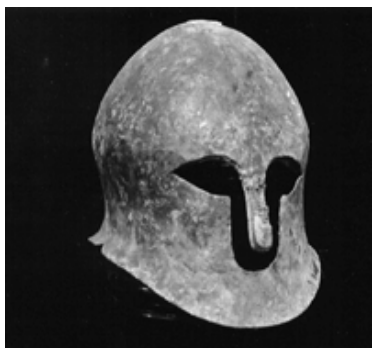
Most items in the ancient Greek panoply of the time were made of bronze. The swords (as well as some spears) were usually made of iron.

The panoply could be very expensive (as much as the equivalent of a modern car according to some experts) and it was the responsibility of each Greek citizen to make it or buy it (this was a very basic responsibility for Athenian citizens that actually had political significance)

The various items of the panoply were not completely uniform from soldier to soldier (although they were pretty close). Many (but not all) helmets bore detachable horse-hair crests.

The hoplites wore leather sandals rather than boots. They wore them because they were easier to make and repair, but also because they allowed the feet to stay cool during marches. Some Greeks marched and fought barefoot.

Below you can see pictures of actual archaeological finds as well as reproduced Hellenic armor of the era.



-- Corinthian type helmets. The Corinthian type was the most common in ancient Greece. The last helmet on the right is of Illyrian type.



-- Hellenic bronze breastplate, greave and spear-head from the time



-- Reproduced Spartan hoplon (shield), reproduced Hellenic sword and sketch of peltas (the wooden shields carried by the Greek light infantrymen who got their name from them - Peltasts). The Pelta was made of wood and covered with leather. The Hoplon was also wooden but was covered with bronze.

You can order replicas of ancient Greek armor here: <http://www.niximperial.com/>. These guys have everything!

Also, here are a couple of very interesting related sites:

<http://www.hoplites.co.uk/>

<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~sparta/topics/rarmour.htm>

Ancient Greek Education and Military Training (Paideia)

The Greek gods were down-to-earth than the unreachable and perfect gods of the East. Because they were endowed with human qualities and often represented aspects of the physical world - such as the sun, the moon, and the sea - they were closer to man and to the world he lived in.

The Greeks, therefore, could find spiritual satisfaction in the ordinary, everyday world. They could develop a secular life free from the domination of a priesthood that exacted homage to gods remote from everyday life. The goal of education in the Greek city-states was to prepare the child for adult activities as a citizen.

The nature of the city-states often varied greatly, and this was also true of the education they considered appropriate.

Both daily life and education were very different in Sparta, than in Athens or in the other ancient Greek city-states. With the exception of the Athenians (who thought Athens was the best!), Greeks from other city-states had a grudging admiration for the military prowess of the Spartans.

They wouldn't want to be Spartans, but in times of war, they most certainly wanted Sparta to be on their side. The Spartans were tough, and the ancient Greeks admired strength.

SPARTA

The goal of education in Sparta, an authoritarian, military city-state, was to produce soldier-citizens that were basically not much more than soldiers.

In ancient Sparta, the purpose of education was to produce a well-drilled, well-disciplined military machine. Spartans believed in a life of discipline, self-denial, and simplicity. They were very loyal to the state of Sparta.

Every Spartan, male or female, was required to have a perfect body.

On the other hand, the goal of education in Athens, a democratic city-state, was to produce citizens trained in the arts of both peace and war.

In egalitarian Sparta, the rule was: even if you've got it, don't flaunt it. This was applied to everything from houses to clothes, even to food. In the common messes, the dish of the day, every day, was a concoction made of boiled pigs' blood and vinegar, known as melas zomos, 'black soup'.

The joke goes that, on being told the recipe for black soup, a man from Sybaris – a city in southern Italy infamous for its luxury and gluttony – said he now understood why the Spartans were so willing to die.

Spartan frugality may have shocked their contemporaries, but to a modern audience, their diet – leaving aside the black soup – sounds nutritious and healthy. Their land was very fertile, producing figs and quinces among other fruits. It was also a rich hunting ground. Compared to the diets of their neighbours – and enemies – the Spartans' comprised a much higher proportion of meat.

SPARTAN BOYS

When babies were born in ancient Sparta, Spartan soldiers would come by the house and check the baby. If the baby did not appear healthy, it was taken away, and was either thrown in the "Keadas" (a deep cave outside Sparta) to die, or taken away to be trained as a slave (a Helot).

Spartan Slaves

Sparta had, like the rest of the Greek city states, a large population of slaves, more so than any other state. In fact, their sheer numbers made it impossible for Sparta to wage war in far away places. Spartan slaves closely resembled medieval serfs; they were freer than the slaves of other Greek states who were mostly foreign, were of a wide racial mix, and did not have a common language to articulate opposition. Spartan slaves came from a single nationality, Messenians, spoke Greek (Messenia was next door to Sparta, and today one can drive there in less than an hour), and were known to rise up when the opportunity arose (since they had an ethnic identity that unified them). The Messenians mainly belonged to the people of the first Aryan descent to the Helladic area (Achaians). The Spartans were mainly Dorian (people of the second Aryan descent)

The boys of Sparta were obliged to leave home at the age of 7 to join sternly disciplined groups under the supervision of a hierarchy of officers. From age 7 to 18, they underwent an increasingly severe course of training. They lived, trained and slept in the barracks of their brotherhood. At school, they were taught survival skills and other skills necessary to be a great soldier. School courses were very hard and often painful.

Although students were taught to read and write, those skills were not very important to the ancient Spartans. Only warfare mattered. The boys were not fed well, and were told that it was fine to steal food as long as they did not get caught stealing. If they were caught, they were beaten.

They boys marched without shoes to make them strong. It was a brutal training period.

Legend has it that a young Sparta boy once stole a live fox, planning to kill it and eat it. He noticed some Spartan soldiers approaching, and hid the fox beneath his shirt. When confronted, to avoid the punishment he would receive if caught stealing, he allowed the fox to chew into his stomach rather than confess he had stolen a fox, and did not allow his face or body to express his pain.

They walked barefoot, slept on wooden boards, and worked at gymnastics and other physical activities such as running, jumping, javelin and discus throwing, swimming, and hunting.

They were subjected to strict discipline and harsh physical punishment; indeed, they were taught to take pride in the amount of pain they could endure.

At 18, Spartan boys became military cadets and learned the arts of war. At 20, they joined the state militia - a standing reserve force available for duty in time of emergency - in which they served until they were 60 years old.

The typical Spartan may or may not have been able to read. But reading, writing, literature, and the arts were considered unsuitable for the soldier-citizen and were therefore not part of his education. Music and dancing were a part of that education, but only because they served military ends.

Unlike the other Greek city-states, Sparta provided training for girls that went beyond the domestic arts. The girls were not forced to leave home, but otherwise their training was similar to that of the boys. They too learned to run, jump, throw the javelin and the discus.

Somewhere between the age of 18-20, Spartan males had to pass a difficult test of fitness, military ability, and leadership skills.

Any Spartan male who did not pass these examinations became a perioikos. (The perioikos, or the middle class, were allowed to own property, have business dealings, but had no political rights and were not citizens.)

If they passed, they became a full citizen and a Spartan soldier. Spartan citizens were not allowed to touch money. That was the job of the middle class. Spartan soldiers spent most of their lives with their fellow soldiers.

They ate, slept, and continued to train in their brotherhood barracks. Even if they were married, they did not live with their wives and families. They lived in the barracks. Military service did not end until a Spartan male reached the age of 60. At age 60, a Spartan soldier could retire and live in their home with their family.

When the Spartan warriors left home to go to war their mothers bid them goodbye by telling them "TAN EE EPI TAS" ("come with your shield or on it", meaning, either come back a victor or come back dead and carried on your shield - shields were often used to carry the dead warriors back home)



"tan ee epi tas"



The legendary Spartan motto is today proudly displayed in the logos of various divisions of the modern Greek army.

SPARTAN GIRLS

In Sparta, girls also went to school at age 6 or 7. They lived, slept and trained in their sisterhood's barracks. No one knows if their school was as cruel or as rugged as the boys school, but the girls were taught wrestling, gymnastics and combat skills. Some historians believe the two schools were very similar, and that an attempt was made to train the girls as thoroughly as they trained the boys. In any case, the Spartans believed that strong young women would produce strong babies.

At age 18, if a Spartan girl passed her skills and fitness test, she would be assigned a husband and allowed to return home. If she failed, she would lose her rights as a citizen, and became a perioikos, a member of the middle class. In most of the other Greek city-states, women were required to stay inside their homes most of their lives. In Sparta, citizen women were free to move around, and enjoyed a great deal of freedom, as their husbands did not live at home.

Spartan Poetry

On Courage

For no man ever proves himself a good man in war
 unless he can endure to face the blood and the
 slaughter,
 go close against the enemy and fight with his hands.

Here is courage, mankind's finest possession, here is
 the noblest prize that a young man can endeavor to
 win,
 and it is a good thing his city and all the people share
 with him
 when a man plants his feet and stands in the foremost

On those Who Died with Leonidas

Leonidas, king of the open fields of Sparta,
those slain with you lie famous in their
graves,
For they attacked absorbing the head-long
assault
of endless Persian men, arrows and swift
horse.

-- Simonides of Creos c. 480BC

Epitaph for the Tomb of Leonidas

(In Sparta, on which stood a stone lion.)

I am the most valiant of beasts,
and most valiant of men is he
Whom I guard standing on this stone tomb.

-- Simonides of Creos c. 480BC

On those Who Died at Thermopylae

(for story of Thermopylae see part III)

Of those who perished at the Hot Gates,
all glorious is the fortune, fair the doom;
Their grave's an altar, ceaseless memory's theirs
instead of lamentation, and their fate
Is chant of praise. Such winding sheet as this
no mould nor all-consuming time shall waste.
This sepulchre of valiant men has taken
the fair renown of Hellas for its inmate.
And witness is Leonidas, once king
of Sparta, who hath left behind a crown
Of valour mighty and undying fame.

-- Simonides of Creos c. 480BC

spears
relentlessly, all thought of foul flight completely
forgotten,
and has well trained his heart to be steadfast and to
endure,
and with words encourages the man who is stationed
beside him.

Here is a man who proves himself to be valiant in
war.
With a sudden rush he turns to flight the rugged
battalions
of the enemy, and sustains the beating waves of
assault.
And he who so falls among the champions and loses
his sweet life,
so blessing with honor his city, his father, and all his
people,
with wounds in his chest, where the spear that he was
facing has transfixed
that massive guard of his shield, and gone through his
breastplate as well,
why, such a man is lamented alike by the young and
the elders,
and all his city goes into mourning and grieves for his
loss.
His tomb is pointed to with pride, and so are his
children,
and his children's children, and afterward all the race
that is his.

His shining glory is never forgotten, his name is
remembered,
and he becomes an immortal, though he lies under the
ground,
when one who was a brave man has been killed by
the furious War God
standing his ground and fighting hard for his children
and land.

But if he escapes the doom of death, the destroyer of
bodies,
and wins his battle, and bright renown for the work of
his spear,
all men give place to him like, the youth and the
elders,
and much joy comes his way before he goes down to
the dead.

Aging, he has reputation among his citizens. No one
tries to interfere with his honors or all he deserves;
all men withdraw before his presence, and yield their
seats to him,
the youth, and the men his age, and even those older
than he.

Thus a man should endeavor to reach this high place
of courage
with all his heart, and, so trying, never be backward
in war.

-- Tyrtaeus of Sparta c. 630 BC

No significant intellectual work came out of Sparta, but Spartan military force was regarded as terrifying. Thus, the Spartans achieved their goal.

ATHENS

ATHENIAN BOYS

When we think of ancient Greece, we almost invariably think of Athens. This is where the blueprint for Western civilization received its first draft. Philosophy and science, art and architecture, democracy itself – all of these have their roots there. But there's much more to the story of ancient Greece than Athens.

Unlike Athens, Sparta can't boast of its philosophers and politicians and artists. It became famous for two things: its frugality – which is where we get our word 'spartan' from – and its fighters. In everyday Sparta, these two were intimately linked.

In ancient Athens, the purpose of education was to produce citizens that would be prepared for both peace and war. Other than requiring two years of military training that began at age 18, the state left parents to educate their sons as they saw fit.

The schools were private, but the tuition was low enough so that even the poorest citizens could afford to send their children for at least a few years.

Until age 6 or 7, boys were taught at home by their mother or by a male slave (Athens, although a democracy, had a lot of slaves. These were usually lower class people originating from remote Hellenic areas or even people of different ethnic backgrounds. The Athenian democracy was a proto-democracy that only applied to the ethnic Athenians and NOT to all people).

Boys attended elementary school from the time they were about age 6 or 7 until they were 13 or 14. Part of their training was gymnastics.

The younger boys learned to move gracefully, do calisthenics, and play ball and other games. The older boys learned running, jumping, boxing, wrestling, and did discus and javelin throwing. The boys also learned to play the lyre and sing, to count, and to read and write. It was literature that was at the heart of their schooling.

The national epic poems of the Greeks - Homer's Odyssey and Iliad - were a vital part of the life of the Athenian people. As soon as their pupils could write, the teachers dictated passages from Homer for them to take down, memorize, and later act out. Teachers and pupils also discussed the feats of the Greek heroes described by Homer.

About writing in ancient Greece

It was from the Phoenicians that the Greeks borrowed their writing system. The Greeks took the final step of separating the consonants from the vowels and writing each separately, thus arriving at the first ever full alphabetic writing about 800 BC.

Ancient Egyptians started writing on papyrus as early as 2,800 BC. Greek people started writing at about that time but it was done mainly on materials such as stone, clay, gypsum, wood and even wax (a wax layer on top of a harder substrate). Letters were inscribed using either etching or writing with various colored substances. This practice continued until fairly late (start of 5th century BC) when papyrus was introduced in Greece. This means that the Greek civilization hit its peak just as papyrus was being introduced. (important note: there were no indigenous papyrus plants in Greece or Europe)

Papyrus was replaced by parchment about 3 centuries later. Parchment ('pergamini' in Greek) was made out of goat (or other animal) skin and was superior to papyrus (smoother writing, could be bound in books). It took its name from the Greek city of Pergamum that produced very good quality parchment.

Papyrus kept being massively used until 4th century AD (by the Romans) and even as far as 8th century AD. Various kinds of parchment remained the main writing medium through most of the middle ages to be later replaced by paper.

"Vellum" was also used. Vellum was good quality parchment made from the skin of young animals; e.g. one could use "kid vellum", meaning parchment made of young goat skin ("kid" actually means "young goat").

The time of the Medean wars basically coincided with the time of the introduction of papyrus in ancient Greece but the two facts are unrelated.

The history of writing

Writing was practiced for many centuries before books were written, just as the book in manuscript was three or four thousand years old before the invention of printing.

Old writing was mainly of monumental character and was inscribed on things like:

- flat-sided stone pillars or cylinders of stone or brick (as among the ancient Babylonians)
- stone slabs (as were the hieroglyphic inscriptions of the ancient Egyptians and the Ten Commandments)
- clay tablets which were afterwards baked to give them durability (like the tiles with wedge-shaped writing on them, known as Assurbanipal's "library", or the famous Tel-el-Amarna tablets)
- metal plates of copper or lead (like the works of the old Greek poet Hesiod, that were inscribed on lead plates and deposited in the Temple of the Muses in Boeotia)
- wooden planks (the earliest Greek legislation, known as the Laws of Solon, was so recorded, and carefully preserved)

Solon's wooden tablets in particular were covered with white gypsum, and the words on them were possibly written in red paint, which was considered sacred. In Athens, during the Peloponnesian Wars (these came 50 years after the Medean Wars) and later, such tablets were used for public notices. Old Orphic songs were also written on wood tablets. For ordinary use, bark, especially bark from lime trees, palm leaves, and the like, were employed. In the Temple of the Muses on the Helicon (a mountain close to the city of Thebes) there was preserved an old example of the Works and Days of Hesiod which was written on lead tablets, despite the fact that this material, though cheap, was not popular. As the need for writing grew with the increase in education, the skin of animals was utilized (parchment); this had long been in use as a writing material in the Orient. Herodotus ascribes its use to the Phoenicians.

The use of wax tablets for writing was widespread in antiquity and ancient Greece. A wax tablet consisted of a thin film of wax, usually black or green, spread upon a hard white surface (hence the word "album" from the Latin "albus" (= white)), which was commonly a thin sheet of wood, upon which the writing was engraved with a stylus made of metal or bone. The apparatus resembled a child's slate, the album being enclosed within a frame the ridge of which protected the writing when two or more such frames were employed (these frames were held together by a cord run through a hole perforated in the corner of the frames). Such a combination of tablets was, in Roman times, known as a codex; literally a "block" since a pile of such tablets resembled a block of wood. If the tablets were small, the block of them was called "codicilli" - a little codex.

According to the number of tablets a distinction was made between codices dup/ices, trip/ices, quinquip/ices, or mu/tip/ices- the Greek word is "polyptyeha", a word which passed into the Latin language and then the English as "polyptych". The two outside faces of the codex were left blank and covered with leather or boards. This is the remote origin of bookbinding. But wax tablets were never used for books, and hence their history is alien to that of libraries. They were used for keeping accounts, casual notes, correspondence not meant to be preserved. The first draft of many a work in prose or poetry was indited upon wax tablets, the composition later being transcribed on papyrus or parchment for permanent record. Small papyrus rolls, in like manner, were used for short notes.

The first thing that resembles the books of today was later on made out of bound parchment sheets.

The education of mind and body, and the building of an aesthetic sense was, according to Plato, so that the boys "may learn to be more gentle, and harmonious, and rhythmical, and so more fitted for speech and action; for the life of man in every part has need of harmony and rhythm."

From age 6 to 14, they went to a neighborhood primary school or to a private school. Books were very expensive and rare, so subjects were read out-loud, and the boys had to memorize everything. To help them learn, they used writing tablets and rulers.

At 13 or 14, the formal education of the poorer boys probably ended and was followed by apprenticeship at a trade. The wealthier boys continued their education under the tutelage of philosopher-teachers.

Until about 390 BC there were no permanent schools and no formal courses for such higher education. Socrates, for example, wandered around Athens, stopping here or there to hold discussions with the people about all sorts of things pertaining to the conduct of man's life.

But gradually, as groups of students attached themselves to one teacher or another, permanent schools were established. It was in such schools that Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle founded and taught in.

The boys who attended these schools fell into more or less two groups.

Those who wanted learning for its own sake studied with philosophers like Plato who taught such subjects as geometry, astronomy, harmonics (the mathematical theory of music), and arithmetic.

Those who wanted training for public life studied with philosophers like Isocrates who taught primarily oratory and rhetoric. In democratic Athens such training was appropriate and necessary because power rested with the men who had the ability to persuade their fellow senators to act.

ATHENIAN GIRLS

Girls were not educated at school, but many learned to read and write at home, in the comfort of their courtyard. Most Athenian girls had a primarily domestic education. The most highly educated women were the hetaerae, or courtesans, who attended special schools where they learned to be interesting companions for the men who could afford to maintain them. In ancient Athens women were considered lower beings and were used mainly for breeding and domestic work. They were not allowed to vote or take part in athletics and they were not taken seriously when they spoke. The latter trend survives in most modern societies to some extent.

Homosexuality and Paideia (=education) in Ancient Greece

There are scholars who have come to the conclusion that the educational relationship between male teacher and male student in Greece was sexual as well. There is evidence of that in various vase paintings (about 30) and writings that speak of the teacher as "erastis" and the student as "eromenos". These scholars argue that homosexuality was pretty common and accepted in the ancient Greek world and it mainly stemmed from the the belief of the ancient Greeks that women were inferior beings incapable of true intellectual love.

However, there is an emerging school of thought on the subject that argues (after many years of research and studies) that homosexuality, although existent, was neither that widespread nor permissible or accepted. In fact, they argue that it was punishable by law with severe penalties.

I will approach this subject, in great detail, in a future article.

Why Marathon?

Why did the Persians choose Marathon?

It appears that the Persians did not exactly choose the plain of Marathon bay to fight the Athenians.

The Athenians at that time had just expelled Hippias, the son of Pisistratus, their last tyrant. Hippias (now a bitter old man), who together with his remaining followers in Athens dreamed of coming again to power (much like any other tyrant in history), was helping the Persian Army as an advisor. It was he who told Datis and Artabernis to land at Marathon. They could calculate, he argued, on drawing the Athenian army away from Athens, thus facilitating the seizure of power there by his followers who would revolt (never happened or if it did it was put down easily).

It seemed also that Hippias had in his mind the battle between his father's, Peisistratus, army and the army of their political opponents in that same plain forty seven years earlier. Peisistratus had won the day and restored himself in the tyrannical power and his son was now maybe hoping that the same may happen here.

Another note of interest is that the Peisistratids (the family of Hippias) came originally from the area of eastern Attica where Marathon is located. Cleisthenes (the great Athenian father of democracy), in implementing his democratic reforms after the fall of the tyrants, had perhaps tried to break up old sources of political influence in this region. It seems that, probably reasonably, Hippias was hoping to establish a kind of political bridgehead here by appealing to old political and personal bonds.

In any case, and to quote Liddel Hart, if this was the intention of the landing at Marathon, then it succeeded, for the Athenians finally decided to rush to the Marathon plain to challenge the enemy.

Another reason given by Herodotus for the choice of Marathon by the Persians was the proximity to Eretria. That is, the Persians wanted to establish a camp on mainland Greece that was only a short distance from the city of Eretria that they had just conquered.

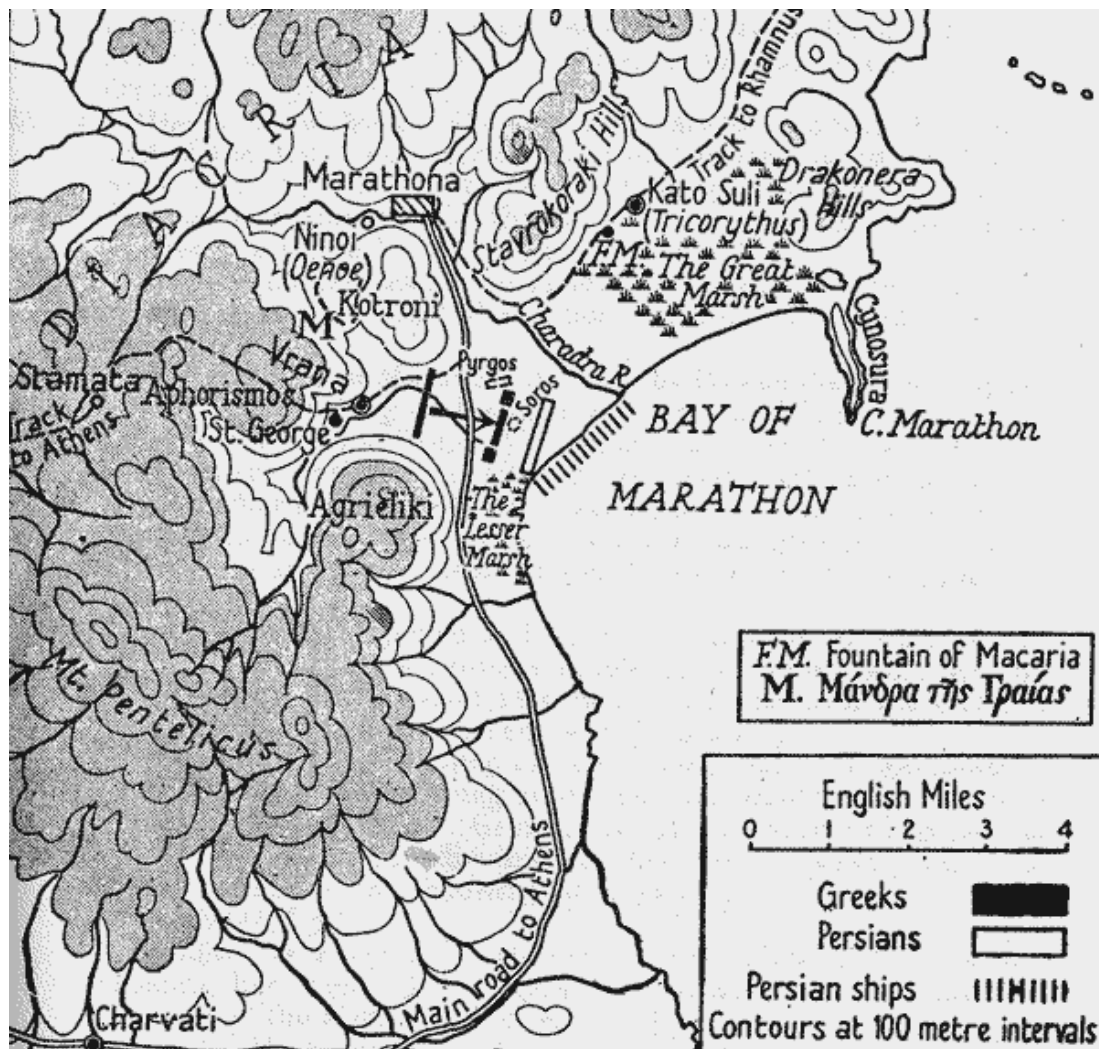
However, Herodotus does not mention (possibly for propaganda reasons) the most important reason (given above) that was of a political nature.

Why did the Athenians choose Marathon?

The Athenians considered the following three possible courses of action against the Persian threat:

- To fight the Persians at Marathon (the most daring of the three)
- To wait the Persians at the Pallini pass (15 klms east of Athens)
- To face the Persians walled in the City (the worst of the three)

The first solution prevailed due to the insistence of Miltiades, one of the ten Athenian generals. Miltiades persuaded the Athenians when he told them that their appearance in Marathon would have surprised greatly the Persians. One must have in mind here that at that time the Athenian army could go to Marathon in 8 hours (standard march) through the Pallini pass.



-- The bay of Marathon area and cape Cynosura (=dogtail). Mount Pentelicus is where the marble for the construction of the Parthenon was brought from.



-- Bay of Marathon pine tree



The part of Marathon's beach closest to the battleground as it looks today



Same part of the beach (to the North). You can see cape Cynosura in the background.



Same part of the beach (to the South)



Part of the beach close to where Charadra river ends. Cape Cynosura in the background.



The north-most part of Marathon beach



What remains of Charadra river today (sorry about the cord!)



Along the beach there are several clubs/bars like this one (they are only open during the Summer)

-- Bay of Marathon pictures (October 2003)

The battle of Marathon



In the spring of 490 BC, Darius assembled in Cilicia a big army, he also prepared a fleet of 600 galleys. Their leaders were Datis, a Mede, and Artaphernes, a nephew of the King (a Persian). Their mission was to oblige all the other Greeks who had refused to give "earth and water" to become vassals to the Great King, but also to sack Eretria and Athens and "bring before him all their inhabitants as slaves."

At first, they sailed to Samos and from there to Naxos, the island which had repelled a large Persian fleet, ten years ago. The people of Naxos fled from the cities, which they were burned by the Persians. All the other islands submitted and the fleet sailed to Eretria, where they found great resistance. For six days the Eretrians fought gallantly, but on the seventh, the gates were opened by two Eretrian traitors, both leading citizens. The city was destroyed and the surviving inhabitants were put in chains.

While all this was taking place the Athenians were being informed of the progress of the Persian force by various means that were available to them (couriers and simple optical signaling).

Telecommunications in Ancient Greece

The prefix "tele" is a Greek word and it means "remote"

Fryktories (early coded optical communication)



The Greeks used fire signals during the night and smoke signals during the day to send messages from city to city or from remote places back to their homeland, even as early as 1200 B.C. For this reason they had built a whole network of manned communications towers (called Fryktories) on the mountain tops of the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea and on many mountain tops of the Greek mainland.

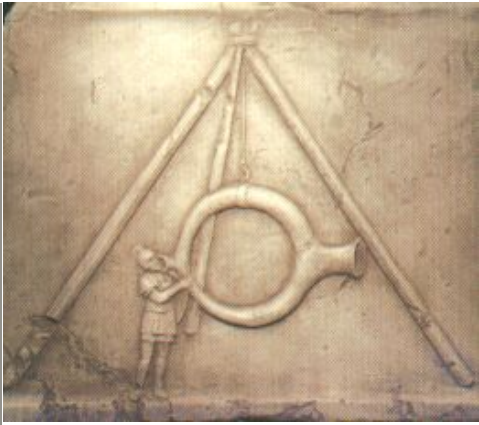


It is said that during the time of the Trojan war (c 1200 BC), they used this system to notify their cities back home that they had won the war.

Smoke signaling was also used by the Indians and later on by the Romans who developed a smoke telegraph net with a total length of about 4500 kilometers (composed of hundreds of towers). Smoke signals were used by the Romans mainly for military signaling.

Acoustic Telegraph

The acoustic telegraph was first used by Alexander the Great in his expeditions (4th Century BC).



Hydraulic Telegraph



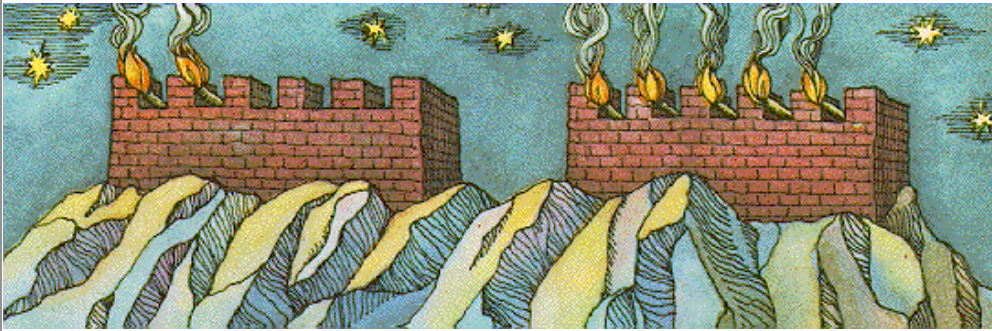
At first, simple fire signals were used in order to exchange messages but later on the hydraulic telegraph, as described by Aeneas (4th Century BC), was developed in order to exchange more sophisticated messages. Still they could only exchange a few set messages (more than the previous system), but faster and more accurately than before. They could only send as many messages as the hydraulic telegraph could take on it.

The hydraulic telegraph consisted of a long wooden bar, with markings bearing certain conventional meaning, floating in a tubular water container. The container had a faucet at the bottom of it and could be filled with water from its open top. The more water was let in the higher the wooden bar would float. The communicated symbol was the lowest (on the bar) one that could be seen from afar when the operator waved the torch (waving of the torch basically meant: "read now").

Optical Telegraph (Pyrseies)

The optical telegraph was invented in the 2nd century BC by two Alexandrian engineers of Greek descent (Kleoksenos and Dimoklitos), by coding the Greek alphabet using two groups of five torches each. The system, since it was based on torches, could not work during the day (at least in great distance).

For example, for the message "One hundred Cretans have deserted", 173 torch signs were used.



-- The two torch groups had to be separated by a distance great enough to be perceived as two (and not one) groups from afar.

The Greek alphabet was separated in 5 groups of 5 letters each, except for the last one that had only 4 (the Greek alphabet has only 24 letters). This way they could exchange any kind of message they wanted because with this system they could actually send letters and not messages of specific previously agreed meaning. This system is the true ancestor of the morse code that we still use today.

In the optical telegraph they used double telecommunications towers at each end with 5 torches on each side of the station. The torches on the left side were used to indicate which group of letters they where about to send and the torches on the right to indicate which actual letter of the group they were sending. So if they wanted to send the letter "I" they lit 2 torches on the left (letter "I" was in the 2nd group) and 4 torches on the right (the letter "I" was the 4th letter of the 2nd group).

They also used double pipes through each of which they could only see one side of the remote tower. As you can understand the bigger the separation distance between the twin towers of the optical telegraph, the longer the communication range would be. This range was usually 20 - 30 kilometres but sometimes about 100 kilometres because the nights in Greece are usually very clear.

Maximum communication speed was about 6 letters per minute (about 1bps. Compare to the 45Kbps of the average modem connection of year 2000)

When they wanted to send encrypted messages they just changed the letter groups and or the number of the groups. Of course both ends need to know before any communication which combinations they would be using. This could be done via a messenger.



-- Greeks coding the letter 'I' as: 2nd row, 4th letter

In later years, in 1792 Chappe designed an optical telecommunication system that could transfer 196 different signals. In 1837 Morse lays the foundations for electrical telegraph and in 1876 Bell made the first telephone call. In 1895 Marconi invented the cordless communication and telephotography became the precursor of telefax.

Telecommunications at the time of the battle of Marathon

At the time of the battle of Marathon the only kind of telecommunication available was various forms of optical signaling (light signals). During the night fire was used as the light source and during the day shiny metal plates or shields. However at the time of the battle of Marathon the practice of signaling was not very widespread and furthermore there were no widely accepted

coding conventions or codes that could be used to deliver complex messages at great distances.

Although they knew that the time when they would have to defend their city would come soon the Athenians waited until the last minute (fall of Eretria) before they asked for help from the Spartans with whom their relation had always been antagonistic. So, they sent Phidippides to Sparta, to ask for assistance. The Spartans promised to send a force, but asked for time, because it was not full moon yet (one more week was needed for the moon to fill), a Spartan religious superstition, which was prohibiting them to send help immediately.

After a few days, Datis crossed to Attica, landing on the plain of Marathon, a place which had been chosen by Hippias, the son of Peisistratos, who was accompanying the Persians. The efficient lookout organization of the Athenians must have immediately spotted the landing of the enemy.



-- Reproduced Persian ships of the era (from the set of a movie that was shot on site). The reproduction is probably not accurate (see part III for what the Persian ships really looked like).

The Athenians decided to march to Marathon and face the enemy on their own. The citizens of a single Greek city against the might of an awesome empire. Upon reaching the battleground they were joined by a force of 1,000 Plataeans (Plataea was a smaller nearby city that owed their freedom from the rule of Thebes to the Athenians).

The Athenians were divided into ten "tribes" (phylae). Each tribe had to mobilize 1,000 hoplites and to appoint a general as their leader. Thus the Athenian army comprised 10,000 hoplites and 10 generals. To that strength one must add a number of slaves and light infantry (peltasts) armed with small spears. An tentative of the whole Greek force would be around 15,000.

On the other hand the Persian force is calculated (mainly from the number of the ships they had) by different scholars to numbers between 30,000 and 50,000. The most widely accepted view is that they were more than 40,000.

When the army was assembled for war, each day one of the ten generals in turn was appointed as the head of the whole army for that day. Because they voted for any decision made, there was another general, appointed by the city, with the title of "polemarch" (literally "War ruler") who also had the right to vote. Thus there was no case of parity in the vote, the number of voters being eleven.

Regarding the spirit of the Athenians, who had a newly founded democratic state, I had better let Herodotus, the contemporary historian and Father of History, to tell the tale: "Liberty and Equality of civic rights are brave spirit stirring things, and they who, while under the yoke of a despot, had been no better men of war than any of their neighbors, as soon as they were free, became the foremost men of all. For each felt that in fighting for a free commonwealth, he fought for himself and whatever he took in hand he was willing to do the work it required thoroughly."

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 the battle of Marathon Miltiades had gone to Thrace, as ruler of the Peninsula (today Dardanel) and lived there up to 494 BC. When the Persian Empire expanded to that territory, Miltiades submitted to the Great King Darius and watched closely the Persian Army in its expedition against Scythia. Thus he had had a good idea of their tactics.

During his staying in the Peninsula, Miltiades conquered and placed under the authority of Athens the islands of Lemnos and Imbros and therefore he stood high in public opinion. So when the invasion of the Persians became known he was elected as one of the ten generals of the Athenian army. The names of five generals are known. Among them were two generals who played a vital role in the last invasion of the Persians after ten years: Aristides and Themistocles. The name of the Polemarch is also known: Callimachus (= "he who fights well")

The plain of Marathon has the form of a crescent with a length of about ten kilometers and a maximum width of three in the center. It narrows towards its two ends where at that time existed marshes and a pine forest (the forest is till there and is in fact a great area for camping), flooded during the period the battle took place and therefore unsuitable for cavalry operations. The Persians had run their ships ashore and they had camped in even, unbroken ground. They must have been surprised when they saw the Athenian army arriving at Marathon and encamping at the valley of Vrana. The position was not easily attackable. The Persian camp was in full view in the distance.

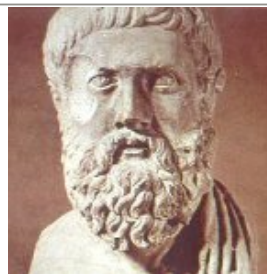
To the Athenians it became immediately clear that the enemy did not intend to make an overland advance to Athens since they had left unoccupied the two passes leading to Athens.



-- Greek side is red, Persian side is green. Dots are soldiers and the shaded areas are the camps of each side. The bulk of the Persian fleet can be see towards the end of the bay.

So the fear of trickery became a decisive factor for the conduct of a battle. In the war council that was held, there was a parity of votes: five generals, with Miltiades first and foremost, were in favor of immediate attack while the other five voted for attack after the arrival of the Spartans who had promised they would come. Then Miltiades (who was the man behind the decision of the Athenians to march to Marathon) turned to Callimachus, the man whose vote would be decisive, and said, in the words of Herodotus: "With you it rests Callimachus either to lead Athens to

slavery or, by securing her freedom to leave behind for all future generations a memory even greater than of those who made Athens a democracy. For never since the time the Athenians became a people were they in such great a danger than now...." After that address Callimachus voted for immediate battle.



The Athenian General Miltiades



The Helmet of Miltiades

Dedication by Miltiades (the inscription informs us "Miltiades dedicates to Zeus"). It is the same helmet worn by the Athenian general in the battle of Marathon, where he defeated the Persians, and thus offered it to Zeus as a sign of gratitude.
Archaeological Museum at Olympia (close to Delphi), Greece

For eight days the two armies stood confronting each other. In the ninth day the Persians started embarking and it became apparent that a covering force would stay securing the Athenian army at Marathon while the rest of the army would sail to Athens to seize the obviously defenseless city. The situation demanded immediate action and Miltiades, whose turn to be commander in chief had come that day, ordered the army of the 10.000 Athenians and the 1.000 Plataeans to prepare for battle. It is theorized that the Athenians chose this time as the most suited for attack as much of the Persian cavalry had already embarked (obviously horses needed to embark and be secured before anything else).

Miltiades faced two difficult problems and to solve them applied new tactics, totally deviating from the commonplace tactics the Greeks had applied 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) the 40.000 thousand men would have formed a front-line of about 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 8 men deep their front would be only 1.250 meters wide, and thus the flanks would be dangerously exposed. But Miltiades knew from previous experience the way the Persians deployed their army: in the center their best troops (Persians and Sacae) while in the flanks their vassals' forces (whose motivation usually was just "fight or else...." since no national cause inspired them).

This led him to apply totally new tactics, which was to be repeated by Hannibal in the battle of Canea 3 centuries later and by the Germans in the battle of Tannenberg 24 centuries later. He deliberately weakened his own center forming a line of two Phylae (tribes) in a depth of only four men (i.e. since each one of the Phylae had 1.000 men the front in the center was 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 Plateans with a depth of 8 men, and thus the front has a total width of 1625 meters.

Callimachus took the honorary position in the right flank. The two Phylae of the center were led by two men who ten years later would become famous: the one was Aristides (the Just) who led

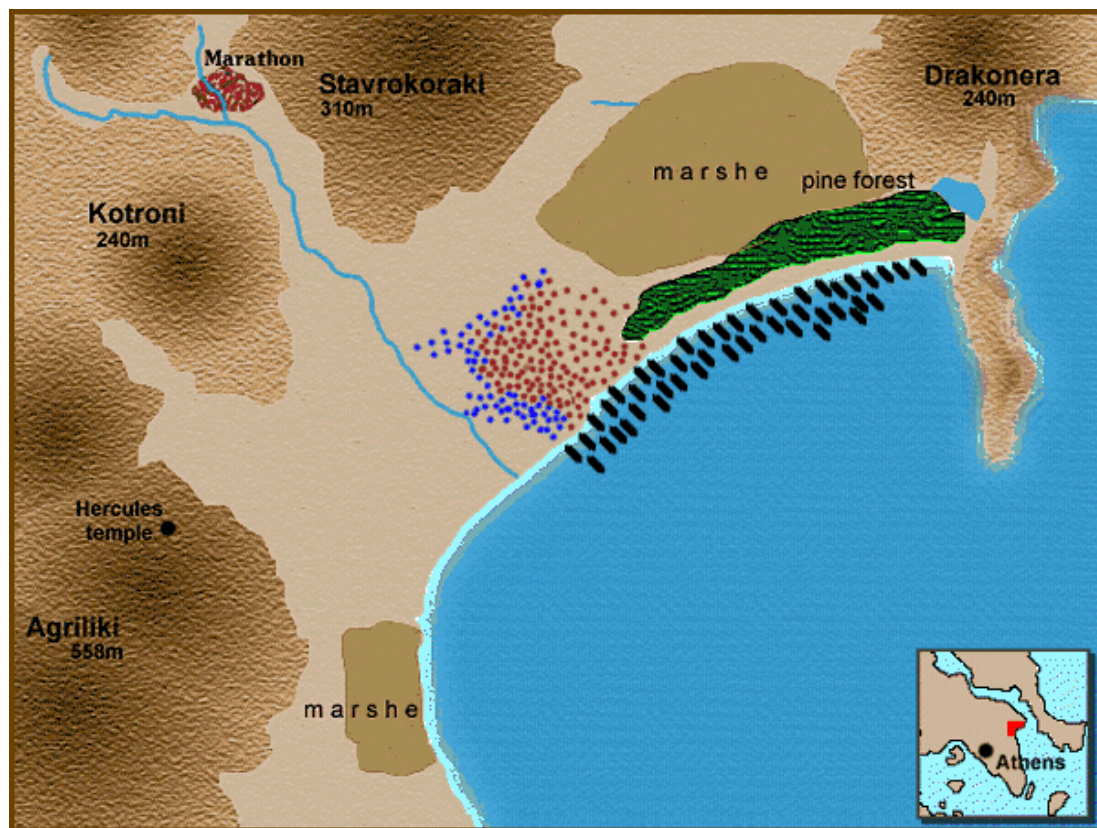
the Athenian army in the battle of Plateae in 479 BC and the other Themistocles, the victor of the naval battle of Salamis in 480 BC.

The Persian army would try to exterminate the Athenian army with 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 if they run. To that end he applied the technic of the "assault at the double". 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 killing ground in the shortest possible time and fall on the enemy with the greatest possible momentum.

So in the morning of the 17th of September 490 BC, Miltiades gave the order and the 11,000 Athenians and Plataeans formed their ranks and marched against the enemy. Later on, the great tragic poet Aeschylus, who fought in all the battles of the Persian Wars, brought to our days through his famous tragedy "Persians" what was going through the minds of the Athenians as they attacked the hordes of the enemy: "On, sons of the Hellenes! Fight for the freedom of your country! Fight for the freedom of your children and of your wives, for the gods of your fathers and for the sepulchers of your ancestors! All are now staked upon this strife!"

Herodotus tells us that "When the Persians saw the Athenians coming down on them without cavalry or archers and scanty in numbers, they thought them as an army of madmen running towards their certain destruction." Soon they arrayed their troops to face the "madmen". Nearing the "killing ground" the Athenians launched the assault at the double. With their war cry, "Alala! Alala!", the Athenians fell upon the Persians.

The engagement developed exactly as planned. In the weak Athenian center the Phylae of Aristides and Themistocles fought bravely but the numbers and quality of the Persian soldiers obliged them to cave in towards the inner country where the ground gave them the possibility to regroup and renew the fighting. In the flanks the Athenians and Plataeans had routed the opposing forces. Then Miltiades gave the order: they had to forget the fleeing enemy and turn against the backs of the Persians of the victorious, so far, center. And so they did.



The Persians surrounded by their opponents, their short lances and swords and their wicker shields no match for the Hellenic spears and bronze shields, had no chance. Hard they fought but

finally the previously invincible Persians turned their backs and fled while the Athenians run then back to the sea.

There took place the hardest battle and there the Athenians suffered the heaviest casualties as their goal was to capture the Persian ships before they could sail towards Athens. There fell Cynaegyus, the brother of Aeschylus (while trying to heroically hold on to a Persian ship), the noble and brave polemarch Callimachus as well as many other Athenians. However, the Persians, fighting hard for their lives, succeeded to save all their ships except seven that were captured.



Many of the Persians could not make it to the ships and fled towards the marshes where they were slaughtered.



The casualties of the Hellenes amounted to a total of 192 Athenians and an unrecorded number of Plataeans and slaves. It seems that the Greek shields and the on-the-double charge strategy worked well as there is no evidence that many Athenians died by arrows.

The Persians lost 6400 men but in these casualties we must include a large number of prisoners, for Herodotus tells us that when Miltiades perceived that the Persian fleet could sail and attack the undefended city of Athens, he left the Phylae of Aristides and Themistocles, who had been tried hardly in the center of the line, to keep the spoils and the prisoners while the rest of the army departed hastily for Athens where they arrived late night after a 7 hour march and encamped in the temple of Herakles, at Kynosargaes.

It is also known that when the battle was nearing its end, someone at the summit of Penteli mountain used a polished shield to sent an optical message. It is assumed that this was a signal to the Persians by one of the followers of Hippias, that the City was undefended, or, more possibly, to the Athenians by some special observer who from Penteli could easily see the Persian fleet sailing towards the shores of Athens.

The Persian leaders had indeed sailed to Athens and arrived at the bay of Faliron the next morning. There another surprise awaited them: in the distant hills the 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 in Athens (about 2,000 of them having marched about 140 miles in 3 days). They asked permission to inspect the battlefield and when they were granted permission they expressed their admiration for the feat of the Athenians (although it is sure that they made the usual ironic remarks that are so characteristic of Greeks of all times).

The spoils of the battle were dedicated by the Athenians to the Oracle of Delphi in central Greece (a place of seminal religious importance for all Greeks). They also erected a large bronze statue of Athena (made by Pheidias). Later on they would raise the magnificent Parthenon that was in large part dedicated to the Athenian victories during the Medean wars. Part of the loot was given to the city of Plataea.

Thus ended the first great engagement between Greece and Persia but it did not end the contest. Ten years later a vast Persian Army, under king Xerxes himself, would invade Greece only to be defeated in Salamis and Plataea.

The strategic genius of Miltiades

- *Offensive tactic:* He seized the initiative and ordered the attack against the Persians, with inferior numerically forces at the right moment.
- *Economy of force and mass:* He deployed his line of battle in such a way as to hit the weakest section of the Persian line with his strongest. In that respect he did what few generals have done: he broke a taboo (that of meeting the best with your best), risking an anathema against him in case of failure.
- *Unity of command:* Herodotus tells us that the Athenian generals offered their turn of command to Miltiades, but he attacked the day of his turn of command. Thus he secured that all Phylae were under one responsible commander.
- *Surprise:* First he persuaded the Athenians to go to Marathon and then at the decisive moment he attacked the enemy, applying the new tactics, in such a way that the Persians considered the Athenians "madmen".
- *Maneuvering:* In the battle of Marathon, Miltiades applied the maneuver of double envelopment. It does not matter that the front was not very extended. That was the way battles were fought those days. It matters that this magnificent maneuver, so often repeated by other great generals later, was conceived and directed successfully for the first time by Miltiades who had not had any previous knowledge or example.

Finally, I consider proper to offer the opinion on Miltiades by one distinguished historian, Hans Delbr, who in his classic work "History of the Art of War, Warfare in Antiquity" writes:

"The figure of Miltiades as a field commander stands giant-like in the early annals of world military history. The most complete and rarest form of leadership that the art of work has evoked up to the present day, the defensive-offensive combination, is found here, in the simple lines of work of art of the first great military event. What perspicacity in his choice of the battlefield, what self-control in awaiting the enemy attack, what authority over the masses, over a proud, democratic citizens' levy, to be able to hold them fast in the chosen position and then to lead them forward to the attack at the double at the decisive moment! Everything was geared to this moment -not a minute too early, for the Athenians would have reached the enemy breathless and disordered; not a minute too late, for then too many of the enemy arrows would already have struck and the large number of falling and hesitating men would have slowed up and finally broken the power of the assault, which had to fall on the enemy line like an avalanche if it was to give victory. We shall have further occasion to discuss many a similar situation, but never a greater one."

Amazing stories from the Marathon battle legacy

In the battle of Marathon fought the tragic poet Aeschylus and his brother Kynegiros, who fell in the battle showing immense bravery. Trying to hold a Persian ship, his hand was cut off by an axe. Aeschylus, who was wounded badly, considered his participation in the battle of Marathon, the highest honor he had in his life, as it was written by himself in his grave style.

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Also, from Herodotus: "And there occurred there a marvelous happening, as follows: an Athenian man, Epizelos son of Cuphagoras, while fighting at his station—a man become heroic—was bereft of his eyes, although not struck in any part of his body nor shot, and for the rest of his life he lived, from this time, blind. And he said himself about what he had suffered, as I heard, something like this: a man seemed to him—a hoplite—to stand against him—a huge man whose beard shadowed his whole shield; this phantom passed by Epizelos himself, but killed the man standing beside him. These things indeed, as I learned, Epizelos said." It seems to me that Epizelos' blindness was psychological and probably occurred because of the extremeness of emotions he experienced. However, I have heard people theorize about extra-terrestrials and time-travellers based on Epizelos' story.

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Pausanias (1.33.2) tells us that the Persians were so sure of victory that they had brought with them a block of marble to be carved into a victory monument. Instead, the great Athenian sculptor Pheidias carved it into a statue of the god Nemesis, avenger of wicked actions, plainly indicating that the Persians got exactly what they deserved. See Book 6 of Herodotus' History for a full report on the 490 BC Battle of Marathon.

The Marathon Tombs

The Athenians, to honor their dead, buried them in three tombs (mounds). In one of the tombs were buried the Athenian citizens, in the second the Plataeans and in the third the slaves. The tomb of the Athenians still exists in the plain of Marathon and it is the starting point of the Marathon race. The tomb of the Plataeans is found at the foot of mount Penteli. 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 during the battle.

The Greek term for this kind of tomb is called a "soros" (= pile)

The tomb of the Athenians

The 192 Athenians killed, were buried in the field of the battle and a thirty nine feet high tomb was erected over them. Their names were inscribed on ten pillars (these have been reconstructed just as the tomb monument was), one for each tribe. The tomb was discovered by Dr. Stais in 1890-1891



Marathon Tomb. Here lie the cremated remains of the 192 Athenians that perished in the battle of Marathon.



Tomb, reconstructed monument and reconstructed marble pillars that listed the names of the dead by tribe. Unfortunately, the names of the dead are not extant and thus the pillars are today blank.



Monument and 10 pillars



The inscription at the base of the marble monument reads:



The whole place is being re-tiled and generally renovated as the 2004 Olympics approach



The monument and surrounding olive trees. Mount Penteli in the background.



View from the top of the tomb towards the north



In this very ground the battle of Marathon took place



The battleground today as seen from the top of the soros



This is the inscription, on the base of the Marathon tomb monument, in ancient Greek. Notice the absence of whitespace delimited words. This is not because there were no words (of course) but because Greeks had the view that somebody who is proficient enough in Greek should be able to make them out without the sissy help of whitespace. It is a test, if you like, of proficiency in Greek that was imposed on every reader of Greek, in every instance and forever, because of the very nature of the Greek writing. "Speaking and writing Greek efficiently" was not just "communicating in Greek" but in many ways "being Greek".

Greeks should also notice how ancient Greek is closer to English than modern Greek is. For instance there is usage of a silent 'H' and 'E' is pronounced as 'ee' and not 'eh', as in modern Greek (except when it has an H before). Also note the English like lambdas (L's) - that are pronounced exactly like the English 'L'. The Greeks should note that the English and ancient Greek L is basically the modern greek lambda inverted.

Also note how the '+' is basically the 'x' rotated by 45 degrees and how the Delta is basically the English D rotated by 45 degrees. However, x is pronounced as h (as in 'he' or 'her') in both ancient and modern greek.

The Athenian Soros is about 9 metres high (14 metres originally), and 180 metres around. This mound marks the place where the 192 Athenian fell at the Battle of Marathon. They were buried here after cremation on a pyre to mark their extreme valour instead of the usual practice of being taken home for burial. Archaeological finds unearthed at this site and at other nearby sites are on display in the Archaeological Museum of Marathon, which is located in the Vranas area (a few kilometres from the tomb and right next to the tomb of the Plataeans). The museum contains exhibits from as far back as 4th millennium BC as well as sculptures, reliefs, pottery, graves and inscriptions.

The tomb covers a prepared surface beneath a layer of ashes two to ten centimeters thick composed of human bones and funeral vases. Below this layer is a sacrificial pit containing the bones of sacrificed animals and birds (those were eaten during a banquet that followed the burial rituals). Thucydides thought these practices an exception to his city's "patrios nomos" (= "ancestral custom") of bringing the bones of its dead home for burial in the public cemetery in the Kerameikos: "They always bury the dead from the wars there except for those at Marathon. Because they judged their bravery exceptional, they buried them on the plain" (2.34).

Schliemann originally incorrectly dated this site to the Bronze Age (an actual Bronze Age tholos does lie very close by). But later Greek archaeological excavations confirmed this to be the grave mound known from classical tradition. They determined that an artificial floor 85 feet long was constructed for the purpose of a mass cremation, followed by animal sacrifices and a funeral banquet, remains of which have also been found. The mound (eroded from its original 14 meters to its present height of only 9 meters) was then heaped on top.

Pausanias comments that even in his day (2nd century AD) the men who died at Marathon were worshipped as heroes.

The tomb of the Plataeans

Near the main soros, another tumulus stands 4 meters tall and spans 30 meters in diameter: the Tomb of the Plataeans. Marinatos' 1970 excavations uncovered 11 burials: 8 inhumations (skeleton burials, one of which are pictured below), 2 cremations and 1 pithos-burial (a child, probably a later addition).



-- The tomb of the Plataeans on the foot of mount Penteli (Vranas area)



-- An inhumation. The skeleton of a heroic Plataean in the tomb





Marathon bay and plains



Mounts of Penteli

-- Pictures of the the Vranas area and the tomb of the Plataeans (October 2003)

The importance of the victory

In the short term, this was a very important victory for two reasons:

- First, it showed what lethal damage hoplites could do to Persian forces; this encouraging message was not missed by the Spartans who arrived to view the corpses and departed with patronizing congratulations to the Athenians.
- Second and more important, it was a propaganda victory, celebrated in all the available media. Thus, the Marathon battle soon became an almost mythical event that heightened the Hellenic morale.

The Athenian Treasury at Delphi was built out of the spoils of the battle. An ambitious conjecture seeks to equate the 192 Marathon dead with the 192 equestrian figures on the Parthenon frieze. The horses on the frieze would be a difficulty if the idea were to recall the battle in a literal way, because the battle was definitely not a cavalry affair; but it has been ingeniously suggested that the horses were intended to suggest "heroic" status in the technical sense of "hero," or demigod. Heroic cult often involved horses (as perhaps at Lefkandi), and heroic funerals regularly included equestrian events.

Well after the Persian Wars the victory was exploited in epigram and painting. For instance, there was a famous rendition of the Battle of Marathon in the "Painted Colonnade" at Athens (now lost), which was perhaps commissioned by Miltiades' son Cimon. This was celebratory artistic propaganda, with a far clearer message than that of the Peisistratids. The Battle of Marathon and the Persian Wars must be recognized as an artistic watershed. There was admittedly something splendid about the gesture of sending help to the Ionian revolt, and it has been suggested accordingly that early 5th-century depictions on vases of Theseus attacking the Amazons (inhabitants of Anatolia) may be a coded allusion to Athens' Asiatic adventure of the 490s. The vindictive Athenian treatment of the playwright Phrynichus for referring in a play to the fall of Miletus shows, however, that the Ionian revolt was a dangerous subject, not lightly to be treated by pot painters.

Marathon was the beginning of an epoch that lasted for centuries, during which Athens asserted its claim to uniqueness on the basis of two things: its achievements in the Persian Wars and (in and after the 4th century) its cultural primacy.

The battle of Marathon and the victory of the Hellenes had far reaching historical consequences. Here is what two distinguished historians have to say:

According to Fuller "Marathon was a remarkable battle both from the point of view of Persian Strategy which was admirable, and of Grecian tactics, which were no less so. For the first time in their history the Greeks had beaten the Persians on their own element, the land, and Marathon endowed the victors with a faith in their destiny which was to endure for three centuries during which western culture was born. Marathon was the birth cry of Europe."

According to Creasy: "The day of Marathon broke for ever the spell of the Persian invincibility which has paralyzed men's minds. It generated among the Greeks the spirit which beat back Xerxes and afterwards led on Xenophon, Agesilaus and Alexander in terrible retaliation through their Asiatic campaigns. It secured for mankind the intellectual treasure of Athens, the growth of free institutions, the liberal enlightenment of the western world and the gradual ascendancy for many ages of the great principles of European civilization."

The battle of Marathon debunked the myth of the Persian invincibility and made possible the survival of the newly born democracy (as the return of the tyrants was averted). Democracy would live and grow in Athens and other Greek city-states for another 2 centuries until Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great brought back the days of the Kings. Democracy would slowly re-emerge during the enlightenment (with things like the Magna Carta), only to be fully resurrected by the French revolution and mostly the American constitution. Democracy has only recently become the standard government type in the modern world.

The Battle of Marathon is perhaps the single most important battle in Greek history. Had the Athenians lost, Greece would have eventually come under the control of the Persians and all the subsequent culture and accomplishments of the Greeks would probably not have taken the form they did.

The sad colophon of the story of Marathon

The Battle of Marathon, among other things, immortalized the name of Miltiades; but in a few years' time he fell from grace, for he failed in an Athenian expedition against the island of Paros.

The Greeks had no pity for failure. Just as they hooted against unsuccessful athletes in their games, so they jeered at Miltiades. In spite of all the honors they had recently heaped upon him, the people hearkened to his enemies when they said his failure was due to criminal conduct of some kind. He was called up for trial, though he was wounded, and forced to appear before his judges on a couch. He was fined fifty talents of silver, and when he could not pay the debt he was sent to prison (while still wounded) to die.

Thus ended the life of Miltiades and such was the gratitude shown by the Greeks to their own hero of Marathon. Many years later, Socrates would die in similar conditions, struck by national scourge of the Hellenes: ungratefulness.

What comes next?

Meanwhile the Persians retreated, and Darius died (while preparing for another expedition to Greece), to be succeeded in 486 by Xerxes. No Greek could have doubted that Marathon, for all its symbolic importance, was not the end of the matter and that the Persians would return with a much larger invasion force.

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