**Battle of Marathon:**

**A Model for Heroic Behavior**


“Callimachus, it is now in your hands to enslave Athens or make her free, and thereby leave behind for all posterity a memorial such as not even Harmodius and Aristogeiton left. Now the Athenians have come to their greatest danger since they first came into being, and, if we surrender, it is clear what we will suffer when handed over to Hippias. But if the city prevails, it will take first place among Hellenic cities.” *(Miltiades to Callimachus, on whether to fight the Persians advancing to Marathon)*


However, the story shall be told not so much to deprecate hostility as to testify against it, and to show, if you are so ill-advised as to enter into a struggle with Athens, what sort of an antagonist she is likely to prove. We assert that at Marathon we were at the front, and faced the barbarian single-handed. That when he came the second time, unable to cope with him by land we went on board our ships with all our people, and joined in the action at Salamis.


The dead are laid in the public sepulchre in the most beautiful suburb of the city, in which those who fall in war are always buried; with the exception of those slain at Marathon, who for their singular and extraordinary valor were interred on the spot where they fell.


O hateful divinity, how have you foiled the purpose of the Persians! Cruel was the vengeance which my son brought upon himself for his designs against illustrious Athens; the barbarians whom Marathon destroyed were not enough. It was in an effort to exact retribution for them that my son has drawn upon himself so great a multitude of woes.

Epitaph of Aeschylus *(www.theatrehistory.com/ancient/aeschylus001.html)*:

Aeschylus, son of Euphorion, an Athenian, is covered by this tomb; he died in wheat-bearing Gela. The famous grove of Marathon can tell his valour. As can the long-haired Persian who knew it.
Epitaph by Simonides on the dead at Marathon (www.union.edu/PUBLIC/CLSDEPT/classics21/ outlines/):

Fighting as Greece's champions the Athenians at Marathon
Laid low the might of the gold-appareled Persians


Chorus
How is this fair or right,
ruining a greybeard
in court beside the water-clock?
He has borne his share of toil,
he has wiped off manly sweat
by the bucket when he fought
for the city at Marathon.
In our prime, at Marathon,
we pursued the enemy.
But nowadays
evil men eagerly
sue and pursue us.
What can the shysters say to this?


The day of Marathon is the critical epoch in the history of the two nations. It broke forever the spell of Persian invincibility, which had paralysed 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 treasures 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.
Battle of Marathon

Winston Churchill in 1940, responding to the deaths of British airmen at the hands of German forces, said, “Never before have so many owed so much to so few,” employing the loss of life fighting the good fight against seemingly insurmountable odds as the heroic ideal. Likewise the loss of life in the battle of Marathon served later generations of Athenians as the model of heroic behavior.

Herodotus in Book 6, sections 111 to 113, states:

“Then the Athenians drew up their lines in the following manner – they had their line cover the full length of that of the Persians, but their center was only a few ranks deep and herein lay their weakest point. Both wings, however, were manned to full strength. They took up their position, and when the sacrifices proved propitious the Athenians were given the signal and advanced on the barbarians at the run. The armies were separated by not less than eight stades. When they saw them running forward the Persians made ready to meet the attack, but they thought the Athenians must be possessed, for they were as good as lost they were so small a force yet here they charged forward at a run with neither horse nor bowmen to aid them.

This was the attitude of the barbarians. But the Athenians fell on the enemy all together, and gave battle as to truly deserve their fame. Now as far as we know they were the first Greeks to charge the enemy at the run, and the first to hold firm at the sight of the Median costume and the men dressed in it. Before that the very name of the Persians was fearsome to the Greeks.

For a long time they fought at Marathon. Then the barbarians drove back the center of the Greek line, for it was here that were stationed the Sacae and the Persians. Along this part therefore the Barbarians broke the Greek line and drove it inland, but on the two wings the Athenians and the Plataeans were victorious. Seeing what had happened they left the barbarians they had defeated to flight, and each wing wheeled round to fight the part that had pushed through their center. Here too the Athenians were victorious. The Persians were put to flight, pursued and cut down – when the Athenians reached the sea they asked for brands and proceeded to assault the ships.”

Thus we have the official description of the battle of Marathon, and later scholars have attempted to prove or disprove the proceedings as Herodotus gives them. We are told by Herodotus that 6,400 Persians and 192 Athenians died in the battle. N.G.L. Hammond in his 1968 *Journal of Hellenic Studies* article reminds us that Herodotus “was writing contemporary history and reciting at Athens to men who had fought in the campaign of Marathon, so that the facts of the action which he gives – facts known to contemporaries – are unimpeachable.” While Plataeans joined the battle on the Athenian side, Herodotus does not mention the number of deaths; he refers only to the Persians and Athenians. Later generations credit the Athenians for the Greek victory, and Athens certainly used the glory for their own gain. Nevertheless, the Plataeans must be recognized for their part.

Pausanias mentions two burial mounds: one at Marathon, called a Soros or Tymvos, and one in the Vrana valley. The Marathon Tymvos, excavated in the 1890s, holds the bodies of the 192 Athenians who died in the battle, while Vrana since its start in the late 1960s has only been excavated in one area, in which were found 11 bodies (8 in trenches, 2 cremated, and one a child). The dating of the Vrana mound and its identification as the Mound of the Plataeans comes from the findings of artifacts, such as lekythoi and a pyxis, which are datable to 500-490 BC.

The importance of the battle of Marathon is not the number of deaths or military strategies, however, but rather the way in which the Greeks, particularly the Athenians, responded to the results of the conflict. Charles Freeman in his 1999 *The Greek Achievement* attests, “It was a
stunning achievement, transcending the most epic of heroic legends. No single event was ever to exercise such grip on the imagination of Athens.”

We saw at the Acropolis Museum that the battle of Marathon, just a few decades after the actual event, was depicted on the Temple of Athena Nike, thus taking on mythical proportions in the minds and eyes of Athenians. Another sculptural monument of the battle is the fresco in the Stoa Poikile, in the Agora of Athens. The fresco illustrates three scenes as being stages of the battle:

1. engagement of Athenians and Plataeans with the Persians;
2. flight of the barbarians
3. fight along the shore

The final stage shows both gods, in the form of Athena, Theseus, Heracles, and Marathon (as the personification of the region, just as we’ve seen with Brauron), and also the Greeks, among them Miltiades, the military commander. Pausanias refers to this fresco in 1,15.3. He tells us in 1,32.3-7 that Miltiades received an individual monument, while the other fallen heroes were given a trophy near the burial mound, with an inscription by Simonides.

I supply on the Handout several literary sources to assert the importance of the battle of Marathon to the people of Athens. The first supplies Herodotus’ depiction of the conversation between Miltiades and Callimachus, on whether to wait for the Spartans to join the defensive line once their religious festival concludes, or to launch an attack against the Persians immediately. The conversation likely did not occur as given, but Herodotus, in linking the battle of Marathon with Harmodius’ and Aristogeiton’s attempted coup against the Peisistratid tyranny (appropriately since Hippias, advisor to the Persians, was one of the Peisistratids), creates a liminal point where a crucial decision must be made and the importance of Miltiades’ argument is clear.

The next quote comes from Thucydides, where in Book 1 an Athenian contingent assets their city’s strength of purpose in any situation. They employ such phrases as “at the front” and “single-handed” to show their courage, and they proclaim via the battle of Marathon their commitment as well as ability.

Thucydides later, as supplied in the third citation, states at the beginning of the Funeral Oration that unlike other burials for war heroes, the fallen at Marathon were not buried in a public ceremony in a sepulcher. Rather, they were buried where they fell, Thucydides tells us due to their “singular and extraordinary valor.”

Aeschylus, who fought at Marathon and Salamis, and whose brother died at Marathon, in his play The Persians provides words to Atossa, mother of the King Xerxes, upon learning of the Persian defeat at Salamis. She bewails the Persians killed at Marathon, and attributes her son’s expedition against the Greeks as retribution for that battle.

In Aeschylus’ mind, as well as of most Athenians, to have fought in such an epic battle was more noteworthy than anything else one can accomplish. Despite having won several prizes for his plays, Aeschylus refrains from showcasing his writing abilities and instead touts his military experience. Even at the time of his death in 456, 35 years after the battle of Marathon, Aeschylus considers his participation at Marathon as indicative of his worth as a Greek, and he makes certain that it appears on his gravestone.

Simonides composed an epitaph for the fallen, noting that they are “Greece’s champions” and that, much as David defeated Goliath, they “laid low the might of the gold-appareled Persians.” The Athenians were not decked out in gold and did not have a cavalry or extensive weaponry. However, as Simonides makes evident, they proved their worth against insurmountable odds.
Aristophanes in his comic play *The Acharnians* has his Chorus contrast the heroism of the Athenians who proved victorious at Marathon to their later predicament, where the prior valor was disregarded and “heroes” were prey for those wishing to make a buck, by pushing false accusations and hoping the accused would settle instead of endure a lengthy trial. The Chorus states, “He has borne his share of toil, he has wiped off manly sweat by the bucket when he fought for the city at Marathon. In our prime at Marathon, we pursued the enemy.” In referring to fighting “for the city,” it is as if the Chorus expresses the obligation of the city, Athens, to protect the heroes. Alas, ultimately valor is discounted when someone can make money in the deal.

To conclude, Creasy’s statement in *Fifteen Decisive Battles* eloquently makes the claim that “the day of Marathon is the critical epoch in the history of the two nations [Greece and Persia]… It secured for mankind the intellectual treasures 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.”