



Written by [Fr. James Thornton](#) on April 4, 2023

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Ancient Fighter for Freedom

Editor's note: At its height during the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., the Persian Empire was the largest the world had ever seen, ranging from central Asia to Egypt and the Balkans. Its armies earned a reputation as invincible — until the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C., when, against all odds, the Greeks routed the Persians, setting up their nation for victory and independence.

This inspiring story is told here by Father James Thornton, longtime contributor to The New American magazine, who has written biographies of 15 great military leaders of the ancient world. Their stories teach timeless lessons regarding patriotism and love of country. Central to Greece's struggle to maintain sovereignty is the account of Miltiades the Younger, who ruled over an Athenian colony on what is today the Gallipoli Peninsula. Following is an excerpt, adapted from Thornton's work.



[Wikipedia/Sailko](#)

Freedom fighter: Miltiades the Younger was born about the year 550 B.C. to the noble and wealthy Philadae family of Athens. Without him, Greece may never have realized independence from the Persian Empire.

In 513 B.C., King Darius I of Persia moved a large army threateningly close to Miltiades' colony, forcing him to become a vassal. Darius had imposed the same control over the Ionian Greek cities in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), and therefore required Miltiades and the other rulers to accompany him on an expedition against the Scythians.

Darius' army marched north up the Balkan Peninsula, beyond the Danube (a river that the Greeks called the Ister). Miltiades and some Greek units were left in charge of a bridge over which Darius and his army crossed the Danube to confront the Scythians. Herodotus records that since the Persians were unfamiliar with the territory, the two armies, Persians and Scythians, bypassed one another. The Scythians, coming across the Greek units guarding the bridge, urged them to destroy it, thereby leaving Darius and his army trapped, without food or supplies, and likely to be destroyed. That would have freed the Greek cities.

Miltiades advocated for the Scythians, but most of the other commanders opposed him. It was a political move, for they held their positions as tyrants of these cities at the pleasure of the Persian king. Were he no longer their overlord, and they no longer protected by his power, they would most certainly be overthrown. And so it was that the bridge remained, and Darius and his army safely returned.

A decade or so later, Miltiades seized the islands of Imbros and Limnos from the Persians. It was during that time that the cities of Ionia, on the central western coast of Asia Minor, arose in rebellion against Persian rule, an event known as the Ionian Revolt, which Miltiades supported. At one point during the revolt, armies from Athens and Eretria (a town on the island of Euboea) marched on the Persian capital,



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Sardis, captured it, and set it ablaze. When Darius heard this news, he launched an arrow into the sky and said, as history records, "O Supreme God! Grant me that I may avenge myself on the Athenians." Moreover, he instructed a servant to repeat thrice to him at each meal, "Sire, remember the Athenians."

The Ionian Revolt failed, and the Persians attacked Miltiades' realm. The latter and his family barely escaped, sailing to Athens. There, political enemies brought Miltiades to trial for the crime of ruling the Thracian Chersonese (i.e., Gallipoli) oppressively, but he was acquitted of the charge. He even gave to the Athenians the islands of Imbros and Limnos, which he had wrested from the Persians. Athens then appointed him as one of their 10 generals, thanks to his proven hostility to the Persians and his knowledge of their ways. As general, Miltiades led one of the 10 Athenian tribes, or *phylai*.

Since Eretria and Athens had both sent aid to the cities in revolt against the Persians and had participated in the destruction of Sardis, Darius' capital, the Persian monarch determined to punish the offending cities. Allied with him was Hippias, a former tyrant of Athens who, if Darius succeeded in occupying that city, was anxious to regain his former position. Darius regarded Hippias as a useful tool who quite possibly could mobilize some of his former supporters to assist in overpowering Athens. Under the command of Artaphernes, a nephew of Darius, the Persian army assembled to attack Eretria and Athens.

In 490 B.C., a Persian fleet sailed up the channel between Euboea and mainland Greece and landed a large force that first besieged Eretria and, after entering the city through an act of treachery on the part of an Eretrian citizen who had been bribed with Persian gold, sacked and burned it, taking its population captive and transporting them to the interior of the Persian Empire, where they would spend the remainder of their lives as slaves.



Pivotal battle: The Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. marked the first victory by the Greeks against the Persian Empire and shattered the myth of Persian invincibility.

Just before Eretria's fall, the town sent a runner to Athens, notifying that city of the attack. Athens, in turn, sent a messenger to Sparta, asking that city for immediate assistance. The Spartans were in the midst of a religious observance, but they promised to send help after conclusion of the festival, which was still several days away. Athens also alerted its ally, Plataea, which rallied one thousand soldiers to join the Athenians.



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Darius' aim in striking at Eretria so brutally was twofold. First, he wished to punish Eretria. He also aimed to strike terror into the hearts of the Athenians. This, he thought, might encourage action on the part of those within the Athenian population who wished to submit peacefully to Persian overlordship, or, to put it more bluntly, who wished for peace at any price. Fortunately, most of the Athenians were not so easily intimidated.

The Persians landed a force at Marathon, intent on marching against Athens from there — a journey of 26 miles. That threat, they believed, would draw the Athenian army to Marathon to confront the invaders, leaving Athens unprotected. Meanwhile, another Persian army would sail from Marathon to Athens to capture the undefended city, perhaps with the help of a pro-Hippias fifth column within Athens, which, as a bonus, would obviate any need for combat.

Just after the Persians landed at Marathon, the Athenians moved their army of about 10,000 to the Vrana valley overlooking the site of the enemy's disembarkation. There, the thousand Plataean infantrymen joined them. An actual battle was delayed several days since the Athenians were awaiting the arrival of the Spartans, not having heard yet that the religious festival detained them.

Finally, however, an Athenian war council waged a heated discussion as to whether their armies should resist the invasion by attacking immediately at Marathon, or deal with the Persians at Athens. Before their eyes was a host much larger than anything that Athens could muster, perhaps by two or two and a half times. Yet, Miltiades, having been forced to serve with the Persians for several years, knew of their weaknesses and knew of the overall superiority of the individual Greek *hoplites* — the Athenian infantrymen — in both skill and equipment.

Of the 10 generals, five, including Miltiades, voted for an immediate attack, while five voted against. But there was one other vote to be counted; the *polemarch* (an overall commander-in-chief) by the name of Callimachus, had not yet voiced his decision. History relates that Miltiades approached him, saying, "With thee it rests, Callimachus, either to bring Athens to slavery, or, by securing her freedom, to leave behind thee a memory beyond even Harmodius and Aristogeiton [Athenians who had helped overthrow Hippias' despotic rule]. For never since the time that the Athenians became a people were they in so great a danger as now.... On thee therefore we depend in this matter, which lies wholly in thine own power. Thou hast only to add thy vote to my side and thy country will be free, and not free only, but the first state in Greece. Or, if thou preferest to give thy vote to them who would decline the combat, then the reverse will follow." Callimachus broke the tie by voting with Miltiades, in favor of an immediate attack.

It was about this time that the Persians re-embarked a large portion of their infantry and all of their cavalry and sailed for Athens, with Datis in command. Seeing this, Miltiades knew that it had become crucial for the Athenian army to begin the battle at once, defeating the remaining enemy forces, and then to march straight to Athens. Otherwise, undefended Athens would surely be lost.

The Greek underdog: Most of the known world was under Persian control when Greece stood up to the much larger oppressor in defense of its freedom. (wikipedia/Bibi Saint-Pol)



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The Persian order of battle placed the toughest troops in the center of the line, with the wings occupied by less-reliable Ionians and other conscripts. Miltiades' order made the best of the Greek inferiority in numbers. He drew out his phalanx so its length equaled that of the Persians' line. Were that not done, the Persians would easily outflank and defeat the Greeks. But to achieve that length, he thinned the Greek center to perhaps four ranks in depth, while the wings on either side were twice that thickness. The distance between the two armies was, according to Herodotus, eight *stadia*, which equals roughly nine-tenths of a mile.

The second factor the Greeks had to consider was the great number of Persian archers. A barrage of arrows could so seriously decimate the ranks of the hoplites before even reaching the Persian line that victory would be impossible. Miltiades decided therefore that the Greek line would advance at the usual relatively slow pace until they came within range of the Persian arrows, roughly 150 feet, at which time they would advance at the double — that is, they would run.

There were two advantages to this: The hoplites would more quickly pass the effective killing zone of the arrows, and the impact of their running advance would be more psychologically powerful, raising the morale of the Greeks while possibly demoralizing the Persians through fear and the physical shock of collision.

And so began the steady advance of the Athenians with their Plataean allies. Callimachus, the polemarch, was on the far right, the place of honor, with the Plataeans occupying the wing on the far left. Miltiades was at the head of his tribal unit. Upon entering within range of the Persian arrows, they broke into a run, precisely as planned. This tactic, coupled with the excellent Athenian armor, kept casualties at a minimum. The running, however, disturbed the alignment, or dressing, of the Greek phalanx, so by the time it collided with the Persian line, gaps had appeared. That allowed the Persians to break through, to some extent, and push back the thin center line. However, as the Greek center moved backward, the wings, twice as thick as the center, slowly wheeled inward, enveloping the Persian flanks.

The Persians, without armor and with shields made only of wicker, were at a distinct disadvantage. When they realized they were being encircled, they panicked and ran for their ships. The Greeks pursued closely, attacking the embarking Persians and capturing seven ships.

Persian losses at Marathon amounted to 6,400 men, while the Greeks lost only 192. Among those losses



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was the brave polemarch, Callimachus.

But Athens had won the day! They dispatched the runner Philippides, who ran 26 miles to Athens, announcing to the astonished inhabitants, "Rejoice, we conquer!" He then collapsed, dead of exhaustion.

However, the danger had not passed. Most of the Persian fleet and large army had sailed around the promontory of Cape Sounion to attack Athens. Though doubtless exhausted by the battle, the Athenians and Plataeans had to march immediately to defend the city.

Before they arrived, someone flashed a signal, using a shield, from the peak of Mount Pentelicon to the Persian fleet, letting them know that Athens was unguarded. Historians blame Persian spies within Athens for this treachery.

What they did not realize was that Miltiades force-marched his army to Athens, where they took up position at Cynosarges outside the walls of the city. Shortly thereafter the Persian fleet arrived off Phaleron (modern Faliro), which was at that time the port of Athens. Learning that Miltiades' army had won the race to Athens and that the city was indeed defended, the Persian fleet turned and sailed away. Darius' desire to avenge himself on Athens had to be postponed, and Hippias knew at that moment that he would never again rule there. On the Plain of Marathon, the Athenians buried the 192 Greek dead beneath a large conical mound that survives to this day.

For a time, Miltiades was Athens' hero, having delivered her from the ignominy of Persian enslavement. But popular opinion can be capricious. The island of Paros had collaborated with the Persians by supplying a *trireme* (warship) for the attack on Athens. Hence the Parians had committed an act of war for which Miltiades proposed retribution. A fleet of 70 ships sailed for Paros and besieged the main city for 26 days. Not only was the expedition a failure, but Miltiades himself was badly injured. Convicted of treason upon his return, he was sentenced to death. The sentence was subsequently commuted to a fine of 50 talents — a huge sum that Miltiades was unable to pay before he died. His son, Cimon the Younger, paid it.

Years later, in an attempt to justify the monumental ingratitude of the Athenian people toward Miltiades, fantastic stories were spun about the Paros episode, and are sometimes repeated by modern historians. It is said that he deceived Athens by promising to return from Paros with massive treasures of gold. It is alleged that he undertook the Paros campaign to satisfy a personal grudge against its people. Finally, the story was spread that he corrupted a priestess of the goddess Demeter and injured his leg while escaping her religious sanctuary. But it is nearly certain that these calumnies were fabricated.

The Battle of Marathon marked the first victory by the Greeks against the mighty Persian Empire. More such contests were in store. The importance of Marathon, however, is that it shattered the myth of Persian invincibility, giving Greece confidence in her ability to succeed and a breathing space to prepare for future threats. Thus, the Greece that gave birth to the men whom the renowned historian Jacob Burckhardt called "the representatives of genius on earth" lived on to the benefit of that part of humanity that has learned from the ancient examples and who therefore are prepared, at all costs, to defend their precious freedom.



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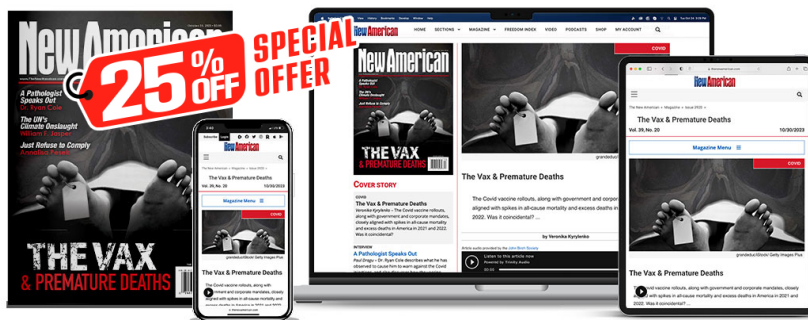
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