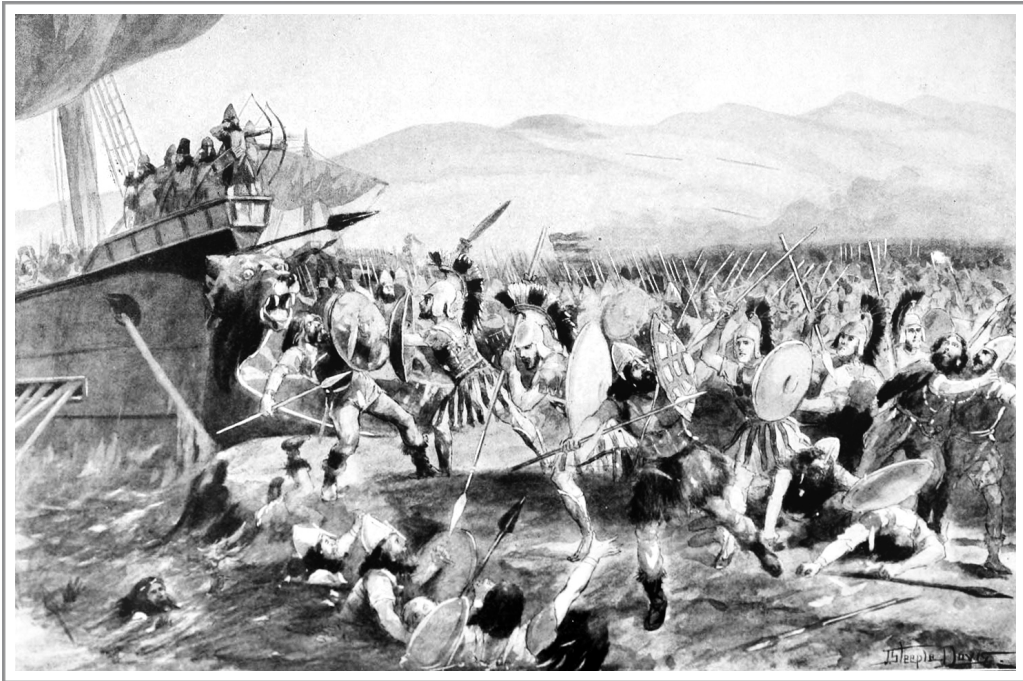


Battle of Marathon



The Persian preparations for war were hastened by news that all the Ionian cities had rebelled. These were Greek colonies founded on the coast of Asia Minor. They had little by little fallen into the hands of the Persians, but, as they hated to submit to foreign rule, they had long planned a revolt.

The Athenians, who knew that the Persians were talking of coming over to conquer them, now offered to help the Ionians, and sent some troops over to Asia Minor. These joined the rebels, and together they managed to surprise and burn to the ground the rich city of Sardis, which belonged to Darius.

A messenger was sent in hot haste to bear these tidings to The Great King; and when he heard them, he was very angry indeed. In his wrath, he said that he would punish both rebels and Athenians, and immediately sent his army into Ionia.

The first part of his vow was easily kept, for his troops soon defeated the Ionian army, and forced the rebels to obey him once more. When Darius heard this, he was very much pleased; and then, sending for his bow, he shot an arrow in the direction of Athens, to show that the punishment of the Athenians would be his next care.

As he was afraid of forgetting these enemies in the pressure of other business, he gave orders that a slave should appear before him every day while he sat at dinner, and solemnly say, "Master, remember the Athenians!"

When the preparations for this distant war were ended, the Persian army set out for Greece. In order to reach that country, it had to march a long way through the northern part of Asia Minor, cross a narrow strait called the Hellespont, and pass along the coast of the Ægean Sea, through Thrace and Scythia.

In these countries the Persian army met the fierce and warlike Scythians mounted on their fleet-footed horses, and was nearly cut to pieces. The Persians

were so frightened by the attack of these foes, that they refused to go any farther, and even beat a hasty retreat.

The Persian fleet in the mean while had sailed along bravely. It soon came to the promontory formed by Mount Athos, a tall mountain which sometimes casts a shadow eighty miles long over the sea. Here a terrible tempest overtook the fleet, and the waves rose so high that six hundred vessels were dashed to pieces.

All the rest of the Persian vessels were so damaged by the storm, that it was soon decided that they had better return home. The soldiers of The Great King were of course greatly discouraged by these misfortunes; but Darius was more than ever determined to conquer Greece, and at once began to gather a second army and to build a second fleet.

Darius was very busy preparing this other army to march against Greece. While the men were being drilled, he sent two messengers to the Greek towns and islands, bidding them surrender and give him earth and water.

By demanding "earth and water," Darius meant that he wanted them to recognize him as their king, and as master of all their lands and vessels. The inhabitants of many of the islands and towns were so frightened by the messages sent by The Great King, that they humbly yielded; but when the messengers came to Sparta and Athens, they met with a different reception.

In both cities the people proudly replied that they were their own masters, and would not yield to the demands of the Persian king. Then, angered by the insolent command to give earth and water, the Spartans entirely forgot that the life of an ambassador is sacred. In their rage, they seized the Persians, flung one into a pit and the other into a well, and told them to take all the earth and water they wanted.

This conduct made Darius all the more angry, and he hastened his preparations as much as he could. He was so active that in a short time he was able to start out again, with an army of a hundred and twenty thousand men.

The generals of this force were Datis and Artaphernes, who were guided and advised by the traitor Hippias. The fleet was to land the army on the plain of Marathon, close by the sea, and only one day's journey from Athens.

When the Athenians heard that the Persians were coming, they immediately decided to ask the Spartans, who were now their allies, to come to their aid, and help them drive back the enemy. As there was no time to lose, they chose as their messenger a fleet-footed Athenian, who made the journey of a hundred and fifty miles in a few hours, running every step of the way, and only seldom pausing to rest.

The Spartans listened breathlessly to his tidings, and promised that they would help the Athenians; but they added, that they would not be able to start until the moon was full, for they thought that they would be beaten unless they set out at a certain time.

The Persians in the mean while were advancing rapidly, so the Athenians started out to meet them with no other help than that of their neighbors the Plataeans. The whole Greek force numbered only ten thousand men, and was under the command of the ten Athenian generals who were each entitled to the leadership for a day in turn.

Among these ten Athenian generals were three remarkable men—Miltiades, Aristides, and Themistocles. They consulted together, hoping to find a plan by which their small army could successfully oppose the Persian host, which was twelve times greater.

At last Miltiades proposed a plan which might succeed, provided there was but one chief, and all obeyed him well. Aristides, who was not only a good man, but also remarkably just and wise, at once saw the importance of such a plan, and offered to give up his day's command, and to carry out his friend's orders just as if he were nothing but a common soldier.

[Illustration: Themistocles.]

The other generals, not wishing to appear less generous than he, also gave up their command to Miltiades, who thus found himself general in chief of the Athenian and Plataean armies. So he speedily made his preparations, and drew up his small force on the plain of Marathon, between the mountains and the sea.



The Greek army seemed so very small beside the huge host of invaders, that the Persians felt perfectly sure that it would surrender as soon as the fight began. Imagine their surprise, therefore, when the Greeks, instead of waiting for them, gave the signal for battle, and rushed furiously upon them.

The daring and force of the Greek attack so confused the Persians, that they began to give way. This encouraged the Greeks still further, and they fought with such bravery that soon the army of The Great King was completely routed.

Hippias, fighting at the head of the Persian army, was one of the first to die; and when the Persians saw their companions falling around them like ripe grain under the mower's scythe, they were seized with terror, rushed toward the sea, and embarked in their vessels in great haste.

The Athenians followed the enemy closely, killing all they could reach, and trying to prevent them from embarking and so escaping their wrath. One Greek soldier even rushed down into the waves, and held a Persian vessel which was about to push off.

The Persians, anxious to escape, struck at him, and chopped off his hand; but the Greek, without hesitating a moment, grasped the boat with his other hand, and held it fast. In their hurry to get away, the Persians struck off that hand too; but the dauntless hero caught and held the boat with his strong teeth, and died beneath the repeated blows of the enemy without having once let go. Thanks to him, not one of those enemies escaped.

The victory was a glorious one. The whole Persian force had been routed by a mere handful of men; and the Athenians were so proud of their victory, that they longed to have their fellowcitizens rejoice with them.

One of the soldiers, who had fought bravely all day, and who was covered with blood, said he would carry the glad news, and, without waiting a moment, he started off at a run.

Such was his haste to reassure the Athenians, that he ran at his utmost speed, and reached the city in a few hours. He was so exhausted, however, that he had barely time to gasp out, "Rejoice, we have conquered!" before he sank down in the middle of the market place, dead.

The Greeks, having no more foes to kill, next began to rob the tents, where they found so much booty that each man became quite rich. Then they gathered up their dead, and buried them honorably on the battlefield, at a spot where they afterward erected ten small columns bearing the names of all who had lost their lives in the conflict.

Just as all was over, the Spartan force came rushing up, ready to give their promised aid. They were so sorry not to have had a chance to fight also, and to have missed a share in the glory, that they vowed they would never again allow any superstition to prevent their striking a blow for their native land whenever the necessity arose.

Miltiades, instead of permitting his weary soldiers to camp on the battlefield, and celebrate their victory by a grand feast, next ordered them to march on to the city, so as to defend it in case the Persian fleet came to attack it.

The troops had scarcely arrived in town and taken up their post there, when the Persian vessels came in; but when the soldiers attempted to land, and saw the same men ready to meet them, they were so dismayed that they beat a hasty retreat without striking another blow.

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