

**CLASSICAL GREECE  
(4TH-5TH CENTURIES  
BCE): BATTLE OF  
MARATHON 490 BCE**



# CLASSICAL GREECE (4TH-5TH CENTURIES BCE): BATTLE OF MARATHON 490 BCE

## Description

Through the investigation of selected primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how a vastly outnumbered and outgunned Greek force was able to defeat the much larger and more powerful Persian army at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE and why this battle is considered to be a watershed event in the history of western civilization.

## Subjects

World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Marathon Battlefield
- Pheidippides statue, Rafina
- Athens Agora

## Essential Questions

- What was the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE? Why was it an important turning point in the Greco-Persian Wars?
- Who was Herodotus? How did he describe the Battle of Marathon?
- Why is the Battle of Marathon seen as a turning point in World / Western History?

## Academic Summary

The Athenian generals were divided in their opinions, and some advised not to risk a battle, because they were too few to engage such a host as that of the Medes, while others were for fighting at once, and among these last was Miltiades. He therefore, seeing that opinions were thus divided, and that the less worthy counsel appeared likely to prevail, resolved to go to the Polemarch, and have a conference with him. For the man on whom the lot fell to be Polemarch at Athens was entitled to give his vote with the ten generals, since anciently the Athenians allowed him an equal right of voting with them. The Polemarch at this juncture was Callimachus of Aphidnae; to him therefore Miltiades went, and said:

"With thee it rests Callimachus, either to bring Athens to slavery, or, by securing her freedom, to leave behind thee to all future generations a memory beyond even Harmodius and Aristogeiton. For never since the time that the Athenians became a people were they in so great a danger as now. If they bow their necks beneath the yoke of the Medes, the woes which they will have to suffer when given into the power of Hippias are already determined on. If, on the other hand, they fight and overcome, Athens may rise to be the very first city in Greece. How it comes to pass that these things are likely to happen, and how the determining of them in some sort rests with thee, I will now proceed to make clear. We generals are ten in number, and our votes are divided; half of us wish to engage, half to avoid a combat. Now, if we do not fight, I look to see a great disturbance at Athens which will shake men's resolutions, and then I fear they will submit themselves, but if we fight the battle before any unsoundness show itself among our citizens, let the gods but give us fair play, and we are well able to overcome the enemy. 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 preferrest to give thy vote to them who would decline the combat, then the reverse will follow."

Now, as they marshalled the host upon the field of Marathon, in order that the Athenian front might be of equal length with the Median, the ranks of the center were diminished, and it became the weakest part of the line, while the wings were both made strong with a depth of many ranks.

So when the battle was set in array, and the victims showed themselves favorable, instantly the Athenians, so soon as they were let go, charged the barbarians. Now the distance between the two armies was little short of eight furlongs. The Persians, therefore, when they saw the Greeks coming on at speed, made ready to receive them, although it seemed to them that the Athenians were bereft of their senses, and bent upon their own destruction; for they saw a mere handful of men coming on at a run without either horsemen or archers. Such was the opinion of the barbarians, but the Athenians in close array fell upon them, and fought in a manner worthy of being recorded. They were the first of the Greeks, so far as I know, who introduced the custom of charging the enemy at a run, and they were likewise the first who dared to look upon the Median garb and to face men clad in that fashion. Until this time the very name of the Medes had been a terror to the Greeks to hear.

The two armies fought together on the plain of Marathon for a length of time, and in the mid battle, where the Persians themselves and the Sacae had their place, the barbarians were victorious and broke and pursued the Greeks into the inner country, but on the two wings the Athenians and the Plataeans defeated the enemy. Having so done, they suffered the routed barbarians to fly at their ease, and joining the two wings in one, fell upon those who had broken their own center, and fought and conquered them. These likewise fled, and now the Athenians hung upon the runaways and cut them down, chasing them all the way to the shore, on reaching which they laid hold of the ships and called aloud for fire.

It was in the struggle here that Callimachus the Polemarch, after greatly distinguishing himself, lost his life; Stesilaus too, the son of Thrasilaus, one of the generals, was slain; and Cynaegirus, the son of Euphorion, having seized on a vessel of the enemy's by the ornament at the stern, had his hand cut off by the blow of an axe, and so perished; as likewise did many other Athenians of note and name.

Nevertheless, the Athenians secured in this way seven of the vessels; while with the remainder the barbarians pushed off, and taking aboard their Eretrian prisoners from the island where they had left them, doubled Cape Sunium, hoping to reach Athens before the return of the Athenians. The Alcmaeonidae were accused by their countrymen of suggesting this course to them; they had, it was said, an understanding with the Persians, and made a signal to them, by raising a shield, after they were embarked in their ships. The Persians accordingly sailed round Sunium. But the Athenians with all possible speed marched away to the defense of their city, and succeeded in reaching Athens before the appearance of the barbarians, and as their camp at Marathon had been pitched in a precinct of Hercules, so now they encamped in another precinct of the same god at Cynosarges. The barbarian fleet arrived, and lay to off Phalerum, which was at that time the haven of Athens; but after resting awhile upon their oars, they departed and sailed away to Asia.

There fell in this battle of Marathon, on the side of the barbarians, about six thousand and four hundred men; on that of the Athenians, one hundred and ninety-two. Such was the number of the slain on the one side and the other.

*Herodotus, Histories, The Persian Wars: The Battle of Marathon, 5th century BCE*

August 490 BCE... Marathon, Greece (south of Athens)

On paper, it was a mismatch of epic proportions.

The Persians, between 25,000 and 100,000 strong on the field that morning (modern estimate vary), had built what was arguably the most powerful and well-trained army in the world. Persian soldiers came from across an empire that stretched from India to the steps of southeastern Europe. Datis and Artaphernes, co-commanders of the Persian forces, had to feel confident as they surveyed the situation. Persian heavy infantry soldiers, known as the "immortals", were feared across the region for their fighting prowess and invincibility, a fighting force unmatched in the ancient world.

Standing across the field were less than 10,000 Athenians, mostly merchants and farmers pressed into service because of the Persian invasion. Loyal and willing to follow every command, the Greek army nonetheless stood very little chance of victory that day, and yet they were defending their homeland, undoubtedly a powerful motive. The Greek battle commander, Miltiades, realized that conventional tactics calling for a frontal assault on the enemy would end up in the decimation of his fragile army. He needed a plan that would lure the Persians into making a mistake.

Miltiades decided to reinforce his flanks, making them stronger than the center, then subsequently ordered an attack from the center only. Knowing it would ultimately fail, Miltiades was convinced this frontal attack would be repulsed and that the Persians would then counterattack. That was the trap. During the counterattack, the Greek center began to give way, luring the Persians in. When all seemed lost, the Greek flanks wheeled around, enveloping the Persian army. In the ensuing chaos, thousands of so-called immortals were trapped and slaughtered. The remainder of the Persian army broke in panic. The day belonged to the Greeks. The Persians retreated. Their invincibility was gone.

Legend says that after the battle was over, an Athenian soldier named Philippides ran from the battlefield to Athens to inform the citizens of the victory. In this story, the exhausted soldier reached the Agora in the city center, screamed "Nike!" (Greek for "victory") and then promptly collapsed and died from his ordeal. The legend is probably false, as it does not appear in text until Plutarch wrote of it in the 1st century CE, but it is still a great story. In 1896, when the modern Olympics started in Greece, organizers decided to include a run from Marathon to Athens commemorating the ancient achievement. The "marathon", now run in every summer Olympics, was born. Through the investigation of selected primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how a vastly outnumbered and outgunned Greek force was able to defeat the much larger and more powerful Persian army at the

Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE and why this battle is considered to be a watershed event in the history of western civilization.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the Greeks were able to defeat the Persians at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE is considered to be a watershed event in the history of western civilization.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How important is defending one's homeland in preparation for battle? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Battle of Marathon (25 min)
- Video – Battle of Marathon (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on the Battle of Marathon, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework before class.
- Suggestion: Advanced/AP students should focus on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on the Battle of Marathon (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment / DBQ – Essay: Explain in detail the Battle of Marathon, how an outnumbered Greek force was able to defeat a much larger Persian army, and why the battle is considered to be a watershed even in the history of western civilization.

## Extension

### On tour: Marathon Battlefield

While on tour, students can visit the battlefield at Marathon where they can see for themselves the location of the famous battle fought in 490 BCE. There is a feature on the plain called the *Tymbos* (tomb). It is the burial mound where Greek soldiers who died at the battle are buried. According to Herodotus, 192 Athenian soldiers died at Marathon, but most historians believe the number was larger, probably somewhere around 1000. There is also a marble stone slab on the site commemorating the battle.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.thenagain.info/classes/sources/herodotus-marathon.html](http://www.thenagain.info/classes/sources/herodotus-marathon.html)  
Herodotus – The Persian Wars: The Battle of Marathon (primary source)
- [www.historyguide.org/ancient/marathon.html](http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/marathon.html)  
Herodotus on the Victory at Marathon (primary source) – from the History Guide (UK)
- <http://classics.mit.edu/Herodotus/history.html>  
The History of Herodotus (primary source) – full text version of the entire work by Herodotus from MIT. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.
- [www.guilford.k12.ct.us/sites/rebhunj/documents/DAY6MARATHON.pdf](http://www.guilford.k12.ct.us/sites/rebhunj/documents/DAY6MARATHON.pdf)  
Background on the Battle of Marathon (worksheet PDF) – from Guilford High School (CT)
- <http://dcgacademics.com/csd/highschool/socialstudies/U2%20Classical%20Greece/The%20History%20of%20Herodotus%20SG.pdf>  
History of Herodotus (worksheet PDF)
- [www.lakepowell.net/marathon.html](http://www.lakepowell.net/marathon.html)  
The Marathon Story: The Battle that Changed Human History (website)
- [www.eyewitnessstohistory.com/marathon.htm](http://www.eyewitnessstohistory.com/marathon.htm)  
The Battle of Marathon, 490 BCE (website)
- [www.helleniccomserve.com/pheidippides.html](http://www.helleniccomserve.com/pheidippides.html)  
Pheidippides Heroic Journey (website) – true story of the “marathon” runner
- [www.slideshare.net/calmacarlo/the-battle-of-marathon](http://www.slideshare.net/calmacarlo/the-battle-of-marathon)  
The Battle of Marathon (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7dZU8sPR18](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7dZU8sPR18)  
Ancient Battles: Victory at Marathon (video). 45-minute video from the History Channel. It is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is worth it.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=l\\_jVCzTf1qY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_jVCzTf1qY)  
Decisive Battles: Marathon (video). 22-minute video from the History Channel. Great video that uses computer animation to explain what happened at the battle. Highly recommended for all classes. Probably the best video out there for students.

### Background Information

- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Marathon](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Marathon)  
Battle of Marathon – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Persian\\_invasion\\_of\\_Greece](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Persian_invasion_of_Greece)  
First Persian Invasion of Greece – Wikipedia article
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/greece/country\\_profile](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/greece/country_profile)  
On the Road: Greece – from Passports Educational Travel

### Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-iliad](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-iliad)  
Ancient Greece – Homer’s Iliad
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-odyssey](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-odyssey)  
Ancient Greece – Homer’s Odyssey
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/ancient-greece-minoan-civilization](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-minoan-civilization)  
Ancient Greece – Minoan Civilization on Crete
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-alexander-the-great](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-alexander-the-great)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Alexander the Great
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-sparta](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-sparta)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Sparta
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-athens-democracy](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-athens-democracy)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Athens
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-marathon](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-marathon)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Battle of Marathon 490 BCE
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-thermopylae](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-thermopylae)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Battle of Thermopylae: Leonidas and the 300
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/plato-allegory-of-the-cave](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/plato-allegory-of-the-cave)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Allegory of the Cave
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-plato-euthyphro](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-plato-euthyphro)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Euthyphro
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/plato-republic-philosopher-kings](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/plato-republic-philosopher-kings)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Philosopher Kings and the Republic
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-socrates](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-socrates)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Socrates: Father of Western Philosophy

## Key Terms

- Ancient Greece
- Athens
- Battle of Marathon
- Flanks
- Persia

