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Review by: John O. Hyland

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REVIEW ARTICLE

CONTESTING MARATHON: BILLOWS, KRENTZ, AND THE PERSIAN PROBLEM*

A once-popular conception of Greek hoplite battle portrays infantry combat as proto-rugby, with ranks of soldiers shoving forward to pile into a compact, unyielding press of bodies at the center of the engagement. While the metaphor has fallen out of favor in some recent treatments, it remains an apt description of the history of scholarship on the Battle of Marathon, with almost every decade since the mid-nineteenth century witnessing the addition of new reconstructions of the battle in articles, essays, commentaries, and monographs.¹ For all the erudition displayed in attempts to explain this critical event in Athenian and Persian history, no new written evidence has emerged to change the central points of contention, established by the brevity and silences of Herodotus' original account and the lack of explicit Persian testimony on the invasions of Greece.

The appearance of two books on Marathon in one and the same year marks the latest escalation of this long-running conflict, and readers will not be surprised to find that the authors, Richard Billows (Columbia University) and Peter Krentz (Davidson College), take up opposing positions on most of the battle's long-embattled questions and offer contrasting views of its wider historical significance. Both books are targeted at readers outside the confines of academia who may be unfamiliar with the sources and structure of modern Marathon debate, and some retread of previous argumentation is inevitable, but B. and K. each attempt to break new ground on a variety of issues, ranging from the Archaic Greek political background to the specific military context of 490 B.C.E. K. offers more that is genuinely original, which sometimes involves defending parts of the Herodotean narrative doubted by other scholars, while B. follows an academic majority in rejecting or supplementing some of the same aspects of the principal ancient source. Neither author, in other words, fits wholly into a "traditionalist" or "revisionist" box, despite their apparent sympathy with these respective labels, visible in B.'s denunciation of the alleged failure of recent "intellectual fashion" to appreciate the importance of great battles in history (p. 48) and K.'s proud claim to the title of "unrepentant heretic" on the mechanics of Greek infantry warfare (p. 45).

* *Marathon: How One Battle Changed Western Civilization*. By RICHARD A. BILLOWS. New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2010. Pp. 304. \$30.00 (cloth).

The Battle of Marathon. By PETER KRENTZ. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. [xx] + 230. \$27.50 (cloth).

1. In addition to the bibliographic materials in B. and K., see K. Buraselis and K. Meidani, *Marathon: The Battle and the Ancient Deme* (Athens, 2010); in particular its chapter by C. Tuplin, "Marathon: In search of a Persian Perspective," which was not available to this author at the time of submission, doubtless devotes great detail to some of the issues raised below.

Both works court a popular audience through evocative storytelling, but K. is more successful in balancing a conversational voice with a thorough presentation of the literary and topographical evidence and its difficulties. He opens with an imagined glimpse of Miltiades gazing toward the Persian lines just before the charge (pp. 1–2), but soon turns to Noah Whatley's classic critique of ancient battle reconstructions,² and explains the historiographical principles on which his own version of Marathon depends (pp. 12–16). Detailed endnotes (pp. 184–93) and bibliographic essays (pp. 195–224) direct the reader to primary sources and the relevant scholarship, and when his assertions involve controversy, for example on the length of the Athenian run into battle (pp. 143–52), K. explains his disagreements with specific scholars and theories in the main body of the text. In contrast, although this may have been an editorial choice rather than the author's decision, B.'s lack of notes, and relegation of methodological commentary to a brief essay on sources and further readings (pp. 273–82), may make it difficult for the inexperienced reader to separate the events supported in firm evidence from those more hypothetical in nature. For example, B. presents the prebattle embarkation of the Persian horse as fact (pp. 210, 281), and his bibliographic essay notes the *Suda* passage on which the cavalry theory is based, but makes no mention of the qualitative difference between Herodotus and an anonymous anecdote in a late source, or the objections of other scholars to the *Suda*'s reliability in this case.³

B.'s narrative is ambitious in scope, not only discussing the Graeco-Persian Wars, but also offering a broad introduction to Archaic Greek social and cultural history, linked to the overarching argument that Marathon preserved Athenian democracy, Greek literature, and by extension Western civilization (pp. 28–29). The overview suffers at times from a certain lack of focus in trying to cover such a wide range of material, not all of obvious relevance to Marathon. (The lengthy summary of life in Archaic Sparta, for example, seems disproportionate in light of the book's concentration on Marathon rather than Thermopylae or Plataea.) B.'s chapter on early Athens, though, is a valuable precursor to the military history that follows, leading readers through the Solonic reforms and the birth pangs of democracy and highlighting points at which its interpretation splits from commonly held opinion, as in the presentation of Kleisthenes as a deliberate architect of democracy rather than a purely self-serving politician (p. 166).

B.'s treatment of Persian subject matter is more troubling, not least for flirting with Greek characterizations of Achaemenid imperial "decadence" long discredited in modern scholarship (p. 136).⁴ Although he summarizes the contents of the best-known text of Darius I, the celebrated Bisitun inscription (pp. 122–24), B. commits a number of factual errors and omissions that suggest a limited familiarity with Persian sources. Notable is his characterization of the Iranian heartland as "economically and culturally . . . less 'advanced'" than the western regions of the empire (p. 106), a comment that seems to discount the valuable economic and social evidence of the Persepolis Fortifi-

2. N. Whatley, "On Reconstructing Marathon and Other Ancient Battles," *JHS* 84 (1964): 119–39.

3. On the *Suda* as evidence for the absence of Persian cavalry, B. follows A. R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks: The Defense of the West, 546–478 BC* (London, 1962), 247; for examples of critique of the passage, see J. A. S. Evans, "Herodotus and the Battle of Marathon," *Historia* 42 (1993): 295–96; J. F. Lazenby, *The Defence of Greece, 490–479 BC* (London, 1993), 60; L. Scott, *Historical Commentary on Herodotus Book 6* (Leiden, 2005), 622–23.

4. Cf. P. Briant, "History and Ideology: The Greeks and 'Persian' Decadence," in *Greeks and Barbarians*, ed. T. Harrison (Edinburgh, 2002), 193–210.

cation and Treasury Tablets, left unmentioned despite their accessibility in translation and prominent treatment in the works listed in B.'s notes for further reading.⁵ B. lists Aramaic and Akkadian as the "chief languages of imperial administration," but makes no reference to Elamite, the language of the majority of surviving Persepolis archival texts (p. 108). Mithra and Anahita, rather than Ahuramazda, are labeled "perhaps the most important deities" of the Iranians, and Zoroaster is dated to the sixth century, now a minority position in a long-standing chronological controversy (pp. 109–10).⁶ Such missteps on significant Persian social issues contrast with B.'s confident introduction to Greek culture and undermine the authority of parts of the reconstruction that follows.

K. takes a narrower approach to the subject of the Graeco-Persian Wars, avoiding detailed overview of the cultural background on either side and concentrating on the diplomatic and military narrative. The treatment of Persia, therefore, is limited to the empire's military capabilities, but within that scope, K. is more inclusive of non-Greek source material than is B., for example discussing Anatolian iconographic evidence for Persian cavalry and archers (pp. 28–31), and noting the Persepolis tablet PF-NN 1809, which displays Datis' high standing in the imperial ration system (p. 90). In dealing with Archaic Greece, while excluding visual or literary culture except in connection to military matters, K. puts forth a number of intriguing hypotheses about late sixth- and early fifth-century politics. Among the most compelling are the suggestions that Athens' temporary entente with Persia in 506 influenced the collapse of Kleomenes' Peloponnesian invasion of Attika (pp. 42–43) and that Miltiades was an opportunist forced into hostility against Persia very late in the Ionian Revolt (pp. 80–82). K. makes seamless transitions between narrative and historiographical discussion, for instance, using the Athenian victories over Thebes and Chalkis to segue into issues of the weight of hoplite equipment (pp. 45–50) and the nature of the *othismos*, the infamous "shoving" phase of Greek infantry battle (pp. 51–59). Rejecting the rugby analogy, he argues that a figurative push forward, marked by dueling with hand-to-hand weapons, was more common than the large-scale pushing with shields imagined in many modern accounts (cf. B., p. 79). K.'s treatment may not mark a turning point in the *othismos* controversy, as the "mass shove" still has its prominent defenders, but the opponents of literalist interpretation have tended to press the point in academic journals rather than in works targeted at a wider audience, and the survey of the argument's origins is a valuable introduction for noninitiates.⁷

Controversies of interpretation abound, of course, in any approach to Marathon itself, and those readers with experience of earlier work on the subject may imagine a checklist of the leading areas of dispute. K. and B. share common ground on a handful

5. For a selection of Persepolis tablets with translation and commentary, as well as a plethora of other Persian source materials, see A. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (London, 2007). For more extensive access to the Persepolis archives, see G. Cameron, *Persepolis Treasury Tablets*, Oriental Institute Publications 65 (Chicago, 1948); R. T. Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, Oriental Institute Publications 92 (Chicago, 1969), and "Selected Fortification Texts," *Cahiers de la Délégation Française en Iran* 8 (1978): 109–36. Also see the ongoing electronic publication project at http://ochre.lib.uchicago.edu/PFA_Online/.

6. Contrast P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, Ind., 2002), 94, noting the possible origins of the Zoroastrian Gathas as early as the second millennium B.C.E.

7. For the most recent contribution to the *othismos* controversy, arguing for the literal push, see A. Schwartz, *Reinstating the Hoplite: Arms, Armour, and Phalanx Fighting in Archaic and Classical Greece*, *Historia Einzelschriften* 207 (Stuttgart, 2009).

of preliminary issues, but the following summary will show the extent to which they diverge on the battle's major points, and reading their monographs side by side serves as a useful reminder of the tentative nature of Marathon reconstruction.

1. Army Size

Herodotus notoriously omits figures for either side, leaving quantitative issues to Plutarch, Pausanias, Nepos, and Justin, who agree that 9,000 to 10,000 Athenians and 1,000 Plataeans were present. B. accepts their estimate for Athenian hoplites, while also noting the likely involvement of "thousands" of additional citizens without heavy infantry equipment, and downgrading the number of Plataeans to the figure of 600 that appears in Herodotus' account of the battle of 479 (pp. 208, 279). K.'s treatment of Athenian numbers is similar, but places greater stress on the importance of non-hoplite (or under-equipped) infantry in reaching a total of roughly 16,000 (p. 106). This is, of course, less problematic than the size of the Persian army, for which the ancient authors give wildly varying but equally ludicrous figures, and B. and K. show appropriate caution. B. suggests that Herodotus' Persian fleet of 600 triremes is two to three times too large, since Athens could offer no naval resistance. Following a common estimate for the land army, he guesses at a force of 25,000 to 30,000, large enough to outnumber the Athenians but not logistically unimaginable (pp. 198–99). K. agrees on Herodotus' naval exaggeration and suggests that Datis' infantry could have doubled as marines; if the Persians had brought 300 warships, 40 marines per ship would have provided a total of 12,000 Persian foot soldiers. He also comments favorably on the suggestion of military historian Sir Frederick Maurice that the water resources of the Marathon plain would not support more than 16,000 men (pp. 91–92). K.'s Persians might not have held an advantage in numbers after all, an intriguing possibility whose implications could have been developed further in the account of the actual fighting: might the Athenians have triumphed in some areas of the battlefield through numerical pressure rather than equipment or skill alone?⁸

2. Battlefield Topography

Thorough geographical survey is one of the outstanding elements of K.'s account, and its absence is damaging to B.'s treatment of the battle. B. refers readers to specialist literature on the subject (p. 280), but does not explain his grounds for placing the Athenian camp near the St. Demetrios chapel west of the battlefield (p. 208), or the battle around the site of the Soros mound (p. 226). He provides a schematic tactical map that depicts the battle lines as parallel to the shoreline, but gives no scale and leaves out the Great Marsh, which Pausanias (1.32.6) describes as an obstacle to the Persian retreat (p. 219). K., with detailed supporting argument, puts the Athenian starting position near the plain's southern exit (p. 121), and argues that the battle and *tropaion* should be situated far from the Soros, in the eastern part of the plain under Mount Stavrokoraki and near the marsh (pp. 130–32). Relying on recent scholarship that proves the marsh to have been more of an impassable lagoon at the time of the

8. Hans Delbrück was the first modern scholar to suggest that the Persian army might have been outnumbered at Marathon, but the theory has not found widespread acceptance; see H. Delbrück, *History of the Art of War within the Framework of Political History*, vol. 1, trans. W. J. Renfroe, Jr. (Westport, Conn., 1975), originally published as *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte*, vol. 1³ (Berlin, 1920).

battle (p. 117), K. makes the persuasive hypothesis that the Persian army may have experienced delays in passing through the narrow ground around the edges of the marsh and thus lost the opportunity to engage the Athenians in the most open parts of the Marathon plain.

3. Persian Cavalry and the Athenian Advance

Herodotus is notorious for his silence on Persian mounted troops, and B. and K. both believe that the cavalry's absence must have prompted Miltiades' decision to attack. As noted above, B. accepts the *Suda*'s claim that the Persian horse was "apart," and follows a popular theory in which the Persian generals reembarked the cavalry before the battle, intending to send it on a voyage around Attika toward Athens itself (p. 218). K. rejects the *Suda* passage as unreliable, possibly based on Ionian *apologia* (pp. 141–42), and instead notes the habitual slowness of Persian cavalry in morning deployment (cf. Xen. *An.* 3.4.35); accordingly, Miltiades may have ordered the Athenian charge in order to preempt the Persians' eventual movement of mounted troops past the marsh and into open ground (pp. 142–43). While K.'s idea is attractive, it is worth noting a possible flaw in both authors' assumptions on the Persian cavalry issue. Herodotus' account of the Battle of Plataea suggests that Mardonios' cavalry waited on the sidelines, employed in prebattle harassment and postbattle skirmishing and pursuit but not in the crucial infantry encounter itself. A recent and exhaustive study of the evidence for Persian cavalry argues for a general tendency to exaggerate its battlefield importance.⁹

4. Hoplite Equipment and Formations

The authors' divide over the methods of hoplite battle and the *othismos* has already been noted; their earlier discussions on the nature of Greek armor put them at odds also, with B. estimating the weight of an average hoplite panoply at 60 pounds (p. 76), and K. at 28 to 45 pounds, or lower for the many warriors lacking breastplates and greaves (p. 50). K.'s meticulous discussion, combining evidence from archaeological finds with modern replicas, is thoroughly convincing, with important implications for the nature of combat; his findings are essential for defending the authenticity of the Athenian running charge, but their value might have been extended through greater comparison with the types and weights of equipment used by Persian soldiers in combat (see further discussion below).

5. The Athenian Run into Battle

Herodotus' claim that the Athenians advanced at the run for eight stadia, almost a mile, has provoked extensive modern skepticism. B. follows what has become the orthodox revision of Herodotus: the Athenians, encumbered by heavy equipment, would have marched most of the way and only run for a short distance (maybe 150 meters), to lessen the effects of the relatively short-ranged Persian arrows (p. 218).¹⁰ K., on the other hand, argues that Herodotus' account is plausible, and that the Athenians

9. C. Tuplin, "All the King's Horses: In Search of Achaemenid Persian Cavalry," in *New Perspectives on Ancient Warfare*, ed. G. Fagan and M. Trundle (Leiden, 2010), 101–82.

10. For argument that the distance of the Athenian run is exaggerated in Herodotus, see Delbrück, *History of the Art of War* (n. 8 above), 20, 83–86; Lazenby, *Defence of Greece* (n. 3 above), 66–67.

jogged the full mile, not only to counteract archery, but also to force the Persians into combat before their entire army could deploy (p. 143). K.'s defense of the running charge is based not only on the lower assessment of hoplite equipment weights, but also on a fascinating body of comparative evidence, a survey of Davidson College ROTC graduates that suggests that soldiers bearing 35 pounds or less could run a full mile and still go into combat in good condition (pp. 148–50). For example, Major David Taylor writes that "U.S. Infantry troops train to move 12 miles with a 35- to 50-pound load, in less than 3 hours (4 mph), and fight on arrival" (p. 150). While the comparison with the run into battle at Marathon is attractive, it does raise some further questions. The survey responses do not specify the type of combat envisioned, and their testimony about American soldiers' abilities may not take sufficient account of the difference between modern combat with firearms and the hand-to-hand fighting required in ancient battle. On another point, if many of the Athenian soldiers lacked full hoplite panoplies or wore lighter equipment, it is perhaps surprising that they did not take higher casualties from Persian archery (B.'s note [p. 231] on the likelihood of a high number of Athenians wounded may be relevant here).

6. The Victory of the Athenian Wings

Herodotus specifies that the battle was won by the men on the far ends of the Athenian (and Plataean) lines, who drove off the anonymous forces to their fronts, then reformed in some fashion and turned on the Persians and Saka who had broken the Athenian center, causing their panic and flight to the ships (6.113.1–2). B. imagines a preplanned double envelopment, a proto-Cannae designed to trap the Persians, for which he praises Miltiades as a tactical genius (pp. 215–16). K. is more cautious, and he is persuasive in discussing the difficulty of such a maneuver for untrained hoplite infantry who may have become dispersed over the course of the battle. Instead of a deliberate pincer tactic surrounding the Persians, he prefers a spontaneous rejoining of parts of the Athenian wings to attack parts of Datis' center, which may have been in the process of withdrawal already due to the collapse of the forces on its flanks (p. 158).

7. The Persian Voyage to Phaleron and Athenian Return March

B. follows Herodotus in placing the Athenian army's return march, as well as the Persian voyage to Phaleron, on the same day as the battle (pp. 231–33). K. believes that due to the slow speed of a Persian circumnavigation of Attika, which he argues did not begin until after the battle, the Athenians had time to make their return on the following day, meanwhile taking some rest after their extensive period of running and combat (p. 165).

B.'s and K.'s approaches to Marathon, despite their differences in detail, share a common interest in explaining why the Athenians won. It is possible to fault both authors, though, for insufficient attention to questions of Persian perspective. Although they offer introductory chapters on the history of Achaemenid expansion and the reign of Darius in particular, neither is fully satisfactory on Persia's political intentions in 490 or the behavior of the Persian army in battle. This uncertainty stems in part from the surviving Achaemenid royal inscriptions, which prefer thematic statements of ideology to discussion of specific events, while no documentary evidence comparable

to the Persepolis tablets survives for major Persian military campaigns. Nevertheless, there are pieces of textual and iconographic evidence that permit more detailed treatments of the Great King's attitude toward expansionist warfare, as well as of his soldiers' tactical capabilities.¹¹

As to Darius' intentions, B. and K. agree that the invasion of 490 served a double purpose: to punish Athenian involvement in the burning of Sardis, and to resume a conquest of Greece, long intended but interrupted by the Ionian Revolt (B., pp. 177–79, 187; K., pp. 87–88). Darius' wish to chastise the Athenians is plausible in the light of both Greek and Persian evidence, as K. demonstrates through allusion to the concept of the "Lie" (pp. 37–39, 98). Persian inscriptions, Bisitun above all others, emphasize punishment of rebels as a preeminent royal duty, tied to the King's dependence on divine favor and the god Ahuramazda's disapproval of political rebellion as a manifestation of cosmic falsehood and evil.¹² The theory that Darius already meant to conquer mainland *poleis*, on the other hand, while not unlikely in light of Herodotus' testimony on earlier Persian expansion into Europe, could be advanced further by attention to the ideological nuances of Achaemenid imperialism.

B. treats Darius' advance into Greece as a strategic necessity, tied to the need for a stable western border (pp. 179, 187), but royal inscriptions seem to lack a frontier concept, instead imagining Darius' power as universal. The subject lists that appear in several Persian inscriptions assert the King's authority over the *Yaunā*, or Greeks, as an overarching ethnic group, and the royal title, "King of Peoples of Many Sorts," may imply an interest in collecting further offshoots of populations already familiar to the Persians. It is possible that the wish to display royal power for its own sake trumped strictly strategic motives in pushing into regions that had not yet seen the "spear of the Persian man."¹³ Darius' texts also offer moral imperatives for the extension of an empire envisioned as beneficial to otherwise turbulent subjects, and such paternalism should also be noted as part of the Achaemenid context for the Greek invasions. Consider the programmatic statement in a royal foundation text from Susa:

Much that had been done wrong, I made right; the lands were in turmoil, one smiting the other. That which I have done, all that I did by the favour of Auramazda—that the one no longer smites the other, each one is in his place. My law—that they fear, so that the stronger does not smite nor harm the weak.¹⁴

Similar sentiments appear in Darius' funerary epitaph at Naqsh-e Rostam:

By the favour of Auramazda I am of such a kind that I am a friend to right, I am no friend to what is wrong. (It is) not my wish that to the weak wrong is done because of the mighty, it is not my wish that the mighty is hurt because of the weak.¹⁵

11. See Tuplin, "Marathon" (n. 1 above). Recent scholarship on the Persian perspective has concentrated on matters of royal policy and strategy, but avoided detailed reconstruction of the battle; see Briant, *Cyrus to Alexander* (n. 6 above), 160; G. Cawkwell, *The Greek Wars: The Failure of Persia* (Oxford, 2005), 88–89.

12. For introduction to the theological roots of Persian imperialism, see B. Lincoln, *Religion, Empire, and Torture: The Case of Achaemenian Persia, with a Postscript on Abu Ghraib* (Chicago, 2007).

13. For Achaemenid boasts of conquest and territorial appropriation, see, e.g., DNa §4 and DZc §3 (cf. Kuhrt, *Persian Empire* [n. 5 above], 502–3 and 486).

14. DSe §4 (translation from Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 491).

15. DNB §2a (translation from Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 505).

For a King who professed a commitment to justice and the suppression of conflicts among the world's peoples, trans-Aegean Greece with its ceaselessly warring *poleis* may have appeared an attractive stage for the demonstration of royal principles. Darius' interest in works of political restoration and social balance, addressing the needs of the "mighty" as well as the "weak," may also support the idea that he meant to reinstate Hippias as Athenian tyrant. B. notes Hippias' old age and doubts the Persians could have used him as a client ruler (p. 256), but the Achaemenid conception of justice may mean that Hippias' ability to govern effectively was less important than his restoration to a position unjustly lost.

Assessment of Darius' motives and justifications for war is less difficult than reconstruction of Persian military tactics, a subject poorly documented but crucial to any attempt to understand Marathon's outcome. Both B. and K. offer introductory discussions of the Achaemenid army, and admit the battlefield effectiveness of a military system that had conquered the world's largest empire within less than half a century. Yet they share the impression that amateur Athenian hoplites outclassed Persian imperial foot soldiers in armament and combat skills. Both hold to the theory that Persian armies won battles through cavalry maneuver and the demoralizing effects of archery and that, if this formula could not be applied, they were deeply vulnerable in hand-to-hand fighting against armored infantry (B., pp. 224–25; K., pp. 156, 159). This model is based on a handful of passages in Herodotus' accounts of Thermopylae and Plataea, but is problematic in light of inconsistencies in Herodotus as well as a few fragments of Persian evidence that B. and K. overlook.

Herodotus makes three assertions about the inferiority of Persian to Greek infantry in the battles of 480–479 that are commonly applied to Marathon as well: (1) in close combat, Persian soldiers were helpless due to lack of hoplite shields and armor (9.62–63); (2) Persian spears were too short to match their Greek counterparts (7.211.2); (3) as a result, Persian infantry formations were defensive, relying on a barricade of wicker shields that allowed archers to shoot with impunity unless Greek infantry forced them to fight at close range (9.61–62, 99, 102). Each one of these points requires greater scrutiny.

First, Herodotus' claim that Persians lacked adequate defensive equipment is contradicted by his description of Persian scale armor at 7.61. B. tries to evade the conflict by claiming that only the elite royal guard known as Immortals wore scale armor and the rest of the Persian army went without (p. 132), but this contradicts Herodotus, who assigns this armament to the entire Persian *ethnos*, and also claims that all Medes, Elamites (Kissioi), and Hyrkanians were equipped in the same way (7.62). B.'s account of Marathon, then, is on shaky ground in depicting Persian infantry as unprotected (pp. 224–25):

Swathed from head to toe in cloth, but wearing little or no armor and carrying only a light wicker-work shield which, though a useful protection from the arrows and javelins of their native warfare, offered little resistance to the firm thrusts of the heavy Greek spears.

If this is the case, it is unclear how the Persians defeated the hoplites in the middle of the Athenian line, and B.'s battle account once again skims over Herodotus' testimony on this issue, describing the Greek center as "giving ground and, according to our sources, *very nearly breaking*" (p. 221, my italics). Herodotus is explicit about the fact of a Persian breakthrough and pursuit, before the Athenian wings turned the tide (6.113.1):

And the Barbarians were triumphing in the middle of the battle line, where the Persians themselves and the Sakai were deployed; at this very point, the Barbarians were triumphing, and bursting through, were pursuing into the interior.

K. is more careful on matters of equipment, accepting Herodotus' testimony on scale armor in his introductory treatment of the Persian army (pp. 23, 183 n. 3), and his treatment of hoplite equipment seems to undermine the idea of a significant discrepancy between the levels of chest protection available to either side, by emphasizing the likely preference of Athenian infantry for linen corselets with bronze scales rather than heavier bronze breastplates (pp. 46–47). He also argues that many Greeks wore limited head protection and opted for lightweight shields, even some made of wicker (49–50), the same material used in Persian *gerra* (p. 23). If this analysis is accurate, it cannot be assumed that the Persian infantry's defensive gear was significantly inferior, and it comes as a surprise when K., assessing the battle, returns to the traditional view that "the Greeks also had better defensive equipment, especially stronger helmets and sturdier shields" (p. 159).

As for offensive weaponry, both B. and K. assume that the Persians relied primarily on archery (B., p. 133; K., pp. 26–27), and could not compete with the Greek use of thrusting spears (B., pp. 224–25; K., pp. 159, 161). This theory overlooks Persian evidence for the importance of the spear as an infantry weapon of equal value with the bow. Both B. (p. 131) and K. (p. 25) quote from DNb, the lower tomb inscription of Darius at Naqsh-e Rostam, which boasts of the king's prowess as archer and spearman, but neither references DNa, the text on the upper register of the same tomb, which describes royal conquest exclusively as the work of the Persian man's spear.¹⁶ B. claims that Darius meant javelins rather than thrusting spears (pp. 131, 133), but this translation is not required by Old Persian *arštiš*, and Herodotus does not specify that Persian spears were meant to be thrown. Persian iconography not only includes numerous examples of stationary spear bearers, such as the Louvre's famous collection of glazed-brick guard images from Susa, but also shows the use of stabbing spears by royal hero figures, for example in a cylinder seal from the Oxus treasure.¹⁷ K. recognizes that Persians could fight with spears at close range, but still suggests that the Greek thrust gave some advantage (p. 161), perhaps referring to Herodotus' claim of the Persian spear's inferior length. This allegation remains problematic in light of images such as the Susa guard reliefs, which show spears significantly taller than the men who carry them, evidence for possible lengths in the vicinity of at least 7 feet.¹⁸ Greek hoplite spears averaged between 7 and 8 (K., p. 49), hardly enough to give a decisive lunging advantage over the weapons of Persian spear bearers. There is no comparison with the sort of situation that resulted, for instance, from the gap in length between the hoplite spear and the Macedonian infantry *sarissa* after the reforms of Philip.

Due in part to their misunderstanding of Persian weaponry, both authors imagine Persian tactics as passive, based on shooting from behind the wicker shield wall until the enemy broke or closed to hand-to-hand range (B., pp. 133–34, K., p. 156). This is how Herodotus describes Persian behavior at Plataea and Mycale, but he gives no details on how Datis' and Artaphernes' infantry fought at Marathon. Herodotus' account of Thermopylae suggests that Persian infantry might also charge a line of

16. DNa §4 (cf. Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 503).

17. Cf. Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, fig. 11.33.

18. Cf. Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, fig. 11.20.

unbroken Greek hoplites to fight hand-to-hand, instead of simply shooting at a distance until the enemy gave way (7.210–11). It is not necessary to assume that the Persians awaited the Athenian charge without launching immediate counterattacks, and such an aggressive charge by Persian spearmen may have caused the breakthrough in the Athenian center, even if archery played a supporting role. K. admits that the action in the center suggests that Persian technological inferiority had its limits (p. 156) and that victories over hoplite armies in the Ionian Revolt may have made the Persian infantry confident of its success in such an engagement.¹⁹

Nonetheless, a lingering belief in the weakness of Persian infantry contributes to B.'s and K.'s unquestioning acceptance of Herodotus' claim (6.117.1) that 6,400 Persians fell at Marathon, in staggering contrast with the 192 Athenian dead (B., p. 227; K., pp. 171, 224). The slanted casualty ratio, if true, means that the engagement devolved at some point into a one-sided massacre, and even if that slaughter is tied to the partial encirclement and pursuit of the Persian center, its scale supports ideas of basic inequality between Persian soldiers and Greek hoplites. Yet the Persian figure is so much higher than the normal losses in Greek battles that it is reasonable to consider the other option, that Herodotus' numbers are exaggerated.

A handful of scholars have questioned the Persian casualty numbers, and Harry Avery has raised the possibility that Greeks invented the figure, using a ratio of 33 1/3 dead Persians to every dead Athenian.²⁰ The majority of modern accounts, though, reject Avery's formula as too complicated for plausibility, and accept that Herodotus derived his number from an actual Athenian effort to count the Persian dead (B., p. 227; K., pp. 171, 224).²¹ This position depends on Xenophon's statement that Athens vowed a goat to Artemis Agrotera for every slaughtered Persian, and that due to a shortage of livestock in the immediate aftermath of battle, the city paid the goddess in annual installments of 500 for the rest of the fifth century (*An.* 3.2.12). Unfortunately, the use of the Artemis Agrotera oath as proof of a thorough casualty count rests on a flawed premise. The Xenophon passage, in a speech set in 401 B.C.E., assumes that eighty-nine years (and 44,500 goats) had not yet proved enough to complete the vow and match the number of Persian dead. The sacrifices associated with the Artemis vow, therefore, seem to have relied on grandiose exaggeration of enemy losses and bear no connection with the smaller figure of 6,400 dead, which indicates that Herodotus' figure was comparatively modest, but not necessarily based on careful accounting.

Comparison with casualty totals in Greek battles, for which *poleis* followed a social obligation to count and bury their own dead, offers a vital point of reference. Herodotus mentions only one comparable death toll in a Greek context, claiming that the Spartans killed 6,000 Argives at the Battle of Sepeia (7.148.2), but many of these deaths resulted from an attack on an undefended camp and the burning of a wood full of Argive fugitives (6.78–80), and at least one distinguished modern authority

19. The Carian and Milesian forces defeated by Persians at Hdt. 5.119–20 and the army of Histiaios at 6.28–29 probably contained hoplites; Herodotus mentions cavalry as a factor in the victory over Histiaios, but does not claim that the Persians could not have won without it.

20. H. C. Avery, "The Number of Persian Dead at Marathon," *Historia* 22 (1973): 757; cf. W. F. Wyatt, "Persian Dead at Marathon," *Historia* 25 (1976): 483–84. For other expressions of suspicion, but without detailed discussion, see Delbrück, *Art of War*, 80; Briant, *Cyrus to Alexander*, 160.

21. Cf. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks* (n. 3 above), 251, 256; Evans, "Herodotus and the Battle of Marathon" (n. 3 above), 302 n. 102; Lazenby, *Defence of Greece*, 75 n. 73; Scott, *Herodotus Book 6* (n. 3 above), 394–95.

has rejected the number as “surely exaggerated.”²² The definitive study of Greek combat losses is an earlier article by K. that notes the atypical nature of the figures for Marathon. K. has demonstrated that in attested hoplite battles of the fifth and fourth centuries “the defeated army rarely lost more than 20%: typical is 10–20%, the average approximately 14%.”²³ Yet if one accepts K.’s suggestion that the Persian army at Marathon numbered between 12,000 and 16,000 (p. 92), Herodotus’ casualty figure would mean that 40 to 53% fell in action. The terrain of Marathon, specifically the narrow bottlenecks around the edges of the Great Marsh, could have slowed Persian efforts to reach the camp and ships, and might help to explain the high number of dead.²⁴ On the other hand, the Athenian pursuers lacked cavalry and must have been exhausted by marching, fighting, and perhaps running the prebattle mile, even if not weighed down by heavier armor than that of the Persian infantry. It is worth asking whether the killing of 6,400 Persians was beyond the capabilities of a hoplite army in such circumstances, when neither Thucydides nor Xenophon’s *Hellenika* ever reports death tolls above 1,100 in accounts of fifth- and fourth-century Greek battles, even disasters such as Delion and Leuktra.²⁵ Fleeing Persians should not have been vastly easier to kill than fleeing hoplites, and Herodotus’ casualty figure is probably exaggerated by hundreds or thousands, a result of the postbattle mythologizing of Athenian combat superiority.

In short, a complete explanation of why the Persians lost at Marathon is beyond the reach of historians, but the tendency to assume that Athens’ soldiers held some significant and widespread advantage in quality over non-Greek troops must be resisted. While Herodotus passes over the causes of Persian defeat, it is likely that the true answers have something to do with the non-Persian troops on the flanks of Artaphernes’ and Datis’ lines, perhaps including the Ionians and Aioliens who are mentioned at the outset of the campaign (6.98.1), but not in the battle itself. Herodotus’ silence does not permit extensive speculation on the Persian order of battle outside the center of the lines, but if the Anatolian Greek hoplites who made up part of Datis’ army were citizen militia rather than more experienced mercenaries, they might have lacked the morale or fortitude to stand up to Athenian hoplites who had battled formidable Greek opponents in recent years. It would be supremely ironic if the Persian army lost the decisive actions on the flanks through the inadequacy of its Greek auxiliaries rather than of its Iranian elites.

B. and K. follow their accounts of Marathon with discussions of the battle’s long-term results, and both engage in counterfactual argument to explore the significance of the Athenian victory. What would have become of Athens (and its cultural heirs) if Persian forces had exploited the gap in Miltiades’ center and won the day? K. paints a brief picture of an Athenian golden age much like that of the actual fifth century, led by a Persian-backed tyranny that patronized the arts in much the same ways as the democratic leaders of Periclean Athens (p. 175), or actual Persian client rulers like

22. P. Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History, 1300 to 362 B.C.*² (London, 2002), 129. H. Van Wees, in *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities* (London, 2004), 132, blames the high total on the lack of a proper battle and the Spartan assault on the Argive camp.

23. P. Krentz, “Casualties in Hoplite Battles,” *GRBS* 26 (1985): 18.

24. Cf. N. G. L. Hammond, “The Campaign and the Battle of Marathon,” *JHS* 88 (1968): 30–31; Lazenby, *Defence of Greece*, 70–72.

25. For references, see Krentz, “Casualties” (n. 23 above), 19. Only the late author Diodorus reports higher death tolls for defeated hoplite armies and he only reports a small number of them (between 2,000 and 4,000).

Mausolus of Halicarnassus. B., on the contrary, imagines defeat at Marathon as the beginning of the end of Greek civilization, but many of his arguments invite rebuttal.

It is unquestionable that Persian victory would have entailed physical suffering for some element of the Athenian population, first and foremost the hoplites of a broken phalanx exposed to casualties in flight. The Babylonian and Aramaic translations of the Bisitun inscription show Darius' pride in precise-looking counts of enemy dead which, even if exaggerated, indicate a royal interest in the slaughter of opponents.²⁶ Herodotus attests the deportation of defeated civilians from *poleis* such as Barka, Miletos, and Eretria, and it is reasonable to assume that the Persians might have removed a group of Athenian citizens if the city had fallen (cf. B., pp. 255–56; K., p. 175). Yet the enormous population of Attika, significantly larger than those of the other *poleis* in question, argues against the likelihood that Persian victory would have inflicted an insurmountable demographic blow. As K. notes, even Eretria was not totally depopulated (p. 100), and other scholars have recognized Herodotus' exaggeration of the scale of social disruption at Miletos.²⁷ It is possible that a punitive deportation of Athenians, especially if influenced by Hippias, might have been similar in scale to Isagoras' expulsion of seven hundred pro-Alkmaionid families in the late sixth century (Hdt. 5.72.1), large enough to punish the Athenians but not to end their long-term cultural development (cf. K., p. 175).

B. makes a reasonable case for regime change as the likely outcome of Persian victory and the consequent end of Athenian democracy as a great loss to the subsequent history of political thought and practice (p. 256). Yet his resulting inference, that modern Europeans and Americans might enjoy very different systems of government if Athens had fallen to Persia, overlooks the greater importance of the Roman Republic as a model for Western political systems. B.'s portrayal of an Athenian cultural landscape stripped of its great thinkers and artists by the city's depopulation is on shakier ground, vulnerable to arbitrary counterargument: if Aeschylus had died at Marathon, who is to say that the Pisistratids would not have continued to celebrate the Dionysia, or that Phrynichus might not have escaped literary obscurity and left his *Sack of Miletos* as the founding text of the tragic canon? B. meditates on another literary disaster in the potential loss of Thucydides, as "there would have been no Peloponnesian War for him to write about" (p. 259), but this provokes contemplation of a more positive result of Persian victory. Aside from the impoverishment of Greek historiography, it is worth asking whether a common peace that prevented internal conflicts among the *poleis*, like the one Artaphernes attempted to enforce in postrevolt Ionia (Hdt. 6.42.1), would not have benefited Greek civilization as a whole.

As for B.'s suggestion that the "depressing impact of Persian predominance" was not suited to the artistic or literary freedom of Greek provincials (p. 261), one misses the necessary grounding in modern scholarship on interaction between imperial and provincial cultures. Studies of the Achaemenid empire have rejected the concept of cultural stagnation among Persia's subjects, and counterexamples abound, from the prosperity of Persian-period Sidon to the flourishing of written Anatolian languages

26. Cf. E. Von Voigtlander, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great: Babylonian Version* (London, 1978); J. Greenfield and B. Porten, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great: Aramaic Version* (London, 1982).

27. Cawkwell, *Greek Wars* (n. 11 above), 79–80.

such as Lydian and Lycian under Achaemenid hegemony.²⁸ Even comparative studies of imperial acculturation in the Greek and Roman worlds might have supported a more effective discussion of this issue. Margaret Miller's art-historical study of relations between fifth-century Athens and Persia shows the receptivity of victorious Athenians to items of Persian material culture that were reused and transformed during the Athenian "Golden Age";²⁹ would not such exchange and interaction have intensified in the event of an increased Persian presence in Greece? On what evidence can one assume that the extension of Persian royal authority over Athens would have stifled Hellenic expression in a way that the later Roman conquest did not?

Resistance to Persian invasion at Marathon was a great moment in Athenian history whose importance swelled further in the city's civic mythology throughout the Classical period and beyond, but it is difficult to prove that the campaign threatened the very existence of Athenian civilization. K. is more careful in limiting his conclusions on Marathon's definite results to the immediate aftermath, as an undefeated Athens prepared for the coming confrontation with Xerxes (p. 175).

Overall, B.'s study of Marathon is not without some appeal as popular history, and it is possible to applaud his apparent intention of using a famous moment in military history to draw his audience into a broader narrative of Greek social and cultural development. His approach to Persia, though, offers insufficient correction to readers who might be more likely to derive their view of the Achaemenids from the popular film *300* than from the scholarship of Amelie Kuhrt or Pierre Briant. K.'s treatment is more balanced in engagement with Achaemenid scholarship, and despite the problems in his treatment of Persian battlefield behavior, his closer attention to topography and both Greek and Persian source material results in a stronger contextualization of the Marathon campaign in general. The effort to reconstruct an event such as Marathon, for which so much of the evidence is lacking, can come dangerously close to an act of academic hubris. Nevertheless, K.'s account succeeds in establishing plausible explanations for several crucial factors in the battle and offering an account of the early stages of the Graeco-Persian Wars that is richer and more persuasive in many parts than its rivals. In light of the difficulty of the evidence and the antiquity of polemics over Marathon, this achievement deserves recognition as an *ergon megalon* in its own right.

JOHN O. HYLAND

Christopher Newport University

28. On Sidon under the Great Kings, see V. Jigoulov, *The Social History of Achaemenid Phoenicia: Being a Phoenician, Negotiating Empires* (London, 2010); for aspects of Achaemenid Anatolian history, see A. Keen, *Dynastic Lycia: A Political History of the Lycians and Their Relations with Foreign Powers c. 545–362 BC* (Leiden, 1998); E. Dussinberre, *Aspects of Empire in Achaemenid Sardis* (Cambridge, 2003); C. Roosevelt, *The Archaeology of Lydia, from Gyges to Alexander* (Cambridge, 2009).

29. M. Miller, *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century B.C.: A Study in Cultural Receptivity* (Cambridge, 1997).