

## HERODOTUS 6.112.2

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The place is Marathon. The time, the moment the Athenians and the Plataeans begin their attack. "When the Persians saw them attacking on the run, they prepared to receive the attack. The Persians attributed a complete and destructive madness to the Athenians, seeing that the Athenians were few in number and advancing on the run, with neither cavalry nor bowmen." This passage has been cited often as an indication that the Persians did have cavalry at Marathon.<sup>1</sup> I would like to suggest that it may be used as evidence for another of the problems connected with the Battle of Marathon: why did the Persians themselves not attack for so long after their landing at Marathon. If my interpretation of this section in regard to the question of the Persian delay is accepted, then some light may also be shed on the problem of the Persian cavalry.

This passage is somewhat different from most of Herodotus' account of the Battle of Marathon in that it views the situation through the eyes of the Persians.<sup>2</sup> We of course cannot say with certainty that this is what the Persians actually thought and said when they saw the Greeks pressing on, but the statement is in our best source for the battle and with the evidence presently at hand we can do no better. The Persians give four reasons why they think the Greeks are insane to attack:

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. R. W. Macan, *Herodotus, Books 4-6* (London, Macmillan 1895) note to 6.112.2 and vol. 2, p. 161; N. Whatley, *JHS* 84 (1964) 135; and most recently J. H. Schreiner, *Pro. Camb. Phil. Soc.* n.s. 16 (1970) 106 and n. 6.

<sup>2</sup> N. Whatley, *loc. cit.* (n. 1 above), conjectured that the information may have come from a Persian source, perhaps a Persian prisoner. But the fact that the only other passage in Herodotus' account of Marathon that professes to reproduce the thoughts of the Persians (102) is followed immediately by the introduction of Hippias might indicate that one of the Greeks with Hippias was the ultimate source for the passages where the thoughts of the Persians are recorded.

1. The Greeks were few in number.
2. They were attacking on the run.
3. They did not have any bowmen.
4. They did not have any cavalry.

These reasons apply in the first instance to the Greeks and they are all acceptable as true statements of the conditions under which the Greeks took the offensive. Modern scholars agree that the Persians outnumbered the Greeks that day, even though Herodotus gives us no specific information about the number of Persians and Greeks involved in the battle.<sup>3</sup> Similarly there is a general consensus that the Greeks had no cavalry and archers.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have rejected Herodotus' statement that the Athenian forces advanced eight stades on the run, but the quarrel here is with the distance and not with the fact that the Athenians did advance some (perhaps unknown) distance on the run.<sup>5</sup> Thus, what the Persians said was apparently true in regard to the Greek army.

How can this passage help to solve the problem of why the Persians delayed their attack at Marathon? If it can be shown that the reasons the Persians gave were also relevant to the situation of the Persians themselves, then we might be able to discern among these reasons some explanation of why the Persians did not take the offensive.

But first we must assess the usual motives adduced by modern historians for the Persians' procrastination. This inactivity is considered a problem because the situation as we understand it indicates that it would have been to the Persians' advantage to attack as soon as possible. (1) They had come to destroy Athens as they had destroyed Eretria (Hdt. 6.94.2 and 102) and they were not accomplishing their mission at Marathon. (2) "It was in their interest to engage the Greeks before reinforcements could arrive from Sparta."<sup>6</sup> (3) The logistic

<sup>3</sup> See 6.109.1. The weakening of the Greek center in order to make their line equal to the Persians' (6.111.3) also implies that there were fewer Greeks on the field than Persians. For a recent, and I believe sound, estimate of the numbers involved in the battle, see N. G. L. Hammond, *JHS* 88 (1968) 32-34.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Macan *loc. cit.* (n. 1 above); and W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1928) note to 6.112.2.

<sup>5</sup> See Hammond (n. 3 above) 28 and n. 71 for references.

<sup>6</sup> Hammond (n. 3 above) 35. We do not know exactly how much the Persians and Hippias knew about Spartan intentions. Hammond's conjecture (45) that Hippias had knowledge of Spartan religious practices seems reasonable.

problems presented by the large Persian force must have been considerable, and sitting at Marathon, cut off from the rest of Attica, cannot have helped matters.<sup>7</sup> Thus it is generally agreed that the Persians must have had some pressing reason not to take the offensive and force an engagement.

Two explanations have been offered to account for the delay of the Persians. One of these maintains that the Persians expected Athens to be handed over to them by traitors from within and that they were waiting at Marathon for some word from their Athenian confederates.<sup>8</sup> Much can be said about the existence of a group of Athenians who were willing to betray the city to the Persians, but the presence of potential traitors in Athens, even if they actually existed, cannot be used to explain the Persian inactivity. Quite to the contrary, the evidence in Herodotus points in the opposite direction. Eretria was betrayed to the Persians by traitors from within (Hdt. 6.101.2). Furthermore, there may have been a Eretrian counterpart to Hippias in the Persian army in the person of Gongylos of Eretria.<sup>9</sup> Certainly even before the Persians arrived at Eretria there was some suspicion that all was not well in the city in regard to its opposition to the Persians (Hdt. 6.100.1). Yet the presence of a treacherous fifth column in Eretria did not deter the Persians from attacking the city. Since the Persians did not wait at Eretria for their friends inside the city to open the gates and since armies, like men, tend to behave in regular and predictable patterns,<sup>10</sup> it seems most reasonable to suppose that the Persians would not delay their attack on the Athenian forces at Marathon while waiting for word from their supporters in Athens.

The second explanation maintains that the Greek camp was in a strong location on high ground above the plain of Marathon and that the Persians, relying on their cavalry and mistrusting their light-armed infantry in a face to face encounter with Greek hoplites, would not attack the Athenians in a prepared position.<sup>11</sup> They preferred therefore to wait for the Athenians to come down to the plain so the battle

<sup>7</sup> See Hammond, *loc. cit.* (n. 3 above).

<sup>8</sup> This view is set forth by How and Wells (n. 4 above) vol. 2, pp. 358–60.

<sup>9</sup> This view is suggested by Macan (n. 1 above), note to 6.100.1.

<sup>10</sup> See Hdt. 6.102: the Persians plan to do to the Athenians exactly what they had done to the Eretrians.

<sup>11</sup> Hammond (n. 3 above) 35–36 supports this view.

could be fought on ground the Persians thought favorable to themselves. Two points may be made against this view. First, Herodotus does not tell us where the Greek camp was situated. As a result we do not, in fact, know its exact location, even if it was in the hills or on the plain.<sup>12</sup> Various reconstructions of the battle assume different sites for the camp, but considering the present state of our knowledge all such considerations must remain hypothetical and therefore uncertain. Secondly, the information Herodotus provides about the fighting at Eretria again points to a conclusion quite different from that under discussion, that the Persians would hesitate to attack a strong position on high ground. Herodotus tells (6.101.2) that the Persians made powerful attacks on the walls of Eretria for six days before the city was betrayed on the seventh. If the Persians were willing and able to attack a walled city<sup>13</sup> it seems reasonable to suppose that they would be equally—or more—willing and able to attack a camp no matter how well placed (and we must keep in mind that we do not know if in fact it was situated in a strong position) and how well fortified (the fortifications can only have been thrown up hurriedly and in the face of the enemy). In the light of these considerations, then, the most likely conclusion is that the Persians would not delay their attack on the Athenians either because they expected help from traitors within Athens or because the position of the Athenians was too strong for them to attack. There must, therefore, have been some other cogent reason for them to remain inactive during the period when it was so clearly to their advantage to act.

Let us return to our passage. The Persians use very strong language in their comments on the Greek attack: the Athenians show a suicidal madness to attack under those conditions. Twice again in the *Histories* the Persians say the Greeks are mad. Once (8.140.a.3) Mardonius asks

<sup>12</sup> The location of the Greek camp depends on the location of the Heraclion (Hdt. 6.108.1 and 116). Topographers cannot agree on its location. See e.g. Hammond (n. 3 above) 24–25 and 34; and E. Vanderpool, *AJA* 70 (1966) 322–23.

<sup>13</sup> Carystus also seems to have been walled at this time (Hdt. 6.99.2). Herodotus does not tell us specifically that the Persians attacked the walls at Carystus, only that they besieged the city. If Carystus was walled this would be additional support for the contention that the Persians were not daunted by strongly fortified positions. For the extent of the walls of Eretria in 490 see F. E. Winter, *Greek Fortifications* (Toronto 1971) 61–62. It is now certain that Eretria was walled long before the Persian wars: see K. Schefold, *Antike Kunst* 9 (1966) 116–20.

the Athenians why are they so mad as to take up a war against the king. And again, in a passage very similar to the one under consideration, the Persians think the Greeks are insane to attack them (the Persians having many more and better ships) off Artemisium (8.10.1). In all three cases events prove the Persian estimation of Greek sanity to be wrong since the Greeks win decisively at Marathon and Plataea and they come off unexpectedly well in the encounter near Artemisium (8.11.3). Clearly the Persians have misjudged the situation on each of these occasions. Why do they make these mistakes? What does it mean in Herodotus when one group calls another mad?

An examination of the way Herodotus uses *maniê* and related verbs will help provide an answer. Herodotus' use of these words falls in two broad categories.<sup>14</sup> Madness is on the one hand thought of as a sort of sickness in various individuals. This is the situation in the case of Cambyses,<sup>15</sup> Cleomenes,<sup>16</sup> and the women of Argos in the time of Melampus.<sup>17</sup> The second category is broader and, to some extent, includes the first. In Herodotus we find that one group (or individual) considers another group (or individual) mad when the actions of the latter deviate from the norms of the former to such an extent that the behavior of the latter is not comprehensible to the former. One example of this situation is to be found in the way the Scythians regard the Greeks' participation in Dionysiac revels. The Scythians despise the Greeks for allowing themselves to fall subject to a drunken frenzy. On two occasions the point is made that the Scythians consider the Greeks insane when they are in the grips of

<sup>14</sup> *Μανίη* is found three times; *μαίνομαι* nineteen times; and *ἐκμαίνομαι* three, for a total of 25 times in all. Two instances do not fall into the categories discussed in the text. At 8.77.1, an oracle of Bakis declares that those who wish to destroy Athens are indulging in a vain hope (*ἐλπίδι μαινομένη*) and that they will be destroyed by the gods. Here insanity characterizes the hopes of those who oppose the will of the gods. In any case this passage was not written by Herodotus and does not represent his own usage. At 2.173.4, Amasis defends his form of relaxation by saying that if man does not play as well as work he runs the danger of going mad. Here the verb is used much as a modern would use it in similar circumstances: that the pressures of unrelieved work can drive the mind to insanity.

<sup>15</sup> For Cambyses' madness see 3.30.1; 33; 34.1; 35.4; 37.1; 38.1; 38.2. His sickness is discussed at 3.33.

<sup>16</sup> For Cleomenes' madness see 6.75.1; 84.1 (3 times); 84.3. His madness is called a sickness in the first passage.

<sup>17</sup> See 9.34.1–2, where their madness is also called a sickness.

drink (1.212.2; 4.79.3-4). Here the imputation of insanity approaches the idea of *nomos*, for what is custom to the Greeks is not custom to the Scythians. Therefore the latter consider the behavior of the Greeks in these circumstances so different from their own behavior that to them it seems to be madness (see especially the story of Scylas, 4.78-80). Another instance is found in the story of Cyrus' birth. Astyages has ordered Harpagus to kill the infant Cyrus. Harpagus' wife asks him what is he going to do. Harpagus answers: I will not do as Astyages orders even if he becomes madder than he now is (1.109.2). Astyages' desire to kill his own grandson is so far removed from normality that Harpagus considers him insane. Finally, there is the dramatic scene on the battlefield at Plataea when Pausanias has ordered Amompharetus, commander of the Pitane *lochos*, to change his position. Amompharetus refuses to yield to the enemy in any way until Pausanias in exasperation calls him insane (9.55.2). Here we have a more complex situation, for Amompharetus in refusing to move with the rest of the army is deviating from the human norm, but at the same time he is acting just as a Spartan is supposed to act. The fact that another Spartan, Pausanias, thinks him mad for doing what Spartans have been trained all their life to do only adds a certain piquancy to the situation. All the same, the normal urge for self preservation makes it possible to think of the Spartan ideal as verging on insanity. These passages make it clear that in Herodotus madness is attributed to those whose actions are incomprehensible to those making the judgment.

The three passages in which the Persians are reported as considering the Greeks insane should also be included in this category. The Persians make their mistaken assessment of the sanity of the Greeks because the latter are acting in a way the former do not understand. Moreover, our examination of the other passages in which the charge of madness occurs indicates that the Persians make this judgment because the Greeks are doing things which, under the same circumstances, the Persians themselves would not do, just as Pausanias would not keep his troops in an exposed position, just as Harpagus would not kill his only grandson, just as the Scythians would not engage in Dionysiac revels, and just as most humans would not act in the same way as the women of Argos, Cleomenes, and Cambyses.

These considerations lead us to the belief that when the Persians

enumerate the reasons why the Greeks exhibit a complete and destructive madness in their attack at Marathon they are thinking not only of the circumstances under which the Greeks are advancing but also of the circumstances under which they themselves would attack. The reasons the Persians give for the madness of the Greeks are at the same time a list of the conditions which they deem necessary before they—sane men in their own view—would launch an attack. Let us then return to the list in 6.112.2 to see how it applies to the Persians' situation as we understand it. (1) The Greeks are few in number. We have seen that the Persians probably outnumbered the combined Athenian and Plataean forces, so the first requirement for a Persian attack had been met. (2) The Greeks attack on the run. We know that the Persians could attack the Greeks on the run (Hdt. 9.59.1). We may presume that they were as capable of attacking on the run at Marathon as they were at Plataea. (3) The Greeks did not have any bowmen. We know that Persians archers were present at Marathon from the presence of Persian arrowheads in the vicinity of the *sôros*.<sup>18</sup> Thus another requirement had been fulfilled. That leaves the cavalry. The question of the Persian cavalry at Marathon has been, and is, hotly debated. Neither those who claim the cavalry was present nor those who claim the cavalry was absent have been able to produce arguments sufficiently compelling to convince the other side. But in view of the discussion above and the undoubted fact that the Persians did not take the offensive it is reasonable to assume that some necessary prerequisite for attack was lacking at Marathon. If the above arguments are valid, then the essential and indispensable element which was lacking was the cavalry.

This conclusion, of course, only pushes the problem of the cavalry one step further back. If the cavalry were not at Marathon, where were they? They had been at Eretria (Hdt. 6.101.1). Marathon had been chosen as the landing place because it was the most suitable location in Attica for cavalry action (6.102). Herodotus tells us no more. If he or his sources knew more about the cavalry this knowledge seems irretrievably lost to us. The consequence of Herodotus' silence is that we cannot know for certain the whereabouts of the cavalry. It may still have been at Eretria. It may have been elsewhere. The main

<sup>18</sup> See Hammond (n. 3 above) 17.

point I wish to make in this paper is that, relying on Herodotus, our best source for the battle, there are reasons (previously unnoticed to my knowledge) for arguing that the Persian cavalry was not at Marathon and that the Persians remained inactive for a number of days because their cavalry was not present to support their attack. Perhaps the Persians themselves did not know where their cavalry was. In any case, they waited in vain. Miltiades convinced Callimachus and his fellow generals that the salvation of Athens demanded their taking the initiative, even if others would think them mad to do so.