

# BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 3 ★ Issue 9

Ancient & Medieval:

## Marathon

**DATE:**

Late summer, 490 B.C.E.

**LOCATION:**

Marathon, Greece

### OPPOSING FORCES

**Persians:** Approximately 25,000 men, including infantry, cavalry, and archers. This invasion force was sent by King Darius I of Persia under the shared command of Datis and Artaphernes.

**Greeks:** Approximately 11,000 men, including 10,000 Athenian and 1,000 Plataean hoplites, under the command of Miltiades and Callimachus.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In the fifth century B.C.E., the Persian empire dominated southwest Asia and the Middle East. With its large armies and obedient vassal states, it seemed only a matter of time until Persia would conquer the Greek states and expand into Europe. But when King Darius I made the first concerted effort in 490 B.C.E., he faced a new kind of enemy – free citizens of Greece – who fought voluntarily to protect their homeland and preserve their freedom. In what would become the first major battle of the Greco-Persian Wars, the Greeks pulled off a tactical masterpiece to rout the Persian invaders. Historians have referred to this victory on the plains of Marathon as saving Europe from Asian dictators, allowing Western civilization to flourish in the centuries to follow.

### STRATEGY & MANEUVER

**Actions by the Persians** – In the sixth century B.C.E., after the collapse of the Assyrian Empire, Cyrus I, “the Great,” began building what would become the Persian Empire. By taking advantage of a split between the two post-Assyrian dominant powers, Babylon and Medes (present-day Iraq and western Iran), Cyrus was able to usurp the Median throne from within and become king. By the time of his death in 530 B.C.E., this vast Persian Empire included Central Asia and Asia Minor and stretched from the Aegean Sea in the west to the Indus River in the east. Cyrus’s son, Cambyses, became the sole ruler and added Egypt to the empire before his untimely death in 522 B.C.E. from an infected wound. After Cambyses’s death, Darius seized the throne and continued the legacy of expansion.



King Darius I

Not everyone in the empire was pleased with the arrangement. One group, the Greek colonies in Ionia (western Asia Minor),

had lived under a satrap (a Persian provincial governor), paid their tributes, and fulfilled their military obligations. But by 499 B.C.E., they had had enough of Persian oppression and sought military support from mainland Greece for a rebellion. After Athens and Eretria each sent ships and soldiers to their aid, this Ionian/Greek force captured and burned Sardis, the capital of Lydia, in 498 B.C.E. (*Map 1*)

When Darius heard the news, he indicated he was unfamiliar with the Athenians. After learning who they were, he said a prayer, “Grant to me God, that I might punish them.” He then tasked a slave to remind him every day at dinner, “Master, remember the Athenians.”<sup>1</sup> Over the next five years, Darius ruthlessly crushed the Ionian rebellion. When it was done, he turned his attention to Greece.

To punish Athens and Eretria and prevent further challenges to his rule, Darius planned to conquer both the independent cities in the Aegean Sea and the Greek mainland. After an initial expedition in 492 B.C.E. led by his son-in-law, Mardonius, reestablished the satrapy of Thrace (north of Greece), he prepared an expedition to invade mainland Greece. While assembling the required fleet in Cilicia (southeastern Asia Minor), he sent emissaries to each Hellenic state to demand their loyalty. Most Greek states, afraid of angering Darius, agreed. But Athens, Eretria, and Sparta refused, adding to Darius’s anger.

Once the expedition was ready, hundreds of ships carrying approximately 25,000 men and hundreds of horses moved into the Aegean Sea. (*Map 1*) It was led by Datis, a Median admiral, and Artaphernes, whose father was the recent satrap of Sardis. It also included Hippas, the deposed former tyrant of Athens who had pleaded with Artaphernes’s father to help restore him to power. After the Persians sacked the island of Naxos and established a supply base, they rowed to Eretria, where, after a short siege, they destroyed the city and enslaved its population. Next, they moved south to Marathon, where they would disembark and deal with the Athenians.

**Actions by the Greeks** – During Darius’s reign, Greece was a patchwork of competing city-states. These Greek states were wary of the Persians, but because Persian kings had focused on other areas of expansion, a significant conflict had not yet erupted between the two regions. This changed after the Ionian rebellion, after which it was only a matter of time before war came to their shores.