

PRIMARY SOURCE *from The History of Herodotus*

Section 2

Herodotus, who is often regarded as the first historian, was a Greek scholar who lived in the fifth century B.C. In this passage he describes the battle of Marathon, waged between the Persians (whom Herodotus sometimes refers to as Medes) and the Greeks in 490 B.C. during the Persian Wars. Miltiades, one of ten Greek generals, has persuaded the other generals to fight the Persians at once, although some generals wanted to avoid battle when the Persians so greatly outnumbered the Greeks. As you read this excerpt, think about why the outnumbered Greeks defeated the Persians.

111. Then at length, when his [Miltiades'] own turn was come, the Athenian battle was set in array, and this was the order of it. Callimachus the Polemarch led the right wing; for it was at that time a rule with the Athenians to give the right wing to the Polemarch. After this followed the tribes, according as they were numbered, in an unbroken line; while last of all came the Plataeans, forming the left wing. And ever since that day it has been a custom with the Athenians, in the sacrifices and assemblies held each fifth year at Athens, for the Athenian herald to implore the blessing of the gods on the Plataeans conjointly with the Athenians. Now, as they marshalled [arranged in battle order] 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 centre were diminished, and it became the weakest part of the line, while the wings were both made strong with depth of many ranks.

112. So when the battle was set in array, and the victims showed themselves favourable, instantly the Athenians, so soon as they were let go, charged the barbarians at a run. Now the distance between the two armies was little short of eight furlongs [less than one mile]. 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.

113. 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 Sacæ 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 [defeated] barbarians to fly at their ease, and joining the two wings in one, fell upon those who had broken their own centre, 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.

114. It was in the struggle here that Callimachus the Polemarch, after greatly distinguishing himself, lost his life; Stesilaüs too, the son of Thrasilaüs, one of the generals, was slain; and Cynægirus, 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:

from George Rawlinson, trans., The History of Herodotus (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), 207-208.

1. Who was Herodotus? Why was he important?

2. Who joined the Athenians to fight the Persians at the battle of Marathon?

3. How was the Athenian army organized? What formations did they use?

4. How did Herodotus portray the Greek soldiers? What was the reputation of the Medes during the time of the Persian Wars?

5. Why were the Athenians successful?