



Marathon: The Battle that Changed Western Civilization

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In this comprehensive and engrossing treatment, published to coincide with the 2,500th anniversary of the historic Battle of Marathon, Billows captures the drama of the day and the ramifications it has had throughout Western history.

Marathon: The Battle that Changed Western Civilization Details

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Hunter Ross says

Nicely written, however, it is more of a summary of Ancient Greece than a book on the Battle of Marathon. If you have studied Greek history (I have extensively) then it is more a summary of the events before and allowed progression of Athenian culture after. So, if you don't know much about Ancient Greece this is awesome. If you have studied it and are expecting an in depth look at the battle you can forget it. The battle is finally addressed for a few pages about 270 pages into the book. Some interesting facts and he obviously knows a lot of Greek History but call it that, not a book on the Battle of Marathon. There are very few details on battle.

Ryan Patrick says

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Jerome says

In this readable volume, Billows makes the case for Marathon as a decisive victory and examines how the legend evolved, how scholars have historically interpreted it, and how the battle became associated with the “marathon race.”

Billows gives the reader an efficient history of Greece from Homer's time, along with topics like hoplite warfare, Spartan society, lyric poetry, the rise of Persia, and events in Athens and Ionia. He does a fine job describing the feat of Philippides, and how the whole legend is a bit unlikely due to fatigue and the fact that one would only run when in range of Persian arrows. Billows also argues that Miltiades deserves more credit. The description of the battle itself is not particularly strong, though. And his argument for the battle's significance is basically just “things would have been different.” Also, this book is really just an overview of the time period.

A clear, well-written volume, even if it feels a bit padded, and the narrative is a little choppy and unfocused. He describes the Persians as “decadent.” Also, there are no endnotes and a few typos.

Koit says

Far more than a book on the ancient battle, this novel details the story of Greece for the preceding centuries as well as how Persia and Greece came to a contest of wills in the first place. As such, it is a decent overview of both the cultural and military backgrounds of the two peoples as well as making a decent inroad into separating the fact from fiction.

It is a regrettable consequence of the author's stated wish to create an accessible book that he does not

address the majority of the public opinion in his numerous claims of "The accepted opinion is that, but I believe this instead". Very often, this leads to claims which are insufficiently supported by facts and where the author would have done better by choosing a road which brings in more of the academic debate. It is my belief that he could have done so quite nicely as Mr Billows's style is generally good and readable though he also has a bit of a tendency to repeat certain turns of phrase.

Coming back, however, to the question of the myth as opposed to the reality it was quite good fun to read the mythology created by Roman historians and utilised by de Coubertin -- as is typical of these events, the truth of the march of Marathon (marathon?) and the run of Philippides from Athens to Sparta (to Athens) both far surpass that described in the legend of a singular run of approximately 42km.

I'll finish with the note that there is a lot of unexpected information in this book, and I found most of it really enjoyable. People solely hoping for an account of people killing each other will be disappointed, however; people looking for an account exploring potential reasons for why things happen will be pleased.

Paul Childs says

This surprised me in what I liked and disliked about it. I found the first couple of chapters to be fascinating. Each chapter was broken up into topics that would basically help one understand how the Greeks and Persians ended up staring across from each other on the plain near Marathon so long ago.

First you learn about Athens in particular, and more generally about the Greeks and how they developed into the people they were in the centuries before the battle. Billows talks of how the cities developed economically and politically, how and why the phalanx system of fighting was developed and why the Greeks were particularly good fighters during that time period compared with the other civilizations of the time.

Then you learn about the Persians. Billows describes how the first Persian emperors overcame the older civilizations around them, how their armies were able to continually hold the empire together and then at times even grow as they conquered new lands. There first dealings with the Ionian Greeks in Asia Minor are described which set the stage for all the other events to come.

After describing the series of events that would eventually lead these peoples to war, Billows then describes the Persian campaign that eventually leads to their defeat on the field of battle at Marathon.

A lot of time is spent discussing the development of Athenian democracy, which I found to be the slowest part of the book, but in general this is a great book. It is one of those books that enlightens you in ways you never imagined when you picked it up off the bookstore shelf.

hdhgdfh says

Explore one of the most impactful battles in history, the battle of Marathon. Read about the twists and shocking turns that became the battle of Marathon. This book is better than any of the history books that they assign you in school. When you read this book, you'll agree too. Instead of reading a boring book with little in details, you can read a book jam-packed with details, so many details in fact, that it feels like you lived the

battle yourself. For example, the author includes detailed explanations on why and how the battle went the way that it did. He also backs up his explanations with facts and statistics. This book is also great because of its historical accuracy. For example, the book included first-hand accounts from the warriors of Marathon from their views and accounts. What are you waiting for?

Alexis says

A lot of interesting history, though it felt rushed and a little disheveled. Also, I think an academic historian would have some issues with some of his theories that were not well backed. But it was an interesting for a novice Greek history buff.

Zorro says

Το π?σο σπουδα?ος ?ταν ο αρχα?ος Ελληνικ?ς πολιτισμ?ς μπορε? να το καταλ?βει καν?νας καλ?τερα απ? την προετοιμασ?α της μ?χης παρ? απ? την ?δια την μ?χη.

K says

The point made in this book is interesting: that the impact of the battle of Marathon is underappreciated, and it's not widely understood that this was solely an Athenian military triumph that was accomplished without help from the Spartans. The authors states that Spartans get too much credit for military achievements in general, whereas the Athenians have a lot to be proud of in that arena. The author does a good job of explaining his premise and then stepping back in time to set up the situation that led to Marathon, then how it happened, and then a quick summation of why it mattered so much. All that structure is well and good in a general history.

However, the book isn't well-written, and while it's clear enough on most things, it often falls into boring lists of city-states, civic leaders or other stuff, none of which would mean anything to a general reader. In that sense, it falls into the trap of too specific for a general reader and not enough detail for someone with some prior knowledge. But it's meant to be a first book, not a comprehensive review.

The story goes something like this. Greece into about the 7th century BC was a series of small city-states that were constantly at war with each other. Some were more successful than others, but even the largest (like Sparta) had to ally themselves with a lot of other cities for defensive purposes. Along comes Athens, and the century of the 500's BC it develops a unique system of governance, combined with military excellence, that becomes the standard-bearer with which we are familiar. Rule of law, democracy, the start of drama and memorable sculpture and architecture, etc.

But within 15 years of this happening, the biggest empire the world had ever seen (up until that time), Persia, decides it's had enough of the upstart Greeks, and it sends an invasion force in 490 BC. Had Persia succeeded, all the stuff that Western civilization got from Greece probably wouldn't have happened, and it's "experiment" in participatory democracy would have been seen as inadequate to fighting to defend turf.

But Persia is defeated by Greek city-states, actually 3 times. The first time is a small-bore action on the edges of Greece, and the Athenians help to some degree with ships. The second time, Persia comes with a bigger force, and really goes after the leading cities and key islands in the Aegean. In this campaign, all goes well for Persia until Marathon. There on a wide plain 22-26 miles from Athens (depending on the path you take), the Athenians with a little help from one ally city-state (but no help from Sparta), defeat the feared Persian force. Then, on the same day, those soldiers march back to Athens with 60 lbs of weapons, shields and gear per person, and then arrive in time to stare down the Persian naval fleet that has arrived to take the city by sea while the soldiers were engaged at Marathon. The Persians sail away.

In the third effort, they return 20 years later and have their battles with Sparta, and those are better remembered, which is why we credit Sparta with defeating the Persians, rather than the Athenians.

In describing those battles (all three since the tactics were similar), the author explains how the Greeks used a different military style than did the Persians. The Greek "hoplite" army was heavily armored with heavy wood and copper round shields, copper helmets and shin guards. They were basically impregnable from the front, and when they got close enough they spiked people with heavy spears and swords. They could be beaten if you got on their flanks. The Persians carried small wicker shields and no real protection on their bodies, and they fought primarily with arrows. They moved swiftly and coordinated with cavalry charges to create confusion in their opponents, and then charged in with small swords for the final kill. Power vs. speed.

At Marathon, however, the Greeks added a surprise. They moved across the plain as the aggressor, even though they had a great defensive position. When they reached about 150-200 yards from the enemy, they started to run, thus minimizing the time that arrows could hit them. And they smashed the lighter force with their power.

One of the best things about this book is how the author explains how all of the above was developed, and what was innovative at the time, and also what is known and what is legend. Example: Legend is that the Greeks ran nearly a mile across the fighting area to engage the Persians. Nonsense, says this author. Since they knew the Persian arrows didn't go much more than 150 yards, they wouldn't have started running until that point.

The other thing that this author does is explain how Athens' unique governance created an environment in which the brave decision to fight the Persians was taken. Since all citizens (that is, males who weren't slaves) had a voice in the government, a genuine voice, those citizens really did feel they had something to defend. This was a new idea in world culture, and it explained why a huge percentage of the eligible men came out to Marathon to do battle -- the author estimates something like 75% of the men who could afford the military equipment. Not only is it a contrast with the Persians, who had their core people as well as conscripts from subjugated peoples, but it was different than Sparta, which had an elite warrior class that was built on required military service, but which always feared an internal uprising from oppressed peoples within Sparta's territory.

Ryan Stambaugh says

Have you ever seen a sporting event advertised to start at 7:00 only to tune in and find that is when the pregame begins? This book, on the pivotal battle at Marathon, is similar. The actual battle comes late in the book and covers only a dozen or so pages. This is due, really, to a dearth of information on the actual battle: it took place 2,500 years ago and lasted 2 hours.

But, don't worry, this book still delivers a compelling read. The Introduction and Chapters 1-4 (leading up to the penultimate chapter 5 covering the battle itself) can be seen as stand-alone essays. Billows begins by putting Marathon in context, both in Athenian time down to our own modern era.

The main idea advanced by Billows is that Western history would have been radically different had the Persians won at Marathon. Intertwined in this, he sees the burgeoning democracy - taking root in Athens - aiding the Athenians and the battle's outcome in turn advancing democracy.

Building up to the battle you will make stops in Ancient Greece, be introduced to Homer and understand the rise and power of the Persian Empire. The book closes with an interesting, and convincing, theory on what a Persian victory would have meant to Athenians, Greeks, and us.

2011 marks the 2,500th anniversary of the Battle of Marathon, do yourself a favor and read this book.

Ted says

Very well written. Excellent history of the evolution of democracy in Greece, the Persian Empire, the events leading up to the battle, and its subsequent impact on Western culture.

Anya says

Actual Rating - 4 Stars

This is a very well written book but it has a misleading title. This is not a book about the battle of Marathon it is an introductory text about ancient Greece and Persia up to the point of the battle of Marathon. Of the six chapters in this book only one is dedicated to that battle, 4 to the histories of Greece and Persia to create context, and 1 to the aftereffects of the battle.

If you're looking to learn about the histories of ancient Greece and Persia culminating in an interesting battle this is for YOU but if you're looking for an intricate look at the actual battle then this is NOT for you.

I was familiar with a lot of the ancient Greek history covered in the beginning of this book so that's why I gave it a lower 3 stars.

Rob Adams says

Vivid, rich and entertaining. I even felt for one moment how it must have been at the battlefield of Marathon. A must read for anyone interested in the decisive moment that shaped Western culture.

George Sr. says

Marathon may not have saved Western civilization, but it certainly saved Athens, the cradle of democracy. The legend of Marathon and Philippides's run is not nearly as remarkable as the truth.

Rudy says

Not quite as much history of the battle as I would have liked. A little repetitive also with the same facts repeated each chapter. Shed very little new material on Marathon and the impact on western civilization was mostly conclusory and not supported well.
