



New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2010

256 pages

\$27.50

## ***The Battle of Marathon***

by Peter Krentz

**Reviewed by Dr. J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr.**, Professor of Military History, US Army War College

Peter Krentz, the W. R. Grey Professor of Classics and History at Davidson College, has written the definitive book on the battle of Marathon. In doing so, he examined all the available evidence from both historical and archaeological sources, utilizing that evidence, leavened with common sense, to expose myths and challenge conventional accounts. The analysis goes into detail on subjects about which the casual reader will have little interest. For example, the location of the Athenian trophy or the Plataean burial mound are generally unimportant to the military historian trying to learn about the battle itself. In the case of Marathon, Krentz argues such detail can give us otherwise unavailable clues. Because the ancient Athenians customarily placed their victory trophy at the turning point of an action, locating the monument tells a great deal about the battle. That example is perhaps more relevant than discussions of the location of the monument to Miltiades or the cave of Pan that are of primary interest only to the specialist. In any case, the examination is exhaustive, but regardless how esoteric, always interesting.

Krentz's investigation of the geography of the Marathon plain in 490 BC is informative and critical to understanding the battle. Based on the as yet unpublished work of archaeologist Richard Dunn, Krentz convincingly postulates a different shoreline and the presence of a small inlet where a marsh lies today. Although one should generally avoid such redesigns of battlefield terrain, in the case of Marathon where contemporary descriptions are skimpy and the alluvial nature of the plain lends itself to major change in the 2,500 years since the battle, it is probably justified. The fact modern experts cannot even locate the ancient town of Marathon only lends credibility to an attempt to understand the geography from other sources. Krentz is judicious about his assertions and backs them with plausible evidence, so the reinterpretation is easy to accept. The new understanding of the terrain shapes his entire interpretation of the battle—most significantly in that it reorients the armies so they fight parallel to the coast rather than having the Persians with their backs to the sea, and the Persian cavalry, quartered behind the inlet near the best source of water, has restricted access to the plain.

Following the pattern of his geographical investigation, Krentz also examines in detail the Athenian military system to help test one's knowledge about Marathon. For example, Herodotus, the principal primary source on the battle, says the Greeks ran 8 stadia (.9 of a mile) to attack the Persians. The modern accepted assessment is that, given the armor they wore, running such a distance would have been too exhausting to have been either possible or

practical. Besides, the only real need for speed was to cover the deadly ground within bowshot of the Persians—a couple of hundred yards at most. Krentz disputes essentially every piece of that interpretation. He finds, based on weights of existing period armor (adjusted for corrosion and missing leather or linen components), that the Greek hoplite carried between 28 and 45 pounds rather than the 70 or more pounds people had assumed. He provides evidence that modern soldiers can easily run the required distance with that load, especially if one assumes “run” to actually equate to a jog. Krentz's recreation of the tactics requires the Greeks to run to battle to avoid having to face the Persian cavalry, which would have been deploying from its bivouac position through a narrow passage at the top of the inlet. If the Athenians could nullify the Persian cavalry, they stood a good chance of beating their infantry.

With respect to the battle itself, Krentz is not a believer in the rugby scrum style interpretation of classic Greek combat where the front ranks stabbed while the rest of the phalanx pushed. That depiction never has passed the common sense test—assuming any kind of effective push from behind immediately nullifies effective individual combat in the front ranks, which would be squeezed too tightly against the enemy to be able to move very much. Krentz postulates a phalanx whose strength was in its cohesion rather than its mass. The Greeks formed, jogged to attack the Persians, and eventually won the hand-to-hand fight. The center was thinned to be able to cover the entire plain, and the flanks reformed after their initial victory to turn to help the center, which had been broken (no preplanned Cannae-like maneuver, which was probably beyond the training ability of the Athenians). The Greeks pursued the Persians to their boats, perhaps sloshing through the shallow waters of the inlet/lake/marsh, but much of the Persian force escaped. Krentz is conventional in his assertion that the significance of Marathon was its demonstration to the Greeks that the Persians were not invincible.

*The Battle of Marathon* is required reading for anyone interested in the battle, classic Greek warfare, or ancient warfare in general. The explanation of this critical battle is plausible and supported by the evidence. It will probably become the dominant interpretation or the new common knowledge in the near future. The book reads well, is informative, and contains new and interesting material. Highly recommended.

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