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Collecting to the Core — The Greco-Persian Wars

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject editors introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

Tensions between the Western powers and the countries formerly known as the ancient Near East dominate today's headlines. The occupations of Iraq (read Mesopotamia) and Afghanistan (**Alexander** called it Bactria), difficult relations with Iran (the heart of the old Persian Empire), the turmoil of the Arab Spring, and other such conflicts are as often cast as a collision of cultural values as they are geopolitical struggles. The clash between East and West lies at the very beginnings of Western civilization. **Homer's** *Iliad*, one of the earliest and most influential works of Western literature, chronicles the Trojan War and serves as a guiding text for ancient Greek warfare and ideology. The theme continues in **Herodotus'** account of the Persian Wars of the fifth century BC, which were the defining event of the classical Greek era and strongly influenced the major figures of the period. The great tragedian **Aeschylus** fought at Marathon and wrote *The Persians* about the defeat of **Xerxes I** at Salamis.¹ **Sophocles** participated in the victory celebration after Salamis. The continuing relevance and popularity of these Greek authors and their stories is clear, as they are reimagined in print and in commercial films like *300 Spartans* and *300*, and as the scenes, players, and mythologies appear in the rhetorical speech of politicians and pundits. The recent 2,500th anniversary of the Battle of Marathon has occasioned a number of commemorative events and, of course, books. This essay examines some of the key historical works on the Greco-Persian Wars — this first great confrontation of East and West.

There are few works covering the Greco-Persian Wars that are more foundational than the *Landmark Herodotus*.² Herodotus, the major source for this period, begins with a rationalized account of the Trojan War, which he saw as the origin of the conflict between the Greeks and the East:

Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents his research so that human events do not fade with time. May the great and wonderful deeds — some brought forth by the Hellenes, others by the barbarians — not go unsung, as well as the causes that led them to make war on each other.³

He proceeds in describing the rise and growth of the Persian Empire and that of the Greek city-states to their ultimate conflict. He includes many ethnographic accounts of the various "barbarians" (i.e., non-Greek peoples). Throughout, **Herodotus** portrays the rugged, independent Greeks against the corrupt and luxurious Persians and other Easterners. In his account, the victory of the Greeks preserves their independence and asserts the superiority of their way of life. The Landmark edition provides a very readable translation with excellent notes, interpretative essays, illustrations, and maps.

Modern historians have typically approached the Persian Wars through individual battles; one exception is **Peter Green**, whose *The Greco-Persian Wars* (originally published in 1970 as *The Year of Salamis*) begins with some background on the Persian empire and the Ionian Revolt (499-493 BC) before systematically covering the wars from Marathon (490 BC) to Plataea and Mycale (479 BC).⁴ Green, a novelist as well as a distinguished historian of Greece, offers a lively account aimed at the student and general reader. His account is rooted in a thorough knowledge of the Greek lands and the sources. The introduction to the re-titled 1996 edition also provides a good overview of key issues and more recent scholarly work on the wars. It remains the best single work on the Persian Wars.

The Persian invasion of Greece of 490 BC marks the beginning of the wars with mainland Greece, although it was preceded by the revolt of the Ionian Greeks against their Persian overlords (499-493 BC). Indeed, Athenian support for the revolt led to the Persian expedition that landed at Marathon in northeast Attica. The Athenians decisively defeated a much larger Persian force at Marathon, resulting in a Persian withdrawal. The battle at Marathon achieved iconic status and is arguably amongst the most decisive military encounters in world history. The late **W. Kendrick Pritchett's** *Marathon* remains an indispensable work on this subject, although austere and demanding to read.⁵ **Pritchett** was perhaps the preeminent authority in the last century on ancient Greek topography and warfare. His slender volume offers a thorough survey of earlier archaeological work on the site (much of which is difficult to obtain) and detailed examination of the topography and ancient sources, along with **Pritchett's** reconstruction of the events. Few students will read this, but their teachers should.

Several more recent books have appeared on Marathon, inspired by its 2,500th anniversary. Among these, two are especially useful. **Peter Krentz's** *Battle of Marathon* is

primarily a work of military history.⁶ He provides a broad context through four chapters on Athenian relations with Persia and the Ionian Greeks prior to Marathon, followed by three on the battle itself; concluding chapters cover the aftermath of the battle and its significance. Throughout the book, **Krentz** keeps his focus largely on military strategies and tactics, arms and soldiers; he makes some important contributions to the study of Greek hoplite equipment and tactics. One famous problem that he addresses is the probability that the Greek hoplites ran nearly a mile in full armor before engaging the Persians, concluding that it was indeed possible. He addresses the broader significance of Marathon primarily in the short final chapter with speculation on what would have happened if Athens had lost, concluding that the subsequent course of Athenian and Greek history would have been radically altered. In the end, **Krentz** sees the pivotal role of Marathon in the destruction of the myth of Persian invincibility: "Marathon made Salamis conceivable and Plataea possible."⁷

In *Marathon: How One Battle Changed Western Civilization*, **Richard Billows** sets a much broader context, providing a mini-survey of Greek history through the time of the battle.⁸ Only a fifth of the work deals directly with Marathon and its consequences. The description of the battle is vivid, focusing on the leading characters, such as the Athenian Miltiades, and the tactics used. Differences between the Greeks and Persians are highlighted by descriptions of the arms, commanders, and military maneuvers on each side. For example, after describing the Greeks donning their bronze armor, **Billows** depicts the Persians: "strange-looking men, wearing trousers rather than tunics, and other exotic gear."⁹ The final chapter outlines the subsequent course of the Persian Wars and fifth-century Athenian history. **Billows** places the great significance of Marathon in its preservation of Athens, allowing the development of Athenian democracy and the great art, literature, and philosophy of the later fifth-century. He duly notes the influence of these on later Western culture, thus justifying his subtitle. Clearly the development of the West would have been very different had Athens fallen in 490 BC, though it would have been just as different had Athens not been restored after Salamis in 480 BC.

Paul Cartledge, the leading historian of Sparta in our time, tells the story of Thermopylae as the "Battle That Changed the World."¹⁰ About a third of his work is devoted to context and backstory, covering Greece and Persia down to the time of the battle, with special attention given to Sparta. The middle portion recounts the battle of Thermopylae in detail,

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while the final third of the book describes its legend from antiquity to the present. A brief epilogue makes the case for his subtitle, emphasizing Thermopylae as a moral victory. **Cartledge's** detailed, scholarly account of the battle is eminently readable. He oversells the contributions of the Spartans in contrast to the Athenians, while his celebration of Thermopylae — with echoes of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain in the background — is one that only an Englishman could write.

In *The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter That Saved Greece — and Western Civilization*, **Barry Strauss** presents Salamis as the decisive battle in the Persian Wars.¹¹ He argues that the Greek victory at Salamis was the salvation of Greece and Western civilization. He focuses primarily on naval warfare and the events directly leading up to Salamis. The work is organized by location as the action shifts: Piraeus, Artemisium, Thermopylae, Athens, Salamis, Phaleron, and Andros. He writes vividly of Greek ships and sailors, and of the debates, wrangling, and intrigues of the Athenians among themselves and with the other Greek city-states. **Strauss** presents lively and imaginative portraits of characters on both sides ranging from **Themistokles** and **Xerxes** down to individual ship captains. His narrative relies heavily on **Herodotus'** account and on the *Persians* of Aeschylus. **Strauss**

concludes with a reflection on the importance of Salamis to the preservation of Athenian democracy and in the literature of the later fifth century (**Herodotus**, **Thucydides**, **Sophocles**, **Euripides**, **Aristophanes**, and **Plato**), much of which was a reaction to and criticism of the Athenian imperial democracy that arose in the wake of the Greco-Persian Wars.

Although each of these works covers some aspect of the Greco-Persian Wars, only **Herodotus** himself and **Green** really attempt the whole. The rest focus on what they see as the pivotal battle, whether Marathon, Thermopylae, or Salamis. It is striking that none chose **Plataea** and **Mykale**, which sealed the Greek victory, nor do those resonate with posterity. Two unexpected victories and a dramatic defeat have become touchstones in the East-West's ancient story; consciously or not, we continue to be influenced by them. The narrative contrasting the heroic and free Greeks with the exotic and servile barbarians of the East may begin with **Herodotus** and **Aeschylus**, but it continues to resonate in these secondary historical works, despite the obligatory nods to the multicultural and the Other. Each of these monographs can be considered key for a core collection in ancient history and for instructors and students of this discipline. However, the continued battles between the East and West — political, ideological, and martial — make any of these historically significant books a must-read for scholars and a must-have for any academic library collection. 🌱

Endnotes

1. **Aeschylus**. *The Persians: Seven against Thebes. Suppliants. Prometheus Bound*. Edited by **Alan H. Sommerstein**. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.*
2. **Herodotus**. *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*. Edited by **Robert B. Strassler**; translated by **Andrea L. Purvis**. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007.*
3. *Ibid.*, 1.1.
4. **Green, Peter**. *The Greco-Persian Wars*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.*
5. **Pritchett, W. Kendrick**. *Marathon*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.
6. **Krentz, Peter**. *The Battle of Marathon*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
8. **Billows, Richard A.** *Marathon: How One Battle Changed Western Civilization*. New York: London: Overlook Duckworth, 2010.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
10. **Cartledge, Paul**. *Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed the World*. Woodstock: Overlook, 2006.*
11. **Strauss, Barry**. *The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter That Saved Greece — and Western Civilization*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004.*

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.