

# H-Net Reviews

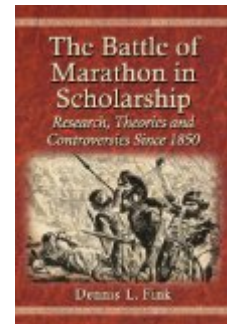
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dennis L. Fink. *The Battle of Marathon in Scholarship: Research, Theories and Controversies since 1850*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2014. 240 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-7973-3.

Reviewed by John Poirot (Louisiana State University)

Published on H-War (April, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



## Untangling the Battle of Marathon

The story of Marathon has long fascinated and flummoxed scholars, and, as a result, much scholarship has been published on the topic. The 2,500th anniversary of the Battle of Marathon in 2010 alone inspired the publication of several prominent books: *The Battle of Marathon* (2010) by Peter Krentz, *Marathon: How One Battle Changed Western Civilization* (2010) by Richard Billows, and *The First Clash: The Miraculous Greek Victory at Marathon and Its Impact on Western Civilization* (2011) by Jim Lacey. Dennis L. Fink's *The Battle of Marathon: Research, Theories and Controversies since 1750* does not add original research to this already crowded scholarly field, but it does attempt to review the battle's lengthy historiography and provide a user-friendly resource for "nonspecialists." Fink's book first examines the roots of the Greco-Persian conflict (i.e., the rise of Persia and the Ionian Revolt) and then delves into a detailed analysis of the battle itself. Above all else, Fink's study demonstrates that Marathon, despite its status as a historical watershed and its wealth of scholarly attention, remains in many ways an enigma. The "legend" of Marathon has obscured the fact that many of the battle's exact details (e.g., troop logistics, battlefield tactics, and casualty numbers) remain largely unverifiable. None dispute that Marathon happened, but, even after a century and a half of modern study, precisely how it happened is still a topic of heated debate and rampant speculation.

As a high school history teacher and university supervisor of student teachers, Fink approaches the topic of Marathon as a "nonspecialist" himself. Although he

appears knowledgeable and passionate about his subject material, he readily admits many limitations in his preface: "lack of specialized training in ancient history, Greek and Latin language skills, and academic experience at the university level" (p. 1). Fink's stated hope is that his perspective will provide a more "accessible and understandable [resource] for high school students, college students, graduate students, perhaps even general European history teachers in colleges and universities and finally the general public" (p. 2). No one would deny that resources are needed to guide students and scholars through the historiography of topics as complicated as Marathon. However, Fink's intended audience is not the homogeneous group that he hopes, and this oversight leaves the reader at times feeling as though the book is stranded between two worlds, accessible to neither.

*The Battle of Marathon* is, for the most part, arranged thematically. This approach is certainly handy for students doing research on Marathon. Chapters are broken into a variety of easily manageable subsections, and Fink usually prefaces each subsection with a question before presenting scholarly arguments debating the issue. For example, the book's first chapter evaluates Herodotus's reliability as a source. Fink presents scholars whose opinions range from those who see Herodotus as useful to those who believe the historian's work is more fiction than fact—that is, the Liar school. After pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each scholarly camp, Fink guides the reader to the (correct) conclusion that Herodotus's description of Marathon, though flawed and

biased, is still in many ways our best resource. When Fink weighs in on scholarly debates, as he does here in chapter 1, he is at his best. If part of the book's intended audience is students and other nonspecialists, helping the reader arrive at some conclusion about the complex historiography should be part of the author's responsibility. Occasionally, in later chapters, Fink abandons his less expert readers to the wilderness: he provides numerous perspectives on a topic, then states something equivalent to "now readers must decide for themselves."

The book's following chapters address the state of Persian and Greek military technology at the beginning of the fifth century BCE (chapters 2 and 3), as well as provide historical background for the rise of the Persian Empire and the outbreak of the Ionian Revolt (chapters 4 and 5). Fink's treatment of these topics is detailed, relying on the work of not only traditional historians but also experimental archeologists. Some of the more nuanced questions Fink explores include: What was the size and function of the Persian cavalry and of the Persian navy? What types of soldiers made up the Greek phalanx, and what were some of the most common hoplite battlefield tactics? Exactly how large and powerful was the Persian Empire on the eve of Marathon? And what did the Athenians hope to achieve by aiding the Ionian Greeks and attacking Sardis during the revolt against Persia? Particularly interesting are Fink's comments on the psychology of hoplite soldiers; he vividly describes the battles themselves and discusses how soldiers prepared beforehand and fared individually in the wake of victory or defeat.

While generally providing thorough background context for Marathon, these chapters suffer from several minor organizational and balance issues that could potentially confuse readers who are less familiar with the subject matter. Fink's descriptions of armor and weaponry, as well as the geography of the ancient Near East and Ionian Coast, are quite specific at times. If a portion of his book's intended audience is lay readers, these chapters could have greatly benefited from visual aids—images of archeological remains and maps marking relevant locations. Also, Fink occasionally employs jargon or non-English terminology before defining terms, as when he uses the term *othismos* ("the pushing of the phalanx en mass") on page 35, but does not clearly explain the word's meaning until page 55. Additionally, Fink cites events from the Ionian Revolt out of context before providing his readers with a clear summary of the revolt itself. His most glaring structural oversight, however, may be the lack of a chapter dedicated to the rise of the Ar-

chaic Greek city-states. By contrast, he includes an entire chapter, stretching back to Cyrus the Great's birth story, on the origin and rise of the Persian Empire. But he simply assumes, in many instances, that his readers already possess an intimate knowledge of ancient Greece's political history and social institutions—for example, when discussing the Peloponnesian League or the tyrant Hippias.

Chapters 6 through 8 review Greco-Persian diplomatic interactions between 492 and 490 BCE, the Persian general Datis's naval expedition across the Aegean, various issues concerning the Battle of Marathon, and the importance of the battle's historical and cultural legacy. Fink examines the book's primary topic, the battle itself, from a number of different angles. He presents several commonly debated topics, but also offers commentary on less frequently explored themes. He discusses the topography of the site, possible reasons the Persians chose to land there, and theories concerning the Spartans' refusal to assist their Greek neighbors. He also goes into great detail about both armies' battlefield deployments—including the mystery of the Persian army's missing cavalry—and he questions the viability of the Athenian army charging into the Persian line at a full run. A few of the minor questions Fink examines include: Did the Athenian army take the northern or southern road to the battle site? What delayed the immediate outbreak of fighting? And why did the Athenians only capture seven Persian ships in the wake of the battle? Despite the book's detailed review of the battle, some readers may be disappointed by Fink's last, somewhat anemic chapter on Marathon's legacy. Fink dedicates seventy-one pages to logistical and tactical questions surrounding the battle but only 3 pages to its historical and cultural repercussions—that is, in spite of a wealth of accessible scholarship on the subject. How the victory at Marathon helped shape a Greek national identity is a relevant question that this sort of book should address. Chapter 8's cursory survey of this issue is one of the author's more conspicuous oversights.

Fink's *Battle of Marathon* is clearly a labor of love. The author's passion for the subject is apparent from beginning to end. His mistake—which is not only understandable but also admirable in some ways—is trying to impart his passion to too many readers at once. Fink's text purports to be a resource for both students and scholars who wish to research Marathon. The publisher's note on the dust cover states that *The Battle of Marathon* is "a thorough historiographic review" and that "full use is made of the ancient sources." The book meets these

standards, but only in limited regards. It does include a lengthy bibliography of more than four hundred sources, and its system of easily navigable subheadings makes exploring individual aspects of the battle manageable and convenient. But many students and other nonspecialists may find Fink's discussions overly detailed and confusing at times. He tends to prefer minor topics (e.g., battlefield topography or troop logistics) to the detriment of some "big picture" issues (e.g., background on Archaic Greece's sociopolitical institutions or the long-term cultural implications of the Greek's victory). For students and nonspecialists, these "big picture" issues are certainly just as important as whether or not Datis could have realistically sacrificed three hundred camel loads of frank-

incense at Delos (p. 113). When Fink pays short shrift to broader, contextual topics, on the one hand, he forgets a key segment of his intended audience. On the other hand, upper-level students and experienced scholars may also find the book problematic. In spite of the publisher's claim, the book's historiography is not thorough, nor does the author make full use of the ancient sources. Because of Fink's language limitations, his bibliography contains few non-English works. For the same reason, he relies heavily on translators when evaluating Herodotus as a source. Experts may find Fink's text a useful place to begin for some topics dealing with Marathon, but they will ultimately need to go elsewhere for a complete historiographic survey.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** John Poirot. Review of Fink, Dennis L., *The Battle of Marathon in Scholarship: Research, Theories and Controversies since 1850*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2015.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43354>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.