

THE great conflict between Greece and Persia – or, to be more accurate, between a handful of states in mainland Greece and the whole might of the Persian empire at its zenith – must always remain one of the most inspiring episodes in European history. As Aeschylus and Herodotus clearly saw (despite the obfuscations of national pride and propaganda) this had been an ideological struggle, the first of its kind known to us. On one side, the towering, autocratic figure of the Great King; on the other, the voluntary and imperfect discipline of proudly independent citizens. In Herodotus's account, Xerxes' soldiers are driven forward to fight under the lash; the recurrent Persian motif of flogging, mutilation and torture throughout his narrative repays study. The Greeks, on the other hand, fought because they had a personal stake in victory: their struggle was to preserve a hard-won and still precarious heritage of freedom.

In Aeschylus's play *The Persians*, produced only eight years after the crowning mercy of Salamis, and written by a man who had fought in the battle himself, what matters is not so much the picture of the Persians – an inevitable caricature: no Greek ever really understood Achaemenid ethics – so much as the spirit, the ideal, which Aeschylus shows us animating the Greeks. The Queen Mother Atossa, Darius's widow, asks a Royal Councillor various questions concerning Athens, and finally (as one might expect from a dowager in her position) quizzes him on the Athenian power-structure, which she assumes to be a replica, *mutatis mutandis*, of that at Susa.

'What man rules them?' she asks. 'Who is in command of their armies?' The answer surely drew a round of applause from that all-too-partisan Athenian audience: 'They say they are no man's slaves or dependents.' This to Atossa suggests incompetent anarchy, a view which the Athenian *demos*, in its more perverse moments, might seem to confirm. 'Then how,' she enquires, 'could they stand against a foreign invasion?' – a feed-line if ever there was one. 'So well,' the Councillor tells her, 'that they destroyed the great and magnificent army of Darius'.

Aeschylus, like most Athenian patriots, may have exaggerated the

military significance of Marathon, but hardly its psychological impact. David had taken on Goliath, against all reasonable odds, and won. That Juggernaut, the Persian war-machine – nothing so formidable had appeared since the collapse of the Assyrian empire – was not, after all, invincible: the lesson went home. Ten years after Marathon, when Greece faced invasion on a scale that made this previous landing look like a mere border raid, the memory of victory still kept Athens, Sparta and her allies fighting. It was, by any rational calculation, an insane piece of intransigence. Those who thought of themselves as long-term realists – including the priests of the Delphic Oracle, and the leaders of nearly every Northern Greek state and Aegean island – argued, like French Vichy politicians in 1940, that resistance was hopeless, and collaboration the only logical answer to Persia's threat. Logically, they were quite right. But great victories of the human spirit against fearful odds – as both Themistocles and Churchill so clearly saw – are not won, in the last resort, by logic. Reason alone is not enough.

About the middle of the sixth century BC, just before the Persian conqueror Cyrus overran Ionia, Phocylides of Miletus wrote: 'A little *polis* living orderly in a high place is stronger than a blockheaded Nineveh.' Though Ionia fell, and Miletus – alone of Ionian cities – made a treaty with the invader, Phocylides, in the long view, was absolutely right. This is a shining central truth which we should never forget when studying the Graeco-Persian wars. In recent years, thanks to spectacular work by Oriental scholars and archaeologists, our knowledge of Achaemenid Persia has increased out of all recognition. Today we are in a position to assess Darius, Xerxes, and their civilisation with greater insight and less *a priori* bias than was possible for even so open-minded an enquirer as Herodotus. Our picture is no longer the xenophobic libel produced by Greek witnesses: what we now have to watch out against is a mood of indiscriminate over-enthusiasm.

Those with a naturally authoritarian cast of mind tend to be fascinated by the Achaemenid empire for just the reasons which induced the Greeks to hold out against it: monolithic (if not always efficient) administration, theocratic absolutism, lack of political opposition (except for the occasional bloody-minded palace intrigue), and easy-going provincial administration by the satraps (provided their subjects made no trouble and paid their taxes regularly). Arnold Toynbee has even suggested that it would have fared better with the Greeks had they lost the Persian Wars: enforced unity and peace might have stopped them dissipating their energies on absurd internecine feuding (and parochial lost causes) until they were absorbed by the benevolent *pax Romana* of Augustus.

What such arguments fail to appreciate is that the whole concept of political and intellectual liberty, of the constitutional state – however individually inefficient or corrupt – depended on one thing: that the Greeks, for whatever motive, decided to stand out against the Oriental system of palace absolutism, and did so with remarkable success. Modern Europe owes nothing to the Achaemenids. We may admire their imposing if oppressive architecture, and gaze in something like awe – from prostration-level, as it were – at the great *apadana* of Persepolis, with its marvellous bas-reliefs. Yet the civilisation which could produce such things is almost as alien to us as that of the Aztecs, and for not dissimilar reasons. Achaemenid Persia produced no great literature or philosophy: her one lasting contribution to mankind was, characteristically enough, Zoroastrianism. Like Carthage, she perpetuated a fundamentally static culture, geared to the maintenance of a theocratic *status quo*, and hostile (where not blindly indifferent) to original creativity in any form.\*

Against this monolithic opposition the Greek achievement stands out all the more clearly, an inexplicable miracle. We sometimes take it for granted that democratic institutions should have evolved in the city-states from Solon's day onwards, reaching their apogee in the Persian Wars and the fifty years which followed. Nothing could be further from the predictable course of events. Free scientific enquiry, free political debate, annually appointed magistrates, decision by majority vote – all these things ran flat counter to the whole pattern of thought in any major civilisation with which the Greeks had to deal. Their achievement, however brought about, and for whatever self-seeking or otherwise disreputable motives, becomes all the more extraordinary when viewed against such a background.

It would be hard to labour this crucial point too much, especially since the story which follows is, in detail, often far from inspiring. For one Greek Churchill there are a dozen Greek Lavals. Cowardice, self-interest, treacherous double-dealing and political in-fighting, between cities and factions within those cities, meet us at every turn. Hostile propaganda and the calculated smear-technique are commonplaces: not even Herodotus wholly avoids suspicion here. Even the most glorious and best-known of actions often turn out, on close inspection, to have singularly mixed motives behind them. Yet nothing, in the last resort, can tarnish the splendour of that marvellous achievement, when,

\* This attitude is characteristic of all the Near East civilisations, even (despite a more striking artistic achievement) of Egypt. Theocratic absolutism applied here with equal rigour; and the one Pharaoh – Akhnaton – who attempted to buck the system had no more long-term success in his crusade than Julian the Apostate.

as Pindar (a Theban, not an Athenian) wrote, 'the sons of Athens laid a bright foundation-stone of freedom'.

'The Persian empire', it has been well said, 'was created within the space of a single generation by a series of conquests that followed one another with a rapidity scarcely equalled except by Alexander, and by the Arabs in the first generation after the death of Mohammed'. It also survived, with its boundaries intact, and under the same ruling house, for over two hundred years, which is more than can be said for Alexander's *oikoumené* – or, strictly speaking, for Islam. In the mid-sixth century the Near East was parcelled out into several small empires: those of Media, ruled over from Ecbatana by Astyages; Babylonia, and Lydia, where Croesus held sway. At this time the inhabitants of Parsa were mere upland tribesmen, hardy fighters but little known – and probably without power – beyond their own domains.\* Yet a bare twenty-five years later this limited region (now Fars, centred on modern Shiraz) controlled a greater empire than that of Assyria at her apogee: the largest single administrative complex that had ever existed in the ancient world hitherto. For this achievement one man, ultimately, was responsible.

In 559 Cyrus son of Cambyses (more correctly Kurash son of Kam-bujiwa, but Herodotus's Greek transliterations have become too familiar to abandon) ascended the throne of Anshan, a Median vassal kingdom lying north and east of Susa. Cyrus's house, founded by Achaemenes [Hakamanish] had for some time held sway in Parsa and its environs; but Cyrus himself was a man of more far-reaching ambitions, and fully endowed with the military and political genius necessary to achieve them. He united the various Parsa tribes under his leadership; he built a new Achaemenid capital, Pasargadae; and he made a profitable alliance with Nabonidus, who had usurped Nebuchadnezzar's throne in Babylon. After thus preparing the ground, he launched a full-scale rebellion against Astyages – who, like so many weak rulers, was both cruel and unpopular.

The first army Astyages sent against Cyrus deserted *en masse* to the Persians – largely at the instigation of their commander, Harpagus, whose son Astyages had previously executed in a most unpleasant fashion. The Median King then took the field himself. Outside Pasargadae his troops mutinied, and turned him over to Cyrus. This was in 550. Cyrus proceeded to capture the Median capital, Ecbatana, which

\* Herzfeld (see Bibliography) has recently argued that Parsa's large eastern expansion was already an accomplished fact. His speculations are intriguing (Kam-bujiwa indeed sounds like an Indian name) but not conclusive.



yielded him a fabulous amount of booty. From now on Media lost its independence, and in fact became the first satrapy of the new Persian empire. In order to have a secure base for further expansion, Cyrus took no punitive measures against Media, and for all intents and purposes placed the Medes on an equal footing with his own people. Harpagus was only the first of many Median nobles to hold high civil or military office under Cyrus and his successors: ironically, where we would speak, generically, of 'the Persians', Herodotus and other Greek writers always refer to 'the Medes'.

By conquering Astyages Cyrus also laid claim – *ex officio*, as it were – to all Media's satellite dependencies: Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia, Cappadocia, the *disiecta membra* of the old Assyrian empire. Here, of course, he came into direct conflict with Nabonidus, who had ambitions to recover some at least of the lost glories of the old Babylonian empire. But Cyrus, far from giving away Mesopotamia or Syria to a potential rival, meant, ultimately, to absorb Babylon itself. There were too many vultures circling the carcase already – including Croesus of Lydia, who in 547 marched east across the Halys River in the hope of picking up a few more outlying provinces. He had been encouraged in this action by the Delphic Oracle, which informed him, with classic ambiguity, that if he crossed the Halys he would destroy a great empire. So he did; but it happened to be his own. His cavalry horses fled in terror from the rank and unfamiliar smell of Cyrus's camels. In 546, after a fortnight's siege, the Lydian capital Sardis fell, and Croesus probably committed suicide by self-immolation to save himself worse indignities. Various popular legends about his end – such as Apollo's miraculous intervention to save him from the flames – look like self-exculpatory propaganda put out by Delphi after the event.

Cyrus himself merely recorded, with sinister brevity, that 'he marched to the land of Lydia. He killed its king [?]. He took its booty. He placed in it his own garrison.' This process, with variations, was to be repeated in a good many places. Between 546 and 539 Cyrus systematically mopped up the coastal cities of Greek Ionia and the Dardanelles: only the half-savage Lukku (Lycians) offered more than a token resistance to his seemingly invincible armies. During the same period he subjugated the whole of the great Iranian plateau, penetrating far beyond the Caspian, to Samarkand and the Jaxartes River (now the Syr-Darya, flowing from the mountains of Tien-Shan to the Aral Sea). Finally came the absorption of Babylonia. Nabonidus had been unwise enough to form a private alliance with Croesus: whether this made any difference to his ultimate fate is debatable. While he held court in Arabia, his son Belshazzar was left to govern Babylon. Nabonidus, an archaising

religious dilettante, had contrived to offend the powerful priesthood of Bel-Marduk: his capital seethed with discontent and treachery. It hardly needed a Jewish prophet to spell out the meaning of the writing on the wall for Belshazzar's benefit. On 29 October 539 Cyrus made a ceremonial state entry into Babylon without a blow being struck against him, and the following year his son Cambyses was installed as Viceroy.

Cyrus now found himself undisputed master of the greatest empire the Near East had ever seen. What was more, he showed himself a most subtle and sophisticated conqueror. He was the first Oriental autocrat to realise that toleration and benevolence, far from being signs of weakness, could be made to pay handsome dividends: that more could be done by clever conciliatory propaganda than through any amount of iron-fisted terrorisation. In Babylon there were no pogroms or deportations, while local deities were treated with scrupulous respect – in return for which, naturally enough, Cyrus claimed to have their divine backing. 'When I made my gracious entry into Babylon,' he announced, 'Marduk, the great lord, turned the noble race of the Babylonians towards me, and I gave daily care to his worship. My numerous troops marched peacefully into Babylon. In all Sumer and Akkad I permitted no unfriendly treatment.' For modern readers, however, Cyrus's most famous example of religious toleration is probably his edict for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem (537). Whenever possible, he believed in placating minorities. It cost little, and it paid handsome dividends.

The remaining eight years of his life Cyrus devoted, for the most part, to organising this great and heterogeneous empire he had acquired. He divided it into about twenty provinces, each under a viceroy whose Persian title – *khshathrapavan*, 'Protector of the Kingdom' – was transliterated by the Greeks as *satrapes*, and has given us the generic term 'satrap'. Two of these satrapies contained Greek subjects: Lydia, with its governmental seat at Sardis, included the Ionian seaboard, while Phrygia covered the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara [Propontis], and the southern shore of the Black Sea. These satraps, especially in the vast eastern provinces, wielded enormous power. They not only concentrated all civil administration in their own hands, but acted as military commander-in-chief as well. Such centralisation of authority was convenient, but had obvious dangers – not least that some ambitious governor might become too big for his satrapal boots, and attempt to usurp the throne. To avoid such a contingency, the Chief Secretary, senior Treasury official, and garrison commanders of each province were appointed by the Great King, and directly responsible to him. More sinister was the travelling inspector, or commissar, known as 'the

Great King's Eye', who made a confidential yearly report on the state of every imperial province.

Cyrus spent much time at Pasargadae, his new capital, where he built himself a great palace – its audience-hall alone was 187 feet long – and a walled park, the lodge-gates of which were guarded by Assyrian-style winged bulls. Above, he had cut the proud trilingual inscription: 'I am Cyrus, the King, the Achaemenid.' Pasargadae stands some 6,000 feet above sea-level, a chill upland plateau: the coda to Herodotus's *Histories* describes a move on the part of the Persian aristocracy to relocate their capital in a milder region. This proposal, however, was flatly vetoed by Cyrus, and his nobles agreed, choosing rather 'to live in a rugged land and rule than to cultivate rich plains and be slaves'. Here, too, Cyrus built his tomb, perhaps in premonition of what was to come: work on the palace was still unfinished when, in 530, he marched east to fight the wild tribesmen beyond the Syr-Darya, and was killed in battle. His career – astonishing enough in sober truth – soon acquired an overlay of heroic myth, to which admiring Greek writers contributed more than their share. Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, that remarkable essay in historical fiction, shows how far the process had gone by the fourth century BC.

Cyrus's son Cambyses ascended the throne without incident in September 530, after some years' training as Viceroy of Babylon. The hostile picture of him drawn by our sources aroused some suspicion in Herodotus, and is almost certainly much exaggerated. Neither the Egyptians whom he conquered, nor his ultimate successor Darius, as we shall see, had much good reason to praise him in retrospect. Modern research suggests that the atrocities he was said to have committed – in a fit of insanity – after his invasion of Egypt were, for the most part, invented by Egyptian priests summarily deprived of their rich temple perquisites. In fact Cambyses seems to have gone out of his way, as Culican says, to 'adopt the titles of Egyptian royal protocol and to put himself in proper relationship to the Egyptian gods'. Here he was clearly carrying on Cyrus's successful policy elsewhere. But even if not the sadistic, heavy-drinking paranoiac of tradition, Cambyses proved a tougher, less paternalistic despot than his father, and made numerous enemies in consequence. Apart from Egypt (where he spent most of his short reign) he obtained the submission of Cyrene and Cyprus and, most important, of the Phoenician states. Persia thus acquired at one stroke what hitherto she had notably lacked: a strong fighting navy.

About March 522, while Cambyses was still abroad, rebellion broke out in Media, led by a man who claimed to be the King's younger brother. Cambyses hurriedly left Egypt, but died, in somewhat suspicious circumstances, when he had got no further than Syria. The

rebellion was put down by a junta under Darius [Darayavaush] son of Hystaspes, who belonged to a collateral branch of the Achaemenid family, and had actually been serving as a staff-officer with Cambyses in Egypt. Darius afterwards claimed, in his self-laudatory Behistun inscription, that the would-be pretender was no Achaemenid, but a Magian priest named Gaumata. Modern scholars believe that he may well have been Cambyses' brother after all, and that the true struggle lay between rival Median and Persian claimants for the throne. Darius's *ex post facto* account is highly suspicious in places. How did an impostor come to rally all the central provinces behind him – let alone contrive to deceive his own putative mother? And if Darius's achievement was to rid Persia of a hated usurper, it is remarkable how hard the job proved. A pogrom against the Magi merely triggered off further revolts: in a single year Darius fought, and won, nineteen major battles. But in July 521 the main fighting was over, and before 520 Darius had established control, however precariously, over almost all of Cyrus's former domains.

These events, which completely transformed the balance of power in the Near East for centuries to come, at first made singularly little impression on the city-states of mainland Greece. One of the oddest, and surely the most significant, facts about Graeco-Persian relations is the abysmal ignorance, tinged with contempt, which each civilisation maintained concerning the other. Even so sympathetic a student as Herodotus knew virtually nothing of the Persian aristocratic ideal, though in many ways it much resembled that upheld by Homer's heroes. Burn's description is admirable:

The Persian gentleman of the great days was . . . encouraged by his religion to be manly, honourable, athletic and courageous; devoted to hunting and the promotion and protection of agriculture; contemptuous of trade, and shunning debt, which 'led to lying'; dignified in his manners, even a little prudish.

There is little here that would be recognised by a reader of Aeschylus. Zoroaster [Zarathustra] had promulgated the doctrine that all men must work for the establishment of God's Righteous Order on earth, a clarion-call for would-be imperialists in any age, and especially attractive to Darius. To begin with he underestimated the Greeks no less ludicrously than they did him; but not for long. What should, by any normal calculation, have been a minor frontier campaign was blown up, ultimately, into war on the grand scale, East against West in a conflict that rocked the empire of Darius and Xerxes to its very foundations.

The degree of mutual ignorance may be gauged from a delightful

anecdote told by Herodotus. When Cyrus, operating on the divide-and-rule principle, confirmed Croesus's previous treaty with Miletus, the other Ionian cities, fearing the worst, appealed for aid to Sparta. The Spartans had recently emerged as the most powerful military state in the Peloponnese, perhaps in all Greece. Two long and grinding wars had – for the time being, at any rate – broken the spirit of their rebellious Messenian serfs. A league of Peloponnesian states had been established under Spartan leadership. If any power in Greece could save Ionia, it was surely this iron-hard militaristic régime. But whether the Spartans would commit themselves was quite another matter. Constant fear of revolt at home made them singularly reluctant to send Spartan troops over the frontier: the present crisis proved no exception. The Ionian spokesman dressed himself in purple (a psychological error, one feels) and made a long speech, which fell very flat indeed. The Spartans refused to give Ionia any military aid.

Nevertheless, a single fifty-oared galley was dispatched across the Aegean: best to see just what was going on. Furthermore, 'the most distinguished of the men on board . . . was sent to Sardis to forbid Cyrus, on behalf of the Lacedaemonians, to harm any Greek city upon pain of their displeasure'. (Isolationism, then as now, formed an excellent breeding-ground for megalomania.) Cyrus, perhaps a little disconcerted despite himself by such sublime effrontery, asked who on earth the Spartans might be, that they dared address him thus. On being told, he made a reply to their herald which, whether authentic or not, pin-points the radical split in temperament between Greek and Persian. 'I have never yet,' he said, 'been afraid of men who have a special meeting-place in the centre of their city, where they swear this and that and cheat each other'. Herodotus goes on to explain that this was because the Greeks had market-places, whereas the Persians did not: a revealing admission. Persia, in fact, was still a basically feudal society, which most of Greece had not been for a century or so: this constituted the deepest socio-economic cleavage (religion apart) between the two cultures.

What Cyrus, as a feudal aristocrat, despised most about the Greeks, over and above their banausic addiction to trade, was the free exchange of opinions that went with it. To a Persian, the Great King *was* the State, in a sense which no Bourbon monarch could have apprehended, and which is demonstrated by the pattern of all Achaemenid inscriptions. The solar radiance of the King's presence also illuminated – in his penumbra, as it were – a few high kinsmen and Court officials; beyond lay outer darkness, a wilderness of faceless, prostrate peasants. This attitude, on both political and religious grounds, was anathema to the Greeks. The Greek word *agora*, 'market', meant originally 'place of

assembly'; there was no clear differentiation between the two. The more advanced Greek city-states had long since got rid of their hereditary noble rulers, together with the *tyrannoi* who succeeded them, and were feeling their way towards some sort of democratic government. (One unexpected exception was Athens, where Solon's cautiously conservative reforms had been followed by an aristocratic dictatorship under Peisistratus.) Ironically, Cyrus delivered his snub to men whose régime had a good deal in common with Persian feudalism: many diehard Dorian nobles would have applauded his sentiments.

The conquest of Ionia taught Persian officialdom some useful lessons about the Greeks – while at the same time minimising the very real danger they constituted. It did not take long for Cyrus and his commanders to realise that, man for man, the Greek hoplite or marine was a formidable fighter: from now on Greeks commanded a high price as Persian mercenaries. But it was equally obvious (to judge by the sorry defence the Ionians put up) that Greek *polis* government formed the worst possible basis for any kind of concerted action, whether civil or military: here the monolithic Achaemenid command-structure came into its own. There were always rival factions in every Greek city-state, to be bribed, exploited, and played off against each other. Greek oracles, like Greek politicians, turned out to be far from incorruptible. *Docet experientia*: with cynical aplomb Cyrus swallowed up the Ionian cities piecemeal, and installed in each a cooperative Greek *tyrannos* – perhaps 'quisling' would be too strong an equivalent – to run it on behalf of the local satrap. Free trade was encouraged, and most commercial concessions granted by the Lydians left intact. A minority (composed for the most part of free-thinking intellectuals, such as Pythagoras or Xenophanes) emigrated rather than compromise with Persian overlordship; the rest stayed put, sized up their situation realistically, and set themselves – with some success – to make it show a handsome profit.

This honeymoon between Ionia's merchants and the Great King began to come under increasing strain from the moment of Darius's accession in 522. That same year Polycrates, the powerful tyrant of Samos, was lured to the mainland and executed by Oroetes, the satrap of Lydia. Though Oroetes himself was afterwards put to death by Darius, the Persians took care to install a puppet-ruler on Samos. The first stepping-stone across the Aegean had been captured: others were soon to follow. After a preliminary reconnaissance expedition, Darius took a large army over the Bosphorus on a bridge of boats, marched north to the Danube, crossed it, and invaded the wild northern steppes of Scythia. Though this expedition was by no means a complete success, from now on (513) it became increasingly clear that Persia meant

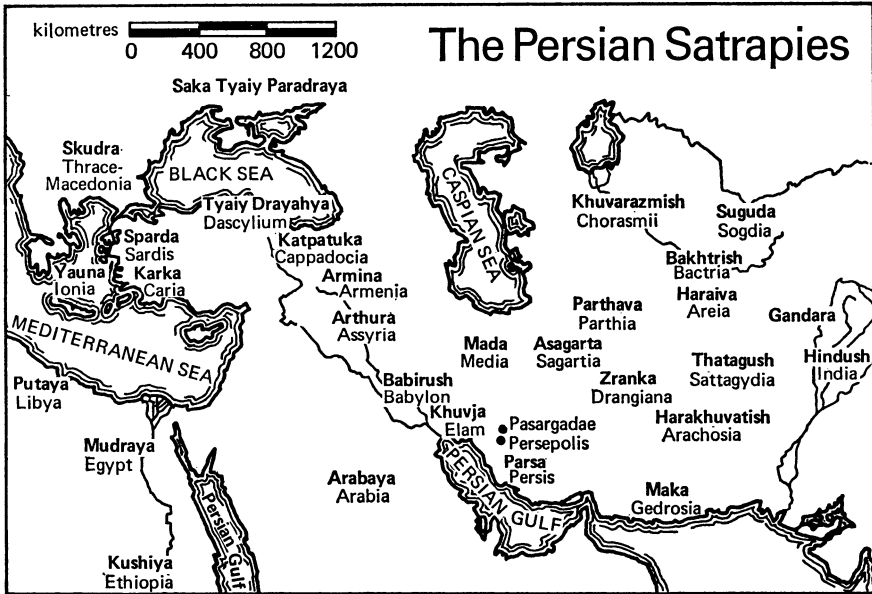
business in Europe. Darius's general Megabazus captured town after town in Thrace. Amyntas, King of Macedon, gave earth and water in token of vassalage. Otanes, who succeeded Megabazus as 'Captain-General of the men along the sea', subdued the rebellious key ports of Byzantium and Chalcedon, at the Black Sea entrance to the Propontis.

Persia now controlled all sea-traffic through the Straits. For the first time, there was a real threat to the food-supply of mainland Greece. Darius had lost no time in recapturing Egypt, with its vast wheatfields. If he closed the Dardanelles, traffic to the Black Sea and South Russia would be cut off as well. Now for fifty years at least Athens, in particular, had been faced with a problem of rising population. Perhaps as early as 594 it had been made illegal to export grain from Attica – which was, in any case, a bad area for growing wheat. Home consumption soon began to soar above the amount produced. By the end of the sixth century BC something like two-thirds of Athens' wheat had to be imported from abroad, and the proportion rose steadily as time went on. The two best grain-markets in the Near East were, precisely, Egypt and South Russia; Darius now controlled access to both of them. In addition, he possessed unlimited supplies of gold, which the Crimean corn-barons often insisted on by way of payment. Thus Darius was also in a position to outbid other competitors in the open market, and force prices up to a level the Greeks could not afford. From now on the threat of the Barbarian, a vast horrific shadow, loomed constantly over the Greek world.

The degree of actual danger would clearly depend very much on the personal character and policies of the Great King. In this respect Darius gave small cause for optimism. All the signs were that he meant to extend Persia's sphere of control into Europe: just how far, no one could tell. Herodotus describes a Persian naval intelligence mission sent out to survey the coasts and harbours, not only of mainland Greece, but also of southern Italy. From the very beginning Darius showed himself a formidable administrator, with strong commercial interests: not for nothing did Iranian noblemen refer to him, half admiringly, half in well-bred scorn, as 'the huckster'. He dug a forerunner of the modern Suez Canal, 150 feet wide, and deep enough to carry large merchantmen. At the same time he sent a Greek captain, Scylax of Caryanda, to explore the sea-route to India by way of the Persian Gulf. These two moves, taken together, reveal a shrewd eye for profitable areas of trade. He reorganised the satrapies, improved provincial communications, set up an efficient civil service, and adapted the Babylonian legal code for Persian use. Nor was he modestly reticent about his achievements. 'What is right I love,' he proclaimed, 'and what is not right I hate'. No one was likely to contradict him.

## DARIUS AND THE WEST

Above all, Darius initiated extensive financial and fiscal reforms: the benefit of these has been overrated. To standardise weights and measures was sensible enough; so was the introduction of an official gold and silver coinage. But the Great King's economic reputation is hardly



enhanced by his attitude to credit, tribute, and the flow of capital within the empire. The total revenue from imperial taxes payable in precious metal has been calculated at 14,560 Euboic talents, which – taking the talent at 57½ lb weight – represents an enormous sum: ‘something like twenty millions of dollars with purchasing power several times greater,’ says Olmstead. Yet very little of this bullion was even coined, let alone fed back into circulation. For the most part it was melted down into ingots, and stored in the vaults at Susa, which thus became something like the Fort Knox of antiquity. Darius seems neither to have known nor cared that this policy was progressively draining the Empire of gold and silver, with obvious, inevitable results: chronic inflation, spiralling prices, and, after a time, the near-collapse of Persian agriculture in a welter of unpaid debts and unredeemed mortgages. His idea of credit was restricted to specie, and he saw no reason why the safeguard which it represented as reserve capital should not remain a royal monopoly.

In modern terms, any such programme would be regarded, rightly,



as pure economic lunacy; yet Darius and his successors clung to it with unswerving faith. Long-term financial planning was something unknown in the ancient world. What the Great King saw was that he could outbid all competition for the purchase of desirable commodities (such as mercenaries or wheat), finance the construction of new palaces, and in general retain a comforting margin of solvency, large enough to deal with any foreseeable crisis. His near-monopoly of gold and silver also offered ample scope for economic blackmail, as the Greeks soon learnt to their cost. It never seems to have struck him that he might eventually exhaust the Mediterranean's resources of precious metal altogether; if one goose stopped laying golden eggs (so the argument ran) another could always be found. This was merely one more reason, as Darius saw it, for extending Persian rule westward across the Aegean.

The Great King's short-sighted avarice had peculiarly disastrous consequences in Ionia. If Darius had not been so hedged about with theocratic delusions of grandeur, he would surely have realised that these rich commercial cities would only collaborate so long as he made it worth their while to do so. Instead, he slapped heavy taxes on them, severely curtailed their free trade with the Black Sea, and refused to change their system of government – though the whole concept of rule by tyrants, let alone puppet tyrants, had been abandoned by the free Greek world. Since about 535, moreover, Carthage and Etruria between them had closed the Western Mediterranean to Greek shipping. Ionia, in fact, was beginning to feel the pinch. The tribute exacted from 'the Greeks of Asia', together with Caria, Lycia and Pamphylia, was 400 talents, or 2,400,000 drachmas – as much as fifth-century Athens made out of her whole sea-empire. When Sybaris, that proverbially rich Greek city of southern Italy, was destroyed by her neighbour and rival, Croton (511–10), the Milesians shaved their heads and wept: they were mourning not only lost friends, but fat lost profits. Sooner rather than later, Ionian resentment at Darius's new-broom policies was liable to boil over in active rebellion. In 513 Histiaeus of Miletus and other Greek leaders had held the Danube bridge for Darius during his Scythian expedition. By 499 it was quite another story.

This ominous march of events made singularly little impression on the Greek mainland states, which, as usual, were preoccupied with their own parochial affairs to the virtual exclusion of all else. The fate of Polycrates, the fact that Persia now controlled a large Phoenician fleet, the softening-up by Darius's generals of Thrace and the Dardanelles – here was the writing on the wall with a vengeance, yet few, until much later, were willing to recognise it as such. At best, the Persian

situation (it was thought) added a new dimension to the domestic power-game.

In Sparta, King Cleomenes kept a watchful eye on Sparta's old rival Argos, and gave cautious encouragement to a group of Athenian exiles who were planning the overthrow of the Peisistratid government. Peisistratus himself had died in 528-7; one of the two sons who succeeded him was assassinated in 514, while the survivor, Hippias, was thus turned into a frightened, cruel despot. Amongst those banished by him, and lucky to escape a worse fate, was a remarkable family of aristocratic opportunists, the Alcmaeonidae, who remained at the centre of Athenian political life for the next century (both Pericles and Alcibiades were related to them). Like the Cecils under Elizabeth I, the Alcmaeonidae were interested in two things only, wealth and political power, but these they pursued relentlessly. If, while taking over the Athenian government, they could also win renown for having rid Athens of an obnoxious tyranny, so much the better. Exile was nothing new to them, and they made the most of it, winning the support of Delphi, whose priests now prefaced every Spartan oracle with the injunction to 'free Athens'.

Cleomenes can have had few illusions about the Alcmaeonidae and their leader, Cleisthenes; but at least they both wanted the same thing, even if for very different reasons. Cleomenes was not, as is sometimes suggested, Hellas's champion against the threat of Persian aggression. This would imply a considerable degree of both altruism and foresight, two characteristics in which Spartan foreign policy was singularly deficient. In fact, some of Sparta's closest allies at the time – Thessaly, Aegina, Delphi, Boeotia – had Persian sympathies *ab initio*, and later emerged as wholehearted *collabos*. What is more, when Ionia finally revolted, and appealed for aid to the homeland, Sparta, as so often, stayed neutral, preferring to keep her forces for an all-out attack on Argos. Nothing could have been more selfish or short-sighted; pan-Hellenic patriotism was nowhere in sight here. Cleomenes wanted the Peisistratids out, not because of their known tie-up with Persia – much less through any ideological opposition to tyranny as such – but because a strong Athens might well become a commercial and military threat to the Peloponnese.

The Alcmaeonids' first attempt at a take-over flopped embarrassingly. They occupied a stronghold on Mt Parnes, in northern Attica, where some of their friends from Athens joined them. But if they expected their countrymen at large to welcome them as deliverers, they were in for a disappointment. Most people must have reasoned (and who could blame them?) that there was little to be gained by changing one noble junta for another. The invasion fizzled out. A year later (511)

Cleomenes was persuaded to send a somewhat inadequate naval task-force to Phaleron. Hippias got wind of its approach well in advance, hired a force of Thessalian cavalry, and drove the Spartans off, with heavy losses, almost as soon as they had disembarked.

This spectacle of rival Athenian factions slugging it out with the aid of foreign troops must have produced a certain weary cynicism among the local peasantry. King Cleomenes, on the other hand, took Sparta's humiliation very hard indeed, and in 510 launched a full-scale invasion by way of the Isthmus. Hippias shut himself up on the Acropolis, with good defences and plentiful supplies; but by a stroke of bad luck his family was captured at the frontier, and he had to surrender. Granted a safe-conduct, he left Athens for his estates at Sigeum, on the Dardanelles, where he soon set up a government-in-exile. Since the Spartans were supposed to be 'liberating' Athens, they could neither choose their own junta nor keep an occupation force on the spot indefinitely – a very modern dilemma. The moment they pulled out, a savage struggle for power began.

Cleisthenes had returned from exile under the Spartan military umbrella: to get back into power by constitutional means, once that umbrella had been removed, was a far trickier business. The conservative group, led by Isagoras, son of Teisander, fought hard – and with considerable initial success – to prevent an Alcmaeonid take-over. They began their campaign by scrutinising the electoral roll, and getting a good many of Cleisthenes' 'new immigrant' supporters disenfranchised on technical quibbles. But they soon saw that it would pay off better, in the long run, to capture the popular vote rather than antagonise it. A law was passed abolishing the judicial use of torture against Athenian citizens; other similar measures followed; for two years Isagoras had things very much his own way. The electorate showed no sign whatsoever, at this stage, of welcoming Cleisthenes as a great democratic reformer, for the very good reason that no such idea had yet entered his head.

In 508, however, Isagoras (a good friend, incidentally, of Cleomenes) was elected Chief Archon. Cleisthenes had already held this office, and was thereby debarred from standing again. Something had to be done: as a desperate measure Cleisthenes, to borrow Herodotus's ambiguous phrase, 'took the people into partnership'. This probably meant a radical extension of the franchise: to put it bluntly, Cleisthenes bribed the citizen-body to support him by offering them their first real stake in the government, a government that he intended to lead by means of their block vote. The proposal was rushed through the Assembly; and so, by a somewhat singular *accouchement*, Athenian democracy finally

struggled to birth. The child proved noisy, healthy and troublesome almost before it could walk; which was lucky, since otherwise its chances of survival would have been slim.

Isagoras, no longer in control of the very people who had elected him Archon, and seeing his power at an end, appealed once more to Sparta. A Spartan regiment marched into Athens; Cleisthenes and the Alcmaeonidae were expelled. They went quietly; they could afford to wait. The Spartans then blacklisted some 700 Athenian families (of known or suspected radical tendencies), and attempted to set up a puppet ruling council composed of conservative yes-men. At this point the newly democratised Athenians decided they had had enough. There was a sudden, violent, and surprisingly successful riot. Isagoras, the Spartans, and their supporters found themselves besieged on the Acropolis. The Spartans were eventually allowed to leave Attica, and smuggled Isagoras out with them; the rest surrendered, and stood trial before a people's court, which demonstrated its democratic solidarity by condemning them to death. Cleisthenes returned home in triumph, to the cheers of his supporters. This time there was no opposition. On the other hand, some large political promises had to be fulfilled, or there would be a swift reversion to factional anarchy.

Cleisthenes did more than fulfil them; once in power he proved himself a far-sighted administrator, whose various reforms (including a complete overhaul of Attica's tribal system) were to reshape the pattern of Athenian political life for centuries to come. How far he was a genuine idealist, let alone planned the long-term consequences of his legislation, is highly debatable. He certainly aimed to break the power of Athens' leading aristocratic families; at the same time, he had every intention of keeping his own in power. His attitude to the *demos* was simple and traditional: he had rewarded them for their support, and now, like any noble patron, expected their gratitude. That within a few decades this same *demos* would be in a position to sway Athens' destiny Cleisthenes, I am convinced, neither foresaw nor intended. Yet in the context of Near East political life, the fact that he carried such reforms through at all is extraordinary enough; and the consequences of the Athenian people thus discovering their collective identity and power were momentous. Herodotus saw this very clearly:

Thus Athens went from strength to strength, and proved, if proof were needed, how noble a thing freedom is, not in one respect only, but in all; for while they were oppressed under a despotic government, they had no better success in war than any of their neighbours, yet, once the yoke was flung off, they proved the finest fighters of them all. [5.78: the Penguin version has 'in the world' for the last three words, which is incorrect.]

It is interesting, by way of contrast, to study the apologia which Herodotus puts in the mouth of Sparta's exiled king Demaratus, now adviser to Xerxes:

When the Spartans fight singly they are as brave as any man, but when they fight together they are supreme among all. For though they are free men, they are not free in all respects; law is the master whom they fear, far more than your subjects fear you. They do what the law commands and its command is always the same, not to flee in battle whatever the number of the enemy, but to stand and win, or die. [7.104.5]

These subtly contrasting ideologies (or ethnic myths) give one much food for thought. How far can freedom go before it degenerates into anarchy, or authority before it becomes mere authoritarianism? Anyone who cares to pursue fifth-century Greek history for another fifty years or so will find somewhat dusty answers to both these questions: Herodotus was wise to end his *Histories* at the point he did. Athens may have gone on to more dazzling achievements, but she never quite recaptured that early mood of buoyancy and dedication. In the immediate surge of self-confidence generated by Cleisthenes' programme, a Spartan king who rode roughshod over free Athenians had been thrown out for his pains. Within a very few years that new spirit would enable Athens to face, and conquer, an invading host far greater – in numbers at least – than any force she could muster against it. Athenian parish-pump politics did, after all, play a crucial part (if only psychologically) in winning the Persian Wars.

Fifth-century propaganda tried to portray this new democratic Athens as staunchly anti-Persian from the very beginning. In point of fact the Cleisthenic régime lost no time in sending an embassy to Darius's brother Artaphernes, satrap at Sardis, with the object of securing the Great King's recognition and alliance. They had very little choice in the matter; Hippias was busy pressing his own claim from Sigeum. Artaphernes was co-operative enough when Cleisthenes' envoys approached him, but made short work of their pretensions. First he enquired who the Athenians were, and where they dwelt; then he forced the ambassadors to offer earth and water in token of submission. This earned them a severe reprimand when they got back home – though no one can have expected Darius to grant Athens his support on more favourable terms, and the whole episode strongly suggests public face-saving by the government.

On the other hand, the merest suspicion of an Athenian *démarche* with Darius was enough to cause considerable alarm at Sparta. Cleomenes

and Demaratus, the two Spartan kings, raised a Peloponnesian army and marched from the Isthmus: their declared objective was to restore a safe conservative régime at Athens, under Isagoras. (Cleomenes was said to be involved with Isagoras's wife, but this sounds like a typical Alcmaeonid slander.) Athens prepared to face yet another crisis, which, oddly, did not materialise. Near Eleusis the Corinthian allies had a change of heart and went home, Cleomenes quarrelled with Demaratus, and the whole expedition collapsed: it looks uncommonly as though someone in Athens had laid out a massive bribe at the eleventh hour. Three or four years later (504) the Spartans were in so nervous a state about this all-too-independent Athenian government that they actually suggested restoring Hippias, the exiled Peisistratid. Their cynical *volte-face* was too much for Sparta's Peloponnesian allies, who vetoed the proposal out of hand. The Spartans had been neatly hoist with their own anti-tyranny propaganda, and were now expected to stick by the principles they preached. All Cleomenes wanted at Athens was a reasonably subservient government, of any sort so long as it was manageable; what he got was a blast of moral obloquy, which forced him to back down in public.

Sparta's dilemma was partially solved in about 500, when Darius, after a decade of enjoyable fence-sitting, decided to recognise Hippias's government-in-exile. *My enemy's enemy is my friend*: for the time being, at least, Sparta and Athens stood, if not in the same camp, at any rate on the same side of the fence. Then, a year later, Ionia's long-smouldering discontent burst, at last, into fiery rebellion. Some of Darius's Greek 'tyrants' were lynched, while others, with remarkable aplomb, transformed themselves overnight into revolutionary generals. During the winter of 499-8 their leader, Aristagoras of Miletus, visited both Sparta and Athens trying to drum up support for his cause. The response was something less than enthusiastic. Cleomenes refused to commit Sparta: his isolationism saw no further than Argos. Non-intervention at this juncture was not only pure selfishness, but may well have ensured the failure of the revolt. With a few more squadrons from mainland Greece, Ionia could at least have held her three great naval bases - Lesbos, Chios and Samos. The resultant combined fleet would have been strong enough to deter Darius from invading Europe at all.

In Athens Aristagoras did somewhat better. The Athenians, after escaping a Spartan invasion, had proved equally firm with Artaphernes. Not at any price, they said, would they have Hippias back. In thus defying the Great King they were taking a big risk, and knew it. The revolt in Ionia must, to begin with, have looked like a godsend: as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. Aristagoras's speech before the

Assembly was typical anti-Persian propaganda, still going strong nearly two centuries later, in Alexander's day. The Persians were hopeless soldiers, he said. The country was loaded with loot. The whole campaign would be a walk-over. His audience gave him a mixed reception. Some wanted the whole fleet sent out: total commitment. Others were for following Sparta's example and staying neutral. In the end a squadron *was* dispatched to Ionia – but one of twenty ships only: perhaps all they could muster, more likely that most lethal of phenomena, a democratic compromise. 'The sailing of this fleet,' says Herodotus, 'was the beginning of trouble not only for Greece, but for the rest of the world as well'.

The trouble, as should by now be clear, had begun long before; but Athens' role in that initial expedition certainly precipitated it. The combined Greek fleet sailed to Ephesus, and from here the rebels' land forces marched to Sardis. They quickly captured the city, though the Acropolis held out. Their hopes of sacking it, however, were disappointed. Most of the houses were reed-built, and even those of brick had reed roofs. A soldier set one house on fire, and the whole city went up like tinder. Persian forces were approaching in strength, and the Ionians hastily pulled out. The Persians overtook them on the coast, at Ephesus, and defeated them with severe losses. At this point the Athenians, seeing which way things were going, hastily withdrew their squadron, sailed back home, and refused to take any further part in the revolt. But it was already too late. The burning of Sardis came as an affront which the Great King could neither forget nor forgive.

The story goes [says Herodotus] that when Darius learnt of the disaster, he did not give a thought to the Ionians, knowing perfectly well that the punishment for their revolt would come; instead, the first thing he did was to ask who the Athenians were, and then, on being told, gave orders that his bow should be handed to him. He took the bow, set an arrow on the string, shot it up into the air and cried: 'Grant, O God, that I may punish the Athenians.' Then he commanded one of his servants to repeat to him the words, 'Master, remember the Athenians,' three times, whenever he sat down to dinner [5.105].

Darius's confident optimism about the outcome of the rebellion was not misplaced. After some initial Ionian successes, the ponderous Persian war-machine lumbered into action. By 495 most resistance had been crushed. In 494 the Ionian fleet, 353 strong, was utterly defeated in a sea-battle off the island of Lade, in the gulf opposite Miletus. Miletus itself was captured and sacked. The men were mostly killed, the women and children enslaved. The whole southern quarter of the city was wiped out. Now Darius could say that the burning of Sardis had

been avenged; yet this was no more than the prelude to his reprisals. The following spring the Persian fleet concluded its mopping-up operations. Chios, Lesbos, Tenedos and the Thracian Chersonese fell in turn. The cities on the eastern shore of the Dardanelles had already been recaptured, together with Byzantium and Chalcedon, which the Ionians had briefly held. All through the straits smoke curled blackly up from burning townships. Refugees fled everywhere – many of them to Sicily and Italy. Young boys and girls were sent off to servitude as palace eunuchs and members of the Royal Harem. The Ionian Revolt was over, and the invasion of mainland Greece had, by that fact alone, become inevitable.

The most interesting casualty of this *débâcle* was an enigmatic Athenian aristocrat named Miltiades. In about 555 his uncle had been sent out by Peisistratus – the Athenian tyrant, Hippias's father – to rule the Thracian Chersonese, the long peninsula which forms the European side of the Dardanelles. Here he established a species of family dynasty, whose benevolent but autocratic rule much resembled that of the 'White Rajahs' in Sarawak, and whose function, clearly, was to safeguard Athenian interests in the Dardanelles area. Miltiades himself became head of the family about 514. His position was ambiguous, to say the least of it: just where he stood, at any given point, with Persia, or Hippias, or the Ionians, or the government in Athens, is almost impossible to determine. In 514–3, he claimed, he had urged the destruction of the Danube bridge while Darius and his Persian army were cut off in Scythia. But the bridge survived; and so, significantly, did Miltiades. Thrown out of the Chersonese by the Scythians in 511, he managed to reinstate himself at the time of the Ionian Revolt – only to become a refugee when resistance collapsed. The Great King put a price on his head, and he only just escaped capture by the victorious Persian fleet. His son, in a following vessel, was not so lucky – at least, from the Greek viewpoint, since he was treated humanely by his captors, and finally 'went Persian'.

Naturally enough, Miltiades made for Athens, but his arrival there (summer 493) must have caused some embarrassment in official circles. He belonged to one of the most distinguished families in Athens, the Philaids, and therefore must be handled carefully. On the other hand, he was that most obnoxious of creatures in the eyes of Athens' new-style democrats – a tyrant. Worse still, he owed his appointment in the Chersonese to Peisistratus and Hippias. But, it could be argued by his supporters, his vast knowledge of Persia would be invaluable for Athens at this critical time. A thoroughly shady record, said some: prosecute



him. Exactly the commander we need, said others: appoint him to the Board of Generals. There was no one who watched this debate more closely, or weighed up the odds with greater care, than the newly appointed Chief Archon. At the age of thirty-one – just above the minimum for eligibility – Themistocles, son of Neocles, from the Phrearri deme, had been elected to the highest civil office in Athens.

Oddly, we know almost nothing about Themistocles' early life. Herodotus first mentions him just before Salamis, in 480, when he is introduced as 'a man in Athens who had recently made a name for himself – Themistocles, more generally known as Neocles' son'. It is Dionysius of Halicarnassus [6.34] who reveals that he held the archonship,\* and Plutarch [*Arist.* 5.3] from whom we learn that he fought, with distinction, though probably in the ranks, at Marathon. We may well have to blame Herodotus's aristocratic informants – not least the Alcmaeonidae – for the deliberate suppression of Themistocles' early career, and his systematic denigration throughout the *Histories*. His record during the Persian invasions was too brilliant and famous for anyone to forget; but at least it could be slanted in as unfavourable a light as possible. Herodotus never misses a chance of emphasising how selfish, greedy, and unprincipled a man Themistocles was. Like all the best propaganda, this picture contains more than a grain of truth; for a more generous, and more reliable, estimate we are lucky to have the magisterial summing-up by Thucydides.

Themistocles was born in 525 or 524 BC. His mother was a foreigner (Thracian, Carian or Acarnanian: accounts differ) but his father, Neocles, belonged to a distinguished aristocratic family, the Lycomidae. The hostile tradition that Neocles was a *novus homo*, without family or background, may depend on nothing more solid than casual etymologising – his name means 'newly famous' – or it may be true that he came from some wealthy *parvenu* family that had married into the Lycomidae. There must have been *something* in the rumour, because Themistocles – to judge from his portrait – did not look at all like a

\* A few modern scholars, in fact, hold that Themistocles was Chief Archon in 483, and died in 449. As it happens, not only the two big Persian invasions of Greece (490 and 480) but also two major Athenian expeditions to Cyprus and Egypt (459, 449) were exactly ten years apart. Themistocles was traditionally supposed to have died at the age of sixty-five, and his death is associated with an Athenian expedition to Cyprus and Egypt. His age as Archon is given as thirty or thirty-one. An ancient writer trying to square these facts *might* have misdated all the events of his life by ten years. But this means assuming either that Dionysius made a glaring mistake (which considering the evidence he worked from is unlikely) or else that *another* Themistocles was Archon in 493 – surely too much of a coincidence? And it still leaves his early life a blank.

horsebreeding Athenian gentleman; and as this story will show, he seldom behaved like one. All the anecdotes we have about him point in the same direction. They show us a plain, blunt, practical man, with a marvellous flair for strategy and political in-fighting, indifferent to art or culture, immensely ambitious, and far better acquainted with the hard facts of trade and commerce than most of his aristocratic opponents, who thought such things beneath them.

The Ostia herm<sup>1</sup> [see plate opp. p. 46] portrays a most striking personality, and one which exactly matches the impression conveyed by our other sources. An influential group of scholars and art-historians now maintains, rightly as I would hold, that this bust derives from an original portrait made towards the end of Themistocles' life, about 460 BC. Till recently it was taken as axiomatic that no true 'likenesses', in the modern sense, existed for almost another century. This view is now undergoing considerable revision and modification, for which the Themistocles bust itself is in no small part responsible. That big round head, simple planes recalling the early cubic conception, poised squarely above a thick, muscular, boxer's neck; the firm yet sensuous mouth, showing a faint ironic smile beneath those drooping moustaches; wiry crisp hair lying close against the skull – all tell an identical story. What we have here is the portrait of a born leader: as Gisela Richter wrote, 'a farseeing, fearless, but headstrong man, a saviour in time of stress, but perhaps difficult in time of peace'. There is, surely, nothing conventional or stylised about that broad forehead and bulldog jaw; they have an ineluctably Churchillian quality. Indeed, of all modern statesmen, Churchill is the one whose career parallels that of Themistocles in so many ways that coincidence will hardly suffice as an explanation. Both possessed the unpopular gift of being right when their more intellectual contemporaries were wrong. Both had a streak of that dazzling yet suspect histrionic genius which can transcend and transform a national emergency. Both were voted out of office with uncommon speed when the crisis they surmounted was over. Under Themistocles' leadership the Athenians, too, lived through their finest hour.

Like everyone else, Themistocles must have watched the Great King's increasing interest in Europe with some alarm. But unlike most of the aristocratic in-group whose members – even under a democracy – were regularly elected to high office,\* he had a very shrewd idea what it implied. Darius not only intended, eventually, to conquer European Greece, but to soften up the city-states beforehand by fifth-column

\* Whatever their political views, the men who actually wielded power in Athens – at least until 425 BC – more often than not came from about half a dozen intermarrying families. In this sense Themistocles *was* an outsider.

infiltration and, worse, by applying simple economic pressure where it would hurt most. After the collapse of the Ionian Revolt in 494-3, it looks very much as though the Great King debarred Athenian and Ionian shipping from the Black Sea grain-route. Ever since the Scythian expedition in 514/3, this must have been a fear that hit the Athenian man-in-the-street with increasing urgency. After 493 it became stark fact. An invasion one could march out and meet with sword and spear. Famine was quite another matter. Obviously, the up-and-coming politician who would be sure of popular support was the man who somehow guaranteed Athenians their daily bread.

But where was the bread to be found? Here our archaeological evidence helps us. We know that Athens' largest single import was wheat. We also know that her main export was fine pottery. In a known wheat-growing region, then, it is a fair assumption that Athenian pottery-sherds will represent payment for grain-imports. The heavier the sherding at any particular stratigraphical level, the more grain Athens will have imported during that period. Now the deposits of sherds in Egypt, Thrace, South Russia, Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean – all Persian-controlled areas – fall off to a mere trickle shortly before the Persian Wars. This is just what we might expect, and the natural consequence of Darius's restrictive policies. But when we look to the West it is another matter. In Sicily, South Italy, and the Northern Adriatic (Po Valley) there is an enormous increase of Athenian pottery-deposits, which reaches its peak between 450 and 430. All these were famous wheat-growing areas in antiquity: it was here, beyond a doubt, that Athens found her alternative market. Indeed, by 490 Athenian merchants had already built up bigger trade-links with the West than any they had previously achieved nearer home.

After the Ionian Revolt this supply-line was no longer a matter of *laissez-faire* economics; it rapidly acquired political importance as well. Athens' life-blood now depended on it, and its fluctuations could not be left exclusively in the hands of merchants. Some far-sighted statesman undoubtedly saw that from now on, at least until the Persian threat was removed, trade with the West must be treated as a public issue of government, and not abandoned to private enterprise. Even if we did not possess evidence confirming his strong interest in Sicily and Magna Graecia,\* it would be almost inevitable to identify that statesman as

\* Hdt 8.62.2 shows Themistocles threatening to lead a mass Athenian migration to Siris in the Bay of Taranto ('it has long been ours, and the oracles say we must found a colony there'); cf. p. 171 and note *ad loc.* He named two of his daughters Sybaris and Italia (Plut. *Them.* 32.2). When he was an exile on the run, his first thought on reaching Corcyra was to make for the court of Hiero in Sicily (*ibid.* 24.4,

Themistocles. We can imagine him talking to his friends down in the Piraeus taverns – where no self-respecting aristocrat would deign to go. There would be long, careful interrogation of merchant skippers and Sicilian brokers, discreetly placed bribes, deals arranged over a bottle of wine. During this period he must have seemed not so much a politician as a hustling import-export agent. But the work he did saved Athens during the Persian Wars, no less surely than his more famous achievement at Salamis.

So gradually this ambitious young merchant-politician got himself established as a public figure. He knew every citizen by name – a characteristic trick of the professional ward-heeler. He always had a smile and a handshake for those he met on the street; he never missed an opportunity of making useful contacts or of getting himself talked about. To borrow an expressive modern phrase, he knew how to project his own image. He persuaded one famous musician to practise at his house, chiefly as a bait for visitors. On top of his other activities, he set up as a private lawyer: in so litigious a society any good courtroom attorney could do very well for himself. This profession was also a popular way (then as now) into politics. Themistocles not only learnt to speak persuasively, which stood him in good stead later; he also made some very useful friends among the influential clients he got acquitted.

Neocles knew the dangers of a life in politics, and tried to warn his son off this dangerous ambition. Surely, he said, it was safer to be a merchant, or to work your estate? One day he and Themistocles were strolling together along the beach at Phaleron, where Athenian ships used to be slip-hauled before Piraeus harbour was built. Neocles pointed to the rotting hulls of some old triremes, lying there abandoned on the shore. 'That, my boy,' he said, 'is just how the Athenian people treat their leaders when they have no further use for them'. In later life Themistocles had good cause to remember those words; but now he was young, and too ambitious to heed the voice of experience. What young man in a hurry ever did? Besides, his ambitions were on the point of

citing Stesimbrotus). His connection with Corcyra itself is suggestive. He gave judgement in favour of the island when called to arbitrate between Corcyra and Corinth (*ibid.* 24.1), and was recognised as a public benefactor there in consequence. His concern with Corcyraean affairs seems to have been of long standing. According to Cornelius Nepos (*Them.* 2.1–3), a late and inferior but on the whole pro-Themistoclean source, the 'first step in his public career' had to do with putting down trouble on Corcyra and ridding the Straits of Otranto of pirates – both of which activities suggest strong Athenian interest in maintaining safe communications with the West. Modern scholars tend to assume that Nepos here wrote 'Corcyra' when he really meant 'Aegina'; on the practice of solving awkward historical problems by arbitrary textual emendation see below, p. 297, n. 13.

fulfilment. He may have been poison to aristocratic diehards, but the average man found something solid, earthy and reassuring about him. With Ionia lost, and the Great King's vengeful wrath-to-come hanging over Attica, a strong leader was needed. Perhaps – so the word must have run in Athenian political circles – perhaps the thrusting young man from Phrearri would fill the bill? So, in the spring of 493, Themistocles found himself elected Chief Archon of Athens; and for a while, as the Persian crisis steadily mounted, he had more urgent things on his mind than trade with the West.

Facing up to the Great King would have been a tough enough assignment in itself, even if Athens had been united; but united was precisely what Athens was not. A powerful pressure-group – including those versatile band-waggon jumpers the Alcmaeonidae – wanted nothing better than to do a deal with Persia. Like most shabby collaborators in any age (French Vichy politicians offer a good modern parallel) the Alcmaeonidae regarded themselves as long-term realists. Perhaps, if they agreed to take back Hippias, they might avoid the indignity of a Persian occupation force, but that was the best they could hope for. Darius's overlordship in Greece, they argued, was inevitable. To fight the Persian war-machine struck them as pure suicidal lunacy. Against them, unswayed by rational considerations, stood the plain, decent, stupid men: farmers and craftsmen and sailors who were not clever enough to know in advance when they were beaten, men who still placed honour above calculation. These took a very different line; they also (no doubt at Themistocles' instigation) gave it some forceful publicity.

In the early spring of 493 the dramatist Phrynichus put on a play called *The Capture of Miletus*, vividly depicting the collapse of the Ionian Revolt. (It may have been the first time that recent historical events, as opposed to myths, were represented in the Athenian theatre.) The effect was remarkable: Phrynichus saw his audience weep tears of grief and patriotic shame. Stung into swift action, the pro-Persian lobby got the play banned: when in doubt, fall back on censorship. Phrynichus himself was fined 1,000 drachmas, almost three years' pay for the average working-man. But the idea of subservience to Darius, however reasonable it might be, now rapidly lost ground. The proof of this is Themistocles' own election in the spring – on a tough-line-with-Persia ticket. About midsummer, with an all but theatrical sense of timing, Miltiades arrived in Athens. Themistocles and he had almost nothing in common except a determination to fight; but that, for the moment, was enough. Miltiades knew both Darius and Hippias personally. For

twenty years he had lived in or near the Chersonese, and during that time he had become a seasoned field-commander – something Athens conspicuously lacked in 493. If there was going to be real trouble with Persia, who better to handle it? Charges brought against him were summarily dismissed (perhaps by Themistocles in person) and soon afterwards – ‘by popular vote’, Herodotus says – he was elected general of his tribal division. Sometimes the *demos* chose better than it knew.

Meanwhile alarming reports were coming in of the Great King’s projected invasion plans. It was clear that the defence of Athens had to be organised without delay. Themistocles argued – and time, as we shall see, did nothing to change his view – that the best course was to fortify Piraeus, abandon Athens, and stake everything on a strong navy. This policy ran into violent and predictable opposition from the whole aristocratic-conservative group. To abandon Athens and Attica, for however strategically impeccable a motive, was bound to offend not only the great landowners, but all those with an old-fashioned sense of honour about defending hearth, home, and the shrines of their ancestors. Themistocles had the whole weight of prejudice and tradition against him. No one, except in the direst emergency, would support such a motion, especially when the direct result was bound to be the destruction of all farms and estates in Attica. Moreover, Themistocles’ main support came from the much-despised ‘sailor rabble’; when his naval plans eventually went through – in the greatest crisis of Athens’ history – people said that ‘he had deprived the Athenians of the spear and shield and degraded them to the rowing bench and the oar’. In 493–2 his naval development programme was defeated; but the Assembly nevertheless voted for the fortification of Piraeus, and its development as the port of Athens. Work on the great triple harbour began at once, and was not completed for another sixteen years. The fortifications alone were a gigantic undertaking: solid ashlar walls on which two waggons could pass abreast. Themistocles aimed to make Piraeus so strong that a small reserve garrison could easily hold it – thus releasing more able-bodied men for the fleet. By Pericles’ day Piraeus was not only Athens’ main arsenal, but also the greatest commercial port in the Aegean.

It soon became clear that Athens was going to need all the defences she could muster. In the spring of 492 Darius sent out his son-in-law Mardonius with a large fleet and army: the burning of Sardis was to be avenged. Mardonius was young, shrewd, and ambitious. He also knew very well that one of the main reasons for the Ionian Revolt had been Persia’s practice of ruling through Greek tyrants. Before he ferried his

forces across the Dardanelles, he threw out the puppet dictators who had been restored in Ionia, and, with exquisite cynicism, set up a series of puppet democracies instead. This soothed Greek opinion, and cost him nothing. His autocratic temper made little distinction between putative forms of government; as far as he was concerned, it all came to the same thing in the end. On the other hand, he had no intention of letting another revolt break out behind him while he was in Greece. Fate smiled sardonically, and dealt him a smart back-hander to lower his self-assertiveness. On the borders of Macedonia his camp was beaten up by a hairy and hitherto unheard-of Thracian tribe, and he himself wounded. About the same time the Persian fleet ran into a severe storm while rounding Mt Athos: many of the ships were driven ashore and wrecked. Mardonius wisely pulled out the remainder of his force and returned to Persia, where he was temporarily relieved of his command.

The following spring (491) Darius decided to test the morale of the various Greek states. While his shipyards were busy turning out fresh warships and horse-transporters, he sent envoys round the Aegean and mainland Greece, demanding earth and water in token of vassalage. Athens and Sparta refused. In Herodotus's words, 'at Athens they [the messengers] were thrown into the pit like common criminals, at Sparta they were pushed into a well – and told that if they wanted earth and water for the king, those were the places to get them from'. But all the islands, Aegina included, and a number of mainland cities, especially in the north, submitted without protest. The Thasians were told to dismantle their walls. They did so. With most of the North Aegean from Thessaly to the Dardanelles in his power, Darius felt ready to strike. Early in 490 a new fleet and army assembled near Tarsus, on the Cilician coast opposite Cyprus, and sailed westward for Ionia. Darius had replaced Mardonius with his own nephew, Artaphernes, and a Median noble called Datis. 'Their orders,' says Herodotus, 'were to reduce Athens and Eretria [a city of Euboea which had also taken part in the Ionian Revolt] to slavery, and to bring the slaves before the king'. The exiled Hippias also sailed with them, in high hopes – though now nearly eighty – of returning to Athens as dictator once more.

From Ionia the fleet moved westward through the Cyclades. There was to be no risk of another shipwreck off Mt Athos. Naxos, which had survived an attack ten years before, was now captured and sacked. The inhabitants of Delos heard the news and fled. Datis, who knew the value of propaganda, sent them reassuring messages: he would never, he said, harm the island in which Apollo and Artemis were born. He also burnt ostentatiously large quantities of incense on Apollo's altar as an

offering. (This policy of religious toleration paid off well – so well, indeed, that the Delphic Oracle subsequently became little more than a mouthpiece for Persian propaganda.) Soon after he left the island it experienced a major earthquake, which perhaps rather spoilt the effect he had intended – a warning of trouble on the way, men said – but his gesture undoubtedly got widespread publicity. The Persian fleet advanced from island to island, commandeering troops and picking up children as hostages. At Carystus, the southernmost town of Euboea, they met with a flat refusal, upon which they laid siege to the town and began burning the crops in the surrounding countryside. Datis and Artaphernes had a fighting force of at least 25,000 men; by now their total numbers, rowers and conscripts included, were over 80,000. To transport them they had some 400 merchantmen, with a minimum escort of 200 triremes.<sup>2</sup> The Carystians, understandably, gave in.

At Eretria doubt and confusion reigned. Some were for fighting it out. Others wanted to abandon their city to the Persians, take to the hills, and (like their modern descendants) harry the enemy with guerilla operations. Others again, the inevitable quislings, were secretly preparing to sell out to Datis for Persian gold. Four thousand Athenian colonists had come from neighbouring Chalcis to help defend the threatened city. One of the Eretrian leaders warned them what was afoot, and advised them to get out while the going was good. They withdrew to Athens, where their services as hoplites soon proved more than welcome. Eretria held out for a week, then was betrayed from inside the walls. In accordance with Darius's orders, all the city's temples were burnt as a reprisal for the burning of Sardis. A few days later, says Herodotus, 'the Persian fleet sailed for Attica, everyone aboard in high spirits and confident that Athens would soon be given the same sort of medicine'. There is an understandably ironic relish about the way he puts this. The Persians' immediate destination was the Marathon plain, some twenty-four miles north-east of Athens itself, on the coast opposite Eretria.

It was old Hippias who had suggested Marathon as the Persian beach-head. Datis wanted room to use his cavalry, and Marathon offered just the right conditions – a long flat strip between the mountains and the sea, with easy through access to Athens by way of the Hymettus-Pentele gap. There were marshes at the north-east end, and clumps of trees and scrub dotted the plain. Better still, there was a fine shelving sandy beach (lined today with dunes and umbrella pines) on which to haul up the Persian warships and disembark horses. The invasion fleet beached at the north-east end of the bay, between the marshes and the long promontory known as Cynosura, or the Dog's Tail. Here Datis had



natural protection on his landward side, an easy line of retreat by sea, and good grazing for his horses. The main Persian camp was probably established near Trikorinthos [modern Káto-Souli], where, then as now, a good spring provided plentiful water. There were only two narrow approaches to this position from the west, along the shore-line and under the lee of Mt Stavrokoraki [see map, p. 33]. Datis and Artaphernes, having landed at dawn, lost no time in securing the road leading north to Rhamnous. Cavalry patrols explored the plain. The Persians were in an extremely strong position.

From the heights of Mt Pentele the beacon flared, telling Athens that enemy forces had landed. A fast runner was sent off to Sparta with the news. Athens was threatened; reinforcements were urgently needed. The runner, Pheidippides, left Athens while it was still dark, and reached Sparta by the following evening, having covered something like 140 miles over bad roads. (On the way, he afterwards swore, he had a vision of Pan. We can, if we like, explain this as a hallucination induced by exhaustion and lack of sleep.) The Spartans were full of sympathy, but regretted that they could not put troops into the field until after the full moon – that is, on 11–12 August. To do so would have meant breaking a religious taboo, probably in connection with the Carneian Festival, sacred to Apollo. It was now 5 August.<sup>3</sup> Reinforcements could not be expected for another ten days. The Spartans were, beyond any doubt, sincerely pious and old-fashioned traditionalists: we have no right, without strong supporting evidence, to accuse them of practising religious hypocrisy for political ends. Yet it is undeniably curious how often such taboos happened to fit in with their practical plans. An expeditionary force was in readiness at the frontier, prepared to move as the moon, or the luck of battle, dictated. Meanwhile the Spartan government avoided committing itself.

From the moment the fall of Eretria became known, a succession of fierce debates had taken place in the Athenian Assembly. Some were for sitting tight and holding the city against siege. Others, Miltiades in particular, insisted that the citizen-army should go out and fight. A siege would cut them off from Spartan reinforcements (the famous Long Walls were not yet built), and increase the risk of treachery within the walls. Just who might be in touch with Hippias and the Persians at this juncture no one, except the conspirators themselves, could tell; but the existence in Athens of a large pro-Persian pressure-group was an accepted fact, and those who meant to fight ignored it at their peril. When the news of the Marathon landing reached Athens, it was Miltiades' policy which won the day. Clearly he argued that their only hope – especially against cavalry squadrons – was, in modern terms, to 'contain the

beach-head': that is, to prevent enemy forces from fanning out and advancing inland. A famous resolution, to 'take provisions and march', was approved by the Assembly: tradition makes Miltiades the proposer, and tradition may well be right.

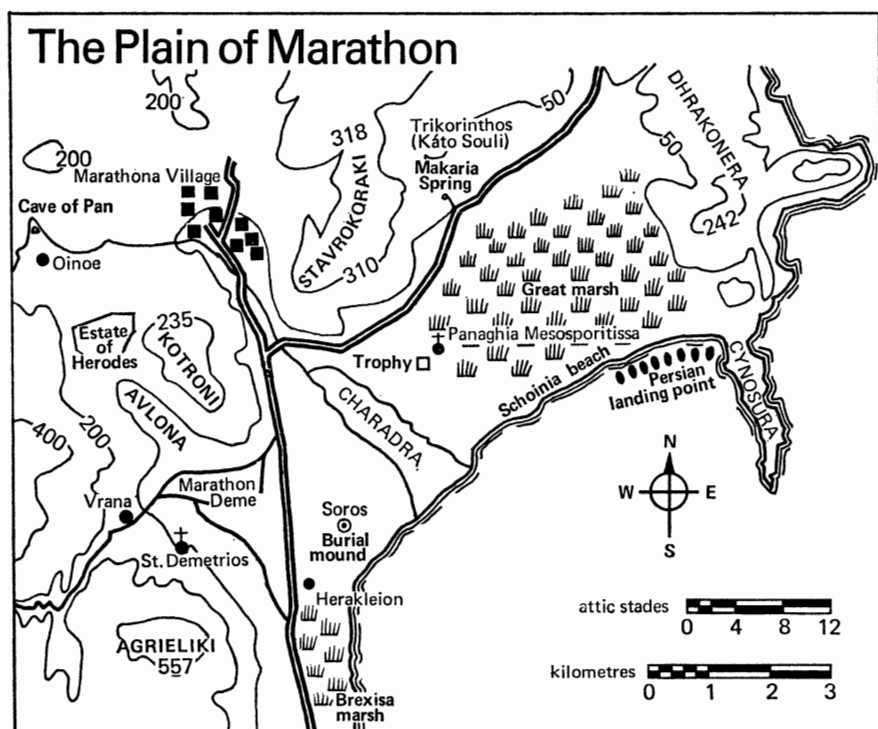
So the heavy-armed infantrymen of Attica, some 10,000 strong, set off along the quickest route to Marathon, through the Hymettus-Pentele gap and along the coast,\* their ration-bags loaded on mules or donkeys, slaves carrying their body-armour. The commander-in-chief, or War Archon [*polemarchos*] was Callimachus of Aphidna. Miltiades, though almost certainly responsible for the strategic and tactical plan which won the battle, and earned him well-merited fame, served as one of the ten divisional commanders; among his colleagues was Aristides, Themistocles' great rival, known as 'the Just'. When the Athenians reached the southern entrance to the Marathon plain, between Mt Agrieliiki and the sea, they took up their position by a precinct, or grove, sacred to Heracles, a little beyond the Brexisa marsh [see map opposite].<sup>4</sup> By so doing they effectively blocked any Persian advance on Athens. As a defence against Datis's cavalry they felled a number of trees and set them in position across the plain, with their branches facing the enemy. At this point they were joined, unexpectedly, by a volunteer force of between six hundred and a thousand Plataeans. Plataea was a small town in Boeotia, to the north of Attica, and an old ally of Athens. Every available man there had turned out to help repel 'the Barbarian'.

For several days (7-11 August) nothing happened: the two armies sat facing one another, two or three miles apart, and made no move. Both sides, in fact, had excellent reasons for playing a waiting game. The Athenians, who possessed neither archers nor cavalry, were unwilling to operate in the open plain, where Datis's squadrons would have them at a severe disadvantage. They still hoped, too, that Spartan

\* There are many reasons for not accepting Hammond's alternative route, by the hill-track from Kephissia to Vraná (*Hist. Greece* p. 216 with n. 2; repeated in JHS 88 (1968) 36-7, with n. 107). The most obvious, surely, is that such a move would leave the coast-road - the only approach to Athens easily negotiable by cavalry - wide open, a bonanza Datis and Artaphernes could not possibly have missed. Miltiades' dash to Marathon was designed to forestall, or block, just such an attack. This end would hardly be achieved by straggling over the hills (where cavalry could not operate) and totally ignoring the coastal gap. Nor would any commander in his right mind have first stripped Athens of defenders, and then obligingly left the front door open, as it were, while he led his troops up the back lane. One alert Persian scout on the hills, and Datis's squadrons could have ridden into Athens while Miltiades' hoplites were still stumbling down the track above Vraná. For other critical objections see Burn, PG pp. 242-3, with n. 14.

reinforcements might reach them in time. After four days the moon would be full, and a Spartan army – with any luck – on its way to join them. The longer the Athenians sat tight, the better their chances.

The Persians, too, had their own motives for not wishing to force an immediate engagement. If the Athenians were shy of encountering Persian cavalry, Datis and Artaphernes, conversely, had no wish to



launch their own weaker infantry against Greek hoplites holding a prepared position. More important, they were in touch, through Hippias, with a group at Athens who had promised to betray the city to the Persian invader. Those slippery opportunists the Alcmaeonidae were, almost certainly, among the ringleaders. When everything was ready, the conspirators would flash a shield on Mt Pentele. Just what did this signal imply? There is very little hard evidence: what follows is a reconstruction, based for the most part on late and often dubious sources.

If the flashing shield meant that the traitors were ready to open the gates of Athens, then the response to it must have been an advance on

the city itself. The Persians, we may assume, would send the bulk of their fleet off round Cape Sunium, and make a landing in Phaleron Bay. The cavalry, or a large part of it, would accompany this assault group, and act as a spearhead for the advance on Athens. The gates would be opened from the inside. Meanwhile, of course, Attica's entire citizen army would still be immobilised at Marathon by Artaphernes' holding force. (If they tried to withdraw, in the confusion they would at once be attacked in the rear by the Persians and forced to fight at a severe disadvantage.) As soon as Athens fell, Datis's troops would march out along the same coast road as the Athenians had taken, and cut off their line of retreat. Callimachus would thus be compelled to fight a simultaneous frontal and rearguard action, between the mountains and the sea, against vastly superior numbers. Until this trap was sprung, the Persian force at Marathon need do nothing – unless the Athenians either attacked or attempted to withdraw.

Day followed day, and still there was no sign of a Spartan army, no shield-signal from the mountain-top. Herodotus reports that the Greek divisional commanders reached a five-a-side deadlock over their immediate course of action. One group argued that the Athenian army could not possibly win a pitched battle against such odds. They were heavily outnumbered; they had no cavalry or archers, whereas the Persians were well-supplied with both; the only logical course was to fall back on Athens. Miltiades and his friends had already countered such arguments in the debate which ended with the decision to go to Marathon. If the generals did in fact fight this debate all over again, then Miltiades, it is clear, proved equally firm. Withdrawal, moreover, would be suicidal in the circumstances. Callimachus needed little or no persuasion to stay where he was. Perhaps he acted on a hunch; perhaps he had learnt something of Datis's plans from spies or deserters.\*

Datis and Artaphernes must have known all about those Spartan reinforcements, and the alleged reason for their delay. Once the moon was full, further waiting might prove highly dangerous. Yet there was still no signal from the pro-Persian party in Athens by 11 August. A crucial decision now faced the Persian commanders; and it looks very much as though they made up their minds to take a chance, and go ahead with their planned operation regardless. In that case, Datis will have sailed for Phaleron Bay on the night of 11–12 August, under cover of darkness, taking the bulk of the cavalry with him: not all, since at

\* Athens' ten divisional commanders each took a turn, in rotation, as 'General Officer of the Day', or operational second-in-command to the War Archon. The four commanders who had backed Miltiades all, as a gesture, surrendered their stint to him – a nice instance of democratic institutions yielding before superior know-how.

least some token cover would be needed for Artaphernes' holding force. This body, to be on the safe side, must have substantially outnumbered the Athenians, though not so far as to weaken the assault group: 15,000 seems a likely figure. Even so, it is clear that neither Datis nor Artaphernes expected their opponents to risk an attack without archers or cavalry: when they in fact did so, the Persians' first reaction was that the poor fellows must have taken leave of their senses.

The Persians may have hoped to benefit by treachery, but it was the Athenians who actually did so. Some Ionian scouts serving with Artaphernes noticed the absence of Datis's task force, and slipped across to the Athenian lines before dawn, bearing a message which afterwards became proverbially famous – 'the cavalry are away'. (Treachery or Panhellenic patriotism? As so often in Greek history, it is hard to know where the dividing-line should be drawn.) Miltiades realised, as soon as he heard the news, that here was the one possible chance for Athens to snatch a victory. Even with a strong following wind, Datis could not reach Phaleron by sea in less than nine or ten hours: twelve would be a more likely estimate. He was unlikely even to begin disembarking his troops and horses till late afternoon. Artaphernes was now very short on cavalry, though he still had his corps of archers. He had also, for safety's sake, redeployed his forces no more than a mile from the Athenian lines. If the Athenians could bring him to battle and beat him, they might just get back to Athens in time to deal with Datis. Even so, it would be – as the Duke of Wellington said on another occasion – a damned close-run thing. Battle-weary troops could hardly hope to march those twenty-four\* miles in much less than seven or eight hours. By nine o'clock at the latest they would have to be on the road. Callimachus agreed with Miltiades and, as Commander-in-Chief, decided to risk an engagement. It was about five-thirty a.m.

The troops were now drawn up in battle order. Callimachus himself commanded the right wing, where he had placed his own tribal division. The left wing was held by the Plataeans. The Leontid and Antiochid tribes were placed in the centre, with the remaining Athenian divisions spread out on either side of them. It was in the centre that the toughest fighting took place. (Themistocles was a Leontid, and Aristides an Antiochid, so they were both in the thick of it.) Now if Callimachus had massed his troops eight deep, in the normal way, the Persians would easily have outflanked him. A front of 1,250 infantrymen, allowing a yard per man, is not all that wide, and once the Athenians

\* Not twenty-six, as is generally supposed. This error has been caused by measuring the distance to the modern village of Marathóna rather than to the actual site of the battle.

left their entrenched position for the open plain they would become doubly vulnerable. (The sea has retreated since 490 BC, but even then the plain was wide enough to constitute a formidable hazard.) Callimachus and Miltiades therefore made a virtue of necessity. They deliberately thinned out their centre, widening the space between each man, and reducing the number of ranks to three or four at most. Their most powerful striking force they massed on the wings. Here Miltiades' intimate and detailed knowledge of Persian military customs proved invaluable. He must have guessed that Artaphernes, like all Persian commanders, was liable to place his crack troops in the centre, and his conscript levies on the wings. To risk – indeed, to invite – a Persian breakthrough in the centre was taking a calculated risk indeed. But if Callimachus and the Plataeans could knock out Artaphernes' wings quickly, and then wheel about to reinforce their own weakened centre, the battle was as good as won.

So they faced each other on that August morning – the 12th, in all likelihood – between the mountains and the sea. It was about six o' clock, and the sun had just risen across the water, above the Euboean hills. Bronze armour glinted; feet shuffled and stamped. Then came the shrill note of a trumpet, and the Athenian ranks moved forward, marching briskly, spears advanced: men with a job of work to do. There was no shouting, no battle-song: they needed all the breath they had. Artaphernes' troops were drawn up in line, waiting for them, a stationary barrier reaching from Mt Kotroni to the shore, archers deployed in front, cavalry – what there was of it – on the wings. As the Greeks came within range of the Persian archers (at about 150 yards distance) they broke into a double, to get through that murderous hail of arrows as fast as possible, and engage.

The Persian order of battle was just as Miltiades had anticipated. Artaphernes' best troops – Iranian guardsmen reinforced by picked tribal warriors from the eastern frontier – were placed in the centre. His less reliable units, the satellite battalions of the empire, had been relegated to the wings. Amongst these were Ionian levies: Greek arrayed against Greek, and (as the events of the previous night suggest) probably not too happy about it. The Athenians had several other advantages to compensate for their lack of numbers. Greek discipline, Greek tactics, Greek weapons and body-armour were all very much superior to those of the Persians. It was long spear against javelin, short sword against dagger or scimitar, bronze-lapped cuirasses against quilted jerkins, bronze-faced shields against wicker targets. The Athenians had a first-rate battle-plan; best of all, they were not imperial conscripts, but free men fighting to preserve their freedom.

In the centre, predictably, the Persians had the best of it. Step by hard-fought step, sweating and gasping, the Athenian hoplites were forced back – ‘towards the Mesogeia’, as one of the survivors told Herodotus: by which he meant, not ‘inland’, as is generally supposed, but more or less along the line of their previous advance through the coastal gap, in the direction of southern Attica. (Local inhabitants still call this region ‘the Mesogeia’.) Here was where the brunt of the Persian attack fell; and it was here, in the front ranks of their respective divisions, that Themistocles and Aristides fought. Meanwhile on the wings the Greeks had carried all before them. Many of the fleeing Persians stumbled into the Great Marsh and were drowned: their total death-roll reached the staggering figure of 6,400, and it was here that they incurred their heaviest casualties. (Afterwards the Athenians erected a white marble column by the edge of the marsh to commemorate this wholesale slaughter: fragments of it still survive *in situ*.) Other fugitives retreated along the narrow gap between the marsh and the shore, making for the ships hauled up in the lee of the Dog’s Tail.

At this critical point Greek discipline once more proved its worth. There are few things harder to control than a military rout and pursuit. Yet both Athenians and Plataeans, once victory was secure, disengaged according to plan. ‘Having got the upper hand,’ says Herodotus, ‘they left the defeated Persians to make their escape, and then, drawing the two wings together into a single unit, they turned their attention to the Persians who had broken through in the centre’. The tactical skill which this complex movement implies is quite extraordinary. The Persian advance was contained and halted somewhere near the great mound which marks the burial-place of ‘the men of Marathon’. The Athenian and Plataean wings about-faced, and hastened back the way they had come. They did not take the Persians in the rear (tempting though this must have been) because to do so might well have meant sacrificing their own hard-pressed centre altogether in the process. Instead, they outflanked the battle in a double-pincer movement, which strengthened the Athenian line with massive reinforcements, and, eventually, brought Artaphernes’ advance to a standstill. Then the tide of battle turned, and the Persian line broke. Those who could forced their way through to the sea, and retreated along the foreshore, where their ships were launched and ready for departure.

The Athenians pursued them closely, cutting down stragglers in the shallows till the water ran red with blood, calling back to their camp-followers for torches to set the Persian vessels on fire. It was during this stage of the battle the Athenians suffered most of their astonishingly few casualties: only 192 all told. Callimachus the War Archon was

killed, together with one of his divisional commanders; and as they reached the Dog's Tail, Cynegirus, the brother of Aeschylus the playwright, 'had his hand cut off as he was getting hold of a ship's stern, and so lost his life'. During the last stand by the Persian centre Artaphernes had had time to get most of his other surviving troops aboard, and to save a large part of his naval squadron. He lost only seven ships to the Athenians: with the rest he stood out to sea. It was at this point – better late than never – that the long-awaited signal was flashed from the mountains above Marathon. The Persians set course for Sunium and Phaleron, no doubt hoping to find Athens already occupied by Datis – or at least to arrive before the Athenian army. It was about nine in the morning, perhaps even earlier: the battle and pursuit had taken something under three hours.

As if they had not done enough already, the Athenians once again achieved a near-miracle. Aristides and the Antiochid division were left behind to guard the prisoners and booty. The rest at once set off back to Athens, each man for himself: 'as fast as their feet could carry them', Herodotus says, and one can well believe it. When they reached Athens, they took up a defensive position at Cynosarges, to the south of the city, facing Phaleron and the sea. They can scarcely have got there before four in the afternoon, and Datis's squadron may well have sailed into Phaleron roads an hour or less later. Yet that hour made all the difference, in more ways than one. The reappearance of the Marathon warriors – grim, indomitable, caked with dust and sweat and dried blood – not only gave Datis pause for thought; it also, obviously, came as an unexpected shock to the Alcmaeonidae and the pro-Persian party. A lot of people in Athens must have silently switched sides in a hurry: Datis would get no help from within the walls now.

His fleet rode at anchor for a while, presumably long enough to let Artaphernes and his battered survivors rejoin the main body. Then the entire Persian expeditionary force set sail, and retreated, somewhat ignominiously, to Asia, leaving 6,400 dead and an unrecorded number of prisoners behind them. Callimachus, on behalf of the State, had vowed a kid to Artemis for every enemy soldier killed. The Athenians were forced to pay the debt by instalments, at the rate of five hundred a year. For the time being at least, Greece was rid of the Barbarian.

After the battle came the feasting, the epigrams, the propaganda, the tall stories: almost before the dead were buried, Marathon had become a legend. Giant warriors and ancestral heroes had, men said, fought in the Athenian ranks. Offerings of Persian spoils and armour flowed in to the temples of Olympia and Delphi. Statues were set up, hymns of thanksgiving composed. Those who died in the battle were



sumptuously commemorated by the mound – originally over fifty feet high – which still marks their last resting-place. The Persian dead got less ceremonious treatment. Their bodies were shovelled pell-mell into a great trench, and Pausanias, the Greek travel-writer, could find no grave-stone marking where they lay. It was left for a nineteenth-century German military surveyor to turn up ‘huge masses of bones lying in disorder in the area of the Mesosporitissa Chapel and over as far as the marsh’: grim witness to that last dreadful mud-slimed holocaust.

Practically speaking, Marathon was no kind of final solution: it merely postponed the day of reckoning. On the other hand, this unprecedented victory gave an enormous boost to Athenian morale. It showed that a well-trained Greek army could beat the Persians *on land* – something the Ionians had never contrived to do. Psychologically speaking, the legend became almost more important than the actual battle. It also very soon turned into a rallying-cry for conservatives and traditionalists of every sort. The ‘men of Marathon’, the heavy-armed soldiers who had saved Athens, alone and unaided except for one Plataean contingent, were all property-owning landowners or farmers. They came in after years to embody every known or remembered conservative virtue: selfless public service, old-fashioned morality, hard work, thrift, respect for one’s parents and the gods. They seemed to demonstrate – against increasing opposition – the natural superiority of the upper classes. Small wonder that, in the years which followed, reactionaries clung so fiercely to their memory.

This mixture of aristocratic snobbery and anti-naval military romanticism proved surprisingly powerful and long-enduring. We shall meet it at every turn during the latter stages of the Persian Wars. Nor did it end with Xerxes’ final defeat. A survey of literary evidence from Aeschylus’s day to Plato’s (Aristophanes is a crucial witness here) amply confirms Macan’s verdict that ‘Marathon was all along for all Athenians the prime victory’. As another modern scholar points out, landowners and agrarians ‘resented historical conceptions which attributed, in their opinion, too much of the liberation of Hellas to the common people’. In Plato’s *Laws* it is, significantly, the Athenian who asks: ‘How can a political constitution be a good one which is based on the sea-folk? . . . We assert that the battle of Marathon began and the battle of Plataea completed the salvation of the Hellenes, and, moreover, that the land-battles made the Hellenes better men, and the sea-battles the reverse.’ This stubbornly chauvinistic *cri de cœur* testifies eloquently to the persistence of the ‘Marathon myth’ – long after it had ceased to bear any relation to reality.

Indeed, Marathon was the swan-song of the old régime. From now on

the real power came to lie, not with yeoman-hoplites or aristocratic cavalrymen, but with the 'sailor rabble' who manned Athens' fleet and merchant marine. It was a new world, both socially and politically, a revolution that transformed far more than modes of warfare. Class-conscious landowners hated it, and did all they could to smear the man who brought it about.\* Yet through Themistocles, and the powerful navy he built, Athens not only faced the ultimate challenge from Persia, but went on to reach the very summit of her power and achievement. If we still talk, today, about the glories of Periclean Athens, it is Themistocles rather than the Marathon warriors whom we have to thank for it.

A Spartan army, two thousand strong, was sent off as promised the moment the moon was full, on 12 August – which happened to be the day on which Marathon was fought. Herodotus says that they 'were so anxious not to be late that they were in Attica on the third day after leaving Sparta [14 August]. They had, of course, missed the battle; but such was their passion to see the Persians, that they went to Marathon to have a look at the bodies. After that they complimented the Athenians on their good work, and returned home.' Curiously, whether the Spartans acted in good faith, or missed the battle on purpose, they still played a vital part in ensuring a Greek victory. The mere fact that they were, or might be, on the move forced both Datis and the pro-Persian group in Athens to act before they were ready. From this all else followed. The gates of Athens remained closed to the invader. There was no treacherous *coup* inside the city, by the Alcmaeonidae or anyone else. Datis did not even land his cavalry, let alone take Miltiades in the rear; and old Hippias had lost his last chance of re-establishing the Peisistratid dynasty in Athens. He sailed away with the Persian fleet, and died on the voyage back to Sigeum. Age and disappointment between them had finished him off: he had nothing left to live for.

\* On the probability of Alcmaeonid treason at Marathon, and the blatantly biassed account of Themistocles given by Herodotus, see now the brilliant article by Daniel Gillis, 'Marathon and the Alcmaeonids', GRByS 10 (1969) 133-45, which only reached me after this book had gone to press.