

The Charge at Marathon: Possible or Impossible?

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Herodotus says three times that the Athenians at the battle of Marathon went towards the Persians at a run. The distance separating the two forces was “no less than eight stades,” and Herodotus’ account makes it clear that the attack was made at the run for the whole distance — approximately one mile.

The question whether a force of 10,000 hoplite soldiers could have advanced for a mile at the run and then closed in violent combat, keeping formation as Herodotus claimed, has long been debated. Some scholars have taken Herodotus at his word, some have flatly declared the feat impossible. There can be no doubt, however, about Herodotus’ intent; he meant his audience to believe that the Athenians charged the Persians at a run for one mile and that this was a most notable achievement deserving special mention.

The paper combines historical research and the techniques of laboratory research. To my knowledge no one has actually measured the physical requirements of a mile-run in full panoply. At The Pennsylvania State University a series of experiments was conducted (two in the field and one in the Human Performance Laboratory) to simulate the charge and test the validity of Herodotus’ statements.

The conclusions reached suggest that Herodotus’ statements were mere exaggerations. Furthermore, it was suggested that the maximum distance covered by the hoplite soldiers was not more than 200 yards. A connection was made between the Athenian victory and the contributions of physical education and athletics. Since the Athenians had no organized military training program until more than one hundred years after Marathon, they realized the important contributions that these two kinds of physical activity made in their victory over the Persians. A further purpose of this paper was to show how research within departmental specializations was feasible as well as a cooperative effort between the Department of Classics and Department of Physical Education.