



The First Clash: The Miraculous Greek Victory at Marathon and Its Impact on Western Civilization

Jim Lacey

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Marathon—one of history's most pivotal battles. Its very name evokes images of almost superhuman courage, endurance, and fighting spirit. But until now, the story of what happened at Marathon has been told exclusively through the narrow viewpoint of specialists in antiquity. In this eye-opening new book, acclaimed journalist Jim Lacey, both a military historian and a combat veteran, takes a fresh look at Marathon and reveals why the battle happened, how it was fought, and whether, in fact, it saved Western civilization.

Lacey brilliantly reconstructs the world of the fifth century B.C. leading up to the astonishing military defeat of the Persian Empire by the vastly undermanned but determined Greek defenders. Using the seminal work of Herodotus as his starting point, Lacey reconstructs the tactical and strategic scenario of the battle, including how many combatants each side might have used and who actually led the Greeks. He also disputes the long-repeated myths of Athenian inexperience and effete Persian arrogance.

With the kind of vivid detail that characterizes the best modern war reportage, Lacey shows how the heavily armed Persian army was shocked, demoralized, and ultimately defeated by the relentless assault of the Athenian phalanx, which battered the Persian line in a series of brutal attacks. He reveals the fascinating aftermath of Marathon, how its fighters became the equivalent of our "Greatest Generation," and challenges the view of many historians that Marathon ultimately proved the Greek "Western way of war" to be the superior strategy for fighting—and winning—battles to the present day.

Immediate, visceral, and full of new analyses that defy decades of conventional wisdom, *The First Clash* is a superb interpretation of a conflict that indeed made the world safe for Aristotle, Plato, and our own modern democracy. But it was also a battle whose legacy and lessons have often been misunderstood—perhaps, now more than ever, at our own peril.

The First Clash: The Miraculous Greek Victory at Marathon and Its Impact on Western Civilization Details

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Robin Friedman says

In 490 B.C., a force of 9,000 Athenian and 1,000 Platean hoplites (heavily armed infantrymen) defeated a Persian army at least three times its size on the plains of Marathon about 24 miles from Athens. It was a heroic and inspiring victory against what seemed to be long odds and saved the budding Greek city states from conquest by the Persian Empire. Ten years later, in 480 B.C., the Greeks would repel another, larger Persian invasion.

Marathon is the stuff of myth and poetry, but it also a critical moment of history. In a famous book, "The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World" published in 1854 by Sir Edward Creasy, Marathon received pride of place as the earliest of the pivotal battles. A new book by Jim Lacey, "The First Clash: the Miraculous Greek Victory at Marathon -- and its Impact on Western Civilization" (2011) offers a detailed and thoughtful examination of Marathon for modern readers. Most students of the battle have been trained as classicists. Lacey, however, was an active-duty military officer for twelve years in the 82nd Airborne Division, has extensive combat experience and, more importantly, has broad academic experience in teaching and military history. He holds a PhD in the subject from Leeds University. He has written or edited earlier books on the invasion of Iraq, on General Pershing, and on terrorism. On the basis of this book, Lacey has also done extensive research in mastering the literature on the nature of warfare in Ancient Greece and Persia. He thus offers a valuable analysis of the Battle of Marathon based upon extensive military knowledge. Besides offering his account of the battle, Lacey discusses what he believes to be its continuing significance.

The source material on the Battle of Marathon is sparse. Lacey summarizes it briefly for the reader and explains the choices he makes. Unlike some scholars, Lacey generally trusts the account of the battle offered by Herodotus, the "father of history". Lacey seems to me judicious and reasonable in his use of sources. He also gives the reader accounts of earlier historical scholarship, with the many debates and uncertainties it has engendered about the battle. I found the author even-handed and non-pedantic in setting forth conflicting points of view and explaining the basis for his own conclusions about the battle.

Lacey is also a writer with a mission. He sees the Athenian victory at Marathon as due in substantial part to the beginnings of democracy and free trade in the Greek states and to the growth of a class of people willing to fight valiantly for their freedom. Lacey wants to go further. Some military scholars see the surprising Athenian victory at Marathon as the beginning of a uniquely Western "way of war" which, with limited exceptions, has been vastly superior to the warfare waged by any other civilization or culture during the past 2,500 years. He sets forth a number of components to the "western way of war", most of which have as their basis the free interchange of trade and ideas and a commitment to a way of life. Other, perhaps most, writers have disputed the existence of a Western way of war or of the unparalleled success of western warfare. Lacey has strong commitments to western, particularly American, democracy and to an aggressive American military posture, on sound strategical and tactical bases, in its war with terrorists and others. Many readers will have questions about Lacey's militarism. Regardless of one's views on the matter, Lacey offers a lucid and informative portrayal of Marathon.

Most of the book deals, as it must, with the events leading up to the battle rather than with the brief engagement itself. Thus, in the first part of the book, Lacey offers a good overview of the growth of the

Persian empire in the centuries leading up to the encounter with the Greeks. Then, in the second part of the book, Lacey enters the thickets of the growth of the Greek city-states and their hard-won, halting efforts towards democracy and trade. This background material on the Persians and the Greeks is essential for understanding Marathon. In the third part of the book, Lacey examines both Persian and Greek wars in the decades leading up to Marathon. Much of this material is fascinating in its own right, as Lacey describes how the Persian army came close to destruction in an ill-advised incursion into the northern reaches of Scythia. Lacey also describes the lengthy Persian military effort required to subdue a rebellion in a number of Greek provinces which Persia had earlier conquered. This difficult and complex struggle, in which Athens and Sparta participated briefly, led to Persia's attempt to destroy Athens by the invasion at Marathon. In the fourth part of the book, Lacey discusses the different ways the Persians and the ancient Greeks made war. This discussion as well is crucial for understanding the battle. Lacey expands his discussion, as indicated above, to make some broad-based comments on the Western manner of warfare.

In the last section of the book, Lacey describes the battle itself. His account is clear, dramatic, and compelling. Histories of troop movements, logistics, and combat are difficult to make clear for nonmilitary minds. Lacey's portrayal of the battle is easy to follow. He allows the reader to follow its progress and to understand the result, given the preparatory material offered earlier in the book. Lacey points to diverging scholarly accounts of the battle and its participants and explains his own conclusions. All told, Lacey offers a reasoned account of Marathon and a good explanation of the battle's importance at the time and in the millennia thereafter.

This book will appeal to readers interested in military history or the ancient world. The book also has a broader appeal and will encourage reflection upon the nature of Greek and Western civilization.

Robin Friedman

Misty says

Jim Lacey's "The First Clash" is a wonderful look at the historic Battle at Marathon, in which the Athenian army held their own against the Persians. Lacey goes in-depth into both the history of Persia and the Greek city states just prior to they met in battle, and his tale is fascinating and easy-to-read. It's been quite a while since I've read Greek history, but Lacey's telling is smooth and engaging.

An important part of Lacey's historical review is the revisionist portion of the book, which occurs in the last several chapters. Lacey has a different view on how the Athenians were able to beat the Persians. Historically, the Athenians were said to be much weaker than what Lacey feels they were; Lacey demystifies the reality of what happened, and I feel he does so successfully. It seems to me, however, that he feels self-conscious about challenging common notions about the event, and spends an entire chapter justifying his point-of-view. While it doesn't detract from his work, I do feel it is unnecessary.

Mark says

A fine history of the battle of Marathon. Lacey is a military man, a journalist and a professor at the Marine War College. The book begins with a teaser briefly describing the battle. The author then discusses the rise of Darius and the Persian empire, the rise of Athens and the nature of Sparta and Athens, the immediate

preceding history of the Ionian revolt, the Persian and Greek styles of warfare, and, finally, his view of what happened at the battle. There is a concluding discussion of other theories of the battle. The author uses his military knowledge to support or explain seeming contradictions with Herodotus and to support his own version of likely events at the battle. As usual, I feel obligated to mention that more maps would be better. (3.5)

Jeanne says

Though this is my first real indepth look into the Battle of Marathon, showing that I do not have the experience nor the knowledge to tell how biased this account is, I found this to be an excellent read.

I was warned beforehand that the actual battle itself was only spoken of at the end, so there was no disappointment to be had upon first starting this book as I did not expect it to only speak of the battle. In fact I found it rather nice to have background information and a better understanding as to why and how the Athenians succeeded.

Of course, this is coming from someone who has only dabbled in Greek history through a course or two as well as a visit to Greece, so there could very easily be some incorrect information and bias within the book that I am not able to see.

But overall I found this book to cover most anything that would affect the battle and thus a very nice read.

Chris Lemery says

This is a pretty good overview of the Battle of Marathon, about which I previously knew little. It's a quick read. It's not superbly written, but it's not terrible, either. It has a lot of backstory about how Persia and Athens came to war, but much of it was dense and really hard to follow. I think it takes a more skilled writer than Lacey to really explain this part. The latter part of the book about the actual Battle was quite good, though, and Lacey offers pretty good evidence for his thesis that the Athenian hoplites were a professional, coherent force that the Persians were unprepared for.

A few notes of caution about the book: most of it is pure conjecture. The main source for the time period and the Battle of Marathon itself is Herodotus, who has been proven to be unreliable in many instances. Besides him, there just aren't that many ancient sources apart from him that exist. Lacey always gives reasons for why he agrees or disagrees with Herodotus on a given point. Also, get a good map of the regions or the battles! This is a very hard book to follow without maps. There are maps provided, but they're not very detailed and are hard to see on an e-reader. I found some excellent maps by poking around the Wikipedia entry for the Battle of Marathon.

Scriptor Ignotus says

“At Marathon, Athens saved itself, Greece, and by extension all of Western civilization. Some have proposed that Marathon made little difference in the creation and development of a unique Western civilization. After all, this argument goes, Pericles, Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates still would have been born. They still would

have been brilliant, and their achievements would have been as great. One is hard-pressed, however, to think how these great minds and independent spirits would have soared as slaves to a despotic empire. In truth, Western civilization owes its existence to a thin line of bronze-encased 'men as hard as oak' who went bravely forward against overwhelming odds, to victory and never-ending glory."

The above quote, the final paragraph of *The First Clash*, more-or-less encapsulates Jim Lacey's interpretation of the Battle of Marathon and its importance for "western civilization", taken to then be extant, though in its infancy. With this overarching theme, Lacey sets out to make three points:

- 1) Contrary to the popular mythos about a Greek army at Marathon comprised of inexperienced citizen-soldiers like the Minute Men of the American Revolution, the Athenians and Plataeans who met the Persians at Marathon were in fact battle-hardened professionals; veterans of a series of wars which Athens had recently fought with other Greek cities. The Athenian victory was thus not as great of an upset as is popularly believed. Lacey likens Athens during this period to Israel in the decades just after its creation: a people-in-arms in constant danger of being beset on all sides.
- 2) The Greek military prowess displayed at Marathon was a product of a uniquely Western way of war; an early example of a military culture exclusive to Western civilization that has developed essentially unbroken throughout the 2500 years from Marathon to the present day. Lacey is straightforward about his support for the work of Victor Davis Hanson, who likewise argues for the existence of a uniquely western style of warfare which accounts, to a large extent, for the ascendancy of the Western world to global predominance.
- 3) Presupposed by #2, Lacey believes, along with Hanson, that we can comfortably ascribe the Greek cities of 490 BC as belonging to a contiguous cultural entity which we now refer to as "Western civilization"; the Hellenes were of an entirely separate civilizational category from the other powers of their time, and there is a direct cultural line that stretches through history unbroken, connecting the Greeks with the Western powers of today.

My verdict is that Lacey is thoroughly convincing on point 1, but somewhat less so on points 2 and 3.

To start with, it is obvious from the account Lacey gives in the first 3/4 of the book that the Athenians were no strangers to warfare, be it with their immediate neighbors, who sometimes threw their lot in with rogue politicians within Athens itself, or in internecine bouts with Sparta and its peloponnesian allies. Nor were the Persians the effets portrayed in films like *300*; they were the finest troops of an empire that had ascended with astonishing speed in the last half-century, steamrolling its rivals in Media, Lydia, Babylon, Phoenicia, Egypt, Ionia, and Thrace. They had every reason to be confident of a rapid victory against the comparatively small Greek force which met them at Marathon. Lacey follows Herodotus's account closely in recounting the comparative histories of the Greeks and the Persians. In fact, he sticks so close to Herodotus for the first half of the book that I found myself wondering whether the reader would not be better off simply reading Herodotus, rather than Lacey's representation of him. Things certainly pick up in the last half of the book, however, when Lacey is able to bring to bear some of his previous insights on the Greco-Persian War itself.

As Lacey demonstrates, we can discern from Herodotus that the Greek and Persian methods of warfare were derived from their divergent geographical and historical circumstances. The Persians, hailing from the open spaces of the Near East, were practiced in a style of warfare based on speed, agility, and a powerful ranged attack. They were the inheritors of Assyrian military culture; itself based on a near-eastern history in which new conquerors would quickly sweep into the region and overrun the defending regimes. Thus, the Persians

put great stock in their light ranged cavalry (even the famed Immortals were not very heavily armored, as Lacey points out), and in their infantry archers, who would set up a makeshift barricade to protect the rear ranks of the army and shower the enemy with arrows until they broke, at which point they could assist the cavalry in pursuit.

The Greeks, by contrast, were adapted to a style of warfare developed over generations of stalemate, political fragmentation, and a ritualized form of decisive battle. Since the Greek cities could rarely overrun one another completely, despite being in such close quarters, they developed a military culture in which cities would resolve their conflicts through one prearranged phalanx battle, in which the two masses of heavy infantry would slam into each other and scuffle until one side finally broke, conceding victory to the other. It was this Greek predilection for decisive battle in close quarters with heavily-armored hoplites which most accounts for why they got the better of the Persians in the cramped melee fighting at Marathon.

This latter observation is perhaps the best supporting evidence that Lacey presents in supporting the Hanson thesis on a uniquely western military tradition. The Greeks certainly fought differently from other Mediterranean peoples; although one can find examples of ritualized warfare and decisive battle in other, non-western cultures as well: one is reminded of the Flower Wars of the Aztecs, although there was no persistent stalemate in Mesoamerica like there was in Ancient Greece. As for continuity between past and present, one could say that this stalemate was roughly analogous to that which has persisted between the European states since Westphalia. Unable to conquer one another outright, though crammed into the European subcontinent, the Europeans have likewise mostly limited the scope and ambition of their continental wars, preferring shorter engagements over smaller disputes or peripheral colonial struggles.

But does this constitute a uniform, exclusively western military ethos? Does the Greek phalanx find its modern expression in today's tank formation? Were the Anglo-American invaders of Iraq, in making their lightning advance to Baghdad, following a tradition in which an army aggressively seeks decisive battle that continues back in time, unbroken, to the sixth century BC? Lacey and Hanson think so. Hanson in particular draws our attention to the recurrence of decisive battle and the usage of heavy infantry formations throughout Western history in his seminal *Carnage and Culture*. I find the suggestion compelling but not conclusive - more work needs to be done.

This discussion leads us into the final topic: is there such a thing as Western civilization at all? Was Ancient Greece its nursery? Such questions are critical to Lacey's overarching interpretation. If Western Civilization exists, and the Greeks were its forebears, there may be some credence to his belief that Marathon, in saving Greek independence, made the world safe for a civilizational legacy whose precepts today dominate most of the world; a legacy which would have been snuffed out in its infancy had the Persians carried the field in 490 BC. I, however, would raise a few issues with Lacey's interpretation.

I first concede that I believe there is a distinct cultural genealogy that we can identify as "Western civilization", though its borders and specific elements are sometimes difficult to identify. That being said, I'm not sure we can ascribe to it a specific date of birth. The Greeks and Romans were, first and foremost, Mediterranean powers, rather than exclusively European ones, which is important, as Western civilization is most closely identified with the nations of Western Europe. The Greeks and Romans shared far more, materially and culturally, with the likes of the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Egyptians, and so on, than they did with the Hyperboreans of the European hinterlands. Are the modern-day inhabitants of Asia Minor, the Levant, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco to be included in this *Western Civilization*, since in ancient times they cohabitated with the Greeks in the same Mediterranean World, and the Roman Empire extended its reach within their present-day borders?

Lacey and Hanson wouldn't think so. They, and other enthusiasts for Western Civilization, would say that the Europeans inherited the Greco-Roman legacy, even if the Greeks and Romans were not themselves culturally "European", and thus we can retroactively identify the Greeks as the germinal people of the West. Some say the point of departure came with the Muslim Conquests, which effectively sealed Europe off from the eastern Mediterranean and allowed for a Europeanized Western culture to germinate. How, then, do we grapple with the fact that Aristotle was reintroduced to the Europeans by the Islamic scholars of the Arab world? That Thomas Aquinas had to master the thought of Averroes and Avicenna before he could work Aristotelian thought back into European intellectual life? Consequently, I find the tangibility of Western civilization and its history somewhat problematic.

Furthermore, I would contest another of Lacey's assertions in the quote at the beginning of this review. He claims that the likes of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle wouldn't have been the creative minds that they were had they been born under Persian despotism. To which I reply, "compared to what?" We revere Socrates so universally now that we forget that he was considered such a nuisance to the rulers of enlightened, free, open, liberal Athens that they presented him a choice between exile and death, between which he chose the latter. The Athens of Socrates's time, having had its democracy and its military might wrecked by the Peloponnesian War, was hardly a paragon of what we would take today to constitute "western values". Socrates was a dissident against the Athenians; who is to say he wouldn't have been a dissident against the Persians? Aristotle, for his part, tutored Alexander; heir to an illiberal, semi-feudal Macedonian monarchy that wasn't *extremely* different from its Persian counterpart, regardless of any liberal cultural influence that may have seeped in from the ancient city-states of Greece proper. Exactly how "free" the Greeks were and how "enslaved" the Persians were is likely a more ambiguous matter than the likes of Lacey and Hanson give it credit for.

Given these objections, perhaps the Marathon myth that Lacey defends rather than discrediting is the one that most warrants challenging, far more so than the myth of the amateur Athenian soldier: that Marathon was an epoch-making event in world history, fought on a razor-thin cosmic boundary between liberty and despotism.

Steven Peterson says

There is not a great deal known about the battle of Marathon, in which the Athenians and some others held back the horde of Persians, who were invading Greece. It is high testimony to the author's skills that he, nonetheless, has authored a fine book on the subject. Much of the book is background. Why did the Persians invade Greece? Why did Athens take on this vast military machine? Lacey does a good job on this background work, freely acknowledging what is his speculation and what is the best we can reconstruct from fragmentary historical evidence.

The lead up to the battle itself is described starting with Chapter 17. Since little is known about the specifics of the actual battle, there is not much detail. Chapter 21 addresses some of the questions about Marathon: Where was the Persian cavalry? Why didn't the Athenians wait for the arrival of Spartan reinforcements?

Who actually commanded the Greek forces?

Sometimes, the writing is less than felicitous, but, overall, a nice volume for those wishing to learn more about the battle of Marathon and its implications. . . .

Clark Hays says

A familiar story well-told; pair with a glass of retsina

The story is now familiar: a vastly outnumbered group of Athenian hoplites turning back the great Persian horde and saving the western world, but I never grow weary of the retelling. Lacey does a great job of distilling the historical events and figures and intrigues down to a very manageable and engaging work. Despite its slender size, it's rich with keen military insights while still providing a roadmap through the social and political context, a sense of the qualities of the opposing armies and a look into the human side of brutal ancient warfare.

I found especially interesting his successful efforts to recast the Athenians as seasoned and accomplished soldiers as well as a very engaging treatment of the Persians, bringing them to life in way others have missed.

Normally, I dismiss as suspect any historian who speculates or assumes much of anything. Lacey, with his clear knowledge of military history, is an exception. When he puts himself into the minds of the generals or soldiers, discusses the strategic value of geographic features or posits the hardships facing armies on the move, it resonates with experiential knowledge. That doesn't make it right, necessarily, but it sure makes it interesting.

The only thing that kept this from earning five stars was a somewhat orphaned and, to me, inexplicable chapter about the superiority of "western warfare methods." I'm not sure why he felt it necessary to address, unsatisfactorily, a rather pedantic notion of approaches to war. He seemed to be addressing dusty issues that detracted from an otherwise stellar, engaging work crackling with immediacy even though it chronicled events that happened 2,500 years ago.

Speaking of Greece, I was lucky enough to travel to Athens last spring year and had a glass of retsina overlooking the plain of Marathon. I wish I'd had this book with me at the time.

J.S. Green says

The Battle of Marathon (490 BC) was a pivotal moment in the history of western civilization. The mighty Persian Empire sent a large force to deal with some of the upstart Greek territories who refused to bow down and submit. Many others had already acquiesced or been brutally forced into submission, but not Athens and Sparta. In spite of overwhelming odds and being vastly outnumbered the miraculous occurred - the small Athenian army singlehandedly defeated Persia even before help from Sparta could arrive. At the end of the brief battle over 6,000 dead Persian soldiers lay on the field while only 192 Athenians had fallen.

I'll readily admit I'm not very familiar with ancient history, but after reading *The Ghosts of Cannae* by Robert O'Connell my interest was piqued (admittedly the two books cover a history hundreds of years apart, but when it's that old it's all "ancient" to me). I knew about the stereotypes of Sparta (warlike) and Athens (democratic) but that was about it. But this book is full of information on the time and told in a very methodical manner that manages to keep some dusty old history from becoming overly textbookish.

Scholars and those interested in this particular history will certainly find this an essential read, but I think others with a strong interest in history will find this appealing as well. Since I'm not familiar with the era I found it hard reading and had to go slow to absorb it, frequently rereading paragraphs. There's a LOT of names and places that make it confusing, and in spite of its overall short length it's not the kind of book I could breeze through. But it was a rewarding effort. Mr. Lacey does an excellent job of interpreting the history from the fragmented and incomplete accounts that have survived the intervening 2,500 years, and his experience as both a historian and a soldier makes it additionally insightful. I can't attest to the validity of his conclusions but they sure made sense to me!

Derek Weese says

This is an excellent, short overview of the Battle of Marathon where a small Athenian and Plataen (I may have misspelled them...) army crushed a much larger Persian army in the first of many fights to occur between the Greek's and the Persians.

I gave this book five stars as, honestly, the majority of academic history is so poorly written that it is no wonder that most Americans couldn't care less about history. This book, while not able to blow minds with its amazing wordsmithing, is still a very well written book. The author, a former US Army officer who served with two elite units, the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, brings a soldier's eye to the discussion of the myths of Marathon as well as to ancient history in general. And since ancient history is at least 50% about epic warfare, this is extremely important.

The one myth that Lacey busts quite spectacularly and which I will mention here is the myth that the Athenian army was an army of bumpkin farmers who had no experience at warfare, hence the long standing trope of calling Marathon a 'miracle' Greek victory. Lacey disproves this, even going on to give a very plausible idea of who was the overall Athenian commander on field (Callimachus) and shows that how can you call a victory won by an army that made Sparta itself stand down a miracle? The miracle was that in only 6,000 Persians were killed, not all of them.

Well worth the read, I hope Lacey writes more on Classical Greek and Roman military history. His voice is greatly valued.

Natasha says

Lacey is not an ancient historian by training, rather he is an analyst at the Institute for Defense Analysis at Johns Hopkins University, and an embedded journalist for the American invasion of Iraq- therefore, his analysis is from a non specialist perspective, and should be read with caution.

Whilst there are many theoretical and logical problems with Lacey's article (so many that perhaps one could write a book or article simply reviewing his work, as I have done for an ancient history thesis) the most concerning is his Lacey's 'clash of civilisations' discourse. This discourse is most popular with non specialists outside the field of ancient history (surprise surprise!) who homogenise the world into two spheres and argue

that the east and west have been in divide since the beginning of time. Lacey argues that western civilisation as we know it, would never have been possible if the Persians had won at Marathon, quoting Lacey, he states "great minds of Pericles, Aristotle, Plato and Socrates would have soared as slaves to a despotic empire" (pg 190). Of course to make this assumption, he relies on a select reading of Greek literary evidence and disregards many Acahemenid Persian archeological and literary evidence that show the Acahemenid tolerance policy of subject peoples. Of course, had Lacey consulted any Persian archeological or literary evidence, or perhaps modern works (if he was too lazy to consult primary evidence) such as Weisheofer's analyse of persian literary and archeological evidence, or Margaret Miller's: Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century B.C: A Study in Cultural Receptivity, he could never make such a claim.

What is most startling, is Lacey's connection to the modern day 'war of terror' with the Greco-Persian wars, as if the threat of modern day terrorism can be traced to the Greco-Persian war! Of course, an embedded journalist for the invasion of Iraq could only make such a claim.

Overall, this book is not a historical review of the Greco-Persian wars and should not be read as one.

Myke Cole says

Lacey is an excellent writer with a real command of the source material and a comprehensive knowledge of the period. Yet he completely collapses what would be an otherwise great book in two ways:

1.) He aligns himself with Hanson's odious position - There is a "Western" way of war that is inherently superior to other cultures by dint of our free-thinking (and therefore morally superior) culture. Close/shock combat and Clausewitzian warfare is a Western invention, while deceit and insurgency are somehow "Eastern" traditions. It's ethnocentric and completely wrong, and Lacey leans on a seriously tortured argument to justify his nasty brand of ethnocentrism. It's not surprising to see that Hanson gave him a cover quote, since Lacey so obediently kissed his ring.

2.) The book is NOT about the Battle of Marathon. In fact, you go through 148 pages of decent survey material on the Greek and Persian story, all the way back to Cyrus the Great and the genesis of the Ionian revolt. The book falsely touts itself as a history of the battle, because that provides the dramatic punctuation Lacey is seeking to make his wrong-headed and revolting political point.

Like Hanson's Western Way of War, this is a political tract masquerading as history. The scholarship is mostly sound, and the writing is great, but it's like a large glass of juice with a small turd floating in it. Sure, the majority of the content is fine, but you still don't want to drink from it.

Lauren Albert says

Since I don't know the controversies surrounding the battle of Marathon, to some extent I had to accept Lacey's point of view. His arguments seem reasonable enough. His first goal seems to destroy two myths-- one, that the Athenian army was a collection of amateurs and their victory was a miracle; and two, that the Persians were effete. In his version, both armies were experienced warriors. But the Persians had no experience with the Hoplite battle style which made normal Persian battle strategy unhelpful. Cavalry, he argues, can't stand against massed spears such as those wielded by the Hoplites since even well-trained

horses can't be forced to run into them. The Greeks were also better armored and a more coherent fighting unit. Lacey argues that superior technology compensates for smaller numbers in a military force. Both strategy and technology played a role in the Greek victory. When the Hoplites broke into a run as they approached the Persian army, it surprised them--their arrows were mistimed and went over the Hoplites' heads. I don't know what to make of his argument (taken from Victor Hanson) that the "Western Way of War" will always be superior.

Jerome says

A lively and well-paced (if surprisingly brief) history of the Battle of Marathon, with the right amount of background of the political and military context.

Billows does a great job providing context (the rise of Persia, Greek politics, Greek vs. Persian warfare etc.), but the sheer scale of the area, the name and number of small kingdoms, and the constantly shifting diplomacy between them can get somewhat overwhelming at times, although Billows does his best to make sense out of it, even if not all of it seems necessary to understand Marathon's significance. Other than that, the author does a great job describing the actual battle, and demonstrates a good command of the subject matter. He writes that Herodotus is not always entirely reliable, and that an over-reliance on his work has not always benefited historical understanding of the battle (even though Lacey does rely on him for much of the text).

In the conclusion, Lacey argues that the battle was a turning point in Western civilization and that the course of history would be very different if the Persians had won. He does not consider the possible outcomes, but, then again, this isn't always suitable for works of history anyway. But he doesn't do much to illustrate the differences between Western and Persian civilization, which makes it hard to believe his assertion that Marathon "saved" the West. Nor does the reader ever really understand what made the victory so "miraculous" (especially since Lacey provides a good deal of background regarding Athens's military discipline and war preparations). And through much of the text Lacey attacks many of the older accounts of the battle; typically, he will provide brief excerpts, then refute them based on little more than his own experience and knowledge. Much of this is speculative.

A fine book on the battle, even if the maps are unhelpful.

Thom says

While not a historian, just someone with a casual interest in ancient history, I found this book to be an interesting read. I thought it well documented and Lacey's arguments for his thoughts on what happened during the years preceding and during the battle of Marathon reasonable and well supported by his logic and facts. The only suggestion I might have had to improve this book would have been to have included maps for the many sites he mentions in his work. For those familiar with the history of this period that may have been unnecessary but for the non-historian it would have been helpful to see the broader picture.
