



Re-creation of a Greek Hoplite (Alex Parker, Digital Art, Parker, Alex.)

# The Alcmaeonids and Their Role in the Battle of Marathon

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Re-creation of a Persian soldier (Bright Hub.)

## Background: Persia, Athens, and the Alcmaeonids

In the early fifth century BCE, the Achaemenid Persian Empire stood unchallenged, the greatest power in the world to that date. Tiny Athens – not coincidentally – was about to embark on its most significant historical period as a foundation-stone of Western Civilization.

In the late summer of 490 BCE, King Darius' expeditionary force landed at the site of Marathon, roughly 26 miles northeast of Athens, to provide the Greeks a lesson in the consequences of meddling in Persian imperial affairs. The Athenian victory at Marathon was unforeseen and unbelievable to the Greeks themselves, but the battle was not won by a unified Athens. Factions within the Athenian camp reveal the complex interplay of their own political struggles and remind us that the Greeks' continued independence was hardly a foregone conclusion. The story of the Battle of Marathon is also a chapter in the story of one of Athens' most prominent families: the Alcmaeonids. This project is part of a larger body of research that analyzes the impact of the Alcmaeonids on Athenian history in the late Archaic and Classical periods, circa 650-400 BCE. The history of the Alcmaeonids is thus the history of Athens, in particular the advent and evolution of democracy.



Modern Drawing of a Greek Phalanx (USS Marathon, Anodyne Productions.)

## Who Were the Alcmaeonids?

The Alcmaeonids were one of the most influential families in ancient Athens, at the forefront of the factional strife inherent in Athenian politics. Their history indicates that the Alcmaeonids did not hesitate to break trust with their friends and enemies; to forge "barbarian" alliances; or commit bribery (even at religious shrines like Delphi). The elusive figure of Cleisthenes, leader of the Alcmaeonid family circa 500 BCE, is critical not only in the establishment of Athenian democracy but also in Athens' relationship with Persia and the Battle of Marathon in 490.



The modern replica of the monument celebrating the Athenian victory located near the Athenian burial mound at Marathon (indyTraveller 2009)

## Major Touchstones of Alcmaeonid and Athenian history

- c. 550 BCE: links with eastern kingdoms, e.g., Alcmaeon becoming "rich as Croesus," dramatically increasing the family's wealth
- 550-510: Alcmaeonid alternating cooperation and rivalry with the Peisistratid tyrants for control of Athens
- 510-508: Alcmaeonid bribery of the Delphic oracle and the overthrow of the Peisistratid tyranny
- 508-507: Cleisthenes' embassy to Artaphernes, Persian satrap and brother of King Darius I, to form an alliance; Spartan invasion of Athens defeated
- 507-500: Cleisthenes institutes sweeping political and social reforms in Athens that establish the foundations of radical democracy
- 500-494: Athenian involvement in the Ionian (western Turkey) revolt against Persia
- 490: Persian attack and the Battle of Marathon. Alcmaeonids implicated in aiding the Persians
- 486: Ostracism of Megacles, Alcmaeonid clan leader
- 461-429: Pericles is the most prominent leader in Athens during its Golden Age

## Herodotus on the Battle of Marathon

Herodotus provides the most complete account of the Battle of Marathon, but his narrative contains gaps and personal bias. Scholars today attribute these irregularities to the likelihood that Herodotus' main source for Athenian history was a member of the Alcmaeonid family. Such a source – possibly the famous Pericles himself – glosses the pro-Persian attitude of the Alcmaeonids and thus defends the Alcmaeonids against their enemies' accusations.



Herodotus (Find Target, Moltte, Jean-Guillaume.)

## Examples from Herodotus

- ♦ Athenian forces were led by ten military commanders who were divided about whether to attack the Persians or not (Hdt XI.103, 109-110). Herodotus does not identify any of the ten as Alcmaeonids even though they were prominent in every other major Athenian affair of the sixth and fifth centuries. At least one prominent Alcmaeonid active at this time, Megacles, was ostracized shortly after the battle, in 486.
- ♦ Herodotus asserts that the idea of the Alcmaeonids signaling the Persians is "too implausible to believe" (Hdt XI.121-131). His praise of the Alcmaeonids is unprecedented and unparalleled anywhere else in his work. Scholars have debated the significance of this passage for decades. In light of the Alcmaeonids' ambivalent place in Athenian history and their previous dealings with the Persian Empire, it is argued here that Herodotus' praise is a justification: the Alcmaeonids had something to hide at Marathon.

## Conclusion

The Alcmaeonids were Athenians concerned with the state and its citizens, but just as much with their prominence. In Athenian politics, no one family was able to maintain influence without alliances. The Alcmaeonid Cleisthenes'

embassy to Artaphernes in 507 was a binding agreement in the eyes of the Persians, and it is argued here that the Alcmaeonids honored it by attempting to surrender the city in 490 BCE. This is the black mark on Alcmaeonid history that Herodotus glossed, and his praise of the Alcmaeonids is nothing more than an attempt to portray the family in a better light. Wiping the Alcmaeonids' pro-Persian policies from the pages of history was a necessity for their continued political success in Fifth Century Athens. It appears to have worked.

## Select Bibliography

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 \*Further citations available

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The Aegean World in 490 BCE (Communication in the Battle of Marathon.)

