the temple of Athena Nike, which may also derive from the great painting of Marathon, shows hoplites fighting mounted Persians.  

All in all, the Suda passage is best put aside. Its staying power derives more from the perceived inadequacies of Herodotus than from its own clarity or pedigree. Other evidence cannot be said to support it. If an explanation of how the Athenians won the battle is consistent with the Suda, or explains the aphorism's origin, well and good, but the Suda is no firm foundation on which to rest a reconstruction. It may be true, as Burn claimed, that "it would have received more respect in our age of Quellenkritik [source criticism] if the writer had only quoted, as the book often does elsewhere, the name of his source." Or it may not, if the writer had only a poor authority or none at all.  

Miltiades' Plan  

If the proposed division of Persian forces is rejected as a modern invention without sufficient support in the sources, then what did break the stalemate? One suggestion is that the Persians threatened to take the coast road to Athens, but the location of the Greek camp at Valaria rules out that possibility. The Persians would have had to go right through the camp. But it did not block the more difficult route via Stamata. To cover that route as well, the Greeks had to advance not only in front of the Vrana valley, which would cut off one entry to the Stamata route, but also to Mount Stavrokoraki, in order to cut off the other entry up the pass between Mount Kotroni and Mount Stavrokoraki. To cover both land routes to Athens, in other words, the Athenians had to cross the broadest part of the plain.  

To protect their flanks as much as possible, the Athenians would have wanted to reach the shortest line between Mount Stavrokoraki and the sea. That line would have passed right by the trophy. The formation there would have extended almost 1.5 miles, a length of line that some previous writers have considered feasible. Herodotus says that the Greek center was stretched thin, but the wings were strong. A force of 18,000, eight deep on the wings and four deep in the center third, would have covered 1.5 miles with a file width of three feet. Fewer would have sufficed in a looser formation, as I think possible.  

The Greeks' challenge would be to cross the widest part of the plain before the Persian cavalry slowed or halted their advance, leaving them sitting ducks to be shot down by Persian archers. (If Richard Dunn turns out to be right in his hypothesis that the delta extended farther out in 490, the plain was much broader in the middle than it is now, and the risk even greater. But this is hypothesis; he did not bore holes in the southern half of the plain.) No Athenian commander would have marched out into the plain without some plan for dealing with the Persian cavalry. What was Miltiades' plan?  

Miltiades had had several days to observe the Persians deploying on the plain, as they surely did, ravaging Athenian land and offering to fight. He had a sense of how early in the morning they started and how long the deployment took. The Persians tethered and usually hobbled their horses at night. To get them ready for action, the grooms had to untie them, give them feed and water, and put on their saddlecloths and bridles. The fourth-century historian Xenophon, who had served with Persians, comments that this preparation is difficult at night. So we should imagine them starting no earlier than first light.  

If the Persian high command and the horses camped in the valley of Trikorynthos north of the lake, as Leake and Hammond have suggested, the cavalry had to make its way single file along the narrow road between Mount Stavrokoraki and the Makaria spring. The effect would be something like what happens on a modern highway that suddenly shrinks from four lanes to one. If it took only five seconds for each horse to pass the spring, a cavalry force of 600 would need 50 minutes to ride through the bottleneck. Ten seconds each would mean an hour and 40 minutes.  

I believe that Miltiades planned to get inside his enemy's decision cycle. If the Greeks could reach the Persian infantry before the Persian cavalry deployed in the plain, it would be too late for Datis to do anything about it. The Greeks could fight on equal terms.  

The Run for Eight Stadia  

The tactical plan outlined above makes sense of Herodotus' narrative, particularly of the famous run. The Greeks ran to cross the plain before the Persian cavalry could reach them.
Herodotus says that the Athenians advanced dromoi (at a run) for eight stadia. He uses the word dromoi four times in a single paragraph. Other fifth-century evidence confirms the importance of this run. The lost painting of the battle in the Stoa Poikile showed the Athenians and Plataeans closing with the enemy for hand-to-hand combat, with the Plataeans, distinguished from the Athenians by their caps, each coming to help “as fast as he could.” In other words, the painting showed both the Athenians and the Plataeans charging at a run, with the Plataeans identifiable not by their running but by what they had on their heads. Another confirmation comes from the comic poet Aristophanes, who says that the Athenians “ran out with spear and shield” to fight the barbarians. After the battle, archaeologist Sarah Morris writes, “the image of a running warrior in armor became a symbol of the Athenian victory over Persia” (Figure 27).12

A Greek stasion was always 600 Greek feet, but the length of a foot differed from place to place. It varied from about 10.9 inches at Halieis, where the stadium was 548 feet long, to as much as 12.6 inches at Olympia, where the stadium was 630 feet. Most likely Herodotus heard this story from Athenians; on the Attic standard (one Attic foot = 11.7 inches), eight stadia would be about 0.9 miles.

Since Hans Delbrück published Die Perserkriege und die Burgunderkriege in 1887, most scholars have refused to believe the Athenians ran this distance on the grounds that, as Delbrück later put it, “Such a run is a physical impossibility: a heavily equipped unit can cover at the most 400 or 500 feet (120 to 150 meters) at a run without completely exhausting its strength and falling into disorder.”13

The skeptics have differed over whether Herodotus exaggerated the speed or the distance. One solution is to translate dromoi as “at the quick step,” that is, 120 steps per minute, each step 2.5 feet, or a pace of 3.4 miles per hour (mph). But in an article published in 1919, W. W. How collected the occurrences of dromoi in Greek historians and argued persuasively that “at the quick step” is too slow. How favored “double-time,” in modern terms 180 steps per minute, each step three feet, or a pace of 6.1 mph.

Delbrück himself argued against the distance, citing current Prussian military practice, which restricted men carrying a load of 64 pounds to
running two minutes, walking five minutes, and running two minutes. They ran at a speed of 6.1–6.5 mph. Delbrück reported that the director of the Military Central Physical Training School confirmed to him personally that two minutes would be the most that a column with field equipment could run and still reach the enemy in condition to fight. Since Delbrück believed that a Greek hoplite carried 15 pounds more than a Prussian soldier, he concluded that the amateur Athenians ran at most 400 or 500 feet.

In the 1970s, two professors at Pennsylvania State University tried to test the Marathon run's feasibility, both in the field and in a human performance laboratory. In 1973, Walter Donlan and James Thompson asked ten male college students, each carrying 15 pounds (including a nine-pound shield), to run a mile at a 7 mph pace. Two students failed to finish the distance, and only one, a member of the varsity track team, was judged able to fight after the run. Donlan and Thompson did not report their data on energy expenditure and heart rate, but they said: “It was calculated that for a subject to run the measured distance carrying a total weight of 13.6 kg (30 lbs.), including the nine-pound shield, would require 90–95 percent of his maximum capability. While this is not an unusually high figure for well-trained men to run a mile, relatively untrained men would have experienced considerable difficulty.” In 1977, they had 13 students, similarly equipped, run 550 yards in 2:45, again at a 7 mph pace. This time they reported that the students reached 93 percent of their maximum work capacity. Again they did not report their data, but by using “established formulae” they concluded: “Given a total panoply weight of 50–70 lbs. (including a 15-lb. shield, carried isometrically), a grade of approximately 2 1/2% (which simulates uneven terrain), and a reduced rate of 5 mph for 1.5 minutes, well-conditioned men can traverse a distance of 220 yards with sufficient energy reserves to engage in combat.”

Mistaken assumptions vitiate these experiments. Instead of 7 mph, the test ought to be done at the slowest pace that would still qualify as a run. Physiologists distinguish walking and running gaits on the basis of the duty factor (the fraction of the stride duration for which each foot is on the ground). When the duty factor is greater than 0.5, a person is walking, whereas if the duty factor is less than 0.5, the person is running. Put another way: To walk, a person must have at least one foot in contact with the ground at all times. If there is a moment when neither foot is on the ground, the person is running. To go faster, people walk with longer and quicker steps until they reach 4.5 mph, when they spontaneously change gait from walking to running. This pace falls between quick-step and double-time. It is well below that used by Donlan and Thompson.

The other mistaken assumption in the Penn State tests relates to the weight hoplites carried. As I showed in chapter 2, by the end of the sixth century a fully equipped hoplite carried 30–50 pounds instead of 50–70, as Donlan and Thompson assumed. So the tests and calculations ought to be done at a pace just over 4.5 mph instead of 7 and a load of 30–50 pounds instead of 50–70.

But even if we redid the experiments, they would never settle the argument to everyone's satisfaction. It is debatable how similar U.S. college students are to ancient Greek farmers, as I learned a few years ago when I had a student who wanted to rerun the tests as a summer research project. I agreed to work with him and helped him apply for a summer research grant at Davidson College. The faculty selection committee turned him down with the comment that the tests would not prove anything. How can college students who drink soda loaded with sugar, eat a high sodium diet, and work out for 30–60 minutes a day be compared with farmers who drank wine mixed with water, ate a lean diet with little meat, and walked almost everywhere they went?

We ought to look at soldiers in the field rather than students in a lab. Delbrück should have asked his Prussian army sources about a slower pace with less weight. He did know about a French captain named de Raoul who claimed to have trained a platoon from the French 16th Infantry Regiment with great success in the winter of 1889–1890. With each man carrying a rifle, a saber, 100 rounds of ammunition, and rations, the platoon covered 12.7 miles in 106 minutes, a pace of 7.2 mph. In another performance they carried field equipment for 6.8 miles in 80 minutes, a pace of 5.1 mph, and proceeded to target practice, in which they bested all their rivals. Delbrück scorned these claims, suggesting that even if they were true, de Raoul had worked with only a small number of carefully
selected men. Athenian farmers, fishermen, charcoal burners, potters, and sculptors, he said, would have had neither the time nor the energy to train for running.

De Raoul's claims are not unparalleled. I give two twenty-first-century examples from two different countries:

- Lieutenant Colonel L. C. C. Schute recently reported on a British battalion challenged to move 15 miles with 66 pounds in less than 3.5 hours (that is, faster than 4.3 mph) and again 15 miles with 44 pounds in less than three hours (that is, faster than 5.0 mph) and then to attack with full battle procedure. Schute reported that the "vast majority" of the battalion passed this test. 15
- To qualify for the Expert Infantryman Badge in the modern U.S. army, soldiers carrying a 35-lb backpack and a rifle have to cover 12 miles in three hours or less. That's an average of 4 mph.

A modern Delbrück might object that only particularly fit soldiers meet these standards. To get a better sense of what might be more typical, I e-mailed all of the Davidson College ROTC graduates for the past 30 years and asked them about running with weight. I received replies from more than 50. With one exception, they were confident that troops carrying 35 pounds could run a mile and then fight. Some of their comments:

- Captain Bob Beard '77: "It was quite common to train by jogging with full equipment, and sometimes wearing chemical gear. I was on active duty from 1977-1980. Given the 'jog' pace of running in a tight formation, I don't think you would be overly fatigued after a mile to continue into battle."
- Captain Bob Blair '98, who served with an infantry unit in 1999: "We discouraged troops from running with weighted rucks, but many did on their own, often with 30 or more pounds, at a jogging pace (around 5 mph). It's fairly common, and for multiple miles... I ran with that weight for 7 miles on one occasion in training."
- Lieutenant Colonel David Dale '76 described training at the 82nd Airborne Division's Recondo school. He remembered running 3 to 5 miles each morning, carrying approximately 30 pounds and running 8- to 9-minute miles. He said that afterward he was drained, but "like anything else we quickly improved our stamina and by graduation (10 days or so) it became just another daily task."

- Based on his polling of old colonels, Colonel Will David '84 thinks that "it would be entirely possible for a formation to run a mile in battle gear... When you look at a well-conditioned unit, most of the soldiers can complete a 12-mile Expert Infantry Badge road march in less than 2:30 with gear weighing about 30 pounds. Many soldiers would be in the 2 to 2:15 range. When you drop down to a 6-mile road march, it is common to see times of about an hour."
- Lieutenant Colonel Rocky Kmiecik '85 wrote from Iraq to describe his combat load (51 pounds plus water) and a run of about 6,800 feet he did once through palm groves chasing a group of insurgents. Though winded at the end, he walked out of the groves and continued on patrol. "For training," he said, "most units have a standard ruck march (usually a jog) where the soldiers carry a 35- to 40-pound load over a 20 kilometer [12 mile] course and must complete it in under 3 hours."
- 2nd Lieutenant Myles MacDonald '79 reported on his experience as an armor officer in a tank battalion stationed in northern Bavaria from 1980 to 1983. "We routinely ran 5 miles/day in boots in an 80-man formation after a half hour of calisthenics. Once a week we did it as a battalion with 600 people in formation... Every couple of months we did 2 miles in gas masks wearing MOPP suits. They ran at 4 to 4.5 mph wearing gas masks, 5 mph for the battalion run, and 4 to 6 mph for the company runs. MacDonald said it was hard to stay organized above 5 mph or so. "Within that limit, running 10 minutes with 20 to 30 pounds 3 feet apart is no sweat. Add peer pressure and adrenaline and I suspect you'd be warmed up to fight on arrival."
- Captain Grier Martin '91 described experiences in college, Air Assault School, the army reserves, and Afghanistan. His sense: "Thirty-five pounds is not so bad to keep up a slow steady run. Fifty-five starts to get heavy."
- Major David Rozelle '95 wrote: "Modern body armor and combat equipment, without even adding a ruck-sack load, is a minimum of 50 pounds. Our field soldiers train for this kind of weight as part of their physical training and adapt to the extra burden before deploying to a combat zone. With that weight it is common for men to run in excess of one mile, climb walls, and even maneuver through various obstacles. If a soldier is properly conditioned, it is not a problem."
- Colonel Jack Summe '78 said: "The U.S. Army is big on running and a great deal of our special forces focus... conditioning training on running with weighted rigs. I have been assigned to Ft. Bragg, NC and commanded both an Airborne Battalion and an Airborne..."
Brigade there. . . . I have seen soldiers running on weekends carrying full backpack loads (approx 35 to 55 pounds) or while wearing a flak jacket or body armor with plates (20 to 30 pounds). . . . We routinely run 3 to 5 miles daily with no extra weight, but could easily run with 20 to 30 pounds of equipment for 1 to 2 miles with no deleterious effect. We also accomplish routine (monthly) "ruck" marches (fully loaded backpack—55 pounds, weapon and load bearing belt or harness) of up to 12 miles. During many of these marches, you might see a soldier run for 2 to 3 miles to make up time. . . . After 28 years of service in the military, I can confidently state that I could throw a 35-pound ruck on my back today and go out and run a mile with very little negative effect.”

• Major David Taylor ’91 emailed from Iraq: “Present-day U.S. Infantry troops train to move 12 miles with a 35- to 50-pound load, in less than 3 three hours (4 mph), and fight upon arrival.”

If our soldiers today can manage 12 miles at 4 mph, ancient Greeks carrying a comparable load could have done one mile at 4.5 mph. It is true that men today are bigger. But we should not underestimate the work capacity of farmers accustomed to doing hard physical labor all their lives. Ancient Greeks could have charged 0.9 miles at a pace that could be described as dromoi, though “jog” would probably better describe their speed than “run.” The competitors in the race in armor (hoplitodromos) at Olympia would have run faster, since the race was only two stadia. (The length of this Olympic event does not prove, as some have suggested, that hoplites cannot have run farther, any more than the 100-meter dash shows that no one can run a marathon.)

Delbrück clinched his argument against the long run, or so he thought, with the battle of Pharsalos. When Julius Caesar’s Romans charged at Pharsalos, Pompey had his troops remain stationary, confident that his enemies would lose their formation and exhaust themselves as they ran. Caesar’s veterans realized the danger, checked their charge about halfway, and caught their breath before charging again. Caesar does not actually say how far apart the two battle lines were. (Delbrück assumed 600 to 700 feet by analogy with an earlier confrontation in Spain.) And Caesar’s legionnaires were more heavily equipped than the Greeks at Marathon. If Pharsalos shows anything, it shows that warriors might spontaneously stop to catch their breath. Anyone who doubts that the Greeks at Marathon could have jogged eight stadia is free to believe that they stopped (just out of missile range?), caught their breath, and made their final charge.16

The charge did not have to maintain a tight formation. Herodotus uses the word athrooi. Though the standard Greek-English dictionary translates athrooi here as “in close order,” it is better understood as “all together.” In a nearly contemporary parallel, the poet Pindar has the leaders of the Cadmeans run quickly athrooi in their bronze armor, but here they are running into the infant Herakles’ bedroom and so running “all together” or “all at once” rather than “in close order.” Or take Thucydides’ account of the Plataneans escaping from their besieged city on a dark and stormy night: They proceeded athrooi along the road toward Thebes.17

Herodotus says that the Persians were surprised to see the Athenians charging without the support of archers or cavalry. The important point is not that the Persians had archers and cavalry or that the Athenians did not yet have archers or cavalry. The point is that the Athenian archers did not fight as archers or their horsemen as horsemen. Because the Persians had Hippas as an adviser, they knew what sort of forces the Athenians had, and the Athenians knew that they knew. So either Herodotus had a source (an Ionian?) who knew that the Persians were surprised to see the Athenians charging without their archers and cavalry, or his source conjectured that the Persians were surprised to see the Athenians charging without their archers and cavalry. Either way, the passage implies that Athens had archers and cavalry but did not use them as such. The Athenians charged “all together,” hoplites and light-armed and dismounted horsemen, all with spears or swords. In his Knights, Aristophanes says that Demos—a personification of the Athenian common people—“competed with the Medes in the sword-dance for the land at Marathon.” I would like to think that a red-figure cup by Douris shows this charge, with a hoplite and an archer, both armed with spears, running together (Figure 28).18

A great irony of Marathon historiography is that so many modern writers have explained the running charge by the presence of Persian
archers while explaining the Athenian decision to fight by the absence of Persian cavalry. Herodotus mentions neither archers nor horses in his battle narrative. He stresses the run for eight stadia. Archers would explain a charge for one stadia, approximately the range of Persian bows, not eight. Only the presence—or rather the near presence—of the cavalry explains the long charge. The Greeks had to cross the plain and engage the Persian infantry before the Persian cavalry could attack them.

On the evening before his day of command, Miltiades explained his plan to the other generals and circulated the orders to prepare for battle in the morning. Like the English king in Shakespeare’s Henry V, he made the rounds himself, offering encouragement. He told them they were going to seize the initiative. They would surprise the Persians by a bold advance, crossing the plain and closing to close quarters before the Persian cavalry could stop their advance. He suggested that his men leave unnecessary weight behind. He asked them, Do you need your shin guards? Could a slave or poor friend wear your corset, while you rely on your shield?

The men woke early. They had a fortifying cup of wine and water. An owl, some said, flew over—a good omen since the owl was the bird of Athena. The polemarchos Kallimachos sacrificed, looking for good omens. Campground sacrifices were a normal part of Greek warfare; the seer studied the flames as well as the internal organs, especially the liver, of the sacrificial victims.19

When the seer declared the sacrifices favorable, the generals gave the orders to arm and begin deployment. The usual way to give such orders was by blowing the trumpet. Aristotele compares its sound to that of a trumpeting elephant. Others likened it to the braying of a donkey. The Persians would have heard it and realized the Greeks were going to act. So perhaps the Athenian generals planned a quieter way of starting their deployment at Marathon.

As Kallimachos took his traditional position of honor on the right wing, the Athenian tribes “followed after as they were counted.” Last came the Plataeans, who took the left wing.20

The Athenians made their line equal to the Persian formation in length. Herodotus says, keeping both wings strong but thinning the middle of the line, where the men were only a few ranks deep. Some recent writers have deduced that the Persians moved first, so that Miltiades could see the length of the Persian line as it advanced and adjust his own. But the Greeks could have observed the size of the Persian force on earlier days. If the Persians deployed first, they would not have been in the act.
of preparing (Herodotus uses the imperfect *pareskeuazonto*) when the Greeks charged.\footnote{21}

The Greeks deployed in front of their camp, perhaps originally eight men deep throughout. As the line wheeled out into the plain, the Plataeans headed for the base of the hills on the far, northern side, while Kallimachos kept close to the shore or headed for the inland edge of the village of Marathon. As a result—did Miltiades foresee it?—the center stretched thinner than the wings.

When a report reached Datis that the Greeks were moving, he was delighted and gave orders for the Persians to prepare for battle. Their preparations began later and so lagged behind the Greeks, as Miltiades had anticipated. The Persians had not gone to sleep expecting to fight the next morning. They had something to eat and drink, dressed, checked their equipment, and began to take positions west of the lake. They were in no hurry. No Greek force had ever charged a Persian army. Datis expected to have plenty of time.

The Greeks continued advancing for some 2.5 miles from the Herakleion, until they were less than a mile from the Persian line they saw forming before them (Figures 29 and 30). Here they paused and dressed their lines. Perhaps some men took off their shin guards or their sandals or even their corsets, to save weight. They would have preferred to continue walking, but Miltiades realized that they did not have 20 minutes to reach the Persian lines. Perhaps the first Persian cavalry appeared on the plain. If the Greeks didn’t close with the Persians soon, if they didn’t jog, the Persian cavalry would reach the plain and be on them. So the seer made the final battle-line sacrifice, the *sphagia*.

The noun *sphagia* and the verb *sphagiazesthai* (to perform *sphagia*) have the same linguistic root as the verb *sphaezein* (to pierce the throat). Greeks made this sacrifice at the last moment before they charged. The act required no altar and no fire. It was quick. The seer stabbed the animal’s neck and watched the blood flow. He used the same sword he would soon wield against the enemy. Sphagia could turn out badly; in that case another victim would be sacrificed. But there was less concern with divination at this last, emotional moment than there had been with the sacrifice in camp. The act of sphagia meant, as Michael Jameson put it, “O gods!
We destroy this life. We wish to kill and not be killed. Support us." Or even more succinctly: "We kill. May we kill." 22

At this critical moment, Kallimachos vowed, on behalf on the Athenian people, to sacrifice one female goat to Artemis Agrotera (of the wild) for every enemy killed. The Spartans regularly sacrificed a goat to Artemis Agrotera immediately before charging. The goddess had a temple at Agrai just outside the city of Athens, but the Athenians are not otherwise known to have sacrificed to her before battle. They may have decided to imitate the Spartan custom this time because they were about to face skilled Persian archers. Artemis the hunter was an archer; her cult statue showed her with a bow. 23

As soon as the sacrifice was good, Miltiades raised his arm, pointed at the Persians, and shouted *Hormate kat’ auton* (Rush at them). The trumpet blew for the charge. The men yelled and began to jog. Herodotus says they were the first Greeks to run all together into a battle. The challenge was not to follow a "rabbit" and run faster than planned—a danger familiar to many a marathon runner today (including me) who, full of adrenalin, has started too fast and regretted it later. Perhaps the officers put mature men in the front line and ordered the others not to pass them. At a jog, they would have covered eight stadia in no more than 12 minutes.

The Persians thought the Greeks were insane to be charging without cavalry or archers, but they prepared to receive the charge. They set up a barricade of wicker shields, as they did at the battle of Plataea, and raised their bows and arrows from behind the shield wall. When the Greeks came within range of the Persian archers, "it was impossible to see the sky because of the arrows," as Aristophanes puts it. The arrows provided an incentive to keep up the pace but did not break the charge. 24

When the Athenians reached the Persian line, the hand-to-hand fighting lasted "a long time." How long is anybody's guess. The only other direct evidence is Aristophanes' *Wasps*, which says that the Athenians pushed the enemy back "towards evening." Athenian tradition remembered a tough fight "with spear, with sword . . . standing man by man," not a quick resolution. Modern guesses have ranged from a few minutes to

an hour or so, at most three, but if we include the advance, the hand-to-hand fight, the pursuit, the fight at the shore, and the return to camp, the battle must have lasted at least six hours. 25

Herodotus describes the fighting in one down-to-earth paragraph: no singing dust clouds, no apparitions of women shouting so loudly that the entire force could hear them, not even a vision of Pan or Herakles. The single remarkable occurrence noted by Herodotus was the blinding of an Athenian soldier named Epizelos, who said he saw a huge hoplite coming at him with a beard so large it covered his shield, but the hoplite passed by and killed the next man. Though he was not hit, Epizelos went blind and remained blind for the rest of his life. Doctors today would say he suffered from conversion disorder or hysterical blindness. 26

Epizelos appeared in the painting of the battle in the Stoa Poikile, as did a "man of rustic appearance" who killed many enemies with a plough handle. Pausanias says that the anonymous fighter vanished after the battle. When the Athenians inquired of the Delphic oracle, the god Apollo told them to honor the hero Echetlaioi (Plough Handle). Though Herodotus doesn't mention Echetlaioi, I find this story entirely credible. If a farmer's spear broke, he might well have grabbed a broken plough handle and swung it as a club. 27

Finally, the Persians and the (Asiatic) Scythians in the center broke the thinner Greek line and pursued the Greeks toward the mesogaia. This word is usually translated "inland," which made good sense when the Persians were imagined as facing the Vrana valley with their backs to the sea. If the Persians were perpendicular to the coast, as most scholars now believe, the phrase doesn't tell us much, since just about any direction back from the point of engagement led toward some pass out of the Marathon plain. Today Mesogaia is the name of the plain in which the new Athenian airport lies, separated from the city plain by Mount Hymettos. If Herodotus meant that the Athenians fled toward that plain, he meant that they retreated toward their camp and the southwest exit along the coast.

On both wings the Greeks won. Instead of pursuing the enemy, they "brought together" the wings and fought the Persians and Scythians who
had broken through in the center. Scholars have understood this phase of the battle in various ways. On one interpretation, the men on the wings formed a single phalanx and attacked the Persian center from the rear. On another interpretation, the wings re-formed separately and executed a tactical double envelopment. Supporters of both ideas tend to agree that Miltiades planned the whole thing, as evidenced by the Greeks’ deployment with a thinner center between deeper wings. Some Miltiades fans have even suggested that he lured the Persians into a trap by ordering his center to fall back.28

I do not believe that untrained and inexperienced Athenian and Platean hoplites—very different from Spartan warriors—could have executed such maneuvers in the middle of a battle. As far as we know, the Athenians had not fought a pitched battle since 506. Hans van Wees even doubts the story altogether, dismissing it as “a story of ideal hoplite behavior pushed to heroic extremes.” But we can take “brought together” as “rallied” or “regrouped” rather than “brought together into a tight phalanx formation.” The Greeks on the wings stopped, regrouped, and turned to help their center. Meanwhile the Persians and Scythians, realizing they had lost on both wings, turned back, perhaps in a panic. As they made for the ships, fighting the Greeks on their flanks, the other Persian infantry and the cavalry had time to board.29

The Greeks later boasted that they cut down the Persians “until they came to the sea.” The Stoa Poikile painting showed many Persians losing their way in the marshy lake. The painting’s original sea blue might have aged to a confusing green that Pausanias misinterpreted as the marsh he could see in his own day. That would fit Richard Dunn’s reconstruction of the topography. The Greeks pursued toward the water. The Persians were pushing and shoving and falling in shallow water as they tried to reach their ships. Herodotus’ use of the Homeric verb koito (cut or smite) lends an epic quality to the narrative, as does the scene at the ships where the Greeks call for fire, as the Trojans had in the Iliad. Aristophanes, on the other hand, recalls Aeschylus’ Persians when he says the Greeks were “spearing them like tuna through their baggy trousers.” In desperate fighting at the water’s edge, the polemarchos Kallimachos died—later legend

said that so many spears pierced his body that his corpse remained upright—together with “many other famous Athenians,” including one of the generals, Stesilaos son of Thrasyllaos. Aeschylus’ brother Kyngeiros died when he grabbed a Persian ship and a sailor chopped off his arm. (Justin later embellished this story: Kyngeiros lost first his right arm, then his left, and died holding on to the ship with his teeth!) In the end, almost all Persian ships escaped. The Athenians captured seven.30

How Did the Greeks Win?

Dedications after the battle show that the Athenians credited the gods and heroes for the victory. Most historians—Pritchett is an exception—have credited Miltiades. Miltiades does deserve recognition. Without his prodigious, the Athenians might have stayed in Athens. Without his persuasiveness, the generals might have continued to wait for the Spartans. Without his bold plan to cross the plain before Persian horsemen could enter it, and without his order to run when it seemed they might not get across in time, the Athenians might never have closed for hand-to-hand fighting with the infantry.

Part of the explanation must be the difference in equipment. The Persians may have had some hoplites—they had picked up some Greeks on their way across the Aegean, and the Athenian soldier Epizelos reported seeing that huge hoplite coming at him—but they relied primarily on archers and cavalry. The Athenians’ thrusting spears gave them an advantage in hand-to-hand fighting. The Greeks also had better defensive equipment, especially stronger helmets and sturdier shields. On the other hand, the difference in equipment did not stop the Persians from breaking the Athenian ranks in the center. The Persians were probably better trained and better disciplined. They fought bravely. The conscripts on their wings may have been less well trained, less well equipped, and less committed. But evidently the battle was no foregone conclusion even after the Greeks charged through the hail of arrows.

Perhaps it is fair to say that Miltiades put the Greeks in a position where they could win. But praise should also go to the Athenians who
elected him, who voted to take the field, who made the run, who fought to defend their land, their families, and their freedom. Plutarch tells a story that is certainly *ben trovato*. When Miltiades asked the Athenian assembly for a crown of olives, Sophanes retorted, “When you have fought and defeated the barbarians by yourself, Miltiades, then you may ask to be honored by yourself.”

CHAPTER 8

After the Fighting

The Shield Signal

After the battle, the Persian ships pulled away from the shore. “At Athens,” Herodotus reports, “the Alkmeonids were later blamed for having contrived a scheme whereby a shield would be displayed to send a signal to the Persians aboard their ships.” A few paragraphs later Herodotus vigorously defends the Alkmeonids, the family of Kleisthenes, against the charge of medism. No family opposed tyranny more consistently. It is inconceivable, he says, that the Alkmeonids collaborated with the Persians. Someone did raise a shield. But it was not the Alkmeonids.

What are we to make of this story? Was holding up a shield really a big deal? Some scholars have dismissed the shield signal as an invention of the Alkmeonids’ political opponents, perhaps Themistokles, or an embellishment of something that happened but did not have the significance the story attached to it. Lionel Scott, for example, suggests that the tale grew after someone raised his shield to taunt the losers. Such attempts to dismiss the story stem partly from the speculations it has prompted.

Here are some of the speculations. John B. Bury turned the story on its head. Instead of a signal shown by a Greek after the battle, he suggested, the shield was a signal shown before the battle by a detachment of