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Fred W. Jenkins
Resources for College Libraries, fred.jenkins@notes.udayton.edu

Anne Doherty
CHOICE/ACRL, adoherty@ala-choice.org

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Collecting to the Core — The Greco-Persian Wars

by Fred W. Jenkins (Professor and Associate Dean for Collections and Operations, University of Dayton Libraries; Ancient History and Classical Languages and Literatures Subject Editor, Resources for College Libraries) <Fred.Jenkins@notes.udayton.edu>

Column Editor: Anne Doherty (Resources for College Libraries Project Editor, CHOICE/ACRL) <adoherty@ala-choice.org>

Column Editor’s Note: The “Collecting to the Core” column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the Resources for College Libraries bibliography (online at http://www.rclweb.net). In each essay, subject editors introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

Tensions between the Western powers and the countries formerly known as the ancient Near East dominate today’s headlines. The occupations of Iraq (read Mesopotamia) and Afghanistan (Alexander called it Bactria), difficult relations with Iran (the heart of the old Persian Empire), the turmoil of the Arab Spring, and other such conflicts are as often cast against the backdrop of cultural values as they are geopolitical struggles. The clash between East and West lies at the very beginnings of Western civilization. Homer’s Iliad, one of the earliest and most influential works of Western literature, chronicles the Trojan War and serves as a guiding text for ancient Greek warfare and ideology. The theme continues in Herodotus’ account of the Persian Wars of the fifth century BC, which were the defining event of the classical Greek era and strongly influenced the major figures of the period. The great tragedian Aeschylus fought at Marathon and wrote The Persians about the defeat of Xerxes I at Salamis. Sophocles participated in the victory celebration after Salamis. The continuing relevance and popularity of these Greek authors and their stories is clear, as they are reimagined in print and in commercial films like 300 Spartans and 300, and as the scenes, players, and mythologies appear in the rhetorical speech of politicians and pundits. The recent 2,500th anniversary of the Battle of Marathon has occasioned a number of commemorative events and, of course, books. This essay examines some of the key historical works on the Greco-Persian Wars — this first great confrontation of East and West.

There are few works covering the Greco-Persian Wars that are more foundational than the Landmark Herodotus. Herodotus, the major source for this period, begins with a rationalized account of the Trojan War, which he saw as the origin of the conflict between the Greeks and the East: Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents his research so that human events do not fade with time. May the great and wonderful deeds — some brought forth by the Hellenes, others by the barbarians — not go unsung, as well as the causes that led them to make war on each other.

He proceeds in describing the rise and growth of the Persian Empire and that of the Greek city-states to their ultimate conflict. He includes many ethnographic accounts of the various “barbarians” (i.e., non-Greek peoples). Throughout, Herodotus portrays the rugged, independent Greeks against the corrupt and luxurious Persians and other Easterners. In his account, the victory of the Greeks preserves their independence and asserts the superiority of their way of life. The Landmark edition provides a very readable translation with excellent notes, interpretative essays, illustrations, and maps.

Modern historians have typically approached the Persian Wars through individual battles; one exception is Peter Green, whose The Greco-Persian Wars (originally published in 1970 as The Year of Salamis) begins with some background on the Persian empire and the Ionian Revolt (499-493 BC) before systematically covering the wars from Marathon (499 BC) to Plataea and Mycale (479 BC). Green, a novelist as well as a distinguished historian of Greece, offers a lively account aimed at the student and general reader. His account is rooted in a thorough knowledge of the Greek lands and the sources. The introduction to the re-titled 1996 edition also provides a good overview of key issues and more recent scholarly work on the wars. It remains the best single work on the Persian Wars.

The Persian invasion of Greece of 490 BC marks the beginning of the wars with mainland Greece, although it was preceded by the revolt of the Ionian Greeks against their Persian overlords (499-493 BC). Indeed, Athenian support for the revolt led to the Persian expedition that landed at Marathon in northeast Attica. The Athenians decisively defeated a much larger Persian force at Marathon, resulting in a Persian withdrawal. The battle at Marathon achieved iconic status and is arguably amongst the most decisive military encounters in world history. The late W. Kendrick Pritchett’s Marathon remains an indispensable work on this subject, although austere and demanding to read. Pritchett was perhaps the preeminent authority in the last century on ancient Greek topography and warfare. His slender volume offers a thorough survey of earlier archaeological work on the site (much of which is difficult to obtain) and detailed examination of the topography and ancient sources, along with Pritchett’s reconstruction of the events. Few students will read this, but their teachers should.

Several more recent books have appeared on Marathon, inspired by its 2,500th anniversary. Among these, two are especially useful. Peter Krentz’s Battle of Marathon is primarily a work of military history. He provides a broad context through four chapters on Athenian relations with Persia and the Ionian Greeks prior to Marathon, followed by three on the battle itself; concluding chapters cover the aftermath of the battle and its significance. Throughout the book, Krentz keeps his focus largely on military strategies and tactics, arms and soldiers; he makes some important contributions to the study of Greek hoplite equipment and tactics. One famous problem that he addresses is the probability that the Greek hoplites ran nearly a mile in full armor before engaging the Persians, concluding that it was in fact, the opposite. He addresses the broader significance of Marathon primarily in the short final chapter with speculation on what would have happened if Athens had lost, concluding that the subsequent course of Athenian and Greek history would have been radically altered. In the end, Krentz sees the pivotal role of Marathon in the destruction of the myth of Persian invincibility: “Marathon made Salamis conceivable and Plataea possible.”

In Marathon: How One Battle Changed Western Civilization, Richard Billows sets a much broader context, providing a mini-survey of Greek history through the time of the battle. Only a fifth of the work deals directly with Marathon and its consequences. The description of the battle is vivid, focusing on the leading characters, such as the Athenian Miltiades, and the tactics used. Differences between the Greeks and Persians are highlighted by descriptions of the arms, commanders, and military maneuvers on each side. For example, after describing the Greeks donning their bronze armor, Billows depicts the Persians: “strange-looking men, wearing trousers rather than tunics, and other exotic gear.” The final chapter outlines the subsequent course of the Persian Wars and fifth-century Athenian history. Billows places the great significance of Marathon in its preservation of Athens, allowing the development of Athenian democracy and the great art, literature, and philosophy of the later fifth-century. He duly notes the influence of these on later Western culture, thus justifying his subtitle. Clearly the development of the West would have been very different had Athens fallen in 490 BC, though it would have been just as different had Athens not been restored after Salamis in 480 BC.

Paul Cartledge, the leading historian of Sparta in our time, tells the story of Thermopylae as the “Battle That Changed the World.” About a third of his work is devoted to context and backstory, covering Greece and Persia down to the time of the battle, with special attention given to Sparta. The middle portion recounts the battle of Thermopylae in detail, continued on page 87.

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Endnotes

3. Ibid, 1.1.

*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.