

History tells us that Pheidippides ran to Athens with the news of the great victory his people had over the Persians at Marathon. It was 490 BC, and the distance he ran was about 26 miles (or, around 40 kilometers). After he delivered his message - "*Nenikamen*" (which means, "Rejoice we conquer" or, put differently, "We have won") - Pheidippides died.

We might ask ... why was that particular run so difficult for him? Why did it take the life of the great-news bearer? To answer those questions, we have to dig a little deeper.

At the end of our investigation, we find-out that the run between Marathon and Athens was not the first for Pheidippides regarding the Battle of Marathon. And it may have happened during the month of August (since recent scholarship has moved the date of the battle from 12 September 490 B.C., or thereabouts, to one month earlier).

In other words ... it would have been really hot during his swift journey-by-foot.

His first run was to Sparta. Athens needed the help of the Spartans to make their stand against the Persians at Marathon.

An Athenian general (Miltiades) sent Phidippides (whose name may have been Philippides), a professional runner, to make the 140-mile run. (Some sources say it was 147 miles.) Herodotus tells us about this event:

And first, before they left the city, the generals sent off to Sparta a herald, one Pheidippides, who was by birth an Athenian, and by profession and practice a trained runner. . . (Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, VI, 106.)

Following a rugged, difficult, mountainous terrain, Phidippides delivered the message. It took him about 36 hours to reach Sparta where their soldiers were willing to help but couldn't take the field of battle until the Moon was full. (Their religious laws required it.) That delay meant Spartan soldiers couldn't reach Marathon in time to be of any use to the Athenians.

Phidippides had to run another 140 miles to deliver the bad news to Athens' generals. And ... history tells us ... when the battle began, he was among Athens' fighters.

Because the Greeks were outnumbered by about four to one, their commanders decided to initiate a very risky move. Instead of defending their ground, they launched an offensive attack which must have seemed like suicide to the Persians. The plan worked for the Greeks, however, and by the end of the day around 6,400 Persians had died (compared to about 192 Athenians).

The surviving Persians retreated to the sea and headed toward Athens. They must have hoped to attack the city before its army could return.

Here is where the story veers-away from the history Herdodotus provides. He never mentions a runner going from Marathon to Athens. More significantly, he doesn't mention the name of a specific runner - Pheidippides - who made the round-trip to Sparta. But Plutarch, writing hundreds of years later, tells us the supposed rest of the story.

Someone had to warn Athens, so the generals (according to Plutarch) called-on a runner. Plutarch actually mentions several collapsing runners, including one from the battle of Marathon (called Eucles):

...who ran in full armor, hot from the battle, and, bursting in at the doors of the first men of the State, could only say "Hail! We are victorious!" and straightaway expired [that is, died].

The mists of history have attributed that feat to Pheidippides (perhaps because we know his name from Herodotus). The runner apparently made the trip to Athens in about 3 hours (or so), covering about 26 miles (just over 40 kilometers).

At the end of the day, we cannot be sure that the collapsing, dying runner was (in fact) Pheidippides (the hero of the Athens-Sparta-Athens trek). But ... if it was ... it certainly makes for a great story!

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ISSUES AND QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

How do facts of history become intertwined with legends of history? How can we figure-out which accounts are true and which accounts are legends?

Do you know anyone who could make a run between Athens-Sparta-Athens the way Pheidippides did? Could you do it? What kind of physical condition would such a person have to be in to perform such a feat, especially during the heat of summer?

What kind of job would "a trained runner" have had during ancient times? Do you think it was a valued, highly paid position? Would such work have age restrictions?

Credits:

Artist's image of Pheidippides, online via Wikimedia Commons (and several other websites).

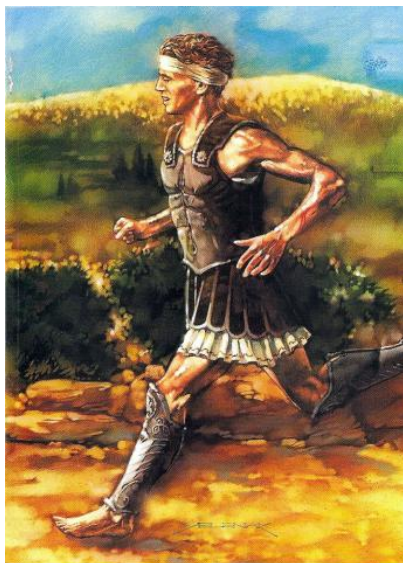
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