

Philippides and Pan: No Spartans Needed

Much can be (and has been) written about Herodotus' account of the battle of Marathon and its lack of detail despite being a history-altering battle for the Athenians and Persians. However, the events leading up to the battle that Herodotus chose to write about impact the interpretation of the Marathon and *Histories* narrative as much as the battle itself. In the lead-up to the battle of Marathon there is mention of the Athenian *hemerodromos*, Philippides, who was tasked with getting help from Sparta, and who meets Pan along the way (6.105-6). Two extremely rare events occur in this passage for Herodotus. One, the *hemerodromos*, a special herald, is given a name. Two, a specific god is mentioned appearing and speaking to a human. In this paper, I will argue that Herodotus included these two unique aspects within his anemic rendition of Marathon to signify the great importance of the meeting between Pan and Philippides for Athens and the outcome of the battle.

Providing the name of Philippides is not something, on first glance, out of the ordinary for Herodotus, especially considering how legendary the act has become; nevertheless, heralds elsewhere throughout the *Histories* run around nameless. A *hemerodromos*, who is described as *aristos*, is mentioned in book nine, but he remains nameless (9.12.1). According to Christensen et. al. (2009), both runners ran incredible distances worthy of recognition even if Philippides ran about 250 kilometers more than the unnamed *hemerodromos* (155). Philippides also does not accomplish what he set out to do, which was to retrieve help from the Spartans. In these respects, his run was not particularly heroic or successful.

The most important part of Philippides' run is his communication with Pan in Tegea. Herodotus rarely mentions gods by name choosing instead to call all of them as

“divinities” most of the time. While typical for Herodotus to leave out specific gods, a few Olympians do make appearances throughout Herodotus’ prose in unseen forms as Mikalson (2003) notes in his third chapter. Pan is not exceptional for being named, but for his physical appearance as he appears to a mortal. The other deities who interact with humans in Herodotus’ narrative, like Apollo who helps Croesus in Book One, help from afar. Therefore, Pan’s appearance is unique and significant to Herodotus’ story. The significant traits of Pan are his relation to wild places and causing panic in men. I argue that the Philippiades passage suggests that Pan’s affinity for wild places is especially pertinent to Marathon because the urbane Persians are attempting to take control of the world and Athens is one of the last strongholds. Just as with Xerxes’ invasion, which Bowie 2012 discusses, the invasion by Darius is also dispelled by the gods seeking to maintain balance in nature; Herodotus, I argue, is using Pan to subtly remind the Athenians that their success came from nature’s desire for balance, and that they should not attempt the same power grab as the Persians.

Works Cited

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