

The Legend of Pheidippides

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Epic Threads
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DOI: 123345678248998349

~ The Unbroken Stride of Athens' Messenger ~

The Athenian hills were merciless, their jagged, sun-scorched stones biting into the tattered remnants of Pheidippides' leather sandals with each strained step. His feet, raw and blistered from days of relentless running, throbbed with a pain so deep he feared it had pierced into his very bones. The frayed, dust-stained straps of his sandals had long ceased to offer any real protection. Each stride sent shocks through his swollen muscles, yet Pheidippides felt as though he were gliding, his mind numb to the agony that threatened to consume him. Only his purpose remained, clear and urgent, bound to him as tightly as the hastily written message strapped to his belt.

The memory of the past week's events flashed before his eyes, triggered by each dull thud of his feet against the earth and a desire to quicken time's passing. Just a day earlier, he had been chosen as the *hemerodromos*¹—the swift-footed messenger—entrusted with delivering a plea to the Spartan *ephors*² for aid, leaving what felt like the entirety of Athens' fate resting on his shoulders.

Pheidippides had set out from his home with the dawn, wearing little more than a simple *chiton* cinched at the waist. Leaving behind the familiar cityscape, he ran westward through the plains of Eleusis and past the bustling city of Megara. The rocky path through the narrow Isthmus of Corinth was punishing, yet he had pushed forward through Argos, driven by the urgency of Athens' plight. After hours without pause, he finally allowed himself a brief rest by a stream at the base of Mount Parthenium, hoping to soothe his parched throat.

The messenger knelt at the stream's edge, cupping his hands to drink, when a flicker in the water caught his eye. Staring back from the rippling surface was a face not his own—ancient and wild, crowned with curling horns, its shadowed eyes glimmering with something older than myth. He jerked his head up, heart hammering. The banks lay empty, the air hushed but for the whisper of leaves stirred by a wandering breeze. Slowly, warily, he looked down again.

¹ *Hemerodromos*, meaning, “day runner” or “courier runner”. See Matthews, “The ‘Hemerodromoi’: Ultra Long-Distance Running in Antiquity.” *CW* 68 (1974): 161–69.

² Annually elected magistrates. *Ephors*, meaning, “overseers”. See Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 4th ed. (2017), 108.

The face had returned. From the water's depths rose a voice like shifting earth, resonant and near enough to tremble in his bones. "Why do the Athenians forsake me, Pheidippides? Have I not guarded them in ages past, and would I not rise again to shield them in every trial to come?"³

In an instant, the reflection fractured, dissolving into sunlight on ripples. Pheidippides blinked hard. The god was gone.

For a heartbeat the world held itself in abeyance. No bird chattered. Even the water softened its murmur. He stayed kneeling, fingers pressed into the cool bank and felt—as keenly as a hand upon the shoulder—the presence of something that belonged to rock and root.

He bowed his head. Gravel and fine sand shifted beneath his palms. When he spoke, it was not a murmur, but a pledge shaped carefully as one names a god at an altar: "Athens will remember. We will construct a temple for you, keep the seasons with offerings, and bind our gratitude to song." He did not bargain. He promised.

A breath of air slid along the ravine—cool, spiralling, edged with pine. The leaves shivered once, as if acknowledging witness, and the ache that had crowded his limbs loosened. Strength did not blaze; it settled—quiet, enduring—into tendon and lung. His pulse found measure. The path before him no longer seemed so endless.

He rose. The stream's murmur resumed, but it sounded changed—clearer, brighter, as though it carried his vow downstream to waiting spirits. The breeze stirred again, no longer heavy but playful, weaving through branches with a melody that beckoned him onward. Even the earth beneath his feet felt altered, not hostile but steady, as if the land itself lent him strength.

Where the path had once loomed endless and merciless, it now stretched before him like a ribbon drawn by unseen hands, leading him not merely to Sparta but toward something larger than any city's walls. His breath found rhythm, his heart thrummed with quiet conviction, and his steps steadied into certainty. The exhaustion that had shadowed him was gone; in its place burned a calm resolve, deep as stone and steady as the gods themselves. He would run. He would deliver this message—not just for Athens, not just for Sparta, but for all of Hellas—for the fragile freedom that trembled at the edge of history.

He set off at a pace that felt strangely effortless, each step a vow renewed, each mile a hymn to the unseen power that had touched him. Behind him, the ravine exhaled, returning to its ancient

³ This quote has been rephrased slightly from the original translation. See Herodotus, *Histories* 6.105 (Rawlinson p. 411).

silence—but for those who might pass that lonely place, the air would still carry a faint, reedy song, a whisper of Pan’s blessing, light as breath, eternal as stone.



Hours dissolved as he pressed southward, crossing Arcadia’s ridges and descending into the broad valley of the Eurotas. Dawn spread across the horizon in pale gold, and for the first time he saw Sparta not as a word on a map or a legend in a soldier’s tale, but as a living city.

It was nothing like Athens.

There were no walls to startle the eye, no marble facades to proclaim ambition. Instead, the settlements stretched loosely along the river, villages—Pitane, Mesoa, Limnai, Kynosoura—linked by fields and roads.⁴ The openness unsettled him at first. Yet here lay the essence of Lacedaemon: a city that trusted its defence not to stone but to the discipline of its citizens.

He had heard of this contrast many times but witnessing it now gave the words a sharper truth. Athens carried the din of politics, markets, and artistry, its towers and gates rising as monuments to its restless energy. Sparta stood bare, disciplined, and assured. Its strength lay in men trained to stand as walls themselves.⁵

As he entered the valley floor, the city stirred with quiet purpose. It was the season of the *Karneia*, and the signs of preparation were plain. Men carried wood for fires. Women bore loaves and meat for the *syssitia*⁶, the common meals where citizens gathered. Boys moved in files with wooden spears, watched closely by their instructors, for not even holy days excused the drills of the young.⁷ A thin plume of smoke lifted where fat was tested on an altar. Nothing was hurried and each task had its place.

The rest he knew from stories. The *Karneia* lasted nine days, and for that time Sparta laid aside war.⁸ Outside the city, nine tents were raised, one for each tribe, serving as the ritual heart of the festival. There were choruses in honour of Apollo. There were races—the chase of a garlanded runner whose capture was a sign of prosperity, and the grape-bearer’s race, where dropping a single cluster foretold misfortune for the harvest. At the centre of it all were sacrifices to Apollo Karneios, the shepherd and guardian of the Dorians, whose protection no Spartan would set aside.⁹ These

⁴ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3.16.9 (Jones p. 321).

⁵ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.10–11 (Warner).

⁶ Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 12 (Perrin p. 249).

⁷ Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* 2 (Marchant p. 139).

⁸ Herodotus, *Histories* 6.106 (Rawlinson p. 411).

⁹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 3.13.4–5 (Jones p. 285).

were not spectacles for outsiders. They were the fabric of the city itself, the law of the gods and people joined.

Even on this first morning, that discipline pressed upon everything he saw. There was no shouting, no bargaining, no spectacle. Every movement was deliberate. The city breathed with the god's order.

At the edge of Pitane, two men in crimson cloaks regarded him. Their eyes lingered on his dust-caked limbs. One stepped forward, broad-shouldered, hair bound in the Lacedaemonian fashion. He spoke no words. A nod sufficed, and Pheidippides followed.

As they walked, they passed a mess-hall where shields lay stacked in neat rows by the doorway, their bronze rims dulled from long use. In a courtyard, elders oversaw youths at practice, spear-thrusts sharp and controlled. At a small shrine of Apollo Karneios, garlands were being fastened to wooden posts. Nothing was gaudy and nothing was wasted. The city prepared as it always had, steady and unhurried.

The *Skias*¹⁰ soon came into view, its round timbered roof casting a wide circle of shade across the packed earth. Within that chamber void of ornament, the affairs of Sparta were conducted with a severity as old as the city itself.

Inside, the air was cool and bare. Two thrones stood apart at the head of the space, emblems of Sparta's dual kingship.¹¹ On one sat Cleomenes, lean and sharp-eyed, his frame coiled with restless energy. On the other, Demaratus, broader, slower to move, carrying the weight of tradition. Around them stood the five *ephors*, magistrates chosen yearly whose authority even the two kings must heed. Beyond, seated in a half-circle, were the elder men of the *Gerousia*, silent guardians of law.¹²

Pheidippides bowed low, his voice hoarse but steady.

"Men of Lacedaemon," he began, "the Athenians beseech you to hasten to their aid, and not allow that state, which is the most ancient in all Hellas, to be enslaved by the barbarians. Eretria is already carried away captive; and Hellas weakened by the loss of no mean city."¹³

But Athens stands next. Even now the Persian fleet rides at anchor off the plain of Marathon, their cavalry restless, their archers eager to darken our skies. We are a single city, outnumbered

¹⁰ The *Skias* is a round structure originally built for the purpose of holding assemblies. See Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3.12.10 (Jones p. 275)

¹¹ The dual kingship system of Sparta. See Herodotus, *Histories* 6.50–6.85 (Rawlinson pp. 388–402).

¹² Aristotle, *Politics* 1270b–1271a (Rackham pp. 459–61).

¹³ Herodotus, *Histories* 6.106 (Rawlinson p.411).

many times over. Yet our men have not faltered. Under the command of Callimachus the *polemarch*, and with generals such as Miltiades, Themistocles, and Aristides dividing the days of command, we have gathered on the plain to bar the invader's path.

If Athens falls, the road into Hellas lies open. The fate of every *polis* hangs upon this hour. I beg you, Lacedaemonians, do not delay."

When he finished, the chamber held its silence. Cleomenes' gaze was sharp, Demaratus' unreadable. At a signal from an *ephor*, attendants stepped forward and guided Pheidippides from the hall. The heavy doors closed behind him.

He stood waiting, the stillness pressing on him harder than the miles he had run under the burning sun.

Before long, he was summoned back. The kings sat unchanged, the *Gerousia* unmoving. One of the *ephors* stepped forward, his voice calm and deliberate.

"Stranger of Athens, your plea is heard. Sparta will not turn from you. We will march. But we are bound to the god. The days of the *Karneia* must be fulfilled, for Apollo Karneios watches over us as shepherd over flock. Until the nine days have passed and the full moon rises, no Spartan may take the field. To break that law is to dishonour both god and people. When the moon is full, our army will come."

The words carried finality, yet not of refusal.

Though disappointment pricked at him, Pheidippides bowed. He had not been dismissed; he had been answered with honour. Sparta would march, though not yet.

He stepped out from the shadow of the *Skias* into the glare of noon. Warriors in crimson cloaks stood nearby, their faces grave, their stances unyielding. They met his gaze without words, and in their silence, he saw what Hellas had always feared: if Spartans carried such power in peace, what must they be in war? He was grateful they would come as allies and not as foes.

Yet urgency pressed on him anew. It was not enough that Sparta had promised aid. Athens had to know at once that the Lacedaemonians would march—but only after the full moon. That knowledge alone could decide whether the generals stood at Marathon or fell back to guard the city walls. Every hour of delay risked ruin.

He set out again, retracing the rugged passes, the mountains rising and falling before him. Hours blurred until at last, Athens came into view. He delivered the message to the remaining generals inside the city without pause: Sparta would come, but bound by Apollo's festival, their march would

be delayed. He also told of Pan's voice on Mount Parthenium, urging that the god be honoured in return for his protection.

The men conferred amongst each other then, one turning to the others with concern, "Another runner must be sent at once. This man has already carried more than any body should endure."

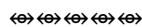
Pheidippides straightened at this, though his legs trembled beneath him. "No," he said, voice low but firm. "I have run this road before. I know the tracks through Parnes that will cut the hours. Let another go, and Athens may wait too long. Let me finish what I have begun with the divine strength gifted to me."

The generals exchanged glances. They could see the strain carved into his frame, but also the fire that would not be put out. At last, Callimachus gave a single nod. "So be it. Take food, take water, and rest for a short while. At nightfall, you will go."



When Pheidippides finally arrived at the Athenian camp, twilight had gathered, shadows stretching long over the encampment. The air was thick with the tang of sweat and bronze, mingling with the low murmur of voices as soldiers sharpened spearheads, tested shield straps, and whispered to one another of what the dawn would bring. Exhaustion hollowed his body, yet he pressed on until he stood before Miltiades. The general's face, weathered by years of command, betrayed no fear, only a calm resolve that steadied those around him. Pheidippides delivered Sparta's answer once again, but this time in a parched and struggling whisper.¹⁴

Miltiades inclined his head, the lines of his jaw tightening. He had faced many wars and knew what it meant to be alone. A gesture sent Pheidippides off toward a nearby tent, urging him to rest. Though his mind churned with anxiety for the battle ahead, his body betrayed him the moment he lay down. As he sank into the rough bedding, his eyes fluttered shut almost immediately, overriding his fears with the heaviness of sleep as the murmurs of the camp faded around him.



It was the sound of distant marching that jolted him awake. Disoriented, his limbs ached with every movement as he scrambled from his tent. He stumbled toward a small rise overlooking the plain, where he could make out the Athenian forces assembling below. From this vantage point, he

¹⁴ Namely the Scythian Campaign (513 BCE) and the Ionian Revolt (499-493 BCE). See Mark, "Miltiades" (*World History Encyclopaedia*, 2016).

could see Marathon Valley stretching out to the Bay, the early morning mist lifting to reveal the stark contrast between the two armies.¹⁵

Below him, ten thousand Athenians and one thousand Plataeans stood in disciplined rows, forming a *phalanx*—a shield wall of bronze and wood, unyielding in its unity. Each man bore a polished *thorax*, a Corinthian helmet, bronze *knemides*, and either an *aspis* or *hoplon* shield, every piece reflecting the sun's early light. All held their *dory* spears upright with *xiphe* at their sides, presenting an impenetrable front, undeterred by their difference in numbers.

In contrast, the Persian army, a terrifying twenty-five thousand, filled the far side of the plain in looser, more fluid lines. They were dressed in what appeared to be scale, linen, or leather body armour while their heads were covered with the softer *kyrbasia*. Unlike the Hellenes, who relied on heavy armour and tight formations, the Persians emphasized speed and mobility. They wielded shorter spears and *sagaris* axes, while many carried *gerron* shields made of woven wicker that he mused would offer little protection against the piercing thrust of a *hoplite's* spear. Archers stood behind the Persian infantry, ready to release a deadly volley that would darken the skies of the battlefield.¹⁶

From hushed conversations among the *hoplites* the night before, he had learned that King Darius I had entrusted command of the Persian forces to the two generals, Datis and Artaphernes¹⁷, who had brought six hundred Persian triremes¹⁸—a number he could scarcely believe. Now, as he looked beyond the valley, the monstrous sight of the warships anchored in the bay foreshadowed the destruction that would reach Athens should they fail here.

Pheidippides watched as the Persian archers unleashed their first volley, the sky thick with black fletching. The shafts whistled downward, but the *hoplites*, trained for this storm, raised their shields in unison, the bronze rims clanging together to form a roof of protection. The arrows splintered harmlessly, rattling off helmets and shields, embedding themselves in the earth.

At Miltiades' command, the Athenians advanced. At first, they moved deliberately, each step measured, the *phalanx* keeping its tight wall. Then, when they closed to within a few stadia, the trumpet blared. With a sudden roar, the entire line broke into a run. Bronze and scarlet surged forward as one, the pounding of thousands of sandals shaking the plain. The Persians, stunned by

¹⁵ Miltiades persuades Callimachus to attack at or soon after dawn once he learned of the absence of the Persian Cavalry. See Hammond, "The Campaign and the Battle of Marathon," *JHS* 88 (1968): 37

¹⁶ Relative to the Greek *hoplites*, the Persian infantry wore far lighter armour as their style of combat required them to be more mobile. See Herodotus, *Histories* 6.111–6.117 (Rawlinson pp. 414–16).

¹⁷ Herodotus, *Histories* 6.94 (Rawlinson pp. 405–06); 6.102 (Rawlinson p. 409); 6.113 (Rawlinson p. 415).

¹⁸ A swift, agile, and light warship with three rows of oars and versatile maneuverability. See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.13.2 (Crawley).

this unexpected charge, loosed arrows too high, the deadly shafts sailing over and past the Hellenes' heads.¹⁹

The collision was a crash louder than any of Poseidon's largest waves. The *dory* spears of the *hoplites* punched through wicker *gerrha*, splintering the Persian shields as if they were kindling. Men screamed, trampled underfoot, or were driven back by the relentless advance. The Persians slashed with *sagaris* axes and thrust with shorter spears, but they could not withstand the crushing weight of the *phalanx*. Their ranks locked tight, each man's weight forcing the invaders backward step by bloody step.²⁰

Miltiades' stratagem now revealed its force. The centre, drawn up thinner than custom, bent under the Persian assault, yet it did not break. On the wings, where he had placed Athens' strongest ranks, the *hoplites* drove hard, pushing the enemy inward. The plain echoed with the crash of bronze on wicker, the cries of men pressed too tightly to wield their weapons. Slowly, then with gathering speed, the wings curled around, enclosing the Persians in a tightening crescent.

Confusion rippled through the invaders, men stumbling over the fallen as shouts to hold the line went unanswered. The Athenians and their Plataean allies surged onward, breaking the enemy ranks into fragments. Thousands fled across the field toward the waiting ships, throwing down shields in their haste. The Hellenes pursued without mercy, driving them to the very surf, where the clanging of spear and axe was swallowed by the crash of water upon land.²¹

The plain of Marathon lay strewn with the fallen, the soil darkened where the Persians had broken. At the shoreline, the rout reached its climax: cries of terror rang out as men fought to board their ships. In the struggle, the Athenians seized seven vessels, though most slipped their anchors and fled to sea.

Victory surged across the field. Men raised spears in triumph, a chorus of disbelief and pride rising from ten thousand throats. Yet the rejoicing was shadowed soon by grief. Callimachus, the war-*archon* who had led the right flank with unflinching resolve, lay among the dead.²² His fall

¹⁹ Miltiades ordered the soldiers to, "rush headlong upon [the Persians]". See Hammond, "The Campaign and the Battle of Marathon," *JHS* 88 (1968): 26.

²⁰ A *hoplite phalanx* was a tightly packed formation of heavily armed soldiers, using overlapping shields and long spears for collective defence and attack. See Herodotus, *Histories* 6.111-112 (Rawlinson pp. 414-15).

²¹ Followed a new strategy due to the Athenians being outnumbered. See Ploumis, "Strategy, Sun Tzu and the Battle of Marathon," *Defence Studies* 21 (2021): 107-21.

²² Callimachus the *polemarch* was a casualty in the pursuit of the fleeing Persians. See Hammond, "The Campaign and the Battle of Marathon," *JHS* 88 (1968): 30.

the *strategoi*²⁸ who had led on the battlefield, but for every citizen who believed in the city's ideals. Athens was a city that dared to entrust power to its people, that defied the vast empire threatening its shores.

At the gates he was met by a throng already gathered. Their faces were etched with terror and longing. Women craned into the distance for sight of husbands. Fathers searched for sons. The chaos pressed in on him, arms reaching, questions overlapping, the desperate hunger of a city waiting on one word.

Through the press of bodies, he caught sight of a familiar face — his younger brother, forcing his way forward, eyes wide with alarm at the sight of him. He reached Pheidippides' side, slipping an arm beneath his to steady him as he swayed. Breath ragged, the runner pressed the sealed message into his brother's hands.

"Take it," he rasped, his grip firm despite the tremor in his limbs. "To the generals. Now. Do not fail me."

For a heartbeat, his brother did not move. His eyes searched Pheidippides' face, unwilling to leave him in such a state. "But you—" he began, his voice cracking not from fear but from love.

"Go!" Pheidippides forced the word out, more plea than command. At last, his brother nodded, pride mingling in his gaze before vanishing into the crowd with the charge entrusted to him.

Only then did Pheidippides turn back to the multitude. Summoning the last of his strength, he planted his feet, lifted his head, and forced the breathless words past the fire in his chest.

"At Marathon, we have won!"

For a heartbeat there was silence. Then the multitude erupted. Shouts of disbelief and joy rose. Tears streamed down hardened faces as the weight of dread dissolved. The sound washed over him like a tide, but his body, at last spent, gave way. He sank to his knees and toppled onto his back, the world a blur of sky and stone.

In that final moment, as his lungs burned and his heart stuttered, he offered no cry of despair. He gave only a silent prayer to Athena, protector of the city, and a thought of Pan, whose strength had carried him from Parthenium to this hour. His gaze clung to the Acropolis, radiant above the

²⁸ Strategos, plural strategoi; meaning "army leader" or "military general". The chief powers, civil and military, of the old archons. See Badian, "Archons and Strategoi," *Antichthon* 5 (1971): 5.

city he had given all to defend.²⁹ With a last, untroubled breath, Pheidippides yielded to the darkness.

Athens still stood.

His stride was ended, but his sacrifice would echo through all of Hellas for eternity.

²⁹ See Plutarch, *Moralia* "On the Glory of Athens" 347c–347d.

Artist's Statement

The following prose of historical fiction seeks to bring to life the arduous final journey of the trained *hemerodromos*, Pheidippides, as he races across the Greek landscape to fulfill his crucial missions. This account follows Pheidippides' legendary feats, beginning with his dash from Athens to Sparta, then back to Athens, followed by a hasty journey to Marathon, and finally culminating in his dramatic run back to Athens. According to later traditions, it is in this final leg, after running five hundred and sixty-four kilometers, that Pheidippides collapses and dies after announcing the victory of the Athenian forces.

It is essential to clarify that the earliest and most reliable source on Pheidippides' journey is Herodotus, who in *Histories* (Book 6.105-106) describes only the initial stage: Pheidippides' run from Athens to Sparta to seek Spartan assistance before the Battle of Marathon, followed by his return to Athens. Herodotus makes no mention of a run from Marathon to Athens, nor does he describe Pheidippides' dramatic death upon his return. Instead, he focuses solely on the grueling 240 km journey to Sparta and back, underscoring the urgency of the Athenian plea for aid.

The tale of Pheidippides' final run from Marathon to Athens, where he allegedly died after exclaiming "we have won" (νικῶμεν), is first recorded by Plutarch in his work *On the Glory of Athens* (*Moralia* 347c), written several centuries later in the 1st century CE. This version appears to be a later embellishment, adding dramatic flair to the story of Athenian resilience. It is thus important to acknowledge that there is no historical evidence confirming Pheidippides as the messenger who ran this entire sequence, nor proof that such a runner perished after delivering the victory message.

For the purposes of this narrative, I follow Herodotus' account for the majority of Pheidippides' journey, emphasizing the historically attested mission to Sparta. However, I also incorporate the dramatic conclusion described by Plutarch, merging the historical and legendary elements to create a compelling portrayal of one of antiquity's most enduring stories.

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