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To the Editor:

Dear Sir,

PHEIDIPPIDES AND THE MARATHON RUN

Correction of popular misconceptions about the origin of the marathon race is certainly needed and R. Grogan's account (*Brit.J.Sports Med.* Vol. 15, No. 3, September, 1981, pp. 186-189) is to be welcomed. However some qualifications and amplifications may be useful in matters directly concerned with the marathon race and Pheidippides.

Our main source for the battle of Marathon and events before and after it is the *History* of Herodotus. This is hardly a "contemporary historical text" since Herodotus cannot have been more than a small child, if that, at the time of the battle. He was not himself an Athenian and his account of Marathon must have been based on interviews held years after the event. However nor was Herodotus merely an "old gossip". He was a historian who went to some trouble to check facts and record doubts but who did love a good story. If Herodotus does not give a picturesque anecdote, it is reasonable to suppose he did not know it, since if he knew it and disbelieved it he was apt to record both anecdote and disbelief.

According to Herodotus, before the battle of Marathon the Athenians sent a runner to Sparta to ask for help. The name of the runner is in doubt since the manuscripts of Herodotus are divided between "Pheidippides" and "Philippides". On his return to Athens, the messenger reported that on his journey he had encountered the god Pan. This encounter cannot have been "added to the story centuries later", since it is in Herodotus. Pheidippides (?) arrived in Sparta, some 140 miles away, on the day after leaving Athens; we do not know the times of day of his departure from Athens or of his arrival in Sparta. Grogan's view that he "ran from Athens to Sparta and back, a distance of at least 280 miles in 3-4 days" is improbable. Herodotus, as his phraseology shows, was impressed by the speed of the run. If Pheidippides (?) had performed the even more considerable feat of doing double the distance in only double the time, then Herodotus would surely have recorded that. Pheidippides (?) must certainly have returned to Athens, but the silence of Herodotus suggests that there was nothing remarkable about the speed of his return journey. Standards after all were high, if the Spartan army later marched the distance in 3 days.

Grogan also suggests that Pheidippides probably ran to the battlefield of Marathon with the news that the Spartan arrival would be delayed, and that it was this news which caused the Athenians to attack the Persians immediately. There is no evidence in Herodotus for the first part of this and the second part is improbable, since the news that their allies were delayed would surely have induced the Athenians to play for time, not to take immediate action. More likely is the other idea which Grogan puts forward. The Athenians realised that part of the Persian forces was sailing round to attack Athens, and in order to return to defend the city they had first to beat the Persians who were pinning them down at Marathon.

After the battle, it seems likely that news of the victory was sent ahead to the city (about 22 miles by the difficult inland route or about 26 by the easier coast road). First, it was a glorious victory, even if it looked as though there was something left to do, and secondly, if the Persian ships reached the city before the Athenian army, it might be assumed that the army had been beaten and the city might capitulate at once. However the fact that Herodotus does not mention such a message suggests that there was nothing noteworthy about it, i.e. that the messenger was not Pheidippides (?), that there was nothing out of the ordinary about his speed and that he did not drop dead in dramatic fashion at the moment of delivery.

This last detail is given in Plutarch, who also tells us that the messenger ran hot from the battle, arms and all. A few lines later it is implied that he was wounded and covered with blood as well! Plutarch adds that most people said the messenger's name was "Eucles" but that according to Heracleides of Pontus it was "Thersippus". Plutarch's comment on the name is of interest for two reasons. First, the mention of Heracleides of Pontus means that the story of the messenger's dramatic death was in circulation at the latest by the middle of the 4th century BC when Heracleides flourished. Secondly, the fact in his discussion of the messenger's name Plutarch does not reject any story that the messenger was Pheidippides means that he was unaware of a version which said he was. Plutarch came from Chaeronea in Boeotia, not far from Athens, and knew Athens and its history well. His silence is evidence that the attribution of this second feat to Pheidippides was not widely current, if it was current at all, in Plutarch's day (before 50 AD to

after 120 AD). On the other hand Plutarch did know the story of the sending of the messenger, whom he calls Philippides, to Sparta. To sum up, it would be reasonable to accept from Plutarch that a messenger did go from the battlefield of Marathon to Athens and that his name was probably "Eucles", but to dismiss the story of his dramatic death because of the silence of Herodotus.

We have then in circulation a picturesque story attributed to a character so dim that even his name is in some dispute. The next step, for which there are plenty of parallels, is for the story to be transferred to some suitable, well-known person. This step has been taken in the version to be found in Lucian of Samosata (about 120-180 AD), who lived in Athens during the latter part of his life. Lucian gives his expiring messenger the name of "Philippides". Lucian does not tell of the run to Sparta, but that would have been irrelevant to his immediate purpose, which was to comment on the form of greeting used by the messenger as he dropped dead. Lucian's version of course implies that Philippides had run on to Marathon after his arrival in Athens from Sparta. Robert Browning knew the Lucian passage – the epigraph of his poem is taken from it – and it may be surmised that this addition to Herodotus' story was widely known even before Browning's poem. Herodotus was read in Victorian schools and universities, and at least one contemporary edition intended for use in those institutions quotes the Lucian passage, and it is possible that it was in some such source that Browning himself found it.

Yours faithfully,

T. E. KINSEY

REFERENCES

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Plutarch, 347c and 862a

Lucian 727

A. R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks*, Arnold, London, 1962, pp. 239ff

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OBITUARY

Dr. Ramon William Barr-Brown

So soon after the death of Dr. Lew Blonstein Amateur Boxing has lost another doctor deeply involved in making this sport safer for its participants. Dr. Barr-Brown gained Hons. B.A. in Physiology at the University of Oxford, worked in pharmacological research, then studied medicine during the Second World War, at Oxford and St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London, graduating in 1949. Subsequently he was a Consultant in Geriatric Medicine in Croydon, and retired in 1967.

When first qualified, he became an honorary medical officer to the newly formed London Amateur Boxing Association and the A.B.A. in 1961. He was a co-author of "Medical Aspects of Boxing" with Lew Blonstein (1972), and a pioneer in the legislation that reduced the incidence of sequelae from knock-out, legislation that first applied to the United Kingdom, but was later adopted world-wide. He maintained an active interest in the sport to within a few days of his death. We extend our sympathy to his wife.

H. E. Robson