Ian Berger (M.Phil History)

The Battle of Marathon: Evaluating aspects of Herodotus' Histories using experimental archaeology and reenactment

Available written sources for the Battle of Marathon (fought in 490BC) vary in style, content, detail and reliability. Scholars have read and debated available written texts, but frequently reached different conclusions. The site of the battle has not been definitively located and as such the true nature of this battle is far from understood.

This research project will enumerate some of the more contentious aspects of the battle in modern scholarship and examine these through the relatively recent concepts of physical re-creation and experimental archaeology. Whilst tracking levels of exertion under load, I will test assumptions made by modern scholars on the speed at which fully armoured hoplites could travel over varying distances (0.2, 1.4 and 42.2km). A flexible research design will be developed that focuses on replicability, to ensure that multiple configurations of arms and armour known to be in use during the period could be worn. I will run these distances (0.2, 1.4 and 42.2km) unencumbered around a standard, flat 400m athletics track to establish baseline data, and then repeat the process jogging/limping in different configurations to track exertion levels. This data will be queried and modelled using formulae typically used in biomechanical studies so that performance over greater distances can be extrapolated.

Furthermore, published penetration tests undertaken over the last fifty years relating to this arms and armour will be tabulated and reduced to common units (joules) for better comparison. To augment these, a hoplite 'shield apron' will be reconstructed. Reconstructed Persian arrows of the type found at the battle site will be shot from different ranges, from a bow of known poundage to document the performance of the apron as a defensive device.