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# THE ORIGIN OF THE STORY ABOUT THE FIRST MARATHON-RUNNER

Jaakko Suolahti

## I

In his researches a historian has frequently to deal with highly exaggerated, coloured, and one-sided sources. He can decide upon the value of these sources only by comparing them with more reliable information, but on the other hand by revealing the origin, the author, and the motive of an unreliable source he can often gain valuable information from it.

The classical scholar above all has to sift his sources with great care. The Greeks and the Romans included Clio, the goddess of history, among the seven muses.<sup>1</sup> The historian could therefore embroider his writings in order to heighten the aesthetic or moral effect. As is well-known, speeches of famous persons and even many historical documents have been invented by the author himself or have been very freely revised by him.<sup>2</sup> This was done to describe the character of the hero or a certain situation, the author giving a subjective account of what he thought the hero would have said at that memorable moment. Moreover, when we consider that most historians of ancient times wrote with a strong patriotic or political bias, it is easy to understand why the sources of these times are full of exaggerated, coloured, and contradictory reports. From our point of view Herodotus, for example, grossly distorted historical truth by greatly exaggerating the size of Xerxes's army.<sup>3</sup> But this served well his own purpose, which was to enliven the work and to rouse the patriotism among the Hellenes.

The classical scholar especially has to deal with different anecdotes, the literature of antiquity being full of them. He is quite aware of the unreliability of his sources. The Greek and Roman historians and moralists composed

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<sup>1</sup> Hesiod, *Theogonia* 77; Pindar, *Nemeia* 3.83.

<sup>2</sup> A. SHOTWELL, *The History of History* I. New York 1939, p. 161; J. W. THOMPSON, *A History of Historical Writing*. New York 1942, pp. 21, 31.

<sup>3</sup> K. J. BELOCH, *Griechische Geschichte* II: 2, 2. Aufl. Strassburg 1916, pp. 70—73; Herodotus 7.60; 7.87; 7.185; 7.228.

them as freely as they did speeches to describe character, to enliven their writings or to warn and instruct. Several extensive collections of anecdotes from ancient times have been preserved to us<sup>1</sup>, for the people of those days delighted in them as much as we do to-day. The unreliability of those anecdotes is revealed to the scholar by their somewhat varying forms and incidents in different collections. He cannot, however, reject them outright, because those anecdotes are often our only sources of information about famous persons and events. And if they happen to be true, they illustrate excellently the character of the person concerned. Let us think e.g. of the famous words of Cato the elder: »Ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam«, which formed for many years the customary ending of all his speeches.

For this reason, a reassessment of the historical reliability and origin of at least the most famous anecdotes is of every importance. Should the anecdote turn out to be an invention, the result of this analysis is nevertheless not a negative one. Careful investigation of the date and purpose of an invented anecdote throws light upon opinions and principles of that time as well as upon the changes they underwent later.

Although classical scholars have by now for some two hundred years sifted the available anecdotes, historical reference books still contain a great number of quite groundless evidence. Psychologically it is easy to understand why many of the most famous and vivid details have escaped criticism. Once a plausible and effective detail has found its way on to the pages of history, it seems extremely difficult to obliterate it. It gets a firm hold on the mind of every student during his schooldays and some reference books serve only to confirm his belief. By following the development of such a detail or anecdote from one book to another through several centuries, the scholar may to his surprise find it to be of rather late origin. Sometimes it may be consciously distorted, but quite often it is only the product of an imagination with no special purpose of its own or, indeed, is a mere misunderstanding. For example the picture of the so called nobility, which has prevailed until recent times, may be considered a misunderstanding. According to this, the descendants of all the highest magistrates, such as consuls and praetors and curule aediles belonged to the highest Roman aristocracy. Historical evidence gives no support to this opinion, for M. GELZER proved in 1912 that all

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<sup>1</sup> TH. BIRT, *Kritik und Hermeneutik nebst Abriss des antiken Buchwesens* (Handbuch der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft 1.3). München 1913, pp. 172—175, 35.

the *nobiles* in question were consuls or their descendants.<sup>1</sup> The Danish scholar ADAM AFZELIUS did, in fact, show that the mistaken idea, still found in several general surveys, is due to an incidental statement made by SIGONIUS in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

Again, the well-known story of Alexander the Great weeping, because he had no more new worlds to conquer, is only a product of imagination serving no special purpose. Probably it is first found in the Alexander-legends of the Middle Ages, which contain many other imaginative details. Until recent years the story was nevertheless believed to be based on contemporary, or at least ancient sources. Though W. TARN<sup>3</sup> in 1948 proved it to be purely fictitious, it has been included in handbooks and schoolbooks.

One could go on enumerating famous fictions still surviving on the pages of history, such as Caesar's well-known words »*Alea iacta est*» or the stories about the unrestrained drinking and debauchery of most emperors, Julian the Apostate's last words on his deathbed: »You have won, Galilean» etc. But one of the most famous, the story of the first Marathon-race seems up to now have escaped the analysis of the scholars. Its reliability has been in doubt, but its origin has not been explained in greater detail.<sup>4</sup>

## II

Who would not know the story of the first Marathon-runner, who brought to Athens the message of the Greeks' victory on the Marathon field in 490 B.C., then falling dead to the ground. Reference-books sometimes call him Pheidippides, sometimes Philippides, while they also give a number of contradicting details. One of them tells us that a little earlier he had run to Sparta and back again to inform them of the invasion of the Persians and to ask for instant help. On his return he only just had time to take part in the battle before leaving for his last famous run. The painter Polygnotus, who lived about 450 B.C., is supposed by some to have painted a mural dealing with the

<sup>1</sup> M. GELZER, *Die Nobilität der römischen Republik*. Leipzig, 1912, pp. 21—32.

<sup>2</sup> A. AFZELIUS, *Den romerske Nobilitets Omfang*. København, 1935, pp. 12—16:

<sup>3</sup> W. W. TARN, *Alexander the Great II*. Cambridge, 1948, pp. 262—263;

<sup>4</sup> Last B. BILINSKI, *L'antico oplite corridore di Maratona, leggenda o realtà* (Accademia Polacca di Scienze e Lettere. Biblioteca di Roma. Conferenze 8. Roma 1960), who builds his traditional picture of the Marathon runner on the alleged local historians. Cf. *Ath.* 38, 1960, pp. 154—156; *REA* 62, 1960, pp. 513 s.; *AC* 29, 1960, p. 531; *RPh* 25, 1961, p. 123; *GIF* 14, 1961, p. 185; *CR* 11, 1961, p. 176; *RBPh* 39, 1961, p. 215; *AAHG* 15, 1962, p. 91; *Mnem.* 15, 1962, p. 430.

event in the Stoa Poecile, a portico situated on the northern side of the Agora in Athens. And finally two reference books hint discreetly at the uncertainty of traditional tales.<sup>1</sup> Apparently subsequent and present day Marathon-races have overshadowed the original race to such an extent that no further accurate research-work has been carried on. And the first race has simply come to be regarded as an indisputable fact.

A mere glance at ancient sources shows how questionable is the authenticity of the story. The father of history, Herodotus, who gave comprehensive contemporary accounts of the Persian wars, does not know anything about it. The name Pheidippides admittedly does occur in his writings for the first time.<sup>2</sup> He ran from Athens to Sparta and back again, a distance of 228 kilometres in two days, carrying a request for help. In the Arcadian mountains he is said to have met the forest god Pan, who promised to help the Athenians in battle. But after this Herodotus does not mention Pheidippides again, so it is obvious that he was not familiar with the story of the Marathon-runner. As he was inclined to enliven his works with various anecdotes, often of rather disputable origin, he surely would not have left this dainty morsel unused, if it had been known at that time. Besides, Herodotus obtained his information mainly from Athenian or pro-Athenian sources,<sup>3</sup> and it is hardly likely that he would not have heard about Pheidippides's second run, if it had been known in Athens. Thus it seems extremely unlikely that the story about the first Marathon-runner comes from the same period as the battle itself or was based on fact.

Other sources combine to confirm this impression. Pheidippides's run to Sparta and back is mentioned for instance in the Miltiades-biography by Cornelius Nepos at the beginning of the Christian era.<sup>4</sup> It is found in Pausanias's comprehensive guide-book of Greece in the 2nd century A.D.<sup>5</sup> as well as in others.<sup>6</sup> As for the Marathon-race, with one exception it remains unknown for centuries.

<sup>1</sup> Dictionnaire encyclopedique Quillet L-O. Paris, 1937, p. 2814; Enciclopedia Italiana XXII. Roma 1934, pp. 207—208; The Encyclopaedia Britannica XIV. 14 Ed. London 1929, p. 858; The Encyclopedia Americana XVIII. New York, 1951, p. 263; Nordisk Familjebok XIII. Stockholm, 1930, p. 834; Iso tietosanakirja VIII Helsinki 1935, p. 652; Meyers Lexicon VII. 7. Aufl. Leipzig 1927, p. 1668.

<sup>2</sup> 6. 105—106.

<sup>3</sup> JACOBY, Herodotos (Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft. (RE) II Supplementband. Stuttgart 1913, pp. 205—520), p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> 4. 3. (Philippus).

<sup>5</sup> 1. 28. 4; 8. 54. 6 (Philippides).

<sup>6</sup> Solinus Collectanea rerum memorabilium 1. 98 (Philippides); Pollux, Onomasticon 3. 148 (Philippides); Scholia ad Aeschinem 2. 130; Scholia ad Aristidem, p. 51, 215 FROMMEL.

The statement in the reference books that Polygnotus had painted the event in the Stoa Poecile is based on an obvious error. According to the extant records the paintings represented different phases of the actual battle, such as the attack of the Athenian-Plataean army, and the rout and slaughter of the Persians. And even of these Polygnotus painted only a selection.<sup>1</sup>

It is specially noticeable that not even Pliny the elder (29—79) mentions anything about the Marathon-runner in his great encyclopaedia written in the first century A.D. Naturally he knows of Pheidippides's run to Sparta<sup>2</sup> and he mentions a number of earlier and contemporary runners and their records, such as Amystis of Lacedaemon and Philonides who had been in the service of Alexander the Great. Both ran from Elis to Sicyon, a distance of 240 kilometres, the former in one day, the latter in nine hours. But the contemporaries of Plinius excelled in such feats, and in A.D. 59 a boy of 8 ran a course of 111 kilometres starting at midday and finishing in the evening. He also mentions a man who ran 237 kilometres in a short time.<sup>3</sup> As is apparent from these stories, Plinius did not trouble to sift the information which he was constantly gathering from literature.<sup>4</sup> As he was a widely read man, it seems almost certain that the Marathon-race was not yet mentioned in the literary sources of his time.

Plutarch, who lived a little later (46—120) and wrote biographies of famous men such as Aristides and Themistocles, both of whom took part in the battle of Marathon, does not say anything about the Marathon-race either, though he had studied extensively the works of the best early historians. Instead he tells about Plataean Euchidas,<sup>5</sup> who after the battle of Plataea in 479 B.C. ran from the battle-field to Delphi and back again, a distance of some 200 kilometres, to fetch the Holy Fire for the purification rites. »But after having greeted his fellow citizens», Plutarch continues, »and handed them the Fire, he at once fell down and drew his last breath». The Plataeans buried him in the sanctuary of Eucleia Artemis, and put the following inscription on his grave: »Having run to Pythos (i.e. Delphi) Euchidas returned on the same day». This information is hardly based on fact, because there is no evidence about it in the earlier sources. On the other hand Plutarch can not have invented it him-

<sup>1</sup> HOBEIN, Stoa (RE IV A, 1932 pp. 1—47), pp. 18—19; Pliny, *Naturales Historiae* 35. 10. 76.

<sup>2</sup> *Naturales Historiae* 7. 20. 84 (Philippides).

<sup>3</sup> Also Solinus 1. 98; Pausanias 6. 16. 5; Plinius, 2. 71. 181.

<sup>4</sup> M. SCHANZ—C. HOSIUS, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur bis zum Gesetzgebungswerk des Kaisers Justinian II* (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft VIII. 2). München 1935 pp. 772—777.

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, *Aristides* 20. 4—8.

self, and he may have found it in some local history. From the description of Herodotus it was already apparent that in the different states which had taken part in the battles different traditions had grown about the course of events. Details were invented and added or they were coloured by local patriotism. Herodotus tells us inter alia that many city-states, which had taken no part in the battle, built burial mounds for their fictitious deceased heroes; the Aeginians did this ten years later.<sup>1</sup>

The inscription mentioned by Plutarch and the story connected with it were, of course, easily produced in this atmosphere. Many similar forged inscriptions are known from antiquity, and it is often difficult for the modern scholar to distinguish them from the real thing.<sup>2</sup> The people of Antiquity, such as Plutarch and the writers before him could naturally also mistake the forged inscriptions for real ones. Besides, Plutarch had no reason to investigate thoroughly the reliability of his sources. He used the story as a moral example in knowing that his readers would only pay attention to its effect and not to its truth.<sup>3</sup>

Plutarch's description seems to have given rise to the story of the Marathon-runner, though the Plataean Euchidas mentioned by Plutarch apparently had nothing to do with it. Philippides's famous run from Marathon to Athens is mentioned for the first time by Lucian (120—180), the philosopher, satirist, and writer of fiction, who was born at the time of Plutarch's death. His description makes us think of Plutarch's Euchidas. In this short essay »On those who fell while presenting a message of greeting» there is a sentence which runs as follows:<sup>4</sup> »Having brought the message of victory from Marathon, Philippides, the day's runner, is said to have told the archonts, who were worried about the outcome of the battle: 'Be greeted, we have won', and delivering this message and salutation he fell to the ground and drew his last breath».

If we compare this impressive description with those of Herodotus and Plutarch we find many similarities both in style and content. For example the term »the day's runner», i.e. a professional runner<sup>5</sup> who carried a message

<sup>1</sup> Herodotus 7. 85.

<sup>2</sup> J. SUOLAHTI, Piirtokirjoitukset Rooman historian lähteinä (Hist. Aik. 48, 1950, pp. 95—106), p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> W. v. CHRIST — W. SCHMIDT — O. STÄHLIN, Geschichte der griechischen Literatur II (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft VII: 2: 1) München 1920, p. 524.

<sup>4</sup> Lucian, Pro lapsu in salutando 3.

<sup>5</sup> JUTHNER, Hemerodromos (RE VIII, 1913, p. 232—233); BUSSEMAKER, Hemerodromoi (Ch. DAREMBERG — E. SAGLIO, Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines III, 1900), p. 71.



for a whole day, is met with in Herodotus and in most of those who took the story about Pheidippides from his writings. Lucian has apparently combined Herodotus's and Plutarch's stories purposely to get a more effective example. Lucian, who is also known as the inventor of Münchhausen's prototype in direct »True Stories«, did not of course pay any attention to the truthfulness of his examples.<sup>1</sup> It is possible, however, that Lucian did not use Plutarch as his source, but took the story from some later writer based on Plutarch, because he knew the runner as Philippides instead of Pheidippides.

Lucian was an entertaining writer and his works have been very popular both in his own times and later. His fascinating story about the first Marathon-runner was not forgotten, and was known even to the Byzantine writers. But, above all the people of the 17th century who were particularly fond of anecdotes seem to have found delight in it. It was not yet widely known, however, since the comprehensive encyclopaedias of the 18th century do not know it. But at the beginning of the 19th century it finds its way into art. In 1834 the French sculptor Cortot created his famous statue of Philippides (»Le Soldat de Marathon«), which stands in the garden of the Tuilleries in Paris. This work of art has extended the knowledge of this story of the first Marathon-race, as hundreds of Frenchmen as well as tourists see that famous statue every day.

With the re-establishment of the Olympic Games at the end of the last century, Philippides's run was brought to everybody's notice. It was used as a pattern for the most glorious contest, the Marathon-race, in the new Olympic Games, though the scholars had long had their doubts about the authenticity of the story of the first Marathon-race. And when a Greek peasant Louis had won the first Marathon-race in 1896, nothing remained to shake the belief in the tradition. The story has been included in reference books<sup>2</sup> and school-books, and through these it has become common knowledge. No doubt it has served to increase the interest in international athletic contests and has inspired patriotic enthusiasm.

Lucian's story of the first Marathon-runner, who never existed, is a good example of how a complete fictitious event, if it is effective enough, becomes common knowledge in favourable circumstances, through its appeal to people's feelings and their idea of the time concerned. Once it has found its way on to the pages of history, it is as effective as if it had actually taken place.

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<sup>1</sup> W. v. CHRIST—W. SCHMIDT—O. STÄHLIN, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* II: 2 (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft VII: 2: 2) München, 1924 pp. 710—745.

<sup>2</sup> Printed in encyclopaedias in the twenties of this century.