THE OATH OF MARATHON, NOT PLATAIA?

ABSTRACT

An oath on a 4th-century B.C. stele from Acharnai has previously been identified as the Oath of Plataia, the oath taken by the Greeks before they fought the Persians at Plataia in 479. In this article the author identifies it as the Oath of Marathon, rather than as the Oath of Plataia, and suggests that Lykourgos’s reference (1.80) to “the oath that was traditional among you [Athenians]” is to this Oath of Marathon.

When Louis Robert first published a 4th-century B.C. inscription from Acharnai containing the “ancestral oath of the ephebes” and the “oath which the Athenians swore when they were about to fight against the barbarians,” he identified the latter with the oath taken “at Plataia by all the Greeks when they were about to deploy and fight against the force of Xerxes,” quoted by the orator Lykourgos just after he quotes the ephetic oath.1 Scholars have debated whether or not the Oath of Plataia is a 4th-century forgery, but no one has questioned Robert’s belief that the Oath of Plataia is the oath recorded in lines 23–46 of the Acharnai stele (Fig. 1). In a recent essay, Hans van Wees argues that various details in the inscribed oath point to Sparta, and suggests that the Spartans had the Greek allies take a traditional Spartan oath modified for the occasion in 479 B.C.2 In van Wees’s interpretation, the inscription records the oath taken at Plataia, which later Athenians such as Lykourgos altered to suit changed conditions in the 4th century.

Lykourgos, however, says that “the formulation [of the Greeks’ oath at Plataia] was not their own but imitated the oath that was traditional among


2. See van Wees 2006; of the earlier bibliography, Siewert 1972 remains the most detailed treatment.
That assertion suggests that we ought to look for an Athenian precedent for the Oath of Plataia, or at least—allowing for an Athenian bias on Lykourgos’s part—a precedent involving Athens. I would like to suggest that the Acharnai stele records that precedent rather than the Oath of Plataia itself.

3. Habicht (1961, p. 18) interprets Lykourgos as referring by “the oath that was traditional among you [Athenians]” to the ephebic oath, which he has just quoted. But as van Wees observes (2006, p. 126), the two oaths recorded in Lykourg. 1.76–77 and 81 have “next to nothing in common.” Van Wees concludes that the Oath of Plataia did not have an Athenian model. I suggest instead that Lykourgos was not referring to the ephebic oath, which leaves open the possibility that the Oath of Plataia was modeled on a different Athenian oath.
Before discussing my reasons for rejecting the identification of the Acharnai oath as the Oath of Plataia, I first present the text and translation of the Acharnai oath followed by oaths from the Persian Wars known from literary sources.4

THE ACHARNAI OATH

21  ὄρκος ὁν ὀμοσαν Ἀθηναῖοι ὅτε ἥμελλον μάχεσθαι πρὸς τοὺς βαρβάρους: ὁμοσαν ἔως ἃν ἦρ, καὶ οὐ περὶ πλέονος
poήσομαι τὸ ζήν ἢ τὸ ἐλεύθερος εἶναι, καὶ οὐκ ἄπολειψο τὸν ταξίαρχον οὐδὲ τὸν ἐνωμοτάρχην οὔτε ἄνωτα ἄποθανον, καὶ οὐκ ἀπεμι ἡμὲν ἤμεν ἤπεμυνές

24  ἄφηγόνται, καὶ ποήσομαι ὅ τι ἀν οἱ στρατηγοὶ παραγγέλωσιν, καὶ τοὺς ἄποθανόντας τῶν συμμαχοσαμένον θάψω ἐν τοῖς σύνοι ἀεὶ καὶ ἀθανατον οὐδένα καταλείψω καὶ νν.

32  υἱὸς καὶ μαχόμενος τοὺς βαρβάρους διεκ- 

36  στεί τον Θηβαίων πόλιν, καὶ οὐκ ἀναστῆσω Ἀθηναῖος οὐδὲ Ἑλλὰς Πλαταιαῖος οὐδὲ τῶν άλλων πόλεων τῶν συμμαχοσαμένον οὐδεμίαν, οὐδὲ λιμοί περιήπνομαι ἐρημιένοις οὐδὲ ὠντας οὔτε πολεμίους, καὶ εἰ μὲν ἔμπεδοκροῦν τὰ ἐν τοῖς ὑ

40  ῥκοί γεγραμμένα, ἤ πόλεις ἡμὴ άνωσος εὐη, εἰ δὲ μὴ, νοσοῖ τι καὶ πόλεις ἡμὴ ἄρορθης ἐφ' ἐκ, εἰ δὲ μὴ, πορθοῦτο καὶ φέροι ἡμὴ, εἰ δὲ μὴ, ἄφορος εἰ, καὶ γυναῖκες τίκται-

44  εν ἐνικότα γονεύσω, εἰ δὲ μὴ, τέρατα καὶ βοσκόματα τίκται ἐνικότα βοσκόμασι, εἰ δὲ μὴ, τέρατα ταῦτα ὁμόσαντες κατακαλύπτοντας τὰ σφάγια ταῖς ἁσπίζον ὑπό

48  ὁ σάλπιγγος ἀρὰν ἐποίησαν, εἰ τι τῶν ὀμομοιμένον παραβαίνον μὲ ἐμπεδοκοῖν τὰ ἐν τοῖς ὑρκοῖς γεγραμμένα, αὐτοῖς ἄγος εἰναι τοὺς ὁμόσασιν. vacat

21  Oath which the Athenians swore when they were about to fight against the barbarians.
I shall fight while I live, and I shall not put

24  life before being free (eleutheros), and
I shall not desert the taxiarchoi nor the
enómotarchés, neither while they live nor when they are dead,
and I shall not depart unless the leaders (hégemones)

28  lead the way, and I shall do whatever the
generals (stratégoi) command, and I shall bury
in the same place the dead of those who were allied, and I shall leave no one unburied. And when
32 I have been victorious fighting against the barbarians, I shall (totally destroy and) dedicate a tenth of the city of the Thebans, and I shall not raze Athens or Sparta or Plataea or any of the other cities that were allied, and I shall not overlook those who are oppressed by hunger and I shall not keep them from running water, whether they are friends or enemies. And if I keep true to what has been written in the oath may my city be free from sickness, if not, may it be sick; and may my city be unravaged, but if not, may it be ravaged; and may my <land> bear, but if not, may it be barren; and may the women bear children like their parents, but if not, monsters; and may the animals bear young like the animals, but if not, monsters. They swore these oaths, covered the sacrificial victims with their shields and at the sound of the trumpet made a curse: if they transgressed what was sworn and did not keep true to what had been written in the oath, a curse was to be upon the very people that had sworn.

GREEK OATHS FROM THE PERSIAN WARS

Literary sources record several separate but similar oaths from the time of the Persian Wars. Best known is the oath that Lykourgos says the Greeks exchanged at Plataia in 479 B.C.:

I shall not value life more than freedom (eleutheria), and I shall not abandon the leaders (hégemenes) whether they are alive or dead. I shall bury all those allies (summachoi) killed in the battle. And when I have conquered the barbarians in war, I shall not destroy any of the cities that have fought for Greece, but I shall (destroy and) dedicate a tenth of (the property belonging to) all those cities that sided with the barbarian. And I shall not rebuild a single one of the shrines that have been burned and razed by the barbarians, but shall allow them to remain for future generations as a memorial of the barbarians' impiety.¹⁵

Diodoros, probably relying on the 4th-century B.C. historian Ephoros, reports a similar oath exchanged by the Greeks when they assembled at the Isthmus prior to the battle at Plataia:

I shall not value life more than freedom (eleutheria), and I shall not abandon the leaders (hégemenes) whether they are alive or dead. I shall bury all those allies (summachoi) killed in the battle, and when I have conquered the barbarians in war, I shall not destroy

5. Lykourg. 1.81: Ου ποιήσομαι περι πλείονος το ζην της ελευθερίας, ούδ' ἐγκαταλείψω τοὺς ἡμείόνοις οὔτε ζώντας οὔτε ἀποθανόντας, ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἐν τῇ μάζῃ τελευτήσαντας τῶν συμμάχων ἀπαντὸς θάψω, καὶ κρατήσας τῷ πολέμῳ τοὺς βαρβάρους, τῶν μὲν μαχησαμένων ὑπὲρ τῆς Ἑλλάδος πόλεων οὐδεμιᾶν ἀνάστατον ποιήσω, τὰς δὲ τὰ τοῦ βαρβάρου προελομένας ὀπάσας δεκατέσσω. καὶ τῶν ἱερῶν τῶν ἐμπρησθέντων καὶ καταβληθέντων ὑπὸ τῶν βαρβάρων οὐδὲν ἀναικοδομήσω παντάπασιν, ἀλλ' ὑπόμηνμα τοῖς ἐπιγεννημένοις ἐάσῳ καταλείπεσθαι τῆς τῶν βαρβάρων ἁσβείας.
any of the cities that have struggled together, and I shall not
rebuild a single one of the sanctuaries that have been burned or
demolished, but shall allow them to remain for future generations
as a reminder of the barbarians’ impiety.6

Diodoros omits the pledge to destroy the cities that went over to the bar-
barians, a promise that he elsewhere says the allies had voted a year earlier,
before the battle of Thermopylai in 480 B.C.:

The Greeks who were meeting at the Isthmus voted to (destroy
and) dedicate to the gods, after their victory in the war, a tenth of
(the property belonging to) the Greeks who voluntarily chose the
cause of the Persians.7

Here Diodoros is consistent with our earliest source, Herodotos, who
paraphrases an oath sworn before the battle of Thermopylai:

Against all of these (peoples who gave earth and water to the Per-
sians) the Greeks who declared war against the barbarian entered
into a sworn agreement. The oath was as follows: After the success-
ful conclusion of the war, they would (destroy and) dedicate to the
god at Delphi a tenth of (the property belonging to) the Greeks
who surrendered to the Persian voluntarily.8

DISCUSSION

Like the oaths from the Persian Wars found in Lykourgos and Diodoros,
the Acharnai oath pledges one to fight as long as one is alive, to stay with
the officers, to bury allies, to preserve the allies’ cities, and to destroy any
city that joined the Persians and dedicate a tenth of its property. Neverthe-
less, the Acharnai oath differs in some interesting ways.

Line 24: Instead of the abstract noun eleutheria, the Acharnai oath
uses the adjective eleutheros.

Lines 25–26: Instead of promising simply not to abandon the leader-
s (hégemones), the Acharnai oath specifies the taxiarchos and the enómarchés.

Line 30: Instead of referring to the dead of the allies (summachoi),
the Acharnai oath mentions the dead τῶν συμμάχεισαμένων,
which might be translated as “of the fellow-fighters” in order
to bring out the difference.

6. Diod. Sic. 11.29.3: οὗ ποιήσομαι
περὶ πλείονος τὸ ζῆν τῆς ἐλευθερίας,
οὐδὲ καταλείψω τοὺς ἡγεμόνας ὀὔτε
ζώντας ὀὔτε ἀποθανόντας, ἀλλὰ τοὺς
ἐν τῇ μέχρι τελευτήσαντας τῶν συμμά-
χων πάντας θάψω, καὶ κρατήσω τῇ
πολέμῳ τῶν βαρβάρων ὀὐδεμίαν τῶν
ἀγνοισμένων πόλεων ἀνάσαται τοῖς
ποιήσω, καὶ τῶν ἰερῶν τῶν ἐμπρησθέν-
tῶν καὶ καταβληθέντων οὐδὲν ἀνοικο-
dομήσω, ἀλλὰ ἐπόμενα τοῖς ἐπιγινο-
μένοις ἔσσω καὶ καταλείψω τῆς τῶν
βαρβάρων ἁρείας.

7. Diod. Sic. 11.3.3: οἱ δ’ ἐν Ἰσθμῷ
συνεδρέουσιν τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἐνηργί-
σαντος τοὺς μὲν ἐθελοντί τῶν Ἑλλήνων
ἐλομένους τὰ Περσῶν δεκατεύσαι τοῖς
θεοῖς, ἐπάν τῷ πολέμῳ κρατήσωσι.

8. Hdt. 7.132.2: ἐπὶ τούτους οἱ
"Ἐλληνες ἔτοιμοι ὄρκπνοι ὅ τι βαρβάρω
πόλεως ἀπεράντως, τὸ δὲ ὄρκιον οἷος
ἐθέλη, ὅσιος τῷ Πέρσῃ ἔδοσαν σφέας
οὕτως "Ελληνες ἔντεες, μὴ ἀναγκασ-
θέντες, καταστάντων σκλ. εὐ τῶν πρη-
μάτων, τούτους δεκατεύσαι τῷ ἔν Δελ-
φοὶ κράτει.
Lines 30–31: Instead of promising simply to bury these dead, the Acharnai oath pledges that they will be buried in the same place, that is, the same place where they died.9

Line 33: Instead of promising the destruction of all the cities that sided with the Persians, the Acharnai oath mentions only Thebes.

Lines 33–36: Instead of promising not to raze any of the cities that fought against the Persians, the Acharnai oath names Athens, Sparta, and Plataia and adds "or any of the other cities that were allied."

Lines 41–42: Instead of promising never to rebuild the sanctuaries that the Persians have destroyed, the Acharnai oath expresses the wish that the oath-taker’s city be unravaged.

As Rhodes and Osborne have noted, these differences show that the Acharnai oath must have derived from a documentary source rather than from the surviving literary versions of the Oath of Plataia.10 I would go further and argue that the inscription records not the Oath of Plataia, but an oath sworn on an earlier occasion.

Take the last difference first. It would be odd for the Athenians in 479 to hope that Athens would be unravaged, after it had been burned twice. The Acharnai oath makes better sense if it was sworn before the Persians burned the Athenians’ sanctuaries and ravaged their land, rather than at Plataia.

Second, why are Athens, Sparta, and Plataia—and only Athens, Sparta, and Plataia—named? The Serpent Column, the monument erected at Delphi immediately after the victory at Plataia, listed all 31 Greek allies, starting with the Spartans, Athenians, and Corinthians.11 Plataia was fourteenth. Similarly, the offering to Zeus dedicated at Olympia after the battle listed the participants, beginning with the Spartans and the Athenians, and Plataia was fourteenth in this list, too (Paus. 5.23). Why would the Acharnai oath specify Athens, Sparta, and Plataia? One would expect either all of the cities to be listed, as on the Serpent Column and the offering to Zeus, or none of the cities to be specified individually, as in the literary versions of the Oath of Plataia. The Acharnai oath reads like an oath composed by the Athenians, Spartans, and Plataians for an occasion when they expected to fight but were not sure others would join them. Was there such an occasion when Athens, Sparta, and Plataia faced the barbarians alone? Yes—or rather there would have been, had the Spartans arrived a day earlier in 490 B.C. for the battle of Marathon. This earlier occasion also explains the order of the names in the oath. One would expect Sparta to be first on a list composed in 479 B.C., while Athens would naturally receive priority in 490 B.C. when the fighting was expected to be in Athenian territory.

9. A reader suggested that “in the same (place)” might mean “in the same tomb,” that is, a communal burial. Neither at Marathon nor at Plataia were all the dead buried together; at Marathon there was one mound for the Athenians and another for the Plataians and the slaves (Paus. 1.32.3), and at Plataia the Greeks buried their dead in separate mounds for each city (Hdt. 9.85). I follow Fornara (1977, pp. 56–57, no. 57) and van Wees (2006, pp. 126, 132–133), who translate the phrase “on the spot.” Pritchett (1985, pp. 116–117) also understands the phrase as referring to burial on the battlefield.


Third, a pledge to bury the dead where they died (lines 30–31) recalls specifically the battle of Marathon, as Thucydides reports that the Athenians traditionally brought their war dead back to Athens for burial, but made an exception for those who fought at Marathon.\(^\text{12}\)

Fourth, the reference in line 30 to “fellow-fighters” fits the situation at Marathon better than at Plataia, because it would apply to “comrades from one’s own community” as well as to allies from other cities.\(^\text{13}\) Freed slaves fought with the Athenians at Marathon, and those who died were buried in a mound together with the Plataian dead (Paus. 1.32.3, 7.15.7).

Fifth, a pledge not to desert the taxiarchos and the enómotarchês (lines 25–26) sounds odd for Plataia. As Peter Siewert has pointed out,\(^\text{14}\) an enómotarchês commanded the smallest unit in the Spartan army, consisting of 32–40 men. But a taxiarchos commanded one of the 10 Athenian tribal contingents, or about 800 men at Plataia where the Athenians had 8,000 total (Hdt. 9.28.6)—not the smallest unit in the Athenian army at Plataia, where Olympiodoros son of Lampon was a lochagos or leader of a lochos, in this case of 300 men (Hdt. 9.21.3). Why does the pledge not make reference to the lochagos? Siewert’s explanation (that the Athenians felt closer to their taxiarchos, whom they elected, than to their lochagos, whom the taxiarchos appointed) is not convincing. Because an oath such as this aimed at cohesion, and because cohesion in armed forces means above all loyalty to the men close by, we would expect the Oath of Plataia to pair enómotarchês and lochagos. Perhaps, though, the Athenian lochos did not yet exist in 490 B.C., so that the taxiarchos commanded the smallest unit of the Athenians.

Sixth, singling out Thebes for destruction (line 33) would be more understandable in 490 B.C. than in 479, since the Greeks swore in 480 to destroy all the cities that submitted voluntarily to the Persians (Hdt. 7.132.2). Although Herodotos does not say the oath mentioned them by name, Herodotos 7.132.1 lists the Thessalians, Dolopes, Enienses, Periaibians, Lokrians, Magnesians, Melians, Achaians of Phthia, Thebans, and all the Boiotians except the men of Thespiai and Plataia. Van Wees suggests that the purpose of the clause in the Acharnai oath was to bind the Greeks to an immediate assault on Thebes as soon as they defeated the Persians in 479,\(^\text{15}\) but this suggestion is not compelling. Why would the coalition forces ignore all the other transgressors? In 490, on the other hand, there might well have been bitter feelings toward Thebes. Although Herodotos’s account of the events leading up to the battle of Marathon focuses on the Aiginetans, he does mention that some mainland Greek cities offered earth and water to the Persians (6.49). Thebes might have been one of them, just as it was in 480. Since the former tyrant Hippias was accompanying the Persians, his father’s connections with Thebes might also be relevant: Peisistratos had received help from Thebes (Hdt. 1.61.3; Arist. Ath. Pol. 15.2). Athenians might have suspected the Thebans of supporting Hippias’s return to power. Peisistratos had received help from Eretria too, which would explain concerns about Eretria’s loyalty (Hdt. 1.61.2, 6.100; Arist. Ath. Pol. 15.2).

Athens and Thebes had come into conflict several times in the generation before Marathon. In 519 B.C.,\(^\text{16}\) the Plataians asked the Athenians to help them against Thebes. The Athenians sent troops and a battle was about

12. Thuc. 2.34.5. This passage has been extensively debated since F. Jacoby (1938) argued that burial on the spot was normal for Athenians until the 460s. For more recent bibliography, see Hornblower 1991, pp. 292–294. Marathon was not the only exception to Thucydides’ rule. It may, however, have been the first collective burial outside Athens. Herodotos (1.30.5) records only an earlier case of an individual (Tellos) buried on the spot, and the Simonides epigram recording a public burial near the Euripos (Page 1975, p. 9, no. 2), if it does refer to the battle of 506 B.C. (see below), might refer to the Thebans or the Chalkidians rather than to the Athenians. So while Marathon was not the only exception (Hdt. 9.85 records a famous later one in the collective Athenian burial after the battle of Plataia), it might have been the first and most important.


16. The date comes from Thucydides (3.68.5), not Herodotos. Against proposed emendations of Thucydides’ “93rd” to “83rd,” “73rd,” or even “53rd,” which would move the date down to 509, 499, or 479 B.C., see the compelling note by Hornblower (1991, pp. 464–465).
to begin when the Corinthians intervened. Although the Thebans agreed to the border established by the Corinthians, they attacked the Athenians during their withdrawal and were defeated (Hdt. 6.108). In 506 B.C., the Thebans joined a three-pronged invasion of Attica (Hdt. 5.74–77). While Kleomenes and Demaratos led a force of Spartans and Peloponnesian allies from the west, the Thebans attacked from the north, capturing the border villages of Oinoe and Hysiai, and the Chalkidians came in from the northeast and began to ravage Athenian land.

The Athenians first confronted the Spartans at Eleusis, and after dissension led to the Peloponnesians’ withdrawal, the Athenians marched against Chalkis. When the Thebans came to the straits to support the Chalkidians, the Athenians engaged and defeated the Thebans, killing many and capturing 700. On the same day the Athenians crossed over to Euboia and defeated the Chalkidians as well, taking more prisoners. They subsequently imposed 4,000 settlers (klêrouchoi) on Chalkis. From a tenth of the ransom accepted for the prisoners, they erected a bronze four-horse chariot on the Acropolis as an offering to Athena.17 Later the Thebans invaded Attica again and were defeated again, after which they turned to the Aiginetans for help. The Aiginetans responded by raiding Athenian territory, the start of a long “undeclared” war between Athens and Aigina (Hdt. 5.79–81). Lingering resentment from these incidents could explain the formulation of an oath in 490 to obliterate Thebes.

An inscribed column excavated a few years ago in Thebes might refer to a very recent episode that Herodotos does not mention. The text, inscribed in letters of Late Archaic form, reads as follows:

\[ \ldots \text{Ios FOinóς και Φυλας} \\
\ldots \text{Ielóniteς και Ελευσίνα} \\
\ldots \text{La Kallída λυσάμενοι} \\
\ldots \text{Iωι ανέθειαν} \]

Vasilis Aravantinos has interpreted the inscription as a dedication made after the 506 B.C. invasion of Attica, representing the Boiotians’ version of what happened (a limited success, from their point of view).18 Kurt Raaf–laub suggested instead that λυσάμενοι refers to the liberation of Chalkis, that is, the expulsion of the Athenian klêrouchoi.19 It seems possible that while Athens was distracted by Aigina in 490 B.C., the Thebans took the field against Athens yet again.20 If this invasion compelled the Athenians to withdraw from Chalkis, that would explain why the 4,000 Athenian klêrouchoi were available to be sent to help Eretria when the Persians landed fighting between Athens and Aigina took place after the battle of Marathon (as preferred by Scott [2005, pp. 546–552, with references to earlier studies]), Athens’ appeal to Sparta for help against Aigina, Kleomenes’ two invasions of Aigina, and the deposition of Aiginetan hostages all happened no later than the spring of 490 B.C. These actions alone might have spurred the Thebans into action.

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17. For a base, or rather two bases, with the inscription recorded by Herodotos (one with the two hexameters transposed), see IG I 501 = Meiggs-Lewis, GHI 15.
18. The text given here is that presented by Whitely (2005, p. 46), who quotes a report by Aravantinos and publishes a photograph (fig. 80). A fuller publication is expected to appear in the proceedings of the Twelfth International Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy held in Barcelona in 2002.
20. On Athens and Aigina, see Hdt. 6.49–94.1. Many scholars have questioned whether all the disputes and fighting described here can fit into the interval between Dareios’s demand for earth and water (6.48) and the battle of Marathon. I believe that they can, if Dareios’s heralds actually went to Greece before Mardonios’s campaign in 492 (so Rhodes 2003). Even if all the
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(Hdt. 6.100.1), and why the Athenians might well have been furious enough to want Thebes destroyed.21

One last difference between the Acharnai oath and the literary versions of the Oath of Plataia, the first one noted above, points to Marathon as a more appropriate occasion for the inscribed oath. Because Thucydides writes (2.71.2) that after the battle of Plataia the Spartan king Pausanias sacrificed to Zeus Eleutherios, the adjective eleutheros in line 24 of the Acharnai oath might bring Plataia to mind. But the distinction between slave and free in war preceded Marathon too, as Herakleitos’s famous lines show.22 In fact, if the Persian war epigrams refer exclusively to Marathon, the connection between (avoiding) slavery and Marathon is explicit.23 There is, I think, no difficulty in believing that Greeks used the word eleutheros in an oath before Marathon. The contrast in language with the literary versions of the Oath of Plataia may be significant, for if the Oath of Plataia did use eleutheria, it would be one of the earliest known occurrences of the abstract noun, which is not otherwise securely attested until Pindar’s Isthmian 8 in 478 B.C.24 It would not be surprising if an earlier oath was more concrete.

Despite the heading in lines 21–22, several points suggest that the oath was not a purely Athenian oath, but rather the oath of an alliance:

1. A military officer called an enomotarchês is well attested for Sparta and is only attested for Sparta. The references to taxiarchês and generals (stratêgoi) suit Athens, and the leaders (hégemones) would include the Athenian polemarchos Kallistratos, but it seems unlikely that Athens had sworn bands (enómotai).

2. It would be odd for the Athenians to swear not to destroy their own city (“un peu comique,” Robert called it), but natural to list Athens, Sparta, and Plataia in an oath to be taken by citizens of all three.

3. The oath was written (lines 39–40, 50), which suggests that it was worked out in diplomatic negotiations and taken to the three cities for their soldiers to swear as they prepared to depart.

When would the Athenians have sent ambassadors to ask for help and negotiate this oath? Herodotos mentions only the request to Sparta delivered by the runner Pheidippides (6.105–106), which he places after the Persians landed at Marathon (6.102) but before the Athenians left the city. The fact that the Plataians came to Marathon shows that there was at

21. Van Wees (2006, p. 136) points out that “the Thebans to be tithed” became proverbial in Athens (Xen. Hell. 6.3.20, 6.5.35), which ought to mean that there was an oath with this provision separate from the Oath of Plataia.

22. “War is father of all, king of all; and some he shows as gods, others as men, some he makes slaves, others free” (Diels–Kranz 22b53, late 6th century B.C.).

23. See Matthaiou 2003, pp. 194–202, on IG I 503/504 (Meiggs–Lewis, GHI² 26). Matthaiou (2004) stresses that the text of Agora I 4256, which B. D. Meritt (1956) believed was a 4th-century B.C. copy of the first epigram, does not overlap with it and is therefore not a copy. Tracy (2004) identifies the cutter of Agora I 4256 with the cutter of IG II² 913, and therefore dates it to about 190 B.C. The significance of these articles is to remove from the restoration of the first epigram the phrase “on swift ships,” which had been seen as an obstacle to the view that the epigram concerned Marathon.

24. Raaflaub 2004, pp. 61–62. The earliest occurrence of eleutheria would be line 15 of the Themistokes Decree (Meiggs–Lewis, GHI² 23), if only we could be certain that the word was used in 480 B.C. For later inscriptions connecting eleutheria with Marathon, see Agora I 7529 (176/5 B.C., as cited in Matthaiou 2003, p. 197), IG II² 1006 (122/1 B.C.), and IG II² 2788 (end of the 2nd century B.C.).
least one other Athenian request. Plato says that the Athenians sent requests for help “in all directions” (πανταχόσε) when they received a message from Datis that he had captured and “netted” Eretria. The reference in the Acharnai oath to “other cities that were allied” (or “that fought together,” lines 35–36) supports Plato’s story. Though no source mentions earlier conversations, the Athenians probably talked to their friends earlier, too. The Eretrians appealed to Athens for help more than a week before the Persians landed at Marathon (Hdt. 6.100–102). No doubt the Athenians had heard earlier still about the Persian attacks on Karystos, Delos, and Naxos, and I suspect that they learned about the Persian force even when it was still gathering in Cilicia. The exact moment when they realized that Datis’s instructions were to enslave the Eretrians and the Athenians cannot be known, but the landing at Marathon was not a surprise attack. Pheidippides’ message may only have been the last of a series of communications, and may have amounted to: “They’ve landed; come now.”

How did Dion son of Dion from Acharnai, a priest of Ares and Athena Areia, come to inscribe this oath together with the ephebic oath on a stele as a dedication, with a pediment above containing a set of military equipment (a round hoplite shield flanked by a Corinthian helmet and a pair of greaves on one side and a corselet and some other object, perhaps a cloak, on the other)? Noting that the earliest known quotation of the ephebic oath was by Aischines in a speech urging action against Philip II of Macedon in 348 B.C. (Dem. 19.303), Rhodes and Osborne follow Robert in dating the inscription to the third quarter of the 4th century. They interpret the dedication as Dion’s attempt to spur fellow citizens into action against Philip by reminding them of past Athenian success. Van Wees, noting the particular hostility to Thebes in the oath, prefers to follow Georges Daux in advocating a slightly earlier date, in the second quarter of the 4th century when the Athenians and Spartans became allies against Thebes for the first time since the Persian Wars. In her study of Attic documentary reliefs, Carol Lawton comments that “there is little in the style of the relief to argue decisively for one date or the other,” though she inclines toward the later one. Like van Wees, I am particularly struck by the fact that Xenophon twice refers to the hope that the Thebans would be tithed, as the old expression went (Htell. 6.3.20, 6.5.35), and prefer a date in the second quarter of the 4th century. After the Thebans fought with the Athenians against the Macedonians at Chaironeia in 338, and especially after Alexander destroyed Thebes in 335, recalling the Oath of Marathon would have been inappropriate, and in 331 Lykourgos accordingly cited the Oath of Plataia instead.

How Dion got his text of the oath is a subject for speculation. James Sickinger recently remarked, quite sensibly, that “authentic records can be just as valuable in promoting patriotism as forged ones.” In his study of public archives in Athens, he concludes that in the late 6th century B.C. Athenian officials began to keep at least some records. Dion may have found a copy of the original decree calling for the Athenians to make an alliance with the Spartans, Plataians, and anyone else who would fight, and to swear a common oath. Comparisons with other alliances and agreements inscribed in the 5th century B.C. suggest that the document might have included (1) a decree with a statement of the alliance and provisions for

25. Pl. Leg. 698d and, by implication, Menex. 240c. Both passages ignore the Plataians’ positive response.
27. See van Wees 2006, p. 152.
swearing the oath, and (2) the text of the oath. Dion might have quoted the text of the oath and appended, on the basis of the provisions in the decree, a description of how the oath was sworn. 30 This procedure would produce the text that we now read, which sounds redundant when the oath ends with a string of curses and then the description of the swearing ceremony summarizes the curse. Dion might have found all of this information in one document.

This decree might in fact have been the motion of Miltiades, calling (in addition) for the Athenians to bring provisions and take the field, and to free those of their slaves who were capable of fighting. 31 Of course these decisions might have been separate motions, and the name of Miltiades might have been erroneously attached to them. But someone had to make the proposals, and why not the man later credited with the leading role in the victory? If Miltiades did propose the Acharnai oath, and if it was inscribed in the second quarter of the 4th century B.C., then Aischines was not the first to link the ephebic oath and the Miltiades decree (Dem. 19.303). Dion had done it before him. If Dion had his inscription cut after Aischines’ speech in 348 B.C., then the influence probably went in the other direction.

CONCLUSIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

The barbarians against whom the Athenians swore the oath inscribed on the Acharnai stele are more likely to have been led by Datis in 490 B.C. than by Mardonios in 479. The extreme circumstances faced by the Athenians before their victory at Marathon would have encouraged them to take extraordinary steps to find more troops and to encourage everyone to remain loyal. The Acharnai stele preserves the promises they made to the Spartans, the Plataeans, any other Greeks who came to fight on their side (none, in the event), and not least to each other and the slaves they freed. Presumably the Plataeans swore the oath before departing from their city, and the 2,000 Spartans as well, even though they arrived after the battle. Given the Athenians’ tendency to think of themselves as having fought alone at Marathon, it is entirely plausible that Lykourgos could refer to an Athenian-Spartan-Plataian oath as “the oath that was traditional among you [Athenians].” Lykourgos meant that the Greek allies used the Oath of Marathon as a template for their Oath of Plataea.

This interpretation does not undermine van Wees’s suggestion that the oath was shaped in part by the Spartans, but it implies that the Acharnai stele does not tell us as much about Archaic Sparta as van Wees has suggested. The inscription says that the Athenians used the ritual described in lines 46–51, for example, and we cannot be sure that the Spartans used the same ritual, or that the oath and the ritual were traditional among the Spartan “sworn bands.”

Finally, if the arguments presented here are correct, the authenticity of the Oath of Plataea should be debated without worrying about whether the literary versions are consistent with the Acharnai oath. The inscription found at Acharnai is evidence for an Oath of Marathon sworn in 490 B.C., not for the Oath of Plataea sworn in 479 B.C. 32
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Peter M. Krentz
Davidson College
Department of Classics
Box 6973
Davidson, North Carolina 28035-6973
pekrentz@davidson.edu