

BOOK REVIEW

The Battle of Arginusae: Victory at Sea and Its Tragic Aftermath in the Final Years of the Peloponnesian War. By DEBRA HAMEL. Witness to Ancient History. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. Pp. xvii + 125. Paperback, \$19.95. ISBN 978-1-4214-1681-6.

In the grand scheme of the Peloponnesian War, the Battle of Arginusae mattered little: Athens' desperate victory at sea only managed to stave off their final defeat for another year. Yet the dreadful aftermath of the battle has exerted a powerful hold on the historical imagination. Why did the Athenian people turn on their victorious commanders and condemn them to death for failing to recover the bodies of the dead? Does their hasty decision prove that radical democracy is a fundamentally flawed system of government, prone to manipulation by demagogues?

These are difficult questions to answer, not least because Thucydides' magisterial history breaks off two years before the battle. In her slim but intelligent treatment, Debra Hamel pulls together the literary sources that do touch upon Arginusae, principally Xenophon's *Hellenica* and Diodorus Siculus, and attempts to elucidate both the course of the battle itself and the political-cum-judicial re-cremations that followed it. The Witness to Ancient History series is geared toward general audiences, and so Hamel alternates between thematic chapters addressing particular topics—the nature of trireme warfare, the relationship between Athenian generals and the *demos*—with chapters that continue the central narrative. In the end, she succeeds splendidly in bringing both the battle itself and the debacle that followed it to life.

Hamel's discussion of Athenian deployment and tactics in the battle displays a fine command of recent scholarship on the topic. She argues (45–50) that the Athenian fleet was drawn up in two lines, using the Arginusae islands themselves to lengthen its line and resist a possible *diekplous* by the (for once) technically superior Spartan sailors, and that these unorthodox tactics were key in the hurriedly assembled Athenian fleet's improbable victory. The real strength of her treatment, though—especially for newcomers to the study of ancient history—is her keen awareness of the practicalities of ancient naval warfare, informed by data and observations from the test voyages of the reconstructed trireme *Olympias*

(26–33). In the compass of only a few pages, she paints a vivid and memorable picture of the sweaty, unpleasant life of a trireme crew—forced to work themselves to exhaustion, relieving themselves without leaving their places, and the lowest rank further handicapped by being unable even to see their oars strike the water. Thanks to Hamel, we gain a fuller sense both of the difficulties of ancient seafaring and of the immense accomplishment of the trained crews that managed to overcome those difficulties, even in the heat of battle.

But it was, of course, the aftermath of Arginusae that captured the interest of ancient and modern observers alike; and here Hamel’s analysis is equally good. She first gives a synoptic outline of the nature of the Athenian *strategia* and the mechanisms that subordinated it to the *demos*, stressing that accountability to the people was a double-edged sword: while it prevented commanders from exceeding their authority, it also could breed indecisiveness and timidity, as in the notorious case of Nicias during the Sicilian Expedition. Hamel then reconstructs a timeline of the events following the Athenian victory at Arginusae, nimbly negotiating the source difficulties posed by the sometimes conflicting accounts of Xenophon and Diodorus. She is, I think, right to point (79–80) to a piece of bad luck as the primary factor in the generals’ conviction: their initial speech of self-defense, which was winning over the *ekklesia*, had to be interrupted by nightfall, and before the assembly could take up the matter again, the Apaturia, or festival of phratries, intervened—a celebration of family that would have certainly intensified feelings of grief on the part of those whose kinsmen’s bodies were not recovered, even if (as Hamel cogently argues) Xenophon’s claim that Theramenes whipped up popular anger against the generals during the festival is an unjustified smear.

More controversially, Hamel takes the stance (82–83) that the assembly’s decision to try the generals en masse was not, in fact, a violation of any explicit law, but merely contrary to custom, the *graphe paranomon* of Euryptolemus notwithstanding. Her argument here hinges upon a fine distinction between the “law” and “custom” senses of *nomos* that might have been alien to the Athenians themselves; but even so, she has done a useful service in problematizing the consensus narrative of the trial as a blatant act of illegality, which has prevailed in the historical tradition ever since antiquity. Hamel closes with a pointed summary (91–94) that recognizes the grave mistake the Athenian people made in the trial, while challenging facile attempts by historians to use the episode as “proof” that the Athenian democracy itself was fatally flawed.

Small book though it is, *The Battle of Arginusae* is a fine achievement. The general readers for whom it is meant will be both informed and satisfied, while even specialists will find stimulating points of argument. Thanks to Hamel, one of the most intriguing, yet problematic, episodes in classical Greek history has received welcome illumination.

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