

BOOK REVIEW

The Plague of War: Athens, Sparta, and the Struggle for Ancient Greece. By JENNIFER T. ROBERTS. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xxviii + 416. Hardcover, \$34.95. ISBN 978-0-19-999664-3.

The civil war that engulfed Greece and most of the Mediterranean world in the latter part of the 5th century BCE has been chronicled, summarized, and analyzed probably more than any other military struggle in the ancient Greek world. From the critical presentation by Thucydides (down to 411) to the studies by scores of eminent scholars, students of this epic strife have never lacked for systematic accounts. Now Roberts has offered a contribution to our bookshelves, both those of academics and general readers, with a welcome and refreshing re-consideration of the war. This reviewer did not think that yet another study of the Peloponnesian War was warranted, but Roberts has shown precisely how invaluable her approach has proved.

Over the course of 20 chapters, *The Plague of War* retells not only the (second) Peloponnesian War from 432–404 BCE, but as well the events that precipitated and succeeded it. After an introduction that summarizes the war and its aftermath down to the crushing defeat of Sparta at the hands of her erstwhile ally Thebes at Leuctra in 371 and the subsequent termination of Theban hegemony at Mantinea in 362, Roberts begins with “Setting the Stage,” stepping back to the beginning of the fifth century. Aristagoras of Miletus in Ionia arrives in mainland Greece with a novel object—a bronze map—with which he hoped to persuade the dominant city-states of Sparta and Athens to lend military assistance to a rebellion he was fomenting against the Persian Empire.

The Spartans recoiled at a war that would take them so far from home, or so Herodotus and Roberts relate, but the Athenians and the neighboring Eretrians lent 25 ships to the effort. The unsuccessful Ionian revolt introduces Athens and Sparta to the reader, and from there Roberts pauses to provide a thumbnail sketch of the evolution of Athenian democracy. This method of sustaining the narrative while digressing with relevant asides proves surprisingly effective; indeed, it has an Herodotean flavor that enriches the volume considerably. Philosophy from the pre-Socratics to Aristotle, architecture and especially the work on the Athenian Acropolis, religion, drama, sexual relations, political theory, intellec-

tual history: these topics and others populate the pages of *The Plague of War*, not in an encyclopedic way but with just enough substance to guide the reader through life in Greece over nearly 150 years.

By the end of the second chapter Roberts has taken us through the Persian Wars, the rise of the Delian League, and the first conflict between Athens and Sparta. Chapter Three, “Sparta Provoked, Athens Intransigent,” lays out the standard causes of the outbreak of war—Corcyra’s conflict with Epidamnus and Corinth, Potidaea’s rebellion from the Delian League *cum* Athenian empire and Athens’ military response, and Athenian decrees barring nearby Megara from economic activity within Athens’ spheres of influence. Roberts maintains convincingly that the real cause of the war was not only, as Thucydides asserted, Spartan fear of Athenian power, but as well Spartan fear of losing her grip on her allies.

Here and elsewhere annotations provide the reader with the critical primary sources (Thucydides looms large throughout the majority of the text) and, on occasion, scholarship on particularly thorny issues. For example, Aristophanes in his *Acharnians* humorously blames the outbreak of hostilities on the theft of prostitutes first from Megara by soused Athenians and then by Megarians from Athens and, in particular, from the brothel run by Aspasia of Miletus, Pericles’ partner. Roberts’ note on this topic – perhaps the longest in the book—provides the reader with sufficient references to the literary evidence and modern scholarship to pursue the subject further. Elsewhere, Roberts tends to be more restrained in the footnotes, but the reader is routinely reminded of the evidence that supports the narrative of the war. Scholarship that is cited and provided in a 12-page bibliography is almost exclusively in English, indicating the intended audiences—interested lay readers, students, and academics seeking a coherent, tightly argued, and properly sourced account.

Chapters Three to Sixteen cover the war down to its seeming terminus at the Battle of Aegospotami in 405/4, so we should expect the concluding episode about the negotiated surrender of Athens as the last word. But Roberts argues that the war did not end with Lysander rebuffing the demand of the Thebans and Corinthians to raze the city, recalling the Athenians’ heroic efforts against the Persians so many years before. Instead, we learn about the Thirty Tyrants, the travesty of a trial against Socrates, the Corinthian War and the King’s Peace, the Second Athenian Empire, and the rise and fall (in 371) of Sparta due to its inability to provide effective leadership. For these final four chapters Roberts is to be especially commended, for the internal conflicts that plagued the Greeks did not

end until the emergence of Philip II of Macedon, yet most accounts of the Peloponnesian War end in 404/3. And that is really what *The Plague of War* is about: in 371 “there were no winners, only losers” (369).

The Plague of War contains useful figures and maps, a timeline, a glossary of terms, and a note on sources. The book is virtually error-free. Roberts writes with a light touch, occasionally invoking popular culture or recent history, so, for anyone interested in reading an engaging account of Greek history in the fifth and nearly half of the fourth centuries, *The Plague of War* fits the bill nicely.

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