

BOOK REVIEW

Athens Burning: The Persian Invasion of Greece and the Evacuation of Attica. By ROBERT GARLAND. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 170. Paperback, \$19.95. ISBN 9781421421964.

Accounts of armed conflict in the ancient Greek world often focus primarily on military tactics and political maneuverings, or on the actions of a handful of well-known individuals whose names have been preserved in the historiographical records. Yet what of the experiences of the majority, whose lives were disrupted and in some cases changed forever by war? It is these human stories which Garland seeks to explore in *Athens Burning*, which focuses on the consequences of the Persian invasion of Greece in 480–79 BCE. The author looks beyond the famous names of battles or statesmen to consider the effects of conflict on the Athenian populace. His particular emphasis is on the impact of the evacuation of Attica and the experiences of those who fled their homes as their city was sacked; comparisons with current world events, although rarely drawn explicitly by the author, cannot be overlooked.

Though his stated aim is to focus on the emotions and perspectives of “civilians” (2), perhaps inevitably much of Garland’s account focuses on the historical context for these human responses. This is, however, no bad thing, as his discussion interweaves the broader historical narrative of the Persian Wars—from the initial incursion, under Darius, culminating in the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, through to the battle of Plataea in 479 BCE—with reflections on the social and emotional consequences of the military struggle. In keeping with the aims of the ‘Witness to Ancient History’ series to which the volume belongs, Garland’s account offers an accessible introduction to the events of the period for the general reader or student, whilst at the same time offering those already familiar with the material a refreshingly new angle from which to view it. The reader unfamiliar with the history of the period will be glad of the clear narrative structure and background detail (for a relatively slim volume this provides a wealth of information on, for example, Athenian political and social organization and religious ritual, as well as geographical and historical context); Greek words are transliterated and unfamiliar terms glossed in the text when they first arise.

The task of unearthing the human stories which Garland seeks to tell is no easy one given the nature of the extant sources, which offer little insight into the personal responses of those caught up in the fighting (the book contains a helpful note on sources, 131–35), yet Garland does an admirable job of using what we do have – textual and material evidence—to enable his reader to imagine the thoughts and feelings of ‘ordinary’ Athenians. The value of this approach comes to the fore where, for example, he vividly conveys a sense of the multitude of people forced to abandon their homes and the emotional impact of that mass evacuation; he visualizes for his reader both the harrowing spectacle of “numerous groups snaking their way to the coast ... creating enormous dust clouds in their wake” (48) and the traumas of separation from home and family which this entailed. Yet this emphasis on the emotional and physical experience is not limited to his accounts of the evacuation of Attica, as he considers too other ways in which those who lived through these events might have been affected. This leads to some enlightening insights; for example, Garland’s exploration of the physical and mental effects of the protracted overnight wait on the Persian rowers at Salamis (duped into remaining in the narrow strait, exhausted and cramped at their oars, while the Greeks remained encamped more comfortably ashore) sheds fresh light both on the lived experience of ancient sailors and on the factors which gave the Athenian navy an advantage in the battle.

Much of this is inevitably conjectural, however, and this is reflected in the language used by the author throughout; he frequently uses the words “probably” and “possibly” and—in a detail somewhat Herodotean in its honesty acknowledges (135) the speculative nature of parts of his account. He admits that there is much which we simply cannot know—for example, how the evacuation of Attica was organized, or even the final destination of the evacuees. His account also puts forward the theory—with which some readers may take issue—that there were two separate large-scale evacuations, the first of which he suggests took place in the winter of 481/480 BCE, and the second (which, as he acknowledges, is the only one mentioned in the ancient sources) in 479 BCE, before Mardonius’ invasion of Attica. Elsewhere, probability or possibility does lapse into confident assertions which might be deemed problematic—for example, when Garland insists that “Most Athenians subscribed to the belief that it was their moral superiority over the slavish and effeminate barbarians that had secured their victory” (108), this reader found herself longing for the more nuanced discussion which characterizes, for example, his treatment of the range of possible audience responses to Aeschylus’ *Persians* (120–21).

Nonetheless, this book, in inviting readers to consider the real human costs of conflict, offers a fresh and thought-provoking reading of the Persian Wars; in drawing attention to wartime displacement and trauma the author highlights themes which are as relevant in relation to the armed conflicts of the present day as they were for the ancient Greeks.

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