

BOOKREVIEW

Athens Burning. By ROBERT GARLAND. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. Pp. xiii + 170. Paperback, \$19.95. ISBN 978-1-4214-2196-4.

In September of 2015, while on a hiking tour on the island of Lesbos, I found myself awash in a sea of Syrian refugees (both families and single men of military age) fleeing the ongoing civil war in their country. Though the world acknowledged their plight and the struggles of their Greek hosts, we too soon put it out of our minds. In his book *Athens Burning*, Robert Garland focuses our attention on an equally momentous but forgotten evacuation—that of Athens in 480 and 479 BCE. He writes that “... what interests me is the fate of the civilians during the three or four months that preceded the arrival of the Persians and the ten months that followed before their departure” (2).

Of course, the story cannot easily be told. In the first place Garland must explain the context of the Persian Wars. Though the book is written for the interested/educated lay reader, one can no longer assume knowledge of the conflict and Garland thus spends chapter one, “The Origins,” reviewing the history of Greco-Persian relations from the Ionian Revolt through Xerxes’ departure for Greece and the formation of the Hellenic League in 481/80.

The heart of the book follows in chapters two to four in which he explores “The Evacuation,” “The First Burning,” and “The Second Burning.” Within these chapters the difficulty which Garland confronts—generally successfully—is that, while the evacuation has engrossed him and presumably his readers, it did not merit close examination or reporting by those who lived through or wrote of it. Herodotus and Plutarch may be our primary sources for the war narrative, but, in order to explore and explain the evacuation, Garland has been forced to scour the sources for even snippets of information. The reality, however, is that while his war narrative is on solid and traditional ground, there remain gaping holes in our knowledge of the timing, extent, and logistics of the evacuation. Garland necessarily infers a good deal. He asks the questions we would like answered, but the story he tells is, in the end, probable rather than proven—as I suspect he would admit.

A few of his more interesting inferences follow. He argues that, given the logistical demands of such a large scale evacuation, the evacuation began as early as

the winter of 481/80 (46). Pace Herodotus, he believes that most of the refugees probably settled on Salamis due to its proximity; the slaves either scattered once their owners decamped or had already been drafted into the navy (50). I suspect that, if his argument for Salamis is correct, it probably has more to do with unfounded optimism and procrastination. As for the numbers there, he posits “tens of thousands of evacuees” (52) and suggests possible methods of transporting, settling and supporting such numbers. In sum, he believes that Attica was all but abandoned except for the aged and runaway slaves, and he believes that there was no reoccupation in any numbers until after Plataea.

As for the Persian occupation, Garland argues that Xerxes ordered a campaign of destruction throughout Attica (61) but focused his special wrath on the Acropolis in retaliation for the firing of the Temple of Cybele in Sardis in 498. The Persian withdrawal from Athens in the aftermath of the battle of Salamis he judges “a grave strategic error” (91) while Mardonius’ second invasion of Attica in 479 “... achieved very little. On the contrary, it merely stiffened Athenian resistance” (95). In defense of that claim he recounts the brutal and criminal execution of Lycides and his family (Herodotus 9.5) by a lynch mob on Salamis. Finally, in the aftermath of the Persian defeat and Mardonius’ death at Plataea, the Athenians repatriated, though Garland gives this short shrift and shifts his attention to the frantic refortification of the city.

Chapter five, “The Postwar Period,” is a florilegium of various events and topics: the lessons not learned, honors accorded the gods, the subsequent histories of Pausanias and Themistocles, rebuilding Athens and the Acropolis, “writing up Salamis,” and the impact of the war on attitudes towards Persia and its culture. An “Epilogue” notes that the war’s effects, so important for Athens, were scarcely felt (and certainly not noted) in Persia; he concludes with a roster of later occupations of Athens—from Sulla in 86 BCE to the Nazis in 1941 CE.

The book includes as well a timeline (covering 490–479 only), several maps (that of Salamis could with profit be enlarged to include the Isthmus and Corinth), a note on the sources (effectively a discussion of Herodotus), sixteen pages of end-notes, four of suggested further reading and a ten page index. Of errata I noted only some confusion about the location of Eretria (14 and 16) and an idiosyncratic spelling of zealot (74).

What Garland offers here is food for thought. Others have written narratives of the war—its causes, strategy, tactics, personalities and events. Garland reminds us that, though scarcely reported and documented, there was a significant impact upon the civilian population of Attica. And while he may not be able to answer all

of the questions he himself has raised, he has drawn our attention to what was an unprecedented logistical undertaking and one that shaped the Athenian experience and memory of the war (cp. Thucydides 1.73 and 74).

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