

BOOK REVIEW

The Plague of War: Athens, Sparta, and the Struggle for Ancient Greece. By JENIFER T. ROBERTS. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xxviii + 416. Paperback, \$19.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-094088-1.

The Peloponnesian War's attraction for historians has continued relatively unabated since the days of Thucydides. But what has been a particularly welcome trend in the current millennium is the rise of more popularly-oriented scholarship on ancient military history in general, and on this war in particular. The past twenty years have seen such popularly oriented analyses of the Peloponnesian War as Victor Davis Hanson's *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War* (2006), J. E. Lendon's *Song of Wrath: The Peloponnesian War Begins* (2010), and more recently, Marc DeSanctis' *A Naval History of the Peloponnesian War: Ships, Men, and Money in the War at Sea, 431-404 BC* (2017). And it is to this particular category that I would assign the work under review here.

Roberts wrote yet another book on the Peloponnesian War. And yet, this is a somewhat different book on the Peloponnesian War. This is a book that arguably only a seasoned Greek historian, and one who has written, *inter alia*, a major textbook of Greek history, could have written. And, as Roberts notes in her prologue, the book addresses themes related to war that she has been mulling over for much of her life, having grown up with two parents who had served in the Pacific during WWII. But while this is a book about the war, Roberts' main interest, unlike that of Hanson or Lendon in their recent histories, is to tell a more intimate story of the people involved and the long-term changes to their world – cultural, economic and political – that this war has wrought. Proceeding chronologically from 431 BCE to 371 BCE, this broader scope allows for a more compelling narrative of the ways in which the Peloponnesian War irrevocably altered the Greek political landscape. As Roberts summarizes at the end of her introduction, “Yet despite the biting sorrows the fighting occasioned, it remains a gripping saga of plots and counter-plots, murders and lies, thrilling chases at sea and desperate marches overland, missed opportunities and last-minute reprieves, and, as Thucydides had hoped, lessons for the future – though there is considerable

disagreement as to just what those lessons might be" (10).

With the aims of engaging readers whether with or without previous background in Greek history, Roberts provides a preliminary note on sources following the prologue, and opens the main narrative with two chapters of background material on life in the Greek city-states, and the key events from the Persian Wars to the Delian League, whose transformation into the Athenian Empire had a significant background role to play in the outbreak of the war. Chapters 3-9 then contain the narrative of the first decade of the war, leading up to the Peace of Nicias. These chapters are perhaps the most closely aligned to the narrative of Thucydides and amount in parts to retelling the events from Thucydides, but with analysis and explanation of these events' significance along the way. One example is the narrative of the battle of Delium (424 BCE), covered in Book 4 of Thucydides. Roberts provides a summary of Thucydides' narrative of this battle and its consequences, highlighting both the drama of this battle and the contrast between the poor Athenian leadership by Hippocrates and the rise of the Spartan new -- and, alas, short-lived -- super star general Brasidas at the same time (141-146).

Chapters 10-12 cover the Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition. Here, Roberts is able to further enrich the Thucydides-rooted narrative with materials from other available primary sources, such as Andocides' testimony on the affair of the herms. But Thucydides still inescapably dominates the narrative, claiming virtually every footnote in chapter 12, on the Athenian defeat at Syracuse. Chapters 13-16 then take the war at a fast clip through 403 BCE, devoting the final and perhaps most interesting portion of the book to analyzing the reverberations of the war in Athens proper (Chapter 17) and the rest of the Greek world (Chapters 18-19). The book's Epilogue (Chapter 20) returns to the possible parallel between the Peloponnesian War and the Cold War struggle between the United States and Soviet Russia, which Roberts had first mentioned in her Preface, along with other 20th-century wars to which various scholars and journalists have compared the Peloponnesian War. Roberts concludes with this justification of the scope of the book: "Just as the Cold War grew out of World War II, the wars of the fourth century grew out of the Peloponnesian War ... Yet when Sparta was finally dealt a death blow in 371, it was not by Athens but rather by the rising power of Thebes. Only then did the Peloponnesian War really end, but there were no winners, only losers" (369).

As is true with probably every book on the Peloponnesian War, the specter of Thucydides governs the narrative at every turn. Still, Roberts does everything

possible to bring in other available materials, including the coverage of events in contemporary Athenian tragedy and comedy. The result is a narrative that is readable and worth reading for Greek history novice and junkie alike. The affordable paperback, furthermore, is suitable for undergraduate classroom use.

Roberts is an engaging and entertaining story-teller with a sense of humor, which comes through in the occasional pithy statements, such as “Spartans seemed to be constitutionally incapable of winning wars in any meaningful sense ...” (8), or (when describing the persuasive speeches by which the Egestaeans duped the Athenians into launching the Sicilian Expedition), “The Athenian visitors could expect a pleasant stay in Sicily with a viewing of the splendid Doric temple the Egestaeans were building in their city” (187). Indeed.

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