

BOOK REVIEW

Democracy and Empire: The Athenian Invasion of Sicily, 415-413 BCE. By ALEXANDER O. BOULTON. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2021. Pp. xiv + 176. Hardback, \$34.99. ISBN: 978-0-7618-7297-9.

They say, “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” but Alexander Boulton’s *Democracy and Empire* is tricky to judge by its title. The main title may suggest a scholarly monograph about the tension between Athens’ democracy and its imperial reach, but the subtitle—*The Athenian Invasion of Sicily, 415-413 BCE*—is a better reflection of the book’s actual content. Boulton’s book largely re-presents the events of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* with a particular focus on the Athenian campaign in Sicily. In contrast to Thucydides’ relatively complex and disparate history, Boulton simplifies and focuses this narrative, making it more comprehensible.

Democracy and Empire is a historical narrative meant to make Thucydides’ story easier. Boulton states his objective: “this book simplifies Thucydides’ monumental history by describing a single, narrowly-focused event in Thucydides’ history—the invasion of Sicily” (3). Boulton’s goal in making Thucydides more digestible is to encourage readers who otherwise would find the Greek historian too daunting (4). Given this purpose and ambition, Boulton’s book will be a useful companion piece for students reading (and possibly struggling with) the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Boulton’s book will be a great resource assigned to high schoolers, undergraduates or grad students studying the classics. By focusing his story specifically around the Sicily campaign, while still providing solid background on Greek cultures and contexts, Boulton provides an accessible anchor for accessing Thucydides.

Boulton’s style and approach reflect the address to student/amateur audiences. His prose is relatively simple and direct, making the book a quick and easy read. He also provides a lot of useful background information that make the Greek world and the events of the Sicily campaign comprehensible for readers. For instance, he provides a brief history of Sparta prior to the Peloponnesian war (8-11) and a longer history of Athens and the development of democracy (11-

27). The book also provides cultural and historical backgrounds, like the discussion of hoplites and Greek martial culture (95-99), which helps explain the Athenians' dedication and willingness to continue fighting despite the increasingly hopeless situation in Sicily. These explanatory portions diverge from Thucydides, making an excellent supplement by illuminating things that modern readers may not understand but that the Greek historian would have seen as common knowledge.

One technique Boulton often relies on is analogies a United States-based student would likely understand. This is most prevalent at the opening of Chapter 1, which includes an extended analogy between the American Revolution and the Persian Wars as origin points for US and Hellenic culture, respectively. Boulton explains, "In both cases, small, culturally backward states on the periphery of a great empire revolted, and during the ensuing war, they united and shaped their own unique identity as a united, independent, and freedom-loving people. The major personalities and battles became embedded in their national folklore" (5). While Boulton does remind readers of the significant differences between Hellas and the US, he also writes, "By looking closely into the cloudy mirror of ancient Greece, however, we may see ourselves a little more clearly. We might gain some insight into our own history, and even perhaps take a small uncertain peek into our own future" (6). The collective pronouns *we* and *our* clearly situate Boulton as speaking to a US readership. Indeed, the reliance on historical analogies with the United States may not be helpful to readers from other nations. Additionally, while Boulton here suggests that an understanding of the Peloponnesian War might illuminate the contemporary US political situation—a promising enough premise—the book never returns to this point in much depth. Instead, Boulton leaves this tantalizing idea for readers to make of it whatever they will.

This is symptomatic of another limitation of Boulton's work: potential unfulfilled. In particular, one of the biggest disappointments is the failure to genuinely work through the tensions between Athenian democracy and the imperial ambitions reflected by the doomed campaign to Sicily—a topic promised both by the title and in the Introduction (2). Boulton's approach to this question is largely the same as his primary source, Thucydides. The link between democracy and empire is developed by narrating decisions made by the Athenian government. But, like Thucydides, Boulton generally lets these narratives stand on their own as though the historical lesson is self-evident, rather than actually interpreting Athens' actions to make an argument about the link between the two titular

topics. Again, if one is looking for a scholarly monograph developing a sophisticated argument, this is not the book to turn to.

Other issues with *Democracy and Empire* are structural and stylistic. Although the book is ostensibly focused on the Sicily expedition, the actual discussion of the invasion doesn't start until Chapter 3: The Sicily Campaign, beginning on page 69 (out of 150 pages, excluding the Bibliography and Index). The chapter then provides further background until finally getting to the beginning of the invasion on page 78. While much of the background described in the first two chapters generally follows Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, that history could be condensed to refocus the book more genuinely on the Sicily disaster. For a book with the stated purpose of describing this campaign, much page space is given to history not directly connected to the invasion. In stylistic terms, there are repeated grammar and mechanics errors throughout the text. While these do not seriously undermine the quality of the work, they are a regular irritation. A thorough copyediting wouldn't have gone amiss.

Despite its drawbacks and limitations, Alexander Boulton's *Democracy and Empire* will be a useful resource for students struggling with Thucydides' *History*, or otherwise seeking an accessible introduction to the Peloponnesian War. The straightforward historical narrative—supplemented with maps, illustrations and discussions of Greek culture—makes the book accessible and engaging. More advanced scholars, classicists and historians may not find much that's new or revelatory in *Democracy and Empire*, but it is worthy reading to potentially assign in classes.

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