

## SPARTA AND ATHENS

RAHE (P. A.) *Sparta's Sicilian Proxy War. The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta 418–413 B.C.* Pp. xx + 369, ills, maps. New York and London: Encounter Books, 2023. Paper, US\$34.99. ISBN: 978-1-64177-337-9.

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This work belongs to a series of pieces on Spartan external relations, understood broadly as wars, mainly with Athens. After *The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta: The Persian Challenge* (2015) and *Spartan Regime* (2016), the Attic volumes are *Sparta's First Attic War* (2019), *Sparta's Second Attic War* (2020) and the present book, *Proxy War*, treating events up to the Sicilian campaign, so memorably narrated by Thucydides in Books 6 and 7. After a short introduction ('An Erotic Diversion'), a prologue summarises R.'s earlier volumes to bring us to 418 BCE. Part 1, 'A Single Spartiate', introduces Gylippos, Spartan general at Syracuse, and contains 'Greece's Wild West', treating Syracuse, Thucydidean historiography and the strategic situation via the Syracusan Hermocrates. Chapter 2, 'A Venture Ill-Advised', covers the fraught preparations for the expedition, while explicating the Periclean funeral oration, and ends with the Athenian arrival in Sicily. Chapter 3, 'Philosophy, Sophistry, Impiety, Sacrilege, and Faction', is far-ranging, outlining the Attic sociocultural ambiance regarding the crisis of the mutilation of the Herms and the Profanation of the Mysteries. Part 2, 'War by Proxy', starts with early Attic activity in Sicily and the Spartan decision to intervene, before offering 'Syracusa Besieged' with the Athenian effort at circumvallation, Gylippos' arrival and the disruption of the siege in 414. 'Dancing in the Dark' deals with the fighting after the arrival of the second reinforcing expedition, including the Athenian setbacks on land and sea; 'The Flashing Sword of Retribution' recounts their total defeat. A surprisingly short epilogue, 'Sparta's Third Attic War', follows. An appendix makes 'The Case for Grand Strategy'. All chapters are headed by epigraphs of varied derivation.

The volume's strength is its unrelenting focus on military analysis congruent with R.'s vision of the Spartan polity. Regarding other aspects of classical Greece, R.'s treatment is quite conventional; some deviations seem wrongheaded: for example, the Athenian fleet as dependent on slave personnel; exaggerating the impact of the Greek defeat in Egypt (p. 242); misconstrued linkage of Corinth and Megara in Athenian policy (pp. 30–1, 34, 41); acceptance of the Corinthian claim that Sparta seriously considered attacking Athens during the Samian revolt (pp. 32, 146).

The volume shares lucid exposition with its predecessors, which will be helpful for non-experts. Numerous maps excellently complement the text with their focus on features emphasised in R.'s narrative. Several idiosyncrasies are surprising, for example, the frequent periphrastic notation for historical actors, where Pericles is 'the son of Xanthippos' and Alcibiades 'the son of Cleinias'. This practice extends to those whose patronymic has no explanatory valence (e.g. who was the son of Alcisthenes or Thucles?). Moreover, amid ordinary English or Latinate versions of names, 'Syracusa' throughout seems an oddity too.

R. provides comprehensive notation of sources and an impressive citation of scholarship in detailed, dense endnotes. Newcomers to classical foreign policy and warfare will find assistance here, although a complete bibliography and source index would have been enhancements. R. has thoroughly explored recent Italian scholarship, including a most significant parallel work: S. Amato, *Dall'olympieion al fiume assinaro: la seconda*

*campagna ateniese contro siracusa* (3 vols, 2005–8). He works at indicating the filiation of interpretations and his divergences. However, his series is likely to be juxtaposed with the parallel (and still influential) volumes of D. Kagan (particularly here *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* [1981]). An expert reader may recognise where R. has established his stand regarding his Yale mentor. Yet it might have been useful for Rahe to collect his agreements/deviations in one place for each chapter (even risking some repetition). This general approach parallels Kagan.

Histories of the Peloponnesian War over the last 50 years have conformed to a ‘struggle for hegemony’ paradigm and are, hence, Athenocentric in outlook, since Athens exhibited extraordinary dynamism across the political/social/cultural spectrum in the fifth century. In *Proxy War* R. reflects this reality in a dense and learned treatment (pp. 123–38) of the intellectual (in particular, religious) manifestations in the *Pentecontaetia* that contributed to the upheaval associated with the mutilation of the Herms and the profanation of the mysteries. Without an argument in detail here, this material conforms to an Athenocentric template for me. And, specifically, was *eros* in the Thucydidean/Periclean *epitaphios* (with its communitarian vision) meant to lead up to the self-indulgence of Alcibiades (cf. pp. xv, 90–4, 98–9)? Or was it contrapuntal in intent?

A large concern involves the applicability of the concept of proxy war. Much classical Spartan military activity resembled these hostilities, since control of *Lakōnikē* and Peloponnesian dominance excluded dispatching civic hoplitic forces outside the homeland of Greece. Thus, were earlier anti-Persian operations or the later Ionian War then also proxy wars? For Sicily, the Spartans committed their *perioikoi* and *neodamodeis*, along with allied triremes, sailors and infantry. The Spartan intervention did not arise from nor was shaped by Spartan strategising, but conformed to Alcibiades’ advice, which, incidentally, did not foresee Attic disaster (Thuc. 7.89–92). While Gylippos and his allied colleagues generally performed well, factors within Athenian control caused their catastrophic defeat: reckless force structuring, misconstruing Sicilian politics, insufficient and incompetent generalship with gross politicisation, dilatory/haphazard tactical execution, and an uncanny disconnect between domestic politics and the campaign (as well as much sheer happenstance). It is not appreciated by R. (and others) how Alcibiades had indeed exaggerated the chances for and impact of a decisive defeat of Syracuse and minimised the risks of Spartan intervention and counter-fortification of Dekeleia in Attica. Had any appreciable Athenian naval and infantry force returned home, the basis of the Spartan economy would have been vulnerable to collapse through Attic/Messenian raiding and Helot defection.

The volume has not closely engaged with the scholars of the International Sparta Seminar with their significant social-historical emphasis. Perhaps this is owed to *Proxy War’s* interpretative plan: policy is explored as though generated by rational actors who at Sparta were practitioners of a ‘grand strategy’. Not only does this interpretative spirit pervade *Proxy War* and its predecessors but is also defended in an appendix offering the distinguished émigré political scientist Hans Morgenthau as a focalising figure. R.’s tendency has caused some rather free attribution of intention, especially when explicit Thucydidean exegesis is absent. This can be risky, as speculation about the background and motives of Gylippos and his father Kleandridas illustrates (cf. pp. 30, 52–4, 229).

I am not unsympathetic to ‘grand strategy’, as it is shared legacy. Nonetheless, a *polis* is not a nation-state, lacking the requisite economic output for necessary differentiation of socioeconomic functions and, thence, structural articulation that would support professionalisation, careerism and bureaucratisation in mechanisms for intercommunal interaction with or without violence. Thus, decision-making is more fundamentally intertwined with the interplay of underlying socioeconomic and cultural factors.

The archaic Spartan ‘Lycurgan’ order manifested a systematic restructuring under the imperatives of an archaic hoplite army. In the resultant strong, yet brittle, dispensation, the main flows of material goods were politicised or conventionalised. The earthquake of 465 gravely disrupted standing societal protocols. Archaising Sparta was further destabilised by rivalry with Athens, tipping into instability under military pressure on *Lakōnikē* in the 420s. A Sparta-centric history of the Peloponnesian War(s) would necessarily investigate an incremental propagation of such effects for the property regime, distribution of property, class stratification and demography of *Lakōnikē*, albeit in another modality of historiography.

Thus far R.’s Spartan series has not been widely reviewed by Classics publications, as represented by coverage of *L’année philologique: Sparta’s First Attic War, Sparta’s Second Attic War*: five reviews. Yet both the *Wall Street Journal* (11/17/23) and the *Economist* (11/23/23) have recently utilised *Proxy War* for contemporary power politics. It is a misfortune for scholars of fifth-century Spartan and Athenian history that this series from an author well-versed in the sources and prevailing scholarship have not become more frequently reviewed.

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