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J.E. Lendon, *Song of Wrath: The Peloponnesian War Begins*. New York: Basic Books, 2010. Pp. vii, 566. ISBN 978-0-465-01506-1.

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Like the American Civil War and World War II, the Peloponnesian War holds an endless fascination for historians. J.E. Lendon (Univ. of Virginia) has now added his interpretation of this great conflict, with a focus on the first phase of the struggle, what contemporaries called the “Ten Years’ War” or Archidamian War (after the Spartan king). His approach is narrative driven and explores familiar topics: the debate leading to the outbreak of war in 431 BC (all dates hereinafter are BC), including Thucydides’s interpretation of it, and the nature of land and sea battle.¹ Nine chapters organized chronologically are bookended by an Introduction on Thucydidean narrative and an Epilogue looking ahead to the end of the war in 404. A Chronology, Glossaries of People, Things, and Places, an Author’s Note and Acknowledgments, Suggestions for Further Reading, an Appendix on Sources, Notes (alas, endnotes), and a Bibliography provide a useful set of complementing resources. The book features many maps and some black-and-white illustrations.

The Peloponnesian War attracts many students of history partly on account of its parallels to the outbreak of World War I, but principally because of Thucydides’s captivating *History of the Peloponnesian War* (its modern name). The ancient historian’s doctrine of Realism still preoccupies scholars and public intellectuals like University of Chicago political scientist John Mearsheimer. But Thucydides’s account of the origins of Peloponnesian War is complex and not all classicists find his explanation persuasive. While Lendon is convinced, I myself see Thucydides more as a journalist than a historian, an author pushing a case.²

The outbreak of any war, as Oscar Wilde said of the truth, is “rarely pure, and never simple”; this is certainly the case with the Peloponnesian War. *Song of Wrath* devotes a whole chapter (2: “The Coming of the Ten Years’ War”) to a close analysis of Thucydides’s discussion of the key debates in Athens and Sparta on the eve of war. Readers may be surprised to find that the war’s origins date back to the Trojan War (104–5) with its legacy of aggressive competition or that, rather than Athenian-Spartan diplomatic exchanges, it was the Thebans who started the war with their surprise attack on Plataea, an old Athenian ally (108, 224). Lendon detects the war’s causes and course in underlying social-cultural perceptions, centering particularly on *timē*, “honor” or “rank” (6–13 and passim). “Athenian power ... would predispose Athens to challenge Sparta’s supremacy in rank. It is also very likely that by the time the war broke out between Athens and Sparta, Sparta did fear the power of Athens. But Spartan fear of Athens’ power was not the cause of the war; it was a by-product of Sparta’s realization that Athens would not accept Sparta’s supremacy in rank, the old hegemony over Greece that Sparta cast in the sixth century BC, forged in the Persian War, and tempered in the war at mid-century” (104; cf. 11).

While Lendon admits that concern for one’s *timē* “can never be an entirely satisfactory way to understand a set of social regulations that were themselves often unclear, controversial, and evolving” (13), he nonetheless forcefully asserts his interpretation. But, if the rank/honor relationship between Athens and Sparta was critical, why did the “rank” of “lowly” Corinth matter so much to the Spartans that they felt compelled to act against Athens because of Corinthian threats to abandon the Peloponnesian League (Thuc.

1. See Lendon’s fuller discussion of these topics in *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2005).

2. As compared with Herodotus, who often gives choices and leaves conclusions to the reader—so Raphael Sealey in his comments at a session of the Friends of Ancient History (organized by K.R. Walters and L. Tritle) at the 1980 American Philological Association meeting, moderated by J.T. Roberts. See also Ernst Badian, “Thucydides and the Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War: A Historian’s Brief,” *From Plataea to Potidaea: Studies in the History and Historiography of the Pentecontaetia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 1993) 125–62.

1.71.4)?³ Again, if the relative rank or honor specifically of Athens and Sparta was paramount in maintaining peace in Greece, why did the Theban move against Plataea ignite a general war? Lendon might have addressed how states ostensibly inferior in *timē* to Athens and Sparta were able to leverage their “betters.”

Lendon, who has written extensively on the mechanics and tactics of war in the ancient world, provides here very useful discussions of naval warfare and the construction, maintenance, and seaworthiness of the Greek trireme, the “Dreadnought” of its day (125–27). He also explains the ship’s tactical employment in battle, for example, during the Athenian commander Phormio’s remarkable exploits in the western Corinthian Gulf (155–63). Early in the war, Athens certainly held the upper hand at sea: over a half-century of naval experience had well prepared Athenian seamen. But naval power has its limits. Lendon does not respond to the reservations of, among others, Mearsheimer and naval strategist Julian Corbett regarding the “stopping power of water.”⁴ Transporting troops and provisions over water is difficult even when all goes well: lines of communication and supply become longer and more tenuous, and seizing land from an enemy defending his home territory is challenging, as the Athenians later learned to their sorrow in Sicily. The Athenians may have thought that hitting them where they weren’t could damage the Spartans’ societal structures. But even operating from their naval base at Pylos in the Peloponnesus, they made little impact on surrounding Spartan lands. By contrast, the Spartan base at Decelea in Attica (established in 413), an FOB (Forward Operating Base) in present-day military terminology, cost the Athenians dearly in terms of both human resources (twenty thousand escaped slaves!) and morale.⁵ The difference? The Spartans could supply, support, and capitalize on their FOB by land, while the Athenians had to send their men, materials, and reinforcements from afar by sea—a clear instance of water’s “stopping power.”

Lendon’s treatment of land warfare is less convincing. In his general account of the nature of hoplite battle, he poses contrasting views of Greeks fighting either scrum-like pushing and shoving engagements or in a more open order of individuals or groups of individuals (6, 307–16). He also likens hoplite battle to “riot control” (310–13) and Greek armies to “armed mobs” (272), since the soldiers who comprised them were untrained (313) or regarded as “cannon-fodder” by cynical authorities, like the Spartan helots sent north with Brasidas in 424 (292).

This conception of hoplite battle is ill-conceived. Police attempt to use non-lethal force to contain rioters typically armed with makeshift (if occasionally deadly) weapons. The express purpose of battle, hoplite or other, is to destroy the enemy. And seeing a friend, a brother, a father killed elicits a violent response: raised on Homer’s *Iliad*, most Greeks knew this simple lesson. We should also recall the evidence of Greek vases depicting warriors fighting over the bodies of the slain. Simply put, war means fighting and fighting means killing; riot duty it is not.

At the Battle of Delium in 424, an Athenian force of some seven thousand hoplites was caught in a poor position by a much larger Theban army; after a brief pep talk by their commander, they advanced—at the run—against their oncoming foe. This was not the action of any “armed mob.” We are not well informed on the training regimen of young Greeks, but the Atarbos frieze in the Acropolis Museum depicts a competition (most likely, as spectators are present) in which young Athenians dance with hoplite shields.⁶ The relief contextualizes for us the ridicule of young Athenians in Aristophanes’s *Clouds* (line 989) who are unable to perform the dance moves of earlier generations. This evidence strongly implies that hoplites did in fact receive training in the use of weapons; the alternative—that Greek infantrymen went into battle suicidally unprepared to use their equipment effectively—is very hard to credit.

3. Nor was this the first time Corinth had created problems for the Spartans—cf. their sabotaging of the Spartan expedition against Athens c. 506 (Herodotus 5.74–75, 90–96).

4. See Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (NY: Norton, 2001) 86.

5. For several years, the Athenians dared not even venture on the land routes to Eleusis to celebrate the rites of Demeter.

6. Kurt Raaflaub has suggested to me that the shields were not “real” but made of wicker. Perhaps. I have, however, seen young soldiers (in high school even!) throwing nine-pound rifles around like a drum major’s baton; it is entirely possible that ancient Greek soldiers could do the same with hoplite shields, which weighed only a little more, thirteen or fourteen pounds.

At Sparta, weapons training extended even to the lowest of the low. When the Spartan authorities agreed to send Brasidas into Macedonia in 424, his force included seven hundred helots. Lendon claims the men were essentially “expendables,” whose loss would mean nothing. But Brasidas’s successes at Amphipolis and elsewhere (beyond the scope of Lendon’s study) prove that these men were at least adequately trained and not seen as dispensable. When the Spartans won the decisive Battle of Mantinea in 418, the survivors among Brasidas’s helots, now called the “Brasideioi,” were brigaded separately among the Spartan forces, not because they had been helots, but because they had won distinction as a veteran unit.⁷

Wars require money of the engaged communities and individuals as well as training of soldiers. While Lendon does address the devastation of land by both parties (123), further consideration of the economic costs of the war would have been helpful, for example, in his analysis of the famous revolution (*stasis*) that ripped apart the island state of Corcyra in 427–425 (203–12). Nor does he take into account that the margins of survival in the ancient Greek world were slim: everyone had to work “very hard nearly all the time”⁸ in order to survive; and, too, the trust so critical in matters of credit eroded badly under wartime stresses.⁹ Such factors help explain the ferocious acts of the Corcyraean oligarchs who returned home from their Corinthian prisons not necessarily brainwashed (my word), but desperate to recover all they had lost during their captivity.

Ten years of war exhausted funds and manpower around the Greek world. The ensuing Peace of Nicias satisfied mostly Athens and Sparta. Neither side had been especially successful. The Spartans’ strategy of invading Attica had proved ineffective: they were, as the adage goes, fighting the last war. Athenian raids on Spartan lands, aside from the base secured at Pylos, accomplished little more. Tired of fruitless maneuvering, the two powers settled their affairs and obliged others to do the same. But few other signatories shared Aristophanes’s desire to laugh with joy at the peace won (*Peace* 538–40). In the years that followed, some—Corinth and Thebes, for example—often ignored those great in rank and honor, Athens and Sparta. All this both calls into question the degree to which sensitivities over *timē* triggered war and demonstrates why the causes and events of the Peloponnesian War still entice historians and political scientists alike.

7. Thuc. 5.67.1; see Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2008) 3:175.

8. J.K. Davies, “Classical Greece: Production,” *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*, ed. W. Scheidel (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2007) 352.

9. See Paul Millett, *Lending and Borrowing in Ancient Athens* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1991) 7–8.