



Sparta's First Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 478–446 B.C. by Paul A. Rahe.

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Sparta's First Attic War spans the Pentekontaëtia (c. 479–431 BCE), the roughly “fifty-year interval” between the Hellenic victory over Persians at Plataea and the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. Historian Paul Rahe (Hillsdale College) expands on Thucydides’ laconic treatment of the period with inferences about flaring tensions between Athens and Sparta. Though he professes merely to “reenvisage history from a Spartan perspective” (5), his narrative compels readers to consider the forces at work in the decisions made by Sparta’s adversaries as well. Students of military strategy as well as classical scholars will benefit from reading his book.

Rahe assumes a Spartan perspective for much of his book. He stresses the effects of Sparta’s reliance on helots, a servile class whose slave labor allowed landed Spartans “to devote their lives to exercise, to military training ... and [to] other gentlemanly pursuits” (15). Sparta’s need to control its helots, who greatly outnumbered them, fostered insularity, martial discipline, and caution among its citizenry. Following the Persian Wars, Sparta ceded naval supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean to Athens in part because, in Thucydides’s words, they “feared ... that those going out would deteriorate” (38).

Pausanias, the victorious Spartan general at Plataea, exacerbated these fears in the aftermath of Xerxes’ withdrawal with his erratic forays and Persian airs. Balancing the risks of moral rot against the looming presence of the Achaemenid empire before Athens’s decisive victory at the Eurymedon River in 465 BCE, Sparta’s ephors (annual panel of five elected officials) prudently displaced the costs of stemming Persian encroachment onto Athens and its Delian League allies. Only when Athens had solidified its naval supremacy at the Eurymedon and Themistocles, the victor at Salamis in 480 BCE, had stirred Sparta’s restive enemies in the Peloponnesus in the 460s BCE did Sparta realize Athens had “created a new atmosphere and given rise to a new mood” (115).

Persia, resurgent under Artaxerxes I (r. 465–424 BCE) after suppressing Athenian support for a Libyan revolt in the Nile delta, briefly “persuade[d] a majority of the Spartiates that the threat posed by Athens was nothing in comparison with that posed by the Great King” (192) before Athens thrashed the Medes anew off Cyprus. Rahe deftly shows how Sparta’s leaders continually assessed the relative threats posed by Persia and Athens as they sought to secure their hold on the Peloponnesus.

Rahe does not neglect the Athenian perspective. When Sparta sought Athenian help to suppress a helot uprising after a devastating earthquake in 465–464 BCE, for instance, Athens weighed its options as follows: “It was one thing to assist fellow Greeks in subjugating barbarians. This was a matter of ethnic solidarity ... [b]ut to assist the Spartans in denying other Hellenes the liberty they bravely sought—there was something distasteful about that” (140). Sparta upped the ante by its consequent willingness to succor Thasos in its rebellion against Athens’ oppressive leadership of the Delian League. Though the earthquake had decimated Sparta’s population for a time, Athens sensed that “the Lacedaemonians would be back in force. It was imperative that the Long

Walls connecting the city with the sea be finished before that day came, and everyone at Athens knew it” (162). This concern soothed internal tensions over the democratizing reforms made by Ephialtes and Pericles. As Aeschylus implored his audience, Athenians could “hate with a single heart” (*Eum.* 976–987) (167). Indeed, Athenian citizenship conferred many benefits in the mid-fifth century BCE, salaries for skilled laborers foremost among them. Clamors for inclusion caused Pericles to restrict citizenship status to those with two Athenian parents. The “penurious *thetes*” (non-landowners) who thrived in such a “salaried city” forewent agricultural pursuits for the commercial and manufacturing tasks that girded “the great emporium that grew up within the Peiraeus and in Athens as a consequence of the city’s imperial venture” (207). The contrast between dynamic, maritime Athens and hidebound, parochial Sparta permeates the book.

Rahe also focuses on the beliefs and customs that anchored such contrasting outlooks, an inquiry he subsumes under “moral imperative peculiar to particular regimes” (5). Sparta’s *agoge* (military educational system) for instance, inculcated “an exaggerated respect for the old,” and Spartan men could not travel abroad or assume positions of authority until they had reached the age of forty-five (31).¹ Sparta’s random method of selecting ephors to its governing council ensured “nonentities” entrusted with the office “tended toward caution and a defense of the existing order” (36).

According to Rahe, Persia’s Zoroastrian faith, with its insistence that the King of Kings subdue the forces of disorder and bring darkness under his yoke, impelled Xerxes and his successors to extend their reach into the Greek archipelago; hence, “Xerxes invasion was a holy war—akin to those launched by the early Muslim caliphs” (87). Corinth, whose prowess lay on the high seas and in commerce, “sought shelter through an alliance with Lacedaemon” from its Argive rivals, whose hoplite tradition threatened Corinth on land (130). Internal customs drive foreign policy in Rahe’s narrative.

Rahe supplements Thucydides’ terse account of the Pentekontaëtia with logical inferences based on other evidence. Thucydides concentrates on events he deemed essential to Athens’ rise during the fifth century BCE. Hence, “we will have to attend closely to fragments of information found elsewhere” (46). Acknowledging the sparsity of the evidence suggesting Themistocles’ ostracism coincided with a movement by villages throughout the Peloponnesus to form larger polities in opposition to Sparta during the 470s BCE, Rahe concedes that “all that we can say is that it is as easy to imagine as it is impossible to prove that Themistocles’ travels within the Peloponnesus had something to do with these developments” (102). He perceives the drastic loss of Spartan life caused by the aforementioned earthquake in a fragment from Isocrates noting that the Lacedaemonian phalanx at a contemporaneous battle stood only one file deep (122). The sources are mute on the damage the Athenian triremes inflicted around the Corinthian Gulf in the 450s BCE, “but it stands to reason,” that they “must have vigorously asserted Athens’ control over that body of water,” since the Achaeans along the northern coast of the Peloponnesus “aligned themselves with the Athenians” (175). Rahe detects in Corinthian warnings about Athens’ naval prowess the traces of an Athenian blockade of the Corinthian Gulf (176–77). He suggests that prominent authors like Plutarch (c. 46–c. 120 CE) “no doubt follow [fourth-century BCE] Ephorus” without sub-

1. But see A.H.M. Jones, *Sparta* (NY: Barnes and Noble, 1993 [orig. 1967]) 26: Ephors “were elected by the assembly ... and any Spartan citizen (probably over 30) was eligible.” Also Robert Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Herodotus* (NY: Pantheon, 2007) 731: “The Board of Five Ephors ... was elected annually by the Assembly. All Spartan citizens were eligible for election.”

stantiating the claim. In general, however, he is very adept at handling inconclusive evidence (186).

Rahe's many acute observations on foreign policy will charm readers interested in international affairs. "The art of diplomacy," he writes of Cimon's parlay with Artaxerxes after the Athenian victory at the Eurymedon, "has as its focus making it as easy and as painless as possible for the other side to give ground" (86). "In political affairs, in diplomacy, and war," Rahe comments of the Athenians' repulse from the Nile delta in the 450s BCE, "the unforeseen is always lurking just around the corner" (186). Most pertinently for his subject, he remarks that "the day after victory is achieved by a coalition in a great war, that coalition almost always begins to unravel" (203).

Rahe overuses certain words and phrases ("athwart," "as we have seen") and belabors patronymics, for instance, "the son of Xanthippus" and "the son of Miltiades." Such trivial flaws do not detract from the value of *Sparta's First Attic War* for general readers and specialists alike.