

# Sparta's Second Attic War: the grand strategy of classical Sparta, 446-418 B.C.

Paul A. Rahe, *Sparta's Second Attic War: the grand strategy of classical Sparta, 446-418 B.C. The Yale library of military history.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. xvii, 384. ISBN 9780300242621 \$40.00.

## Review by

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## Preview

*Sparta's Second Attic War* is the fourth volume of a series dedicated to the History of Classical Sparta, published in the 'Yale Library of Military History'. After exploring in the previous volumes the Spartan regime, the Persian Wars, and the Pentecontaetia, this book covers the convoluted period from the Thirty Years' Peace (446 BC) to the Battle of Mantinea (418 BC). As the title suggests, Rahe endeavours to examine motivations and military strategies during the Peloponnesian War from a Spartan viewpoint. Accordingly, the volume ends with the crucial battle at Mantinea, since "from the perspective of the Spartans, their victory... marked the end of an epoch and paved the way for a radical shift in their grand strategy" (p. xiv).

The concept of 'Grand Strategy' is revitalized in Rahe's series as a systematic tool for interpreting ancient Greek History. In the introduction, the author explains that the notion has to be understood in a broad sense, comprehending not exclusively the military strategies but also the domestic policy, the diplomacy, the

social customs, the government system. As Rahe explicitly outlines, this analytical approach derives from the military historian John Fuller's studies and was also employed by Edward Luttwak to investigate the Roman Empire (pp. xv-xvi).<sup>[1]</sup> Rahe uses the Grand Strategy concept to decode leaders' attitudes and their strategic actions and shifts his attention often from the events to the 'grand strategists'. The author expresses judgments on the qualities and flaws of the statesmen and commanders on both sides of the war (such as Pericles, Cleon, Alcibiades, Archidamus, or Brasidas), following mainly their description in Thucydides, the primary source for this historical period. As we shall see, while his approach has the advantage of following Thucydides' narrative scheme closely and expanding his analysis, the expected Spartan perspective is often lost.

The volume is divided into three parts, following a chronological order. After the introduction, a prologue summarizes Athens' and Sparta's foreign and domestic policies in the mid-fifth century and the political balance of power, reflected in the Thirty-Years Peace. The agreement is further explored in the pages presenting Part I, 'The Hatch and Brood of Time', which includes three chapters (1-3). The first chapter, leaving Sparta in the background, covers the expansion and consolidation of the Athenian empire, including the foundations and development of two Athenian colonies, Amphipolis and Thurii. Moreover, the author reviews the Samian revolt, which threatened the Delian league's stability, and the origins of the quarrel between Corcyra and Corinth.

Next, chapters 2 and 3 focus on the causes of the Peloponnesian War and the conflict's actual outbreak. After a brief overview of Thucydides' methodology, Rahe analyzes the specific incidents involving Epidamnus, Corcyra, and Potidaea, in Thucydides' eyes a prelude to the war, along with the Athenian blockade of Megara. As Rahe correctly highlights, Pericles' strategy tried to reinforce Athens and her expansion while simultaneously depriving Spartans of a justification to declare war. However, the Lacedaemonians claimed that Athens had broken the agreements, and the tensions escalated into war. Chapter 3 explores Sparta's invasions of Attica in 431 and Pericles' unprecedented strategic

response, namely, to gather the population within the walls and avoid engaging in battle. The reader can also find a good analysis of the Athenian naval victories under the guidance of admiral Phormio. The section ends with an accurate overview of Mytilenean revolt against the Athenian Empire.

Part II, 'Fortune's Wheel', consists of two chapters (4-5). Oddly enough, Rahe opens the fourth chapter by blaming Pericles for not having foreseen his own death, which was caused by the plague that devastated Athens ("he failed... to anticipate his own mortality... for this, there can be no excuse", p. 137). On the other hand, the author successfully elucidates the Periclean policy of 'patience and focus' conducted in the early phase of the war and highlights the significant changes in the Athenian strategy after Pericles disappeared from the scene. In his description of the other military campaigns, Rahe includes a detailed account of the disastrous and shocking Spartan defeat at Sphacteria (425 BC). The consequences of the surrender and the difficult position the Spartans found themselves in are further investigated in chapter 5. Along with the Spartan situation, this section also explores the figure of Cleon, emphasizing that his role in Athens' internal politics resulted in a more interventionist approach to the war. Among the hazardous ventures carried out by the Athenians in this phase, special attention is paid to the Athenian debacle at Delium in Boeotia.

Part III contains three chapters (6-8). The title 'A Peace to End All Peace' clearly hints at the unstable peace promoted by Nicias. Chapter 6 deals with the complex events that led to that agreement, focusing especially on the Spartan operations in Thrace and the clash at Amphipolis. This time, the 'grand strategist', in Rahe's account, is undoubtedly Brasidas, whose moral and military value in the Amphipolitan campaign is stressed. Chapter 7 examines the diplomatic maneuvers in the Peloponnese after the Peace of Nicias, for which Rahe considers the Corinthians to be mainly responsible, labeling them 'master manipulators' (p. 253). The last chapter discusses the preparations and the maneuvering at the battle of Mantinea, with the quadripartite coalition formed by Argos, Athens, Mantinea, and

Elis facing off against Sparta and its loyal Peloponnesians allies. Rahe examines the military campaign in detail, focusing on the armies' tactical movements and emphasizing the role of the Spartan king Agis II ("This entire scenario is testimony of the tactical genius of Agis son of Archidamus", p. 271).

Lastly, there is a separate section with an Epilogue ('The End of the Athenian Challenge'). In his brief final considerations, Rahe reflects on the outcome of the battle of Mantinea and its effects on the Peloponnesians' future strategy: after this success, Spartans no longer aimed at containing but at defeating Athenian power. Furthermore, the author rightly reminds us that the Athenians, after Mantinea, were never again capable of challenging Sparta's supremacy on the Peloponnese.

As far as military history is concerned, Rahe undoubtedly provides excellent reconstructions. From time to time, however, he indulges in complex speculations on how a specific situation might have turned out differently. In his description of the Mytilenean revolt, for instance, Rahe conjectures that if Alcidas, who had been appointed nauarchos in 427 BC, had made his way immediately to Lesbos with his fleet and caught the Athenian navy off guard, the Spartans would have compelled the Athenians to lift their siege of Mytilene and ultimately provoked a broader uprising throughout the Aegean. However, as Rahe himself concedes, none of that happened (p. 120).

The volume is well-produced; the quality of the text is high, and the volume is almost free of typographical errors. Additionally, Rahe conveniently includes twenty-five valuable maps to help better understand and visualize battle sites and troops' movements. In a few cases he states that he has visited a given site, thus confirming or completing 'autoptically' some information derived from Thucydides. An example of this is the Argive assault in 418, which surprised the Spartans camped next to the temple of Heracles at Mantinea. Rahe, who visited that site in 1973 and 2019, radically excludes the possibility that an army

marching from the south of could see another army deployed immediately to the north of either of the ridges described in Thucydides' account (Thuc. 5.66; cf. p. 349, note 29).

Let me finish with a few remarks on the book's intended audience. The author visibly aims at balancing the needs of the general public and the requirements of scholars. On the one hand, his smooth and fluid writing style, as well as the absence of footnotes, address the non-specialist, yet also well-educated readers, who might be fascinated by one of the most crucial conflicts of Greek ancient history. On the other hand, the notes' apparatus, full of references to the ancient sources and to secondary literature, is aimed at the academic reader, who, nevertheless, might miss a separate bibliographic appendix.

To sum up, the volume is an accurate presentation of the first phase of the Peloponnesian conflict (the 'Archidamian War'), although the reader's expectation to find a Sparta-centered perspective will probably not be satisfied. In any event, Rahe's *Sparta's Second Attic War* provides a reconstruction of these events which is solid but also accessible to a wider audience interested in Greek military history and warfare.

### Notes

[1] See Fuller, J. F. C. 1923. *The Reformation of War*. London: Hutchinson; Luttwak, E. 1976. *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.