

[agade] eREVIEWS: Of "Great naval battles of the ancient Greek world"

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Objet : [agade] eREVIEWS: Of "Great naval battles of the ancient Greek world" **À :** The Agade mailing list. <agade@listserv.unc.edu>**Répondre à :** Jack M Sasson <jack.m.sasson@gmail.com>From <<https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2020/2020.03.40>>:

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Owen Rees, *Great naval battles of the ancient Greek world*. Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2019. 218 p.. ISBN 9781473827301 £19.99.

Review by

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Naval warfare has always had to cope with the popularity of land warfare both in the general public interest and in academic studies; and this is even truer in the case of classical studies. It is thus more than welcome that Owen Rees has decided to develop what was originally a section of his previous book, *Great Battles of the Classical Greek World*, into a work entirely consecrated to naval battles. As stated in the introduction, the aim of the book is "to bring the multitude of naval engagements, which pervade the ancient sources, into a broader modern awareness" (p. ix). In the narrative structure of the book Rees recapitulates, with naval engagement after naval engagement, the whole course of Greek military and political history, from the beginning of the 5th century BCE to the first decade of the 4th century.

The bulk of the work is the narrative of 13 individual naval battles involving Greek fleets in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. These battles are presented in chronological order and are grouped into four blocks corresponding to the main major conflicts of the time: the Persian wars (Part 1); the Archidamian war (Part 2); the Ionian war (Part 3); the "Turning of the tide", i.e. the first decade of the 4th century (Part 4). Each part begins with an overview of the political and military background and presents the naval battles. A chapter is dedicated to each battle, and each account is subdivided into four sections: Background, Forces, Battle, Aftermath.

The Introduction—brief but thorough—is most interesting: it presents the main features of Greek naval warfare. The development of the trireme is first introduced, comparing the different types of military vessel throughout Greek history; particular attention is then given to the composition of the crews. The basics of naval tactics are sketched lastly: diagrams help visualize the principal manoeuvres such as the diekplous and periplous. The introduction ends with a notice on the selection of the 'great' battles and the choice of ancient historiographical sources: as Rees warns the reader,

"... naval engagements were rarely solitary affairs. They were usually part of a larger campaign [...]. Alternatively, a fleet was not just used to fight other fleets but would also be used in conjunction with land forces" (p. xvi).

This is why context has a great role in the narration of many battles here discussed, to the point that in a few cases the background narrative covers more than the actual battle (an example could be chapter 6, the battle of Corcyra: pp. 65-70 the background, p. 70-73 the forces and battle).

Although ancient tradition about naval battles dating back to the archaic age survives—one example: Thucydides famously dates to 260 years before his time, i.e. ca. 660 BCE "the earliest sea-fight in history ... between the Corinthians and Corcyraeans" (Thuc. 1.13.4)—no extensive account of any naval engagement before the 5th century can be given.

Part 1, "The Persian conflicts," introduces us to the context of the decades-long complex relations between Persia and the Greek poleis, culminating into the open conflict from the start of the century. The Persian wars turned into myth very early, as Aeschylus' *Persians* already shows just eight years after Salamis. Being part of a very durable celebratory tradition, the battles of Artemisium and Salamis, and to a lesser extent the battle of Lade are quite a challenge to be tackled again. Rees' vivid narrative lives up to this challenge: drawing mainly from Herodotus' *Histories*, complemented with Diodorus, Plutarch's *Lives* and Aeschylus as well, it guides the readers from the sudden appearance of the Persians in the Mediterranean chessboard to the rise of Athenian thalassocracy.

The conflict between the Athenian empire and the Peloponnesian League is the subject of the next two parts, the Peloponnesian War being considered two separate wars. Part 2, "Archidamian War," narrates, from a naval perspective, the main military events of the 430s and 420s. The complex narratives of the chapters of this part show well the different strategies and tactics Greek fleets could employ or had to deal with, as well as the intertwining of naval and land operations. The main source for this part is Thucydides, complemented by Diodorus and Plutarch. Chapter 4 recounts the battle of Sybota of 433 BCE, considered a prelude to the conflict, which was, in fact, a great battle between some of the biggest naval powers in Greece: the Athenian-backed Corcyreans and the Corinthians, Athens' main competitors at sea. The prominence of the Corinthian fleet in a war which is commonly condensed as Athens versus Sparta is equally appreciated in the other two chapters. Chapter 5, "The battle of the Corinthian Gulf" actually narrates the naval operations of 429 around that gulf and two main naval battles: Rhium and Naupactus. Chapter 6 focuses on Corcyra and its internal stasis (427) while tackling the context of the war, and the naval strategy of the two sides, in a wider scale, e.g. dealing with the Mitylenean revolt.

Part 3, "The Ionian War," presents in my opinion the most complex battle narratives of the book. The renewed conflict between Athens and Sparta, following the frail peace of Nicias, includes many campaigns, both on land and sea, in different areas and with different outcomes, whereas a manoeuvre would develop into a battle, a battle breaks down into skirmishes or the fighting stop abruptly. The Battle of Erineus (Chapter 7) is a relatively small encounter in the greater story of the war but saw the introduction of a newly designed trireme by the Corinthians, demonstrating both the vitality and the weight of this

polis in the history of naval warfare.

The great disaster of the Athenian expedition to Sicily is summarized in Chapter 8, "The Battle for the Great Harbour of Syracuse." Rees' account highlights the role of experimentation in naval tactics and design in challenging Athens' supremacy. Reading the chapters sequentially we follow very closely the movements of the Athenians, the Syracusans and the Peloponnesians in this very convoluted sequence of events, as chapter 9, aptly entitled with a plural: "Battles of the Ionian Coast, shows. While the most famous battles of the war, the ones at Arginusae (chapter 10) and Aegospotami (chapter 11) have their own chapter and are easily narrated as units, the rest of the chapters split the many naval encounters between the Background and the Battle sections, with the result of an overgrowth of the former.

The last part, "Turning of the tide," breaks the continuous narrative which we followed from Lade to Aegospotami, as Rees warns in the introduction, since the sources relating to 4th-century naval warfare are either too fragmentary or even more focused on land battles than before (p. xvii). The two chapters of the fourth part, however, give an interesting glimpse of the development of naval technology and tactics. Chapter 12 brings us back to Sicily and the conflict for hegemony between Syracuse and Carthage. We follow the ebbs and flows of Dionysius' wars, culminating in the battle of Catane (396 BCE) which gives the chapter its title. The battle shows simultaneously the value of a new ship, the quinquereme, and its futility in the face of the bad tactical choices of Syracusan admiral Leptines. The last chapter goes back to the eastern side of the Greek world. The Battle of Cnidus (394 BC) was a Persian narrow victory over the fleet of the Greek champions, the Spartans: it is remembered as the first resurgence of Athens' naval force.

The short Conclusion sums up the history of Greek naval warfare as seen through the 13 battles: its trends, innovations, constants. Especially precious is the selected bibliography at the end of the book, which offers updated literature and online sources.

Rees's work is highly recommended. His lively and clear prose entices the reader without giving up historical precision, making it accessible to a wide range of readers.

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