Rezensiert von: Trundle Matthew, Classics and Ancient History, The University of Auckland

The Great Peloponnesian War was the defining moment in the history of Classical Greece. Sparta and Athens spent 27 years from 431–404 BCE locked in a struggle for domination of the Greek world. That the Spartans won, with Persian help, meant they denied Athens the chance to establish itself as a long-term imperial power. As Roberts notes this epic struggle was simply another war, one of many, that littered the classical period. Athenian recovery after the war meant 404 BCE was not really the end of a story (p. 284), but essentially a continuum. As every scholar knows, however, and Roberts amongst them, the Peloponnesian War was much more than just another war. Thucydides’ *Histories* immortalised it and its events like no other. In addition, its context, the so-called Golden Age of Athens in which drama, philosophy, art and architecture all coalesced in their collective brilliance in one place and at one time made the period absolutely and singularly unique.

Roberts presents the reader with a clear, straightforward and chronological narrative of events from the background to and origins of the war through to its grim conclusion and inconclusive war-torn aftermath. The narrative segues from one event to the next identified with good use of sub-headings within each chapter. Each chapter begins with a brief synopsis for what will follow. For those with no knowledge of Greek history these introductory synopses are essentially ‘spoilers,’ though few readers would not know the outcome of the war or the results of certain events within it, like the Athenian disaster in Sicily. And it remains a good read with a useful chronological outline at the start, maps throughout, and a glossary and bibliography at the end.

There is, however, limited analysis of events themselves and discussion of historical issues and problems. One might ask as a result ‘for whom is this book written?’ Novices might need more information and historical analysis, while experienced historians will know the story only too well. As ever it is always better to read the *Histories of Thucydides* and then Xenophon’s *Hellenica* 1–2, the plays of Aristophanes, supplemented by the key *Lives* of Plutarch to get a real flavour of Athens, the war and its zeitgeist. Little in the book discusses source disparities, criticism or historiography. Thucydides, naturally, is preferred as the spine of the story. The origins of the war are traced, beginning with Thucydides’ enigmatic and much discussed statement regarding Athenian power and the fear this caused at Sparta (p. 47), and then the various immediate causes, Athenian involvement with Epidamnus, Corcyra and Corinth first (p. 47–53), then Potidaea and Corinth second (p. 53–55), followed by mention of the Megarian Decrees third (p. 55–57). There is, however, no discussion of the relative importance of each or an attempt (as so many have attempted previously) to apportion responsibility or even blame. Perhaps that is a good thing: let the reader decide. But then why not simply tell the reader to read Thucydides and some key *Lives* of Plutarch in the first place? Roberts paints Pericles in a Thucydidean image (p. 96–98). Pericles thus remains the sensible Democrat who led the people wisely. One aspect of the narrative that is particularly pleasing is the way that the author interweaves the plays of Aristophanes into the story. The Comedies regularly reflected current affairs and plays like *Acharnians*, *Wasps*, *Lysistrata*, *Birds*, and *Frogs* provide excellent satirical commentary on Athens in the context of each moment.

The end for Athens could be more dramatically told. This comes a full 82 pages before the end of the book, signalling the absence of finality, but perhaps not emphasising the drama of the final moments of the Great Peloponnesian War enough. Xenophon’s account of the news that came from Aegospotami that the fleet had been captured and the fear felt at Athens is chilling (p. 285). And a true end-point. But then Roberts, rightly recognises that the great war itself was not an end at all. Hence the book is very much justified in
spending much time on the war’s aftermath and the endless wars that followed resulting in the decline of Sparta and the prominent role of Persia in Greek affairs.

Any final analysis of a book like this must come down to what one wants from it. For those seeking a clear and chronological narrative describing the participants and the events of the period then this book is a good ‘textbook,’ for want of a better term. If on the other hand readers hope for a more in-depth and detailed analytical account that raises questions, explores problems and potential solutions then perhaps other works might better suit. There are occasions when Roberts does analyse the causes of events or their outcomes, the failure of Athens in Sicily is one example (p. 218–219) or the reasons why Sparta did not destroy Athens another (p. 286–287). This is not meant to be critical for there is little in the main narrative that might be challenged, but simply descriptive of the work presented and its aims.

Obviously, there are specifics with which one might quibble. There is no evidence that the Spartan krypteia was ever a small elite unit of the already elite Spartiatae (p. 29), none too that a hoplite’s large oval shield (the aspis) was ever called a hoplon in the classical period (p. 29), while Epidamnus was a colony of both Corcyra and Corinth rather than Corcyra alone (p. 47). Roberts notes that education at Athens was exclusive to the elite and that only Sparta educated all its citizens, but without then noting that in Sparta the Spartiatae were fewer than 5,000 in a state of possibly half a million and so the elite of that city nonetheless (p. 110).

Some details might be usefully added for the sake of the reader’s enjoyment of a special moment. Thus, Roberts recalls how Theramanes toasted the lovely Critias with his last drops of hemlock, but without telling the reader that it was common for Athenians to reserve the last of the wine for one’s beloved augmenting the irony of the staged moment further (p. 289). Roberts notes the final event in Thucydides’ narrative and the transition to Xenophon’s Hellenica (244), but with no reference to the Hellenica of the Oxyrhynchus Historian nor the possibility that Thucydides voluntarily abandoned his History. There is no mention either of the merits or deficiencies of these new histories in the absence of Thucydides.

Finally, let me praise Roberts for one mention that is personal to me. Pleasingly she notes (p. 81) the Auckland War Memorial Museum, which she states is “generally considered to be one of the finest Greco-Roman buildings in the southern-hemisphere. The whole world indeed.” As, indeed, it is!

In short, this is a good read and a good overview of the events that shaped the Classical Age. The events it describes will long continue to invite debate. Scholars and students from around the world will continue to write papers and argue about the wars that plagued Athens, Sparta and their neighbors for as long as we value the past and the lessons it provides.