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Fascicolo 17. Marzo 2024  
**Storia Militare Antica**

a cura di  
MARCO BETTALLI ED ELENA FRANCHI



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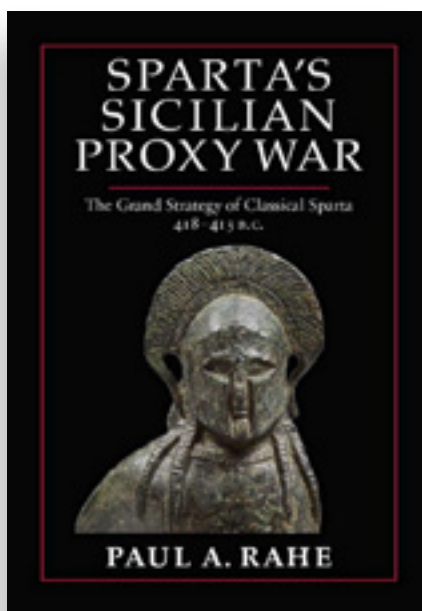


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PAUL A. RAHE,

*Sparta's Sicilian Proxy War*  
*The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta 418-413 B.C.*

Encounter Books, New York – London, 2023, ISBN 9781641773379



**T**he Spartans doted on their collective way of life and one could even state they strived to keep a specific status quo by taking up several strategies in foreign relations. Paul A. Rahe advances this systematic focal assumption in his Sparta's Grand Strategy series: from the first book on the war against Persians to the preliminary series' volume regarding Spartan society, until the two next texts concerning the struggle with Athens, this latest edited one carries on with this theorisation concerning the Athenian expedition to Sicily. The author's standpoint, however, remains Spartan or it is preferable to speak about Peloponnesian, due to the close tie concerning foreign and military between the polis settled on the Eurotas' riverside and her league. Taking the footsteps from the conclusions put forward in the previous book, where the battle of

Mantineia in 418 B.C was rightly regarded, by the Spartan perspective, as a turning point within the struggle against Athens, Rahe portrays the majestic preparations ahead of the expedition to Sicily. Still in this section, he does not dismiss to review the well-known Herms scandal, sorting out some convoluted topics. Within this preliminary chapter more turned toward the Athenian side in comparison with the main of the volume, it is proper to highlight the author's insight concerning the Thucydidean text. In fact, as a sharp reader of the ancient historian especially when he reviews the discourses ascribed by the historian to Alcibiades and Nicias, the author's analysis dwells on the inborn enterprising behaviour of the Athenians. It goes without saying that this reading crops up as the notorious offshoot of the characterisation that Thucydides outlines regarding his fellow citizens especially in the first book of the *Histories*. In this regard, through a neglectful attitude as concerns the foresighted advices by Pericles, at least the Athenians opted for sailing against Syracuse in grand style. Notwithstanding, again following the footsteps of the Athenian counterpart, the collateral Spartan enterprise in Sicily owned its roots in the bold strategy which the chameleonic Alcibiades wisely encouraged during his stay at Sparta. As a matter of fact, in these reflections Rahe follows the Thucydidean narrative step by step, not sometimes lessening his attention on Diodorus and Plutarch. Rather than being simply biased by the Thucydidean standpoint which difficultly allows different accounts from the *Stories* for his reader, it should be noted that the author fits himself in a current of thought which assumes the Thucydides' interview of Alcibiades. As a consequence, the latter's agency as a political refugee weighs on the balance argued by the author. Yet, still, within this reading mainstream among scholars, Rahe does not abstain from adhering to the alleged grand strategy perpetuated by the Spartans, who were compelled, time by time, to reshape their plans to face Athens. In the author's words, Sparta simply learned the lesson from the Archidamian war. In our opinion, even if Rahe consistently follows his theory, however, it would have been appreciable if he had clarified this point with more detail. After all, the peace signed some years before the Gylippus' mission should not be underweighted. Furthermore, we believe it is profitable to not overshadow that the Spartans would have smelled out some Athenian weakness when they accomplished the suggestions by Alcibiades. In other words, even when the so-called Peace of Nicias was up to that period into effect, the Spartans remained congruous with previous occasions when they had embarked on expeditions as long as

Athens was troubled in some way.

Before inspecting how the Spartans opted to support Syracuse in some ways, Rahe expands the narrative on the Athenian measures to encircle the enemy and the following countermeasures by the latter. As well-known among the main topics regarding the Sicilian expedition, scholars always puzzle over the Thucydidean narrative for the topography's problems and alleged inconsistencies. Yet, Rahe faces this challenge by reviewing the debate in the footnotes with an exhaustive bibliography as well as putting forward new readings, not forgoing sometimes authorial comments based on his first-hand survey in Sicily. "Autopsy" in historical research is not only a Ancient Greek anapanage, This section regarding the complex siege measures is worth highlighting due to the topographical reflections which fit in the narrative without impairing the readability.

In the analysis suggested by the author, after the Spartans had resolved to take part in the operations in Sicily, the situation turned more on the besieged side after the Gylippus' arrival. The Spartiate, in fact, after having gathered other allies with his landing in Sicily and joining the Syracusans, promptly started to arrange some undertakings. The building of a counter-wall and a land victory were a turning point. As a consequence, compared to a few weeks before when some defenders were prone to reach an agreement, the hopes for the Syracusans increased exponentially and, by converse, the Athenians became gradually "besieged". On this point, the judgment reserved for Nicias is particularly severe. Rahe stresses many times the faults of the son of Niceratus, even when the author analyses the well-known letter sent to Athens to ask for aid.

According to the author who many times in the following account continues to call attention to Nicias' lack of foresight and his mistakes even for naval warfare, the next months of operations should not be read as a mere continuation of the siege, but as a counter-offensive by the smart Gylippus and his soldiers. Actually, after a naval defeat not resolute for their enemies, the Syracusans seized the so-called Plemmyrium, achieving a key goal. From this moment, neither the Demosthenes' arrival could bypass the unavoidable defeat now. Again, following the Thucydidean narrative where the events become gradually dramatic for his compatriots and their allies, Rahe outlines the defeat representing all the steps forward to the surrender.

In order to reach the conclusion of this review, we can summarise some high-



lights of Rahe's analysis. Firstly, the entire volume is strictly based on Greek sources, especially on the Sicilian books of Thucydides, whom the author proves to be a perceptive reader due to his knowledge of the Greek language. This point is pivotal to appreciate this latest work as well as the entire series. Regarding the latter, consistently Rahe persists in following the Grand Strategy theory applied to the Spartan foreign policy in order to maintain her social *status quo*. If it is appreciable the author's evenness with this modern theory applied to an ancient reality, nevertheless some explications sometimes would have been needed. In addition to an appreciable prose which helps the reader to grasp all the siege operations, honestly, the endnotes are the real backbone of Rahe's work. Here, besides his integration into the academic debate, he proves completeness, quoting not only the major anglophone works on Thucydides but also German and Italian ones. Needless to say, the insiders know how much it is appreciable and a sign of great effort.

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So called Missorium of Kerch, 4th century Found: Bosporan Necropolis, vault on the Gordikov estate. Near Kerch, the Crypt in the North-Eastern Slope of Mount Mithridates, 1891 This silver dish was a diplomatic gift from the Byzantine Emperor to a representative of the Bosporan government. In this fine example of the early Byzantine art traditional Classical themes are combined with a new artistic style. The vessel shows a composition typical of Roman coins: the Emperor on horseback is piercing the enemy with a spear. The rider was usually accompanied by one or several warriors and Nike crowning the winner. In contrast to the Classical composition showing the final scene of a battle, here we see the scene of triumph: Emperor Constantius II sits on a horse, triumphantly raising his spear. To emphasize the Emperor's highest rank and divine power, the artist used special pictorial devices including, for example, the distortion of proportions. The images were produced by a chisel. Part of the ornamentation is nielloed. The outer surface is gilded and a loop is soldered onto it. Hermitage Museum. Saint Petersburg. CC BY-SA 4.0 (Wikimedia Commons).

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