The Battle of Arginusae: Victory at Sea and Its Tragic Aftermath in the Final Years of the Peloponnesian War by Debra Hamel.


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This short, engaging book begins with an introductory chapter, “Setting the Stage,” on ancient Greek history from the Persian Wars to the Peloponnesian War. Chapter 2, “Naval Warfare,” explains Greek trireme warfare, and chapter 3, “The Battle of Arginusae,” covers the preparations for and fighting of the battle between Athenian and Spartan fleets off the coast of present-day Turkey in 406 BCE. The fourth chapter, “The Athenians and Their Generals,” gives an overview of relations between elected military commanders (strategoi) and the democratic assembly (ekklesia) in the fifth century. Chapter 5, “The Aftermath in Athens,” concerns the notoriously irregular trial and execution of six of the eight generals in command at the battle. In her epilogue, classicist and historian Debra Hamel concludes that this trial was, “simply put, ... a terrible mistake” (94) by the people of Athens. Nonetheless, she does not believe either the trial or the subsequent executions detract from the achievements of Athenian democracy. The book is enhanced by maps, diagrams, two short appendices on the chronologies of events pertaining to the trial, and a thematic index.

Most surprising for readers of this book will be Hamel’s slight coverage of the titular battle. Our best contemporary source, the Athenian historian Xenophon (c. 430–354 BCE), recounts the battle as follows:

After [putting their ships in battle order] the [Spartans and Athenians] fought at sea for a long time, first in close order and afterward dispersed. But when [the Spartan commander] Callicratidas fell overboard into the sea and disappeared as his ship was ramming an enemy, and Protomachus [an Athenian general] and those with him on the right wing defeated the [Spartan] left, then the Peloponnesians fled to Chios and large numbers of them also to Phocaea. But the Athenians sailed back to the Arginusae islands. (Hellenica 1.6.33)

This is not much to go on. Accordingly, Hamel herself (regrettably) devotes a mere three pages to the actual course of the battle (50–53), after a longer preceding section on the disposition of the Spartan and Athenian ships (45–50). She does, however, somewhat compensate for our lack of precise knowledge about the battle by providing plentiful explanations of Greek naval warfare in general (chap. 2); we learn from her vivid account of how triremes worked just what it was like to man such a vessel. Helpful diagrams clarify typical naval maneuvers.

Hamel follows the time-honored procedure of trying to reconstruct the battle by testing Xenophon’s terse account against (a) reasonable standards of plausibility and (b) the fuller but admittedly (47) far less trustworthy account of Diodorus Siculus in his gigantic Universal History, written in the first century BCE. Her piecing together of events often ignores the question of the original authors’ intentions. That is, each bit of information in a specific source is treated as non-rhetorical and evaluated.

purely for its degree of plausibility or agreement with other authors. This method can lead to factual results but at the risk of misinterpreting the evidence by discounting possible motives of the ancient historian in recounting events as he did.

For instance, in describing the fate of the Spartan commander Callicratidas, Hamel does not mention a topos favored by Xenophon: in the *Hellenica*, the sudden death of a commander invariably leads to the defeat of his forces. Most notably, the Theban commander Epaminondas somehow dies almost as soon as the Battle of Mantinea (362 BCE) begins. Xenophon describes in detail how his rudderless army disintegrated after his death, but not how the Theban general was killed (*Hell. 7.5.25*). Callicratidas’s much more famous coeval, Lysander, the Spartan commander who forced Athens into submission at the end of the Peloponnesian War, also died in an unknown way at the Battle of Haliartus in 395 BCE (*Hell. 3.5.19*). Callicratidas’s death, then, is part of a thematic strand of commanders’ disappearances from battle in the *Hellenica*.

In addition, Xenophon links Lysander and Callicratidas in a study of contrasts. He portrays Lysander as willing, even eager, to accept Persian money to advance the Spartan war effort (*Hell. 1.5.2–7*). Callicratidas, on the other hand, is a “Spartan” Spartan, disgusted by the Spartans’ shameful dependence on Persian money to make war on other Greeks (*Hell. 6.6–7*). Just before the Battle of Arginusae, for example, “Hermon the Megarian, the navigator of Callicratidas’ ship, said to him that it would be well to sail away, since the triremes of the Athenians were far more numerous. Callicratidas, however, said that Sparta would be governed no worse if he were killed and that it would be shameful to flee” (*Hell. 1.6.32*).

Callicratidas was wrong to fight when he did: in the *Hellenica*, the larger fleet nearly always wins in battle. But he fights anyway, out of principle, and incurs huge losses for Sparta—seventy ships (cf. *Hell. 1.6.34*). In Xenophon’s bare-bones account of the battle, Callicratidas himself vanishes, an otherwise unknown Athenian commander prevails, and Spartan forces really do flee. What Callicratidas rejected as shameful “fleeing” would have allowed the Spartans to wait for conditions under which they could have won the battle.

Xenophon’s account of the battle is, then, designed to explore the consequences of a too rigid adherence to “Spartan” values. Some awareness of that narrative purpose makes his story of the battle more meaningful and vivid. Comparisons to the larger narrative context further reveal the historian’s intentions. For instance, commanders who ignore good advice often get into trouble (cf. *Hell. 2.1.25*). And, too, Callicratidas was quite wrong to imagine Sparta “would be governed no worse if he were killed”: he was mostly a good commander, and bad commanders were a bane to Sparta throughout the period Xenophon records.

Hamel omits the conversation between Hermon and Callicratidas and adopts a different attitude to the sources from the one I have outlined.

Neither Xenophon nor Diodorus has much to say about the actual fighting at Arginusae. Indeed, Xenophon tells the whole story of the battle in three sentences. Diodorus’ account is longer and more detailed.

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2. There is some corruption of the text in the phrase ἡ Σπάρτη †οῦδὲν μὴ κάσιον οίκεῖται† στοῖο ἀποθανόντος. I offer a translation of the generally accepted reconstruction.


4. Cf. φεύγειν δὲ αἰσχρὸν ἐφή ἐναυ (∗Hell. 6.32*) and ἐντεῦθεν φυγῇ τῶν Πελοποννησίων ἐγένετο (6.33); that is, the Spartans do precisely what Callicratidas described as shameful.

5. Hamel fails to mention the clever Spartan commander Eteonicus (∗Hell. 1.6.36–39*), who shrewdly fabricated false news of a Spartan victory at Arginusae in order to hold his own force together long enough to escape.
... but is also more generic, and is mostly concerned with the alleged heroics of the Spartan navarch Callicratidas. Having learned from a seer prior to the battle that he was destined to die, Diodorus writes, Callicratidas aimed to go out in a blaze of glory. He was ramming ships left and right, cutting a swath through the Athenian line, when he finally rammed the Athenian general Pericles’ trireme with unusual violence and got stuck: the Spartans couldn’t extract their ram from the ship they’d holed. Now the Athenian victims became the aggressors. They used a grappling hook to keep the Spartans immobile, then boarded Callicratidas’ trireme and killed everyone on it. Callicratidas himself fought brilliantly and held out for a long time, but he was finally overwhelmed by the sheer numbers against him, and he went down in whatever the pre-gunpowder equivalent of a hail of bullets was—a flurry of sword thrusts, I suppose.... [I]t’s hard to take this formulaic account of a heroic death seriously. I find Xenophon’s mention of Callicratidas’ death far more credible [than] ... the made-for-Hollywood glamour of Diodorus’ account.... (50–51)

This paragraph, which typifies Hamel’s gripping prose style, interestingly shows how Diodorus tried to provide the exciting battle narrative that Xenophon chose not to and that Hamel, therefore, could not, for lack of solid evidence. But the argument that we should accept Xenophon’s account because it is somehow more plausible than the one Diodorus concocted is patently weak. We can establish Xenophon’s serious purposes only through a meticulous analysis of Hellenica.

Hamel’s passionate defense of Athenian democracy also runs afoul of Xenophon’s testimony. Her method of reconstructing the trial of the generals parallels her recreation of the sea battle. Ironically, however, she sometimes rejects evidence from Xenophon because it is absent in Diodorus (e.g., 79), even though the latter’s account lends less support to her argument than does Xenophon’s. It would require more than this to justify discounting Xenophon’s version of events, which shows that during the trial the Athenians willfully broke or disregarded the laws that safeguarded their own polity (Hell. 1.7.12–15).

Moreover, Xenophon’s account does not end with the trial. He goes on to show that the “Thirty Tyrants”—Athenian oligarchs whom Lysander imposed upon Athens after the Peloponnesian War (Hell. 2.3.13–14ff.)—were far worse than the democratic assembly: these self-confessed murderers for the sake of money (Hell. 2.3.21) were destroying Athens for personal gain until they were deposed in a civil war against the democrats. Here the Athenian People emerge as courageous (Hell. 2.4.13–19) and able to make and respect oaths of reconciliation with their fellow citizens (Hell. 2.4.43). Though the Athenians broke their own laws during the trial of the generals and suffered tremendously in losing the Peloponnesian War, they nevertheless recovered even from such tribulations. We need not (and should not) mitigate our evidence for their behavior at the trial by calling their actions a “mistake.” Xenophon teaches us the valuable lesson—that a state can recover from its own deliberate disgraceful actions. And what state has not done things it later feels ashamed of?

Readers will find in Debra Hamel’s The Battle of Arginusae a lively and accessible narrative, but they may do better to read Xenophon instead, and to work toward their own conclusions about both the ancient historian’s account and the events themselves. While many readers find the Hellenica (which describes over fifty years of warfare and features dozens of battle accounts) a hard slog, it rewards the persistent with its analysis of the causes, characters, and outcomes of Greek, and particularly Spartan, warfare in the fourth century BCE.