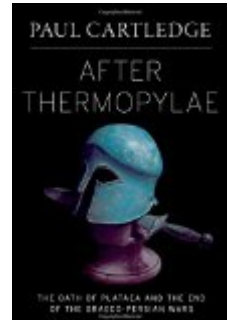


Paul Cartledge. *After Thermopylae: The Oath of Plataea and the End of the Graeco-Persian Wars.* Emblems of Antiquity Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Maps, illustrations. xxx + 203 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-974732-0.



Reviewed by Nikolaus Overtoom

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Paul Cartledge's *After Thermopylae: The Oath of Plataea and the End of the Graeco-Persian Wars* brings out of relative obscurity one of the most decisive battles of the Graeco-Persian Wars. Almost everyone has heard of the valiant stand of Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae. Similarly, the Athenian defeat of the Persians at Marathon and their decimation of the Persian fleet at Salamis are two of the most celebrated events in antiquity. Meanwhile, the Battle of Plataea, which once and for all removed the threat of Persian dominance over the Greek mainland, is a distant fourth in the hearts and minds of ancients and moderns alike. How did this come to be? Cartledge's work aims to answer this question through a discussion of the rivalry that developed between Sparta and Athens after the wars and the subsequent propaganda battle between the two powers. In the war of words that progressed throughout the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the Athenians were able to outmaneuver the Spartans in the recreation of state memory and the invention of "history." Ultimately, the Athenian tri-

umphs at Marathon and Salamis overshadowed the mostly Spartan victory at Plataea. Cartledge's book, a contribution to the new Emblems of Antiquity series from Oxford University Press, is a short work of seven chapters and 167 pages, much of which is background information on people, places, and events. He offers two rather general maps and a sketch map of the battle; he also provides a sprinkling of supplemental pictures. His preface is brief but emphasizes his dissatisfaction with the relative obscurity of Plataea. In the introductory chapter, which examines a marble dedication found near Athens, Cartledge rejects the authenticity of "the Oath of Plataea" inscription as an oath that was actually sworn before the battle. Instead he views it as a piece of Athenian propaganda, the purpose of which was to help create an Athenian identity and convince others of that identity (hence the large marble stele). Cartledge describes Athens as a society that developed an "epigraphic habit" (p. 5). Part of its democratic culture was to make important texts available to the public through inscriptions. This par-

ticular stele comes from the middle to late fourth century BCE and was dedicated near a religious shrine. He describes the oath as a religious offering to the gods (Ares in particular). He argues that those who dedicated this inscription either believed in its authenticity or wanted others to believe in its authenticity. Although Plataea was about as decisive as a battle can be, after the wars it was left to the Athenians and Spartans to fight over the right to control and create historical memory. Cartledge acknowledges that the Athenians were more suited to win a propaganda war and clearly did. He argues that “the Oath of Plataea thus both vividly illuminates Greek anxieties over historical memory and reflects the Athenian and Spartan rivalry that erupted in little under fifty years after the Battle of Plataea” (p. 10). Cartledge uses the oath in the rest of his work as a springboard to investigate “what actually happened,” the goals and motivations of Athenian propaganda, the invention of self-image, and the oath’s significance as a religious artifact.

His second chapter provides an analysis of the oath and compares it with two other literary versions. He concludes that although a new or renewed oath of common purpose is plausible before Plataea in 479 BCE, it is highly unlikely that the oath accurately reflects the terms sworn. Yet the importance of the oath as evidence is its portrayal of the process of Athenians from the 380s BCE onward creating a “retrospectively triumphalist narrative” (p. 30). Further, he argues that the other inscription found on the stele, “the Oath of the Ephebes,” was combined with the Oath of Plataea in the hope that these Ephebes (young Athenian men) “would be inspired to reproduce the putative glory of their ancestors at Plataea” (p. 39). The stele was a propaganda attempt to link the present and future of Athens with the glorious past. Cartledge hypothesizes that the Athenians dedicated the stele after their crushing defeat at Chaeronea in 338 BCE as a way to help soothe such a painful memory.

Chapter 3 tackles the religious interpretation of the inscription. Cartledge uses examples to illustrate that religious oaths were quite common in Greek society and that the gods were thought to watch over oaths and to punish oath breakers. He argues that by creating the Oath of Plataea, the Athenians laid upon themselves a potential religious curse that could incur religious pollution (a debilitating stigma in Greek culture). He concludes that this risk is not surprising because the Athenians “had a special affinity, and affection, for oaths, particularly oaths that fostered amity and collective endeavor, and particularly in the stasis-ridden atmosphere of the fourth century BCE” (p. 58).

His next chapter provides a summary of the Graeco-Persian Wars and background on the Achaemenid Empire. Cartledge reminds his reader that more Greeks aided the Persians than resisted them. He concludes the chapter with a brief account of the Greek resistance to the invasions, emphasizing the various divisions between “the Greeks.” He dispels the “overfamiliar, oversimplistic assertions that ‘the Greeks’ defeated ‘the Persians’ in the ‘Persian Wars’” (p. 87).

In chapter 5, Cartledge addresses the Battle of Plataea more directly with a discussion of the campaign. He also includes brief discussions of the other major battles during the second invasion. He offers three key reasons why the Battle of Plataea is overshadowed: it was a Spartan (instead of an Athenian) victory; Plataea itself was a small, insignificant state; and Herodotus’s account is brief and lacunose.

Cartledge next discusses the competition that began between Sparta and Athens to dominate the memory of the wars immediately after they were over. The Spartans pushed to glorify Plataea, while the Athenians lionized Salamis. Athens had the advantage of using their victory at Marathon as a launching pad. Cartledge illustrates that the Greek art of memory was highly competitive. The Athenians used public inscriptions, oration,

prayers, dedications, images, commemorative religious festivals, civic and sporting events, plays, philosophical writings, and histories all in an effort to laud, expand, and advertise their military achievements. They set the bar immensely high for Sparta. The Spartans created poetry and dedicated commemorative gifts at major Panhellenic shrines. Cartledge concludes the chapter by discussing the Spartan and Athenian competition through literary sources. Simonides's poetry reinforced the Spartan military ethos. Herodotus, who Cartledge describes as "basically truth-telling," is pretty evenhanded in his account of the rivalry (p. 145). In the writing of Thucydides the rivalry grew into the Peloponnesian War, which greatly intensified the struggle over the memory of Plataea. Cartledge argues that the Athenians wished to minimize the mainly Spartan victory at Plataea by advocating their share in the victory. He then states that one further Athenian innovation in the propaganda war was the funeral speech genre, which they used to help advertise a heroic past and invent historical memory. Cartledge theorizes that the oath emerged out of this genre. He argues that the inscription was meant "to cause Athenian breast to swell with nostalgic pride" (p. 157). Finally, in his brief concluding chapter, Cartledge discusses the legacy of Plataea in the modern world. He argues that there are a number of contemporary resonances, especially the concept of "the West" versus "the East."

After Thermopylae is a timely book with news that the Hollywood sequel to the smash hit movie *300* will charge into movie theaters in the spring of 2014. Cartledge's point that the Battle of Plataea is generally overlooked in favor of the other major battles of the Graeco-Persian Wars could not ring more true. The sequel, *300: Rise of an Empire*, will focus (as might seem obvious by the title) on Themistocles and the Athenian victories at Marathon and Salamis. One can only hope that Cartledge's new book will bring some much-needed

attention to the redheaded stepchild of the battles of the Graeco-Persian Wars.

The book appears to have been written with a lay audience in mind, with introductions provided on Athenian government processes, Greek religion, and Herodotus, just to name a few. Cartledge's work provides quite a bit of background information and explanations of terminology. His prose is ever approachable (apart from the jarring use of contractions), but his notations are severely lacking. For example, when he describes the Spartan delay before the Battle of Plataea, he mentions "robust modern criticism" but offers no citation (p. 104). Then in his discussion of scholarly debate over what equipment the Greek soldiers used during the Graeco-Persian Wars, he again offers no citation (p. 110). There are numerous other sections throughout the book that would have been aided by notations. Why not at least add an endnotes section for academic use? Cartledge at least offers a helpful further reading section and a sizable bibliography.

There are a few more specific issues that need attention. Cartledge's translation of the oath needs to be accompanied by the original Greek. I understand that a lay audience would just be bogged down by the Greek. However, to not include the Greek hampers the book's usefulness to graduate students and scholars. Cartledge or the publisher at least could have included the Greek inscription in the back of the book. Further, why use the problematic King James Bible as a source of translation on page 42? Surely The New Oxford Annotated Bible would have been a better and more scholarly choice. Finally, Cartledge provides some general maps and pictures. Yet in a work that appears to be geared mostly toward a lay audience, more maps and pictures would have been beneficial. At only 167 total pages, another twenty pages of pictures would have added much to the entertainment of the book and hurt little.

This book is a quick, engaging, and enjoyable read. Yet I would have liked a more scholarly ap-

proach to a topic that Cartledge successively demonstrates has been rather neglected. The overall usefulness of this work in the classroom suffers because it is probably too focused and specific for undergraduate students and not technical enough for graduate students. Nevertheless it is an important addition to our understanding of the Graeco-Persian Wars and the cultural ethos of the ancient Greeks. For those interested in the Graeco-Persian Wars and how the Greeks came to understand their own history, it is a book well worth the read. Cartledge's work here will hopefully spark further interest, discussion, and scholarly analysis of the role of Plataea in the Graeco-Persian Wars and in the Spartan and Athenian rivalry that developed throughout the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.

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This book is a contribution to the new "Emblems of Antiquity" series from Oxford University Press.

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