



Lords of the Sea: How Athenian Trireme Battles Changed History

John R. Hale

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The epic true story of Themistocles and the Battle of Salamis, and a rousing history of the world's first dominant navy and the towering empire it built.

The Athenian Navy was one of the finest fighting forces in the history of the world. It engineered a civilization, empowered the world's first democracy, and led a band of ordinary citizens on a voyage of discovery that altered the course of history. With *Lords of the Sea*, renowned archaeologist John R. Hale presents, for the first time, the definitive history of the epic battles, the fearsome ships, and the men – from extraordinary leaders to seductive rogues – that established Athens's supremacy. With a scholar's insight and a storyteller's flair, Hale takes us on an unforgettable voyage with these heroes, their turbulent careers, and far-flung expeditions, bringing back to light a forgotten maritime empire and its majestic legacy.

Lords of the Sea: How Athenian Trireme Battles Changed History Details

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John R. Hale

From Reader Review Lords of the Sea: How Athenian Trireme Battles Changed History for online ebook

Tony says

Lords of the Sea is a thrilling account of ancient Athens as seen through the lens of the city-state's Navy. Hale not only provides masterful accounts of major battles and naval policies, but also shows how the Navy influenced virtually all aspects of Athenian life--from theatrical plays to the democratization of government. This is an interesting and unique perspective on ancient Athens's glorious heyday.

Walt O'Hara says

I read LORDS OF THE SEA in a somewhat desultory fashion in paper about two years ago, and put it down, not to get to it again, not because I didn't like it, I just lost track of it and didn't get back to it. Recently I checked out a library audio copy from Overdrive, and I finished it last weekend. I am now going to go back and re-read the paper book to get the names right. LORDS OF THE SEA is an excellent, readable history of the rise of the Athenian navy and the Wars of the Delian League that followed. The author, John Hale, inculcates the story with moments of high drama as the city of Athens struggles to meet the challenge of Persian obliteration, then to achieve naval supremacy against the Persians and other opponents (often other Greeks) in the century that followed the Battles of Salamis and the Eurymedon. This was not a time of unending successes; a disastrous expedition to Egypt to support a revolt against the Persian Empire ended in failure, with 20,000 Athenians lost. Internal disputes among the Delian League members and conflict with the Spartan's own Peliponesian League in the first First Pelopenisian War further eroded Athens' claim to hegemony in the Aegean. Throughout their period of ascendancy, Athens understood their power (and culture, as Hale points out) derived from a relentless pursuit of a superior navy and overall "navalization" of their culture. Much like Sparta's militarization of their entire populace, so did Athens adapt an overall naval focus to every level of society. In an undertaking that required rich men to sit on the same rowing bench as poor men, society soon became democratized as well. Hale's book touches on all levels of the naval revolution of Athens, including the arts, democracy and society-- as well as being an exciting and engaging work of history. LORDS OF THE SEA reads like an adventure book, not a history, and I devoured it. Highly recommended.

Jrobertus says

This is a very interesting, albeit lengthy, book. It describes the rise of the Athenian navy in the Golden Age, and its role and impact on the concept of democracy. Themistocles opined that building a great navy would make Athens a great city state and this proved to be so. Although outnumbered badly, Athenian triremes crushed Xerxes Persian fleet at the battle of Salamis in 480BC and set the stage for two centuries of greatness. The Athenians battled not only Persians, but Spartans and ultimately Macedonians. The fleet was very democratic, and indeed, the trireme rowers had to be free men; this was their responsibility to the state and a great source of pride. Several great playwrights, like Sophocles and Euripides were rowers and their plays often reflect nautical themes. Philosophers too, like Socrates and Plato, used the ship of state as metaphors for the analysis of government. There is a case to be made that sea farers have broad horizons, and that contact with other cultures make them open to new ideas that have adaptive value. The book is historical, showing the role of key figures, like the well managed governance of Pericles, in that history. The

author relates actions, particularly sea battles, not just as who was there and what happened, but adds in a novelists view. He paints a picture for the reader about what it must have looked like on this day, with 200 triremes moving off quietly for a surprise attack.

Piker7977 says

The strengths of states are a combination of a lot of factors. Structural factors like geography are tremendously important as they help form the politics, society, and military which are also significant contributors. In ancient Athens there were two things going for their polis: democracy and a navy. John R. Hale tells the story of the Athenian navy and how it changed the city-state starting with Themistocles' initiatives all the way through the acquiescence to Macedonian hegemony.

What works well in this study is the analysis of the Athenian navy itself. The reader learns how the triremes were built, funded, manned, and utilized in sea battles. This dispels a lot of questions I had regarding economics and military prominence during this period. For instance, how could a coastal, rocky region in Greece have the means to build all of these wooden boats over and over again? Hale discusses how Athens exhausted their wood supply through deforestation which led to procuring this resource from foreign markets. One of which was Macedon. Through this trade relationship, Athens depleted their autarky while Macedon became enriched. This would eventually open a vulnerability that Philip would exploit and start the swan song of the most powerful naval polis of the era.

Combat is also told in a compelling manner which builds excitement when reading about the battles. Different tactics and perspectives are discussed for the many battles which gives the reader new ways to consider what could be identical events. If the battles were told in a standard tactical standpoint, it would get old quick. Hale lets us row, fight, steer, and command which will be great reading for the military historian or nautical enthusiast.

The second theme is where Hale leaves the reader short. In my opinion he does not make a valid case for the navy being the biggest factor for Athenian democracy. The significance of the thetes is very relevant as well as the role of the navy being the lifeline for the city-state. However, one needs to consider how war in general affects democracy. How wealth and trade affect democracy. How individuals can shape democracy. These topics are incorporated in the narrative, but I don't see how the navy directly creates or affects this form of kratos. Could a polis with a substantial land army have a democracy and see it ebb and flow based on the policies and success of their military? I think so. Hale's study definitely leaves the impression that a navy can have a huge impact on a state's or empire's greatness, but I'm not sold specifically on the effects to the kratos. I think that democracy was affected by many other things. The Athenian navy is simply a part of a larger analysis.

Great reading though. This is fine military and political history that does not get bogged down in esoteric details or theories. A good source for those interested in naval history or ancient militaries.

Mike says

I think I would best calssify this book as light historical reading. Hale writes in a very accessible, if plain, manner drawing the reader into the story of the ancient Athenian navy by concentrating on the personalities of the age and how they impacted the Athenian fleet. Battles were described in a way that was both descriptive but not bogged down in minutia. Hale was not afraid to use maps to illustrate battles or political

relations, something more history books ought to do and he provides a wonderful timeline and glossary in the back of the book. This book was certainly intended for those somewhat unfamiliar with the times and Hale makes every effort to ensure the reader doesn't get lost.

The history of the Athenian navy itself was quite fascinating. Unlike an army, the development and maintenance of a fleet requires a large investment to initiate and high annual costs to maintain. Unlike an army where the individual soldiers can mostly provide their own gear for war, a navy requires a port infrastructure, skilled laborers to build and fix ships, the acquisition of a wide variety of materials, and hundreds of trained men to successfully and effectively operate just one trireme. This sort of effort requires a sustained political commitment both by the rulers of a state and its citizens. It costs a lot, but if you control the seas in the ancient world you have a lot of flexibility in both war and peace.

It was fascinating to see how the Athenian democracy changed over the course of this book. At the beginning they were a pretty traditional Greek city state, albeit a smallish one with little to make it stand out from the rest. But with the investment of men and material in the navy they took on a new form. With the successful repelling of the Persians thanks to the "wooden wall" of Athenian ships they began to build a league of alliance with other Greek city states. This alliance eventually developed into an empire with Athens demanding tribute from their client states and trying to expand their influence as far as Egypt and the Black Sea.

After finding so much success they became arrogant behind their walls and fleet, challenging the might of Sparta and her allies. Eventually, like a good Greek tragedy, their hubris brought them low as their advantage on the seas was degraded by smart Spartan leadership, Persian money, the plague, and too many years of losses. But even being brought low by the Spartans after the Peloponnesian War did not permanently cripple the Athenian democracy or navy. It took the might of the Macedonians to finally quench the torch that was Athenian democracy and naval supremacy.

Hale does an excellent job showing how Greek politics influence the navy and how the navy enabled Athenian policy at home and abroad. Hale shows us the key personalities that drove these policies and explains why they acted the way they did. He also offers an excellent window into Athenian culture and life. While I knew the Greeks loved their plays, I was unaware of both their popularity and just how political they were. The Greeks were also extremely superstitious, to their own detriment on many occasions (stupid eclipses), and their beliefs informed their own policies and strategies. Also the Athenian democracy had some pretty ugly warts, be it allowing the rise of Trump-like demagogues or punishing unsuccessful military leaders with death or exile. I thought Hale very clearly laid out the strengths and weakness of Athens as well as why they eventually failed.

I did think the book fell short in a few areas. Where Athenian victories got a decent explanation and description, their defeats mostly amounted to "and the Athenians were defeated in the subsequent naval battle". I also thought Hale came up short in tying the Athenian navy to Athenian democracy. It is certainly true that on several occasions they extended citizenship to any slave or freeman who was willing to row for the fleet, but the institution of democracy didn't seem as closely tied to the navy as the title might suggest.

Still, it was a very engaging and informative read, great for people who want a good entry point into ancient Greece.

Chelsea says

Hale's Lords of the Sea is the history of the Athenian navy. Pretty straightforward, so this will be a fairly

short review. The book is extremely readable, and it wasn't necessary to drag my feet through tons of horribly academic language. It moves at a fairly good pace, and only uses 318 pages to cover hundreds of years of history, so there isn't a lot of pointless detail.

However.

Hale is very obviously in love with the Athenian navy and credits it with every single advancement Athens made. He credits the NAVY with the BIRTH OF DEMOCRACY even when Athens was a democracy BEFORE the navy! He also glorifies it to the point that he ends up glorifying war. A good chunk of the book takes place during the Peloponnesian War, and he makes it seem like a paddle around the pond for Athens, when in fact the the Athenians and Spartans spent most of the war torturing each other and dying in terrible ways. These are entirely glossed over or ignored in favor of relating the detailed plots of some of the plays that were written--and not all of those were about the sea or the navy. If you're going to include plays, Hale, you should probably have thought to include Lysistrata, the one about how the Peloponnesian War was so horrible and caused so many deaths that the women of Greece refused to have sex with their husbands until the men ended the war, because the women didn't want to lose anymore family members. (This was, by the way, fiction; no such sex strike ever took place, to my knowledge.) That seems a bit more important than a farmer flying to Olympus on a dung beetle.

There also seems to be some extrapolation; Hale often puts words or thoughts into Greek mouths, or records actions that I very much doubt were recorded.

Overall, a readable book, but Hale's love of the navy has obviously blinded him to other important aspects of Greek life, and this should be read with a heart dose of salt.

Benji Palus says

Non-fiction lost its draw for me years ago, but I read this one because of a "you read mine, I'll read yours," kind of deal with a friend.

I have to admit, I thoroughly enjoyed it, to the point that I wanted to go out and be an Athenian badass, lol!

It's difficult to write about a battle so that the lay-reader can really follow and grasp it, but through his words and diagrams, John Hale explains the naval maneuvers in a way that made me see them perfectly clearly.

More than anything else, however, is that the author truly does achieve what to me seemed to be his primary reason for telling this rich history: To inspire the reader as to what a bit of daring, a bit of boldness, and a bit of courage can accomplish, along with what can happen when we become afraid to use them.

Dmitry Kuriakov says

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to a democracy to being ruled by the rich tyrants to going back to a democracy. The democracy was never firmly stable. Because as the mood of the mob can change on rulings within the government, so it can easily change with what form of government it wants.

It was also incredible to read of how Athen's power and naval power was constantly going up and down. It seemed just as soon as they had won a few great victories and built a massive fleet, they would lose all the ships in a massive defeat. But within a few years, they would scrounge up the resources to rebuild that fleet and go out and reconquer their lost territory. And this cycle seemed to repeat multiple times in their 200 years of naval dominance. Therefore, with their combination of democracy and navy up and downs, I cannot say the Athenians were a consistent people, I will however commend their astonishing perseverance!

Margaret Sankey says

First, get the slaves to dig up the silver at Laurium, then build a fleet, bully your neighbors and become a great democracy! (or, as my HIST 312 students know full well, maybe not).

Helmut says

Wie alt warst Du, als die Perser kamen?

Kreta, auf dem ich dieses Jahr erneut Urlaub gemacht habe, ist eine Insel: Da denkt man automatisch an meeresverliebte Menschen, an minoische Seefahrer. Doch die modernen Kreter sind anders, landgebunden, meeresverachtend. Die traditionellen Kreter ziehen ins Landesinnere und pflanzen Olivenbäume, und wollen nichts mit dem Meer zu tun haben. Eine Anekdote, von unserem lokalen, auf Kreta aufgewachsenen Führer erzählt, illustriert das. Sein Vater, ebenso auf Kreta in einem Dorf nur ca. 20 Kilometer von der Küste geboren, hat das Meer zum ersten Mal im Alter von 18 Jahren gesehen. Er wusch seine Hände im Meer, schüttelte das Wasser ab, und ging wieder nach Hause zu seinen Olivenbäumen.

Die Athener waren zu Beginn etwas ähnlich veranlagt. Die Diskussion, ob es sich lohnt, auf eine Meeresstreitmacht zu setzen, konnte Themistokles nur durch einen Zufall, einen Silberfund, durchsetzen. Von da an aber war Athen eine "Stadt auf Schiffen", vom Meer verzaubert, freiwillig ans Meer gebunden, eine "Thalassokratie". Bis zu ihrem Aufgang in nachfolgenden Reichen war die Stadt Athen mit ihrer Flotte und Demokratie über 200 Jahre das strahlendste Kleinod des Mittelmeers, und eines, das selbst heute noch als Vorbild für uns dienen kann.

The beat of oars was the heartbeat of Athens in the city's Golden Age.

So eine Triere war die neue Superwaffe der Antike. Unglaublich schnell, agil, manövrierbar; dabei mit ihrer Hauptwaffe, dem Rammsporn, tödlich für andere Schiffe. Nichts konnte einer gut trainierten Schiffsdivision athenischer Schiffe widerstehen. Und in dieser Tradition, in der sich kein Athener zu schade war, auf den Ruderbänken platz zu nehmen (es gab keine Sklaven in antiken Trieren, das war eine mittelalterliche Neuerung und eine Ben-Hur-Film-Irrung), musste sich so etwas wie Mitspracherecht entwickeln.

A naval tradition that depended on the muscles and sweat of the masses led inevitably to democracy: from sea power to democratic power. (...) Oars were great levelers. Rowing demanded perfect unison of action, and the discipline inevitably generated a powerful unity of spirit. Rich and poor shared the same callused palms, blistered buttocks, and stiff muscles, as well as the same hopes and fears for the future. A new unified Athens was being forged on the

decks and rowing thwarts of the fleet.

Und kaum hatten die Athener sich mal an diese Form des Lebens gewöhnt, taten sie mit typisch griechischer Dickköpfigkeit alles dafür, es aufrecht zu erhalten.

What made the Spartans, Athenians, and others willing to fight? Part of the answer lay in a raw Greek spirit of independence, a fierce and fanatical zeal for liberty. Their rough and rocky land had bred a race of tough, self-reliant people. Greek cities were as obstinate as individual citizens in jealously guarding their freedom. For centuries this spirit had kept the Greeks divided against one another. Now at last it helped them unite against a common enemy.

Etwas, das man auch heute noch in Medien und Politik beobachten kann, ist die Tendenz, einst erfolgreiche und geliebte Führer schnell zu verdammen, sobald ihre Glückssträhne nachlässt. Die Begrenzung der Herrschaftszeit eines Anführers in modernen Demokratien hat schon ihren Grund; und den Athener Helden wäre es gut angestanden, ihren Zenit nicht zu überschreiten, denn wenn sie nicht freiwillig abtraten, tat es das Volk für sie - im besten Fall mit einfacher Verbannung aus der polis, im schlimmsten Fall durch mehr oder weniger erzwungenen Selbstmord mit dem Schierlingsbecher.

Only six years had passed since the victory at the Eurymedon River had seemingly put Cimon at the summit of Athens' pantheon of heroes. His father, Miltiades, had suffered a similar fate within a year of his victory at Marathon. There was no question that the Athenians often dealt more harshly with their leaders than they did with their enemies. (...) One after another the heroes of Arginusae drank their vials of hemlock juice and departed this life.

Dennoch bleibt ein ewiger Glanz auf diesen wenigen Generationen; die Namen der Helden überleben bis heute, und sie dienen trotz aller ihrer Mängel immer noch als Vorbilder für den Kampf für etwas, an das man glaubt.

As youths many had taken the traditional oath: "I shall hand on my fatherland not less, but greater." More than any other generation, these men had fulfilled that promise. (...) All those gifts of mind and spirit that set Athenians apart shone at their brightest in Phormio: optimism, energy, inventiveness, and daring; a determination to seize every chance and defy all odds; and the iron will to continue the fight even when all seemed lost—even when the enemy had already begun to celebrate their victory. For Phormio, it was never too late to win.

Waren es die scheinbar unschlagbaren Gegner in Form der Perser und Spartaner, die dennoch bezwungen wurden, die diesen Glanz erzeugten? Die unüberwindbaren Schwierigkeiten im Bauen und Aufrechterhalten einer so teuren Streitmacht, die gemeistert wurden? Die inneren Widerstände, die Opposition, die gegen alles kämpfte, was Athen groß gemacht hatte, die leider am Ende gewann, aber einen harten Stand hatte?

When the historian Thucydides recorded the people's energetic response, he observed that democracies are always at their best when things seem at their worst.

Eine Beobachtung die heute, in Zeiten des Demokratieabbaus, gegen den sich niemand wirklich wehrt, da es uns allen scheinbar zu gut geht, eine besondere Aktualität gewinnt.

Nach dem Erfolg der Frank-Miller-Comicverfilmung "300" war Sparta eine Weile in aller Munde. Eine brutale Militärdiktatur, kulturverachtend, herrschsüchtig, gewaltbereit, die Bürger (wenn man sie überhaupt

so nennen konnte) unterjochend - alle fanden es "cool" (mich erstmal eingeschlossen). Dennoch waren sie letztlich, obwohl es im Peloponnesischen Krieg erstmal eine Weile so aussah, als hätte Sparta die Oberhand, den Athenern unterlegen, deren Geist und Witz sie nie gewachsen waren.

The inexplicable failure of the Spartans to attack Athens immediately after this battle led Thucydides to dub them "quite the most convenient enemies that the Athenians could possibly have had."

Ich wäre froh, wenn es das kluge, strategische, clevere und edle Athen wäre, und nicht Sparta mit seinen hohlen pathetischen Kriegermythen, das mehr Aufmerksamkeit in der populären Medienwelt bekommen würde.

Jonathan says

A detailed and yet lively account of the rise and fall of the Athenian navy and, not coincidentally, her role as a great power in the Mediterranean region. Professor Hale is probably the leading authority on rowed warships (he rowed crew for Yale while studying with Donald Kagan) and it shows: not only are the campaigns, the strategies and the battles skillfully portrayed, but the techniques of sailing, rowing and fighting an oared galley - the ancient Greeks used a triple-banked oared ship known as a "trireme" - as is the finance and outfitting of such a fleet. Most important, however, were how the Athenians crewed and commanded their navy, and about the great men who were their leaders. All in all, a ripping great read of life and death on the wine-dark sea, and an excellent introduction to naval warfare in the golden age of Greece.

Chris says

The title and back cover initially led me to believe LORDS OF THE SEA was an analysis of how the ancient Athenians' decision to "navalize" ultimately led to adoption of democratic government. Instead of analysis, per se, the author, John Hale, embraced a more chronological, narrative-history approach. In so doing, he employs the novelist's method of "showing, rather than telling" how naval expansion politically empowered the middle and lower classes of Athens.

That the author uses a novelistic effect is not at all meant as criticism. Hale's writing is gripping and evocative. He makes you feel as though you're actually sailing "the wine-dark sea," the foam of waves splashing your face as you sit on the prow of an Athenian warship, the "trireme."

As with many books that cover this period, LORDS OF THE SEA, while ostensibly focused on naval history, is in truth a good overall history of Athens during its golden age—from the victory against the Persians, through the Peloponnesian Wars, until Alexander of Macedon brought the end of democracy and instituted an age of kings. All the major developments of the period are given fresh treatment, and the individuals who dominated that era—Themistocles, Pericles, Cleon, Alcibiades, Demosthenes, and others—come alive.

When discussing the history of ancient Athens, the Peloponnesian War naturally looms large. Indeed, about two-thirds of the book is about that "Greek world war." This massive conflict exerts such a hold on my imagination that, every time I read about it, I find myself rooting for the Athenians, even though I already know the eventual, dismal outcome.

One final observation: History owes Themistocles an unimaginable debt of gratitude of convincing the Athenians not to use revenue from a newly-discovered (in the 490s BC) silver mine to, in effect, give a “tax cut” to everyone in Athens. Instead, he persuaded his fickle, democratic countrymen to invest in a public works project of common purpose: building a massive navy. Without that investment, Xerxes may well have conquered Greece and, likely, much rest of Europe—extinguishing the light of classical Greece before it had a chance to flourish. The history of the world without that guiding light is a vision of darkness I don’t wish to imagine.

Jonathan says

Excellent overview of 5th and 4th century Athenian life as shaped by the Navy. Starts with the Persian wars and finished with the final defeat of the Athenians by the successors of Alexander. Hale is a good storyteller. The book is a little more pro-Athenian than I like; romanticizing democracy, the Persians don’t come out looking so well, etc. But, his approach as a naval historian is novel and it is an enlightening read on the whole. The illustrations are also nicely done. I would recommend all of the authors Great Courses series.

Roger Burk says

Hale has written an engaging history of the Athenian navy during its period of power, from when Themistocles convinced the Athenians to use a silver strike in 483 BC to build the fleet that stopped the Persians until a later Athenian fleet surrendered to the Macedonians after trifling resistance in 322. I think we sometimes get the idea that the Athenian navy did little of note outside of the Persian and Peloponnesian wars, but their other wars were also important, lacking only their Herodotus or Thucydides to give us a compelling account. For instance, a 300-ship fleet sailed to Egypt in the 450s to aid a revolt against the Persians, and it was destroyed. Who knew? The decisive Athenian defeat by the Spartans in 404, which at the time seemed like the End of Everything, turned out to be but a blip in the history of their navy; they were a power again by 378.

Criticisms: A lot of this history concerns general Athenian politics and its influence on naval matters. I suppose that’s because of the lack of good sources on strictly naval affairs. Hale does not warn the reader (except in an endnote) that his reconstruction of the Battle of Salamis is not universally accepted. He has the Persian fleet forming up parallel to the Attic shore and facing the Greeks along the opposite shore. I think the more common opinion is that the Persians formed a line across the straight, at right angles to the shores, which nullified the great Persian advantage in numbers. In Hale’s reconstruction, it is hard to understand not only why the Persians did not envelope the Greek line, but also why their defeated right wing would attempt to escape by sailing several miles behind the rest of the line towards the Piraeus, rather than running to the Persian-held shore immediately behind them. How many other dubious reconstructions have been presented as fact in this book? The reader should be advised about what is known vs. what is guessed.

And now for a pet peeve: Hale has become convinced that the triremes of this era were rowed with a sliding seat (illustration on p. 41). This highly dubious idea is inconsequential to his tale, but it still bugs the hell out of me. He justifies this with three illustrations from ancient sources, showing rowers with knees bent at the catch (A), knees partially bent during the drive (B), and knees straight at the finish (C). The ancient pictures, from three different times and places, in fact show the opposite of what Hale claims. (A) indeed shows knees bent at the catch, but it is not of a trireme, and a similar pottery fragment from c750 BC shows knees bent at the finish (*The Age of the Galley*, ed. Robert Gardiner, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1995, p. 41). Also, the spacing between the rowers shows no room to slide back. Apparently some early galleys had shallow

draft and the rowers sat with bent knees. (B) shows the one rower from the famous Lenormant Relief (<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File...>) whose knees are raised; the other *seven* very plainly have their thighs perfectly horizontal in the drive, and so are clearly not sliding. The bent-kneed rower is simply sitting over a cross-piece. Also, there is again no room for the rowers to slide. Finally, (C) is from a 700 BC potsherd (ibid., p. 27, mirror-imaged), 300 years before the Lenormant Relief and centuries before triremes. The rowers are only shown from the hips up; it's not clear how straight their knees are. It is clear that there is no room between them for a sliding seat.
