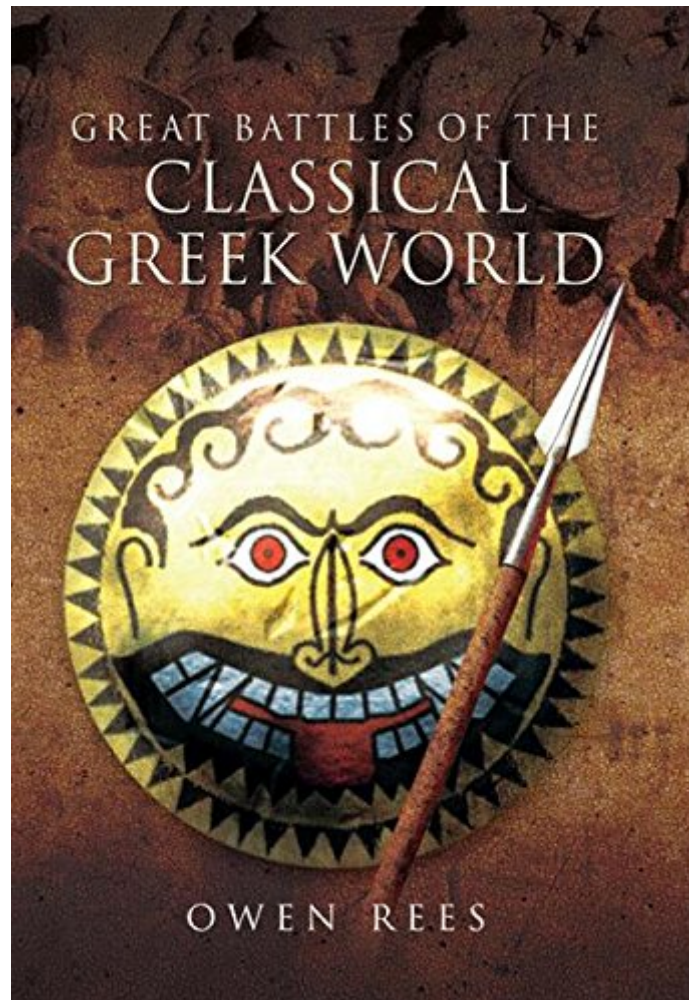




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Great Battles Of The Classical Greek World



Synopsis

This book presents a selection of eighteen land battles and sieges that span the Classical Greek period, from the Persian invasions to the eclipse of the traditional hoplite heavy infantry at the hands of the Macedonians. This of course is the golden age of the hoplite phalanx but Owen Rees is keen to cover all aspects of battle, including mercenary armies and the rise of light infantry, emphasising the variety and tactical developments across the period. Each battle is set in context with a brief background and then the battlefield and opposing forces are discussed before the narrative and analysis of the fighting is given and rounded off with consideration of the aftermath and strategic implications. Written in an accessible narrative tone, a key feature of the book is the author's choice of battles, which collectively challenge popularly held beliefs such as the invincibility of the Spartans. The text is well supported by dozens of tactical diagrams showing deployments and various phase of the battles.

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Customer Reviews

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My first impression in reading this compilation of

battles and sieges was that the author had managed to bring together in a single volume the equivalent of some seventeen Osprey Campaign titles: ten battles between Greek states during the fifth and fourth century, plus four sieges, and three more land battles opposing Greeks and Persians thrown in on top. The structure of each chapter reinforces this impression. Each of them opens with a background section which summarises the context and previous significant events, including some cross-references when some battles are linked. This is followed by a section on the respective battlefields and the opposing armies before a description of the battle or siege which constitutes the main piece, often includes useful diagrams, and is followed by an aftermath piece drawing the main conclusions of each clash. The text is easy to read and clear, well written and to the point. While the book is targeted at the so-called "general reader", there are also enough notes for each chapter and the references listed in the bibliography are sufficiently detailed and numerous to suit almost anyone who needs to go learn more about a particular event or feature of war in the classical Greek world. Another strongpoint of what is essentially a rather superb introduction to classical Greek warfare through a sample of case studies is that it is not limited to simply describing and analysing a collection of battles. It also shows how and why such warfare continuously evolved over time, with Sparta being among one of the main innovators contrary to received ideas about its sclerotic ultra-conservatism. It also demonstrates rather convincingly that Greek warfare was always richer and somewhat more complicated than just having two phalanxes clashing and pushing and shoving against each other, and that it got increasingly complex over time. The author's ability to integrate both the classical sources and the secondary literature over the last century into a seamless narrative deserves to be praised. The presentation of the various and multiple controversies between specialists, or at least some of the most important ones, is succinct but also seamless. It fits in very well and is included without disrupting the narrative and without falling into scholarly and ultra-detailed debates that have the potential - at times - of losing at least part of the targeted audience. Also very valuable is the author's ability in showing the main features of the ultra-competitive and generally hostile Greek poleis, but also their inherent instability and stasis (internal conflicts) which made them so vulnerable to subversion and betrayal. Another interesting and valuable component includes the author's explanations with regards to his choices. The presentation of battles is mostly chronological, except that the battles against Persians are deliberately introduced in the book's last sections to avoid distracting the author from the main points he seeks to make on Greek warfare. Another choice is the omission of the battle of Thermopylae, partly because it is one of the best

known of all, but mostly because it presents relatively little value for studying the evolution of Greek tactics. Nevertheless, Part IV on Greco-Persian conflicts is particularly valuable if only because it tends to correct traditional biases about the poor quality of the infantry of Persian Kings and how it was incapable of facing hoplite phalanxes. Perhaps the most original piece is the third part devoted to siege warfare and comprised of four chapters covering the sieges (and multiples battles) of Plataea, Pylos and Sphacteria, Syracuse and the largely unknown siege of Drilae, a town attacked by the Ten Thousand in Eastern Asia Minor during their retreat. The whole part shows the limitations of siege warfare in classical Greece, the fact that siege warfare, as the author clearly shows, may not have been the strongest suit of Greeks and that it may even have been inferior to the various techniques deployed by Assyrians, Babylonians and probably also their Persian inheritors. As also shown in the book, this however does not mean that it was insignificant and the beginning of the Fourth century, with a focus on subterfuge, infiltration, betrayal and deception. The first siege engines developed under Dionysus of Syracuse would clearly show how Greek cities could compete and catch up through the development of new technologies. This is perhaps where I have a slight regret because while some of the battles described take place during the Fourth Century BC, with the last being the second battle of Mantinea in 362 BC where the Theban leader Epaminondas was killed, the latest siege, that of Drilae, is dated 400 BC only. None of the battles or sieges in Sicily against Carthage are included, but this part of the author's deliberate choice to mainly focus upon warfare between Greek cities. Five stars for an excellent and highly recommended overview and introduction that is much more than simply a compilation and collection of Greek battles and sieges.

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