

ATHENIAN DEFENSIVE STRATEGY AGAIN

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IN *PHOENIX* 43 [1989] 294–301 Josiah Ober took umbrage at my review of his book, *Fortress Attica*, accusing me of misrepresenting and garbling his thoughts, and concluding with some rather unpleasant insinuations about my worth. I immediately re-read the work in question, even amidst a busy teaching schedule, though at first sight Ober's own account (294–295) of what he thought he was saying in *Fortress Attica* accorded quite closely with my memory of it. Re-reading has only confirmed my suspicions: Ober has taken his archaeological investigations (some parts of which are useful, others so speculative as to be mere guesswork, yet others, like the map on FA 110 of the "Visual Communication System" of Attica ca 340, which shows forts and towers situated well inside Boiotian and Megarian territory, quite misleading) and developed them into a theory that they cannot sustain and to which I am categorically opposed.

One of the objections to this book that I did not bring out explicitly in my review is that it contradicts itself throughout. There is first of all the grand theory, and then the repeated disclaimers that undercut it at many points. It leaves a rather schizophrenic impression, as of an original that has been revised, maybe in response to some referee's criticisms, without the author realising that the revisions contradict the overall thrust of his ideas. This makes it a difficult book to review. I chose in my critique to react to the grand theories, because they form the bulk of the work and would be likely to leave the strongest impression in the minds of students. I did, however, in several footnotes cite the fact that Ober had indicated an awareness of the detail that contradicted his theory. I should perhaps have stated more clearly why I did that. Ober was happy to have these contradictions co-exist and did not seem to appreciate the inconsistency. Fortunately I need not belabour this point. It has been nowhere more graphically illustrated than by Ober himself in his recent note in *Phoenix*. In his eagerness to demonstrate my mendacious misrepresentation of his ideas he has quoted passages from his work that refute the passages I had quoted. In doing this he is not arguing with me, but with himself.

Ober's first objection to my review is that it strangely misunderstood his "revisionist" approach to Athenian fourth-century history. True, as he points out, he does not subscribe to the theory of moral degeneracy: that is old-fashioned. Instead he has substituted the modern psychological

notion of the "defensive mentality." Now here is a perfect example of the way I have failed to do this book justice. I took the idea of a "defensive mentality" as a negative concept. Not so! It was a "rational fear" (294; an intriguing oxymoron) that "should not be mistaken for generalised apathy or lack of will" (297, quoting FA 65-66). But the strange notion of a "rational fear" is not found in the book; it is an editorial emphasis of his précis in *Phoenix*. And the other quotation is added at the end of chapter three—rather in the manner of those revisions I mentioned earlier, because it belies the whole tenor of the chapter. Or what is one to think when one reads repeated references to the orators playing upon "the *emotional* (my emphasis) response to the potential danger of invasion" (FA 60 and elsewhere)? And I do not have a positive feeling about a fourth-century Athenian who is described as follows: "The fourth-century Athenian *lived in terror* (my emphasis) of enemy invasion and wanted *desperately* (my emphasis) to be allowed to go about his business in peace and safety" (FA 60). The "defensive mentality" seemed to me then, and still does, like a most irrational state of mind.

Again, Ober takes me to task for not citing the subtitle of his book and, further, for expecting him to have written a comprehensive analysis of Athenian defensive strategy. Why was I concealing the fact that by "defense policy" he meant "policy of defending the territory of Attica against the threat of invasion by land forces" (298, note 7) and no more? I should have guessed that the real message of *Fortress Attica* was contained in the subtitle and in the disclaimer in the Introduction that "the present study is not intended to be a comprehensive treatment of fourth-century Athenian military activity or of foreign policy." I did not, of course, criticise his book on the grounds that it had failed to treat all Athenian military activity and foreign policy, but on the emphasis (in my view over-emphasis) it gave to border defence in the overall perspective of Athenian *defensive* strategy. But on this, despite the repeated insistence in the text (from Introduction to Conclusion) upon the thesis that the defensive mentality "chiefly determined the course of Athens' defence policy in the period between the Peloponnesian and Lamian Wars" (FA 65) and that the increasing emphasis upon protection of Attica "tended to eclipse the Athenian resolve to engage in long-distance wars" (FA 65), and despite the fact that chapter four, after reviewing the "wide variety of options" for defensive strategy open to fourth-century Athenians, concludes that the "preference shown by most" (FA 86) was for border defence, I should have realised that all this was so much sound and fury. I'm afraid I did not, but rather took these assertions to show that, at times at least, despite his statements to the contrary Ober recognised that it is impossible to treat the defence of the *chora*

separately from Athens' overall defensive strategy and that he was making bolder claims for his theories than he now finds it convenient to admit.

As for the details I am meant to have garbled, the first concerns my statement that "Ober does not distinguish extra-territorial from territorial defence." That statement was made in specific reference, as I indicated, to page 62 of *Fortress Attica*, where a passage from Lysias (2.70), referring to extra-territorial defence in the Corinthian War, is thrown in with citations purporting to demonstrate Athenian concern for defence of the *chora*, as if it made no difference. (This is, in fact, typical of Ober's generally insensitive use of the sources, especially the orators. As an example of that, let me direct the reader to *FA* 63, where Lykourgos' praise [*Leok.* 47] of the Athenians who died at Khaironeia [they died abroad fighting for their country—extra-territorial defence, of course] and Demosthenes' claim [*Epitaph.* 20] to have protected Attica with "armies and cities and outposts, seaports and ships and horses . . ." are both somehow used as evidence for the defensive mentality and the policy of border defence. In fact, of course, they describe a totally different approach.)

So despite his recognition of the *theory* of extra-territorial defence (*FA* 72–80), Ober fails consistently to recognise or acknowledge that Athens *practised* this policy. When in *FA* 74 he quotes the passage from Demosthenes 18.301–302 that I also used, it is to support his opinion that Demosthenes was a rarity in advocating a full range of defensive options. Quite the contrary, as I was at pains to demonstrate in the spirit of scholarly debate, the Athenians made use of all the strategies Demosthenes describes—consistently, throughout the period.

On the second point, regarding Philip of Macedon's supposed skill in siegecraft (remember he could not take either Perinthos or Byzantion), I am not too sure what Ober believes. On the one hand at *FA* 218 he claims that Philip's "advances in poliorcetics" had by 340/39 "changed the nature of warfare" and rendered the border fort obsolete, on the other (*FA* 222) he claims that these border forts deterred not only Philip but Alexander and Antipater from following up their victories with an invasion of Attica even though the citizens had already retired into the city.

Finally there is the matter of Sphodrias and the thirty-year gap. I had objected that Sphodrias' ability to penetrate Attica's border defences in 379/8 showed that the frontier-defences "were clearly not in place" then (70). Ober has a typically ambivalent attitude to this incident. At one point (301, quoting *FA* 213) he agrees that this must be the case and that the full elaboration of the system of border defences belonged to the period 378–343, but earlier (295) he takes a different line. There he says, "The system worked quite well: Attica was not invaded in force (the raid of Sphodrias in 378 was not in force) between 403 and 322 B.C." This implies

clearly that the system was in place from 403 onwards and, illogically, that, if Sphodrias' raid had been *in force*, it would not have got past the defences!

In short, I stand resolutely behind my original objection. Either Ober believes what he so frequently asserts, that the Peloponnesian War precipitated the "defensive mentality," in which case he should be able to demonstrate some effect of this (after all it cost nothing to reform the military establishment), or else, as now seems to be the case, he thinks it took effect thirty years later in the 370s, at a time, coincidentally, when the Athenians were aggressively recruiting members for their confederacy, Timotheos in the west and Khabrias in the Aegean. In that case Athenian policy was, I'm afraid, as schizophrenic as Ober's theory.

To conclude: whilst I wrote a somewhat vigorous review of *Fortress Attica*, I do not find that I have misrepresented or garbled its theses, to the extent, that is, that they can be divined from a book that is so self-contradictory and inconsistent. In particular, I am opposed to the negative depiction of Athenians as people who "lived in terror of invasion," and, as a result, made defence of their *chora* a matter of such paramount importance that it inhibited their performance overseas. In the spirit of debate I provided Ober with a brief review of what the Athenians actually did, rather than what Plato or Isokrates advocated (after all, if they had their way, the Athenians would have abrogated democracy). This would have enabled him to see Athenian defensive strategy in a broader perspective than the one circumscribed by his theory, if he was interested. It is clear that he was not.

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