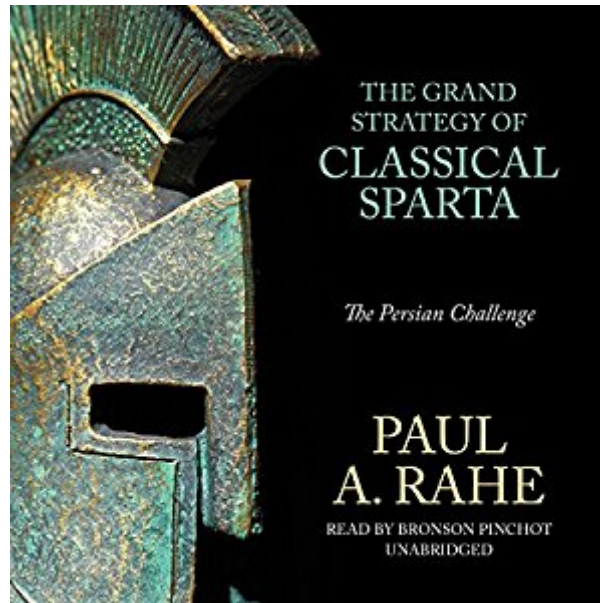


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# The Grand Strategy Of Classical Sparta: The Persian Challenge



## Synopsis

More than 2,500 years ago, a confederation of small Greek city-states defeated the invading armies of Persia, the most powerful empire in the world. In this meticulously researched study, historian Paul Rahe argues that Sparta was responsible for the initial establishment of the Hellenic defensive coalition and was, in fact, the most essential player in its ultimate victory. Drawing from an impressive range of ancient sources, including Herodotus and Plutarch, the author veers from the traditional Athenocentric view of the Greco-Persian Wars to examine from a Spartan perspective the grand strategy that halted the Persian juggernaut. Rahe provides a fascinating, detailed picture of life in Sparta circa 480 BC, revealing how the Spartans' form of government and the regimen to which they subjected themselves instilled within them the pride, confidence, discipline, and discernment necessary to forge an alliance that would stand firm against a great empire, driven by religious fervor, that held sway over two-fifths of the human race.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 14 hours and 31 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Blackstone Audio, Inc.

Audible.com Release Date: November 24, 2015

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B01863JFYE

Best Sellers Rank: #147 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Ancient #585 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Greece #906 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Military

## Customer Reviews

Twenty-five-hundred years ago the full military might the Persian Empire marched upon the weak and disunited city-states of Greece. Despite the humiliation suffered by Persian arms at Marathon, only a decade before, the world was not holding its breath in anticipation of the result. That the Persian forces was irresistible was clear to all, and the outcome therefore was undoubted. In fact, when Greek spies were caught observing the Persian encampments, Xerxes, Persia's Great King, ordered them shown around his camps and sent back to Greece so as to spread word of the vast multitudes preparing to march. How the Greek city-states defeated and turned back the Persian

menace remains one of the most incredible stories in the history of Western Civilization. Even today the battle narratives of Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis, and Plataea are told and retold not just by historians, but remain staples of our popular culture. There are few teenagers who are unfamiliar with the refrain: "This is Sparta!" This is the story Professor Rahe undertakes to tell and he succeeds brilliantly. Rahe's work is, simply put, the most comprehensive and best written history of the Greco-Persian wars in at least a generation. Any historian writing about this period by necessity has to rely to a large extent upon Herodotus. But the father of history has since Plutarch renamed him also been known as the "father of lies." Rahe, a scholar deeply immersed in the period, also relies on Herodotus for the framework of his narrative, but he does so in a measured and judicious way.

I had somewhat mixed feelings about this book. It has many qualities, but I also had a number of problems. The main quality is that this is a narrative of Sparta that starts well before the beginning of the Persian wars with the emergence of the Persian Empire in the Middle East, but also of Sparta and its growing dominance of the Peloponnesus. One problem here is that the author has chosen to write a trilogy of which one volume is to be called "the Spartan Regime" and will focus on the city's institutions. Accordingly, this volume only includes a rather brief overview of what could have been a key element of this book and a key component of Sparta's so-called "Grand Strategy". Two things are missing in particular. One is an analysis on how Sparta's institutions evolved over time. Another is how the key institutions – the two Kings, the Gerousia and the Ephors – interacted and could come into conflict. Another strong point is to insist upon the fact that Sparta's foreign policy was always influenced, or perhaps dominated, by domestic considerations. In particular, Sparta always feared that its helots would revolt and take advantage of any Spartan expedition abroad to claim their independence. This is perfectly true, although not original since it can be found in the sources and the point has been made before by a number of other authors, starting with Cartledge. To the extent that the whole of Sparta's power and dominance was predicated upon maintaining the helots in what amounted to slavery, one can wonder to what extent the expression "Grand Strategy" is an apt one. Perhaps my main problem with this book is the author's tendency to see the Persian Wars as part of a "clash of civilisations." This ideological and biased view is historically wrong.

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