

# DEFENSE OF THE ATHENIAN LAND FRONTIER 404–322 B.C.: A REPLY

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I SHOULD LIKE TO SAY at the outset that I do not much favor the literary form of the “reply to critics” and do think that history books should provoke debate. But debate cannot further understanding if those on one side misrepresent the other side’s position. In a recent review article on my book *Fortress Attica: Defense of the Athenian Land Frontier, 404–322 B.C.* (Leiden 1985) Professor Phillip Harding seriously distorts both the general thesis of that book and some of its specific arguments.<sup>1</sup> I offer here a restatement of the central theses of *Fortress Attica* and a rebuttal of Professor Harding’s interpretation of them.

The main thesis of *Fortress Attica* is that in the fourth century the Athenians’ strategic response to the threat of land invasion was different from the strategy employed during the Peloponnesian War. During the Peloponnesian War the Athenians relied primarily on the strength of their city-harbor fortification complex and did not attempt to exclude the enemy from occupying Attica.<sup>2</sup> By the second quarter of the fourth century the Athenians had put into place a system of land defenses designed to stop invaders in the border zone; thus the “city fortress” strategy was extended into a strategy that regarded all Attica as a “fortress”—hence the book’s main title. The reasons for this change were complex. Among other things the Athenians recognized that (1) the city-fortress strategy had failed to win the Peloponnesian War, (2) with the loss of the empire after the war the resources of Attica became more significant in the overall Athenian economy, (3) new offensive military strategies emphasizing economic coercion threatened Attic resources (*FA* chs. 1–2). These facts contributed to an ideology among the Athenians that I called “the defensive mentality.”<sup>3</sup> This ideology was characterized by (rational) fear of the consequences of invasion and a (rational) determination to defend the state against invaders (*FA* ch. 3). The defensive mentality was one (but only one) factor in determining Athens’ overall military and foreign policy.

<sup>1</sup>P. Harding, “Athenian Defensive Strategy in the Fourth Century,” *Phoenix* 42 (1988) 61–71; cited henceforth as Harding. *Fortress Attica* is cited hereafter as *FA*.

<sup>2</sup>*FA* 35–37, 51–52. I discussed Athens’ Peloponnesian War defense strategy in more detail in “Thucydides, Pericles, and the Strategy of Defense,” in J. W. Eadie and J. Ober, eds., *The Craft of the Ancient Historian: Essays in Honor of Chester G. Starr* (Lanham, Maryland 1985) 171–188; this article is not cited by Harding.

<sup>3</sup>For a full discussion of what I mean by ideology see my *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton 1989) 38–40.

Given the geographical realities of the Athenian borders (mountainous, difficult to cross except by established routes), the logistics of classical Greek armies (large baggage-trains required staying on established routes through difficult terrain), and the general inferior level of *poliorcetics* among classical Greek armies, the policy of defending the borderlands was a feasible and reasoned response.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the strategy of border defense was preferred by most (not all) fourth-century Athenian writers on military theory (*FA* ch. 4), and was the system ultimately adopted by the Athenian state.

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. The success of the border-defense system in deterring potential invaders meant that no great battles were fought in Athens' borderlands and thus the fortification system was not very interesting to ancient historians. The most prolific political orator of the age, Demosthenes, preferred a different strategic approach to state defense. The literary evidence for the fortification system is therefore meager and the traces of Athens' land defenses must be reconstructed by studying institutional changes and archaeological record.

Institutional modifications that can plausibly be linked to the border defenses include the appointment of a general "of the countryside," reforms of the *ephebic* system and infantry recruitment, establishment of highway-builder as a magistracy, and various changes in military financing (*FA* ch. 5). The archaeological record reveals evidence of early- to mid-fourth-century construction (and reconstruction) of several major border fortresses and a network of signal towers (*FA* ch. 7). Roads, which cannot be securely dated, link the city with the borderlands (*FA* ch. 8).

The book concludes with (1) a hypothetical reconstruction of how the defense system might have worked in practice against an invader, and (2) a tentative chronology for the institutional reforms and the building program that together constituted what I take to have been a coherent system of border defenses. I speculated that due to diplomatic and financial constraints the system was not finally completed until mid-century, and that shortly thereafter it became obsolete due to advances in Macedonian *poliorcetics* and artillery technology. I also suggested that emphasis on the border defense system helps to explain why the Athenians did not send their full infantry levy against Philip of Macedon until 338 B.C. (*FA* chs. 9–10).

All of these conclusions are, of course, subject to being emended or rejected outright. They are based on my own interpretation of a lacunary literary and archaeological record. Ongoing work on Attic border sites should

<sup>4</sup>For logistics and routes see *FA* ch. 6; *poliorcetics*: *FA* 43–45. I discuss these matters further in "Hoplites and Obstacles," in Victor Hanson, ed., *Ancient Greek Battle* (London, forthcoming).

help to clarify the chronology of individual fortifications, but scholarly unanimity on how the forts, towers, and so on, relate to one another is still a long way off. *Fortress Attica* is neither the last word on Athens' land defenses, nor a comprehensive discussion of Athens' overall foreign/military/defense policy, but it does attempt to demonstrate that military history can be incorporated into a broader context of social, economic, and ideological history. It seeks to show as well that a close study of unexcavated archaeological remains can add to discussions of Greek history.<sup>5</sup> Finally, it was meant as a modest contribution to a growing body of "revisionist" studies that reject the traditional characterization of fourth-century Athens as a polis beset by anomie and moral/civic decline.<sup>6</sup> My aim was to demonstrate how the Athenians devised a rational and effective (if ultimately imperfect) response to their changed post-war circumstances (especially the loss of the empire). This demonstration undermines the old argument that the Athenians lost at Chaeronea because they had become degenerates.

How surprising to read in Harding's article that I had argued just the opposite! In his introductory paragraph Harding (61) decries

a prejudice of western literature towards fourth-century Athens that was a cliché even in Demosthenes' time: Athenians of the fourth century were not quite up to snuff when compared with their ancestors.

Harding then points out, quite rightly, that this old cliché is falling out of favor with scholars. He then continues:

but at the eleventh hour a new thesis has been advanced to explain Athens' defeat at Chaironeia and all that and to block the road to a positive evaluation of Athens' history in the fourth century. This is the theory of the "defensive mentality"....

Here Harding implies that my discussion of the defensive mentality is intended as a buttress for the crumbling moral decline thesis. This point is later made explicitly (71, n. 36, and 62):

Ober's theory ... is the most recent manifestation of the phenomenon described in my introductory paragraph.

Almost overnight, he [Ober] feels, those go-getting imperialists we had come to know so well from the pages of Thucydides suffered a loss of moral fibre and developed a neurosis called the "defensive mentality."

<sup>5</sup>In this endeavor I was following the lead of N. G. L. Hammond, W. K. Pritchett, E. Vanderpool, and C. N. Edmonson, among others. Cf. *FA Selected Bibliography*.

<sup>6</sup>F. W. Mitchel, to whose memory Harding's article was dedicated, was a leading light in this revisionist school. Cf. his "Lykourgan Athens: 338-322," in *Lectures in Memory of Louise Taft Semple*, 2nd series, 1966-70 (Norman, Oklahoma) 165-214.

The basis for Harding's discussion of my "feelings" remains obscure, but it was not the text of *Fortress Attica*. What I actually wrote was:

Athens' failure to react more quickly and decisively [to the Macedonian threat] has sometimes been interpreted in terms of moral degeneration. The Athenians of the fourth century, it is argued [by Cloché and MacKendrick, *inter alios*] were too concerned with personal gain, insufficiently patriotic, and not the men their ancestors had been. The study of fourth-century defensive policy suggests a very different analysis. (FA 2 with note 3)

E. Lévy, *Athènes devant la défaite de 404*: BEFAR 225 (Paris 1976), 275, claims that the speeches of Demosthenes show that the citizens of Athens were unwilling to fight to the last extremity against Philip and believes this is indicative of a new anticivic spirit. On the contrary, the speeches show that the Athenians were not willing, until 340/39, to fight Philip in just the way Demosthenes thought he should be fought (i.e. by citizen armies sent against Philip in the north), but this is hardly indicative of a lack of civic spirit or a failure of Athenian will. (FA 60, n. 21)

The new Athenian defensive mentality should not be mistaken for generalized apathy or lack of will—even Isocrates and Xenophon in their post-Social War odes to peace and prosperity underline the need to maintain national defensive capability. Rather it was redirection of Athenian resolve, away from distant lands and problems and towards the homeland. (FA 65–66)

By recognizing the influence of the defensive mentality, we are able to reject the simplistic notion of moral degeneration as an explanation for indecisive Athenian military policy in the face of the Macedonian threat. (FA 222)

To be sure, *Fortress Attica* suggests that the Athenian land-defense system can be read as an example of the historically common tendency of preparing to fight the last war, and I hazarded the opinions that this was a strategic error and that the border-defense system may have promoted a false sense of security among the Athenians (FA 222). But these sentiments "block the road to a positive evaluation of Athens' history in the fourth century" (Harding 61) only on the supposition that any criticism of a decision by a state prevents it from being positively evaluated. Criticism is surely inappropriate in the rhetorical genre of encomium, but *Fortress Attica* was written as history; and, on the balance, its depiction of the fourth-century Athenians is overwhelmingly positive.

Harding's other main complaint is that, by emphasizing the frontier defenses, *Fortress Attica* fatally oversimplifies a very complex situation:

In the matter of military strategy [according to Ober] *nothing* was more important to any Athenian, whatever his stripe, than the defense of Attika. (62, original emphasis)

... in the fourth century [according to Ober] Athens put all her eggs in the Attic basket. (64)

To conclude ... that the Athenians decided to ... make the defense of Attika the main feature of their defensive strategy is to fail completely to understand the complexity of fourth-century strategy. (66)

In Harding's view I should have stressed not only defense of Attika, but also the factors of Persian money, naval operations, and especially the importance of food supplies from overseas. Because I do not emphasize these factors,

Ober has greatly overstated his thesis and performed a great disservice to the understanding of Athenian defensive strategy in the fourth century, by allying himself with those who, through a lack of sensitivity to the difficulties faced by Athens, believe that there is a single, simple explanation for her failure to resist the rise of Macedon. (70-71)

Harding's puzzling misrepresentation of what the book is about begins with a curious omission in his first footnote (61), where my book is cited without its descriptive subtitle. In order to make its subject clear, I have used the book's subtitle as the title of this note. As its subtitle announced, the book was about the defense of the Athenian land frontier: it was not a study of all aspects of Athenian security policy.<sup>7</sup> This is pointed out in the text as well: "I hope to demonstrate that the defense of Attika was a central concern of most fourth-century Athenians and hence of the Athenian state" (FA 2). But

it must be emphasized that the present study is not intended to be a comprehensive treatment of fourth-century Athenian military activity or of Athenian foreign policy. I will argue that the border defense system was the primary Athenian response to the danger posed by land invasion, but other measures, including diplomacy and military expeditions ... were also employed during the period under discussion. Furthermore, the defense of the sea frontier by the Athenian navy was a necessary complement to land defense and naval developments ... were often contemporary with major reorganizations of the defenses of the land frontier .... The identification of defensivism as a powerful influence on Athenian attitudes does not imply ... that imperialism and panhellenism were inconsequential. (FA 3)

It is generally agreed that the Athenians [in the fourth century] were deeply concerned with the maintenance of the grain route to the Bosphorus. (FA 27)

<sup>7</sup>On the assumption that readers would keep the book's subject in mind, I occasionally used "defense policy" as synecdoche for "policy of defending the territory of Attika against the threat of invasion by land forces" (e.g., FA 65). I regret any confusion this may have caused. My comments to the effect that "defense of the land frontier played a major role in the history of fourth-century Athens" (FA 222) surely do not exclude the existence of other equally or even more important historical factors.

Therefore, since Attica could only produce annually about as much grain as was imported from this region the effort to guard Attic-grown grain logically should have been "commensurate with the effort made to guard the sea route from the Bosphorus" (FA 27).<sup>8</sup>

Writing a book is, of course, necessarily a process of selection, exclusion, and emphasis. I would applaud the appearance of a general treatment of fourth-century Athenian foreign/military/defense policy that would put border defense into a broader perspective. Indeed, I hope that my much more narrowly focused monograph will pave the way for such a work. Perhaps a synoptic study will show that border defense loomed less large in Athenian thought and planning than I supposed. But meanwhile, it is surely perverse for a reviewer to attack an author for not having written the book of the reviewer's dreams.

Unfortunately, Harding also garbles specific arguments made in *Fortress Attica*; here I will document only two examples.

(1) "Ober does not distinguish extra-territorial from territorial defense" (Harding 67, n. 18). This is a strange claim. Pages 72-80 of *Fortress Attica* analyze two types of defenses discussed by fourth-century military theorists: extra-border defense (= "extra-territorial defense") and border defense (one major variant of "territorial defense"). "The second approach to defense [is] preventing the enemy from reaching the frontiers of one's state" (FA 72). "The idea of using Boeotia as a buffer zone . . . must have been a very real consideration to the Athenians" (FA 75). "A system of border defenses may . . . be passive . . . or aggressive, the defenders advancing a short distance from the frontier to meet the enemy. This latter approach appears to shade into extra-border defense, but is in fact distinct from it. In a true extra-border defensive system the frontier does not come into play and if the system is successful the enemy will not even approach the border. In aggressive frontier defense the defenders base their attack on the natural or artificial defenses located within the frontier district" (FA 75).

<sup>8</sup>Harding claims (66) that "some" of my figures on Attic grain production are "inflated," but does not even hint at his statistical grounds for this claim. In fact my figures may *underestimate* the importance of Attic grain to the Athenian economy (a possibility I pointed out: FA 27) if the production figures argued for by P. Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge 1988), are anywhere near right. I discussed Athenian naval policy in "Views of Sea Power in the Fourth-Century Attic Orators," *Ancient World* 1 (1978) 119-130, reprinted in a condensed and revised form as "Public Opinion and the Role of Sea Power in Athens, 404-322 B.C.," in D. M. Masterson, ed., *Naval History. The Sixth Symposium of the U.S. Naval Academy* (Wilmington, Delaware 1987) 26-32. Neither article is mentioned by Harding.

(2) "Some may feel happy with Ober's explanation [for why the Athenians did not depend on their border defenses when confronted by Philip] . . . that Philip's improvement of the art of siegecraft rendered the forts obsolete . . . [but] if Ober is right about this, then the frontier defenses ceased to be effective *before the middle of the century* [emphasis added] . . . [and therefore] given the mid-century construction date assigned to a large number of the forts, we find the Athenians creating a large part of their 'Maginot Line' at a time when their actions show they knew it to be obsolete" (Harding 70). In fact the latest date I assign to a major fort is ca 343 (Aegosthena: FA 218) and I argue that other forts and towers were built considerably earlier. I point out that it was not until *after* mid-century that Philip's advances were in place: "Only with the invention of the vastly more powerful torsion catapult in ca 350-340 (probably by Philip's engineers) did artillery become an effective offensive siege weapon" (FA 44). "By the late 340s . . . Philip's advances in poliorcetics, including the invention of the torsion catapult, quite suddenly rendered even large and modern city circuits vulnerable to attack" (FA 218).<sup>9</sup>

There remain the issues of chronology and the impact of Athenian reactions to the Peloponnesian War on fourth-century defense policy. Harding makes what initially appears to be a telling point about the time-lag between the end of the war and the completion of a major part of the border fortification line: "there is a disquieting gap of about 30 years that renders the association [of the frontier defense system] with the Peloponnesian War quite uncertain" (Harding 64). The key to understanding the "gap" can be found in the analogy of the French Maginot Line, an analogy that I pointed out (FA 51) and one that Harding stresses (Harding 61, 63, 66, 68, 70).

The association of the French experience of invasion in World War I with the determination to defend French soil and with the eventual decision to build the Maginot Line is unquestionable.<sup>10</sup> Work on the Maginot Line was, however, begun only in late 1929 and the first main section was not completed until 1935, seventeen years after the end of World War I. *Fortress Attica* argued that (like World War I and France) the experience of the Peloponnesian War led to a determination by the Athenians to defend their home territory. *Pace* Harding, this is not the same as saying that the

<sup>9</sup>My discussions of the chronology of Attic fortifications and the relationship of advances in artillery technology to fortress architecture and poliorcetics were elaborated in "Early Artillery Towers: Messenia, Boiotia, Attica, Megarid," *AJA* 91 (1987) 569-604, and "Pottery and Miscellaneous Artifacts from Fortified Sites in Northern and Western Attica," *Hesperia* 56 (1987) 197-227. Neither article is cited by Harding, but they may have appeared too late to be discussed in his review.

<sup>10</sup>In addition to the works cited on FA 51, n. 1, see R. A. Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939* (Hamden, Conn. 1985) 41-71; S. Ryan, *Pétain the Soldier* (Cranbury, N.J. 1969) 245-275, esp. 271-273.

experience of war led to an *immediate* decision to defend that home territory by means of a preclusive frontier defense system. In both France and Athens it was only after an interval of some years, and after considering various strategic options, that the decision to build a system of preclusive fortifications was made.

*Fortress Attica* discusses the “time lag” between the end of the Peloponnesian War and the appearance of the main fortification line on the Athenian frontiers in detail (FA 209–214): “The economic debility of the state precluded any major refortification program in the decade after the war” but the Athenians did establish “a few small frontier watch posts” which “could not have hoped to stop an enemy attack” but “could have warned the city of the approach of hostile forces” (FA 209). In the mid-390s to ca 387 Athenian policy was imperialistic and “as long as the battles of the Corinthian War centered around the Isthmus, Athens was relatively safe from land invasion” (FA 210). The King’s Peace ended the imperial dream, so “the years between 386 and 371 were particularly important in the development of the Athenian approach to defense . . . Sphodrias’ raid of 378 demonstrated the vulnerability of Attica to sneak attacks . . . . The solution was to elaborate the watch system and construct permanent garrison stations” (FA 213). Thus it was the period between about 378 and 343 that saw the full elaboration of the border defense system.

Since Harding began his review article by invoking the name of Demosthenes, I conclude this reply by rephrasing a famous passage from *On the Crown* (18.280). It is not the *logos* of a reviewer, nor the cleverness of his rhetoric which are his worth, but his worth lies rather in engaging in a forthright and vigorous debate with the author’s stated positions. With such a disposition a reviewer will always be regarded as fair and authors, though disgruntled at not being agreed with, will seldom need to write replies.

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