

THE BIG IDEAS

An Assignment for Life

The Hero's origin story.

Mêtis

The hero's (other!) secret weapon.

Socrates & Excellence

Take to the oars!

Showing Zealous Care

For our ships.

Your Heroes

Try to be like them. TODAY.

Lords of the Sea

The Epic Story of the Athenian Navy and the Birth of Democracy

BY JOHN R. HALE · PENGUIN GROUP USA INC. © 2009 · 512 PAGES

“Athens was the first truly modern society, ruled not by kings or priests or nobles but by a sovereign democratic Assembly. The Athenians had to wrestle with the same polarities that confront the democratic nations of the modern world. Like us, they were caught up in conflicts that pitted West against East, liberal against conservative, and scientific inquiry against religious faith. They too confronted insoluble political paradoxes. The same navy that made Athens a democracy at home made it an imperialistic power abroad and at times an oppressor of the very cities that it had helped to liberate from the Persians. The Golden Age was funded in part by payments of tribute that Athens demanded of its maritime subjects and allies. As for the Parthenon, that iconic ruin in pure white marble makes today's world imagine a serene ancient Athens of lofty visions and classical balance. In fact, at the time of its building the Parthenon was a bitterly controversial project, paid for in part with what Pericles' opponents considered to be misappropriated naval funds.

Time and winter rains have washed the original gaudy colors of scarlet, azure, and gold off the Parthenon. Passing centuries have also washed the blood and guts, sweat and struggle, from the modern conception of Athens. In losing sight of the Athenian navy, posterity has overlooked the vital propulsive force behind the monuments. A living sea creature, all muscle and appetite and growth, generated the glistening shell of inspiring art, literature, and political ideals. Today we admire the shell for its own beauty, but it cannot be fully understood without charting the life cycle of the animal that generated it. The beat of oars was the heartbeat of Athens in the city's Golden Age. This, then, is the story of a unique and gigantic marine organism, the Athenian navy, that built a civilization, empowered the world's first great democracy, and led a band of ordinary citizens into new worlds. Their epic voyage altered the course of history.”

~ Pericles

~ John R. Hale from *Lords of the Sea*

“The world before you has two realms open to human enterprise, land and sea, and over the whole of the sea you are lords.”

I'm typing this less than a week after returning from our Heroic trip to Athens where we trained our third cohort of Heroic Workshop Instructors and toured the ancient ruins of the Acropolis with nearly 200 members of our community and their families. It was a *very* special week.

During the trip, I met a new friend. That new friend happens to be an officer in the U.S. Navy. He recommended this book. I immediately got it. I read it a few days after getting home. It's FANTASTIC. And, here we are.

As per the sub-title, this book tells “*The Epic Story of the Athenian Navy and the Birth of Democracy.*” More specifically, it tells us how we have the Athenian navy to thank for not only the birth of democracy but for the Golden Age of Athens that produced those ancient ruins of the Acropolis AND the cultural contributions in architecture, the arts AND philosophy.

"Thanks to Athens' seaborne grain trade, the wheat in Socrates' daily bread was more likely to have grown in Russia, Sicily, or Egypt than in the fields of Attica, just outside the city walls. The far horizons opened up by the navy allowed Socrates himself to say, 'Do not call me an Athenian. I am a citizen of the world.'"

~ John R. Hale

"One man's vision had at last become the mission of an entire city."

~ John R. Hale

"Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability that a man possesses."

~ Pericles

As per his bio, John R. Hale studied at Yale and Cambridge universities before embarking on an archeological career that has included extensive underwater searches for ancient warships. He has written for a number of prestigious journals and has been featured in documentaries on the Discovery and History channels.

It's hard to capture the essence of the book better than Donald Kagan, another renowned historian: "Nobody knows more about the history of oared ships around the world than John Hale, and he combines it with a knowledge of and love for the ancient Athenians that helps explain their achievement. The writing is utterly captivating and makes the reader feel he is back in Athens among the great poets, historians, sculptors, architects, soldiers and sailors, all of whom were connected in important ways to the Athenian navy."

The book is packed with fascinating historical stories and Big Ideas. I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

P.S. Here's another important data point regarding the timing of this Note: I'm creating this precisely 10 days after the 2024 election. After reading [Nexus](#) and [The Chaos Machine](#) in the weeks preceding the election (which provide a powerful perspective on the underlying, invisible dynamics currently driving our culture), I figured going back in time 2,500 years would be a great way to orient myself to the challenges all great civilizations have faced.

P.P.S. Want to join us at one of our upcoming Heroic events? Learn more [here!](#)

AN ASSIGNMENT FOR LIFE

"The Athenian navy first floated into my consciousness on a winter afternoon in 1969, when I encountered Donald Kagan walking down College Street in New Haven. Across the snowbound expanse of the Yale campus his prizefighter's stance and rolling gait were instantly recognizable. I knew him well as the formidable professor of my Introduction to Greek History course but had never worked up the courage to speak to him. On the first day of class Kagan had marshaled the front row of students into an improvised phalanx of Greek warriors, with notebooks for shields and pens for spears, to demonstrate military maneuvers. Though like me a new arrival, Kagan had already ranked as a colossus among the faculty. I tacked across the icy sidewalks to let him pass, but he stopped, asked my name, and inquired what I was doing at Yale. I stammered a few words about majoring in archeology and rowing for the freshman crew. Kagan lit up at once. 'Ha! A rower. Now you can explain something to me. In autumn 429, after Phormio beat the Peloponnesians, they sent their crews overland to launch a sneak attack on the Paraeus. Thucydides says each rower carried his own oar and cushion. But why on earth should they need cushions? They certainly didn't have very far to row.'

We talked for an hour of ships and oars and naval heroes, oblivious to the cold. I fished up a recollection of rowing pads that had been used by nineteenth-century American rowers so that they could work their legs during the stroke. Kagan enlarged upon the tactical genius of the little-known Athenian commander Phormio. He went on to speak of the many unexplored issues that obscured the story of the mighty navy of Athens, bulwark of liberty and engine of democracy. As the great man got under way again, he told me that I should investigate Athenian history from the vantage point of a rower's bench. It was an assignment, I found, for life."

Those are (literally!) the very first words of the book.

I got goosebumps reading that the first time and again as I typed that out.

We'll explore a few "Big Ideas" about and inspired by the ancient Athenian navy in this Note, but I don't think we'll find any wisdom more powerful than THAT. If it wasn't for that one chance encounter a young man had with an incredible mentor, this book wouldn't exist.

The story reminds me of another chance encounter by another legendary scholar.

"The Spartan admiral called a council, and Themistocles impetuously began to argue against a withdrawal. The Corinthian leader angrily reminded him that at the games, runners who started too soon were beaten with rods. 'Yes,' retorted Themistocles, 'but those who start late do not win.'"

~ John R. Hale

"Democracy unchecked by reason proved as violent and unjust as any tyranny."

~ John R. Hale

"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."

~ John R. Hale

In [10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People](#), [David Yeager](#) tells us the story about an underprivileged 12-year-old boy named Daniel Lapsley who met a college student in a gas station. That college student was blown away by the young boy as they debated the Vietnam War. At the end of the chat, he asked him if he ever considered going to college. Then he asked him if he read Dante and encouraged him to check it out.

That son of a coal miner went on to become a preeminent scholar of adolescent development. Professor Lapsley says this about the experience: *"the encounter with the stranger at the gas station looms larger than any teacher, larger than anything that happened in any school. The stranger at the gas station planted an idea, raised a possibility that had not occurred to me. ... He made me feel special, talented. ... This clear, vivid memory I have has never shaken. And I credit this encounter, this stranger, with setting me on the path that was unusual for kids in the steel town of my birth."*

I wrote about that experience in one of my all-time favorite +1s called [The Gas Station Chat: A Micro-Moment of Life-Changing Encouragement](#) in which I share that story along with an encounter I had with a young man at one of Emerson's chess tournaments.

And... Just this morning, Alexandra told me about [a father who wrote a note](#) for one of his daughter's friends who is going through challenging times. I got emotional as we reflected on the loving wisdom our community strives to embody and the potentially life-changing impact of finding these micro-moments of encouragement. Bless you, Joshua.

As it turns out, just the day before *another* one of our Heroic community members, who happens to be one of my dearest friends, [shared a post on HIS work](#) at a small Catholic school in Cleveland, Ohio where he is working with the entire student body to help them forge excellence and activate their Heroic potential so we can change the world together. Bless you, Jason. And bless you, Andy for making this happen.

YOU, my friend, are the Hero we've been waiting for. You are also the GUIDE we have been waiting for. Here's to playing our roles as humbly yet Heroically well as we can while searching for those micro-moments of encouragement that help the next generation of Heroes see and activate their Heroic potential. Remember: In the faces of men and women, WE SEE HEROES!

P.S. Another thing I found incredibly inspiring about this whole story is the fact that John dedicated his life to mastering a very specific domain. His humbly Heroic commitment to excellence reminds me of [this +1 on my new job](#) as the guy who changes your front-right tire and inspires me to play MY role as humbly yet Heroically well as I can. It also reminds me of my current Love identity in the Heroic app: "You're a Good Wingman!"

P.P.S. *Another* reason why this story touched me so deeply is because the VERY FIRST thing we have our Heroic Workshop Instructors master is what we call their "Origin Story" in which they share their life stories and challenges and how Heroic has helped them activate their potential. We train them on how to deliver the stories along with the rest of the workshop. Watching them share their origin stories had a PROFOUND impact on me in Athens. You can watch some [here](#).

MÉTIS

"This distinctively Greek quality was virtually untranslatable into other languages. Indeed it ran contrary to the values in many nations, most notably the Persians. *Mêtis* embraced craft, cunning, skill, and intelligence, the power of invention and the subtlety of art. It was the weapon of the weak and the outnumbered. Athenians knew that no physical force was mightier than the mind. In the world of myth, *Mêtis* was the ancient goddess from whom Athena derived her own wisdom. Not brawn by *mêtis* was the special attribute of Athena's favorite hero, Odysseus, whose stratagem of the Trojan Horse succeeded where ten years of direct assaults had failed.

Every educated Athenian knew the famous lines in Homer's *Iliad* on the uses of *mêtis*.

"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."

~ John R. Hale

"As patron deity of arts and crafts, a goddess of wisdom and also of war, Athena had been presiding over the entire project from beginning to end."

~ John R. Hale

"The navy's experienced steersman could have warned him: smooth and smiling seas sometimes conceal the deadliest reefs."

~ John R. Hale

"Also in the Agora a new colonnaded portico or stoa was built to house paintings of historic Athenian battles: the world's first public art museum. The painted stoa became a popular gathering place and ultimately gave rise to the term 'Stoics' for a school of philosophers who met under its colonnade."

~ John R. Hale

*To win the prize, keep mêtis well in mind.
By mêtis, not brute force, men fell great oaks.
By mêtis steersmen on the wine-dark sea
Steady their swift ships through the tearing gale.
By mêtis charioteer beats charioteer."*

Mêtis. It's one of the virtues the ancient Greeks admired most in their Heroes.

I asked ChatGPT for a quick look at the etymology, definition, and example of mêtis.

Here's some of what I got: *"The term mêtis comes from ancient Greek, meaning 'cunning intelligence,' 'craft,' or 'wisdom.' It is derived from the root med-, which relates to 'planning,' 'thinking,' or 'counsel.' This root also appears in related words like medomai ('to be mindful of') and medea ('counsels' or 'plans')."*

Note: The root "med" is also where we get "medicine"—which, of course, is the craft of healing and mêtis describes the type of intelligence/wisdom needed to optimize our Energy!

I loved this distinction from ChatGPT as well: *"In ancient Greek culture, metis refers to a type of practical, adaptable intelligence. It emphasizes craftiness, strategic thinking, and resourcefulness, often in uncertain or unpredictable situations. Unlike abstract wisdom (sophia), metis is applied and situational."*

Practical wisdom applied to complex challenges?! I love it.

All of which begs the question: How can YOU channel your inner Odysseus and apply a little more mêtis to YOUR biggest challenges today?

P.S. When I read the line about the fact that the *"Athenians knew that no physical force was mightier than the mind,"* I thought of the work we're blessed to do with our armed forces and the emphasis I always place when I give my talks on the ULTIMATE WAR that exists within our minds. ([Check out this SOCOM brief](#) on a recent talk for more.)

I also thought of Gandhi, who once said: *"Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will."*

And and and... Lest you think this obsession with military metaphors is a purely Western thing, know this: When I read the final line above (*"By mêtis charioteer beats charioteer"*) I thought of Gandhi's Bible, the [Bhagavad Gita](#).

As we've discussed many times, the *Gita* features a reluctant warrior named Arjuna going to battle with the aid of his god Krishna. Arjuna is the world's greatest archer (kinda like an ancient special operations forces warrior like a SEAL or Ranger!) and his Heroic guide is... a charioteer!

P.P.S. As I chatted about the idea of mêtis with Emerson, I asked him if he could think of a time when he applied a little bit of the Trojan Horse like cunning in one of his games. He smiled and immediately said: ["My sneaky checkmate?!"](#) To which I said: "Exactly."

SOCRATES AND TAKING TO THE OARS

"Two momentous deaths marked the demise of the old order: Socrates and Thucydides. Five year's after the city's surrender Socrates was accused of heresy and of corrupting the minds of the young. At his trial Socrates denied the charges and reminded the 501 jurors of his war record under Phormio and Lamachus. 'When the generals whom you chose to command me assigned me my positions at Potidea and Amphipolis and Delium, I remained at my post like anyone else and faced death. Afterward, when god appointed me, as I believed, to the duty of leading a philosophic life, examining myself and others, how inconsistent I should have been to desert my post then, through fear of death or any other danger!' He also spoke of the role he played in the trial of generals after Arginusae, when he had upheld the law rather than give in to the crowd."

"The experiment of democracy ensured that the fruits of naval victories were shared by all Athenians, transforming the life of even the poorest citizen. The age of the common man had dawned. For the first time anywhere on earth, a mass of ordinary citizens, independent of monarchs or aristocrats or religious leaders, was guiding the destiny of a great state."

~ John R. Hale

"The greatest glory is won from the greatest challenges."

~ Pericles

"Brave men are made bolder by ordeals, but cowards achieve nothing. We have not come this long way by our only to turn back now from our goal."

~ Euripedes

"But tactical science is only one part of generalship," said Socrates. "A general must be capable of equipping his forces and providing for his men. He must also be inventive, hardworking, and watchful-bullheaded and brilliant, friendly and fierce, straightforward and subtle."

~ Xenophon

The jury sentenced Socrates to death, but his execution was unexpectedly delayed because of a ship. ... In his last days Socrates reminisced about his career as a philosopher. His early scientific interest in the workings of the cosmos had given way in midlife to an obsessive questioning about human nature and the pursuit of virtue. Borrowing a proverbial phrase from Athenian seafarers, he called his change of course a *deutoros plous* or second voyaging. When mariners cruising under sail met with a dead calm, they would run out the oars and venture on by rowing. In the same way Socrates had turned away from the natural world and studied mankind instead. When word came that the Delias had landed near Cape Sunium, his reprieve was over. Like so many others who had incurred the anger of the Athenians, Socrates drank the hemlock, walked about for a little while, and then lay down to die. He had written nothing of his philosophy, asserting that the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing."

That's from one of the later chapters called "Rowing to Hades" in which Professor Hale walks us through the fall of Athens that followed their loss to the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War.

The last Note I created was on [Donald Robertson's](#) latest book called [How to Think Like Socrates](#). Donald joined us in Athens and gave a talk on the grounds of Plato's Academy along with a couple of spontaneous talks on the Acropolis. He also joined us for an incredibly special trip to board an Athenian trireme—their warship that dominated the ancient world. The picture of him joyfully sitting in the commanding officer's chair is one of my absolute favorite shots from the entire trip. (Check it out [here](#).)

When I read about the "second voyaging" I thought of [David Brooks'](#) brilliant book [The Second Mountain](#). Check out those Notes where he tells us: "When making a commitment decision, defining the purpose of your life is the biggest part of the problem. That's a matter of the ultimate horizon. The question What is my ultimate good? is a different kind of question than How can I win at Monopoly?"

And, when I read about the ship returning to Cape Sunium, I thought of our trip at the end of the week to The Temple of Poseidon—which is on Cape Sunium and overlooks an incredible stretch of the Aegean Sea. (Check that out [here](#).)

Finally, when I read about the calm waters that led to the ancient mariners running out the oars, I thought of the Latin proverb: "Si ventus non est, remiga"/"If the wind fails, take to the oars."

P.S. Get this: The ancient Athenian mariners could row 50 to 100 MILES (!) in a single day! And... I LOVED this image of EXCELLENCE: "While still far out at sea, they were greeted by a flash of light on the summit of the Acropolis, four miles inland. It was the sun reflected on the shining spear tip and crested helmet a colossal bronze statue of Athena, one of the first great masterpieces of the Athenian artist Phidias. The statue had been nine years in the making and stood thirty feet tall. As the triremes approached the end of their voyaging, the crews strove to look their best with perfect timing and oarsmanship. There was a popular saying, 'As the Athenian goes into the harbor,' for any task done with the utmost precision. The mariners knew well that thousands of critical eyes were watching and judging their performance."

P.P.S. Fun family fact: You know what we were going to name Emerson if he was a girl? Athena.

SHOWING ZEALOUS CARE FOR OUR SHIPS

"As he had done so often over the previous decade, Demosthenes addressed the Assembly... 'While the ship is still safe and sound—that is when the mariner and steersman and the rest must show their zealous care for it, so that it may not be overturned by sabotage or by accident. Once the sea overwhelms the ship, care comes too late.'"

Demosthenes was one of the greatest orators (and leaders!) of ancient Greece. His story is Heroic. He learned how to speak powerfully (while overcoming a speech impediment!) so he could defend himself in court after his uncles stole his inheritance. The definition of antifragility.

"In one of Aesop's fables, passengers from a sinking ship suddenly found themselves in the sea. An Athenian among the survivors calls on the gods for help. A man swimming for shore hears the prayer. He turns to the Athenians and says, 'Pray by all means! But also move your arms!' Demosthenes intended to be just such wise counselor to Athenians who seemed to have forgotten that the gods help those who help themselves."

~ John R. Hale

That passage reminds me of JFK's wisdom: *"The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining."* It also reminds me of [Peter Attia](#)'s wisdom in [Outlive](#). He tells us that if we want to increase our lifespan AND our healthspan, we need to do it RIGHT NOW (!) while we're still relatively young and healthy. Just like those ancient mariners, we need to remember that it's a LOT easier to prevent disease than to heal it.

TRY TO BE LIKE YOUR HEROES

"When they surrendered to the Macedonians, the Athenians had more ships and a better-equipped naval base than ever before. Philo's Arsenal was still brand-new. Some mysterious spiritual essence, however, had vanished. As Nicias once reminded the Assembly, a trireme's crew could remain at the peak of performance for only a short time. For the Athenian ship of state, thanks to the unremitting effort and self-sacrifice of its people, the peak had been prolonged for a century and a half. Now rule of the sea would pass to other city-states and empires: Rhodes, Carthage, Alexandria, Rome. As for the creative explosion called the Golden Age, it ended with the naval power on which it had been built. With the Athenian people divided and the Paraeus in foreign hands, the reign of Themistocles' navy reached its final day.

The gleaming city of marble and bronze still enshrines the memory of many heroes whose ashes lie buried in tombs along the Sacred Way. Thucydides set down a Funeral Oration delivered by Pericles for citizens who died in the Peloponnesian War. Near the end of his speech Pericles issued a challenge: 'Famous men have the whole world as their memorial. It is not only the inscriptions on their graves in their own country that mark them out. No, in foreign lands also, not in any visible form but in people's hearts, their memory abides and grows. It is for you to try to be like them.' Many have tried, chasing the same goals of democracy, liberty, and happiness that generations of Athenians pursued in their ships. Few can claim to have equaled their achievements; fewer still to have surpassed them."

Those are the final words of the book from the final chapter called "The Last Battle."

As I read that passage and thought about the fierce ambition of Pericles and the Athenian heroes who dedicated their lives to creating the Golden Age that changed the world, I thought of Doris [Kearns Goodwin](#) and wisdom from her GREAT book [Leadership in Turbulent Times](#).

Goodwin features a number of iconic, Heroic leaders including Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. She tells us they were all very different types of leaders who affected the world in very different ways. But... The ONE thing they ALL had in common? A FIERCE AMBITION to make a difference in the world and be remembered by those they served.

Channeling Pericles, I say: Who are YOUR Heroes? Try to be like them. All day. Every day. Especially... TODAY.

B

Brian Johnson,
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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Co-Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#). He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).

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