

## When Cities Sink Howling in Ruin

**K. Partridge**

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*A young scribe who thirsts for adventure witnesses Greece's social collapse in this sprawling historical novel.*

In K. Partridge's historical novel *When Cities Sink Howling in Ruin*, ancient Greeks wage war and plunder Mediterranean islands.

The novel is set 1191 BCE—a period not well documented, and with which the narrative takes liberties. It is narrated by a scribe, Iakos of Pylos. Iakos is disenchanted with the prospect of a lifetime of tedious list-making and drudgery, so he leaves to become a sailor. But his cargo ship runs afoul of a warship and becomes embroiled in a trade dispute. This dispute, which exists among a league of fifty kingdoms, escalates, leading to raging violence across the Eastern Mediterranean.

As such, Iakos witnesses a battle between Mycenaeans and Tiryns; and his Uncle Aithon, a war veteran and merchant, explains military tactics to him, as well as the reasons that he himself took up arms after his village was reduced to rubble and smoke. Iakos observes as Eastern Mediterranean islands succumb to violence, leading into the Greek Dark Ages. The book critiques but also venerates war with its breathless depictions of battles.

Background information is incorporated seamlessly: the book reveals that sea snails supply purple dye for robes, explains why bronze is so valuable, and shares the conditions that led to conflict, such as how scarce resources triggered hostilities. The era's fashion, weapons, and trade routes are covered in an authentic manner, too. Scenes of courtyard intrigue and mariners' voyages help to distill Greek society's collapse well, while Iakos's seafaring adventures blend action, political jockeying, and bawdiness together. He grows from a scholar in training into a hardened warrior; beside him, supporting characters fade into the background.

Though its scenes are sometimes elaborate, the novel's pacing is measured. Conversations are used to move the book forward, and each event serves a narrative purpose, helping to explain the world around Iakos, or otherwise contributing to Iakos's journey. The book crescendos with instances of violent sparring and bloody deaths, with spear thrusts that ensure that combatants "will not see the autumn leaves fall," and gore in abundance: "punctured chests pulse out blood in time with beating hearts." In its effort to conform to the period, though, some of the prose becomes overwrought, incorporating clichés, heavy phrases, and too many exclamation points.

With dramatic twists and an emotional, satisfying conclusion, the historical novel *When Cities Sink Howling in Ruin* resurrects violent conflicts from antiquity.

JOSEPH S. PETE (November 5, 2020)

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