

CHAPTER 16

THE GREEK WORLD WAR THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

66 PLUTARCH,
PERICLES, AND
XENOPHON

This was the situation after the Greek victory in the Persian Wars: Athens was the head of the newly-formed Delian League, which included many islands and city-states that felt uncomfortable with the Persian Empire looming over them. The Delian League had a good army and a great navy. Athens was connected to its port city Piraeus by the Long Walls, a fortification that meant the city always had access to the sea. Trade would go on uninterrupted even if Athens was under attack, so it would be impossible to starve the Athenians into submission.

Meanwhile, Sparta was the head of the older Peloponnesian League, which included the *polis* of Corinth. Corinth had a powerful navy and competed with Athens for trade. Sparta's infantry was strong and well disciplined. The Spartan soldiers wore matching uniforms (unusual for



Even in ruins, the temple of Apollo at Corinth still dominates the area. The city's strategic location made it an important ally for Sparta.



that time) and drilled together. Their unity was intimidating, as the biographer Plutarch says in his biography of the Spartan law-giver Lycurgus:

“ Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, about 100 CE

It was terrifying but also magnificent to see them when they marched in step with the rhythms of their flutes, with no gap in their line of battle, and no disorder in their minds, but with calm expressions on their faces moving with the music to the deadly fight.

Athens and Sparta had never really gotten along, so even though they had joined together against Persia, they were keeping an eye on each other. They had occasional fights, so to keep things calm, in 445 BCE the two *poleis* signed a temporary treaty called the Thirty Years' Peace. They figured that after the 30 years were up, they could review the terms and sign again if they wanted.

But the peace collapsed long before the 30 years were up. Trouble broke out between Corinth and its colony Corcyra, which didn't belong to either league. The Corcyraeans had the second-largest navy in Greece (after Athens) and asked Athens to support them. They warned Athens that if Corinth conquered Corcyra in a war, the Corinthians would then have a huge navy to use to help Sparta if the Spartan and Athenian leagues ever had a war. Pericles agreed, saying that he saw a “cloud of war over the Peloponnesus.” Soon,

Athenian sailors were fighting against Corinth—a member of the Peloponnesian League. It's not surprising that Sparta didn't like this at all.

Then Athens forbade a Spartan ally to trade in any ports belonging to the Delian League (which controlled almost all the ports). There wasn't much reason for this prohibition aside from annoying Sparta. The Spartans asked the Athenians to change their minds, but they refused.

The Spartans were led by a wise king. He and Pericles were friends, so he knew how powerful the Athenians were. He warned his people that they weren't ready to fight, since they were low on money and ships. He told them that their children would still be fighting this war after they themselves died. This was a serious warning, since most Greek wars were quite short-lived.

But the Spartans were angry at how the Athenians were treating their allies and fearful of the way Athens kept expanding its power. So they voted for war and the Spartan king was forced to lead an army into Athenian territory.

Pericles came up with a plan: everyone should come inside the city walls where they would live off food and supplies brought into the Athenian harbor town Piraeus by boat. Meanwhile, the Spartans would wander around looking for someone to fight and would eventually give up and go home.

This plan might have worked except for two problems. First, the Athenians didn't like the idea of hiding from the enemy. They knew that everyone would say that they were scared that the Spartan army was better than theirs (and they were probably right).

But there was soon a bigger problem, and one that wasn't caused by people—not directly, at least. A plague hit Athens and with everyone living so close together, it spread rapidly. No known disease fits all the symptoms described by Thucydides: raging thirst, rash, red eyes, a swollen mouth, cough, vomiting, irritated skin, diarrhea. Death usually followed within a week. Few survived and those who did sometimes lost their fingers and toes and even their memory.

It raged for four years, during which between one-quarter and one-third of the inhabitants of the city (including

What Was Plaguing the Athenians?

"Plague" comes from the word *plege*, which means "a blow or wound." A plague is a disease that infects a lot of people and kills many of them. Thucydides, who lived through the plague described it in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*:

"No pestilence of such extent or mortality was remembered in any part of the world. Physicians were no match for it, and they died in the largest numbers, since it was they who visited the sick most often. . . . Prayers in the temples and things like that turned out to be so pointless that finally the overwhelming nature of the disaster led people to abandon them altogether."



“They love, they hate, they cannot do without him.” The Athenian playwright Aristophanes captured his countrymen’s feelings toward the complicated personality of Alcibiades (above) in these words.

As armies became more professional, it became more important for the *strategos* (the military-political leader) to use clever strategies as well as strength to win battles.

Pericles) died. Sick and discouraged, the Athenians gave up on staying inside the city and marched out to battle the Spartans.

They fought for years. The Spartans tried to keep the combat on land and the Athenians used their navy to attack Spartan allies near the sea. Each side won sometimes and lost sometimes. At one point a group of Spartans who were stuck on an island surrendered to the Athenians. The other Greeks were shocked that the usually valiant Spartans would lay down their arms. In 421 BCE, Athens and Sparta signed a new truce. But it didn’t last long.

Pericles had raised an orphaned nephew named Alcibiades. This young man seems to have shared his uncle’s charisma and intelligence, but not much of his loyalty or emotional stability. He had inherited an enormous fortune from his father and was very handsome. But he was also eccentric. He once cut off the tail of his own beautiful and expensive dog. When he was asked why, he said that he knew people were going to talk about all the strange things he did and if he did this one *really* strange thing, they would gossip less about the rest.

Alcibiades was a brave soldier and risked his life in battle to save Socrates, the philosopher who was also his teacher and friend. But this wasn’t enough. What he wanted more than anything else was to be famous. It must have been hard for an ambitious person to grow up in the house of someone as well known and important as Pericles. It would be difficult to do something so amazing that people would stop referring to him as “Pericles’s ward” and admire him for his own accomplishments.

He decided to enter politics and in 420 BCE was elected *strategos*. He convinced the Athenians to let him attack Sicily. A more experienced *strategos* was to go along.

But before they set sail, some unknown person or persons vandalized the sacred statues of Hermes, which were supposed to protect the city. People suspected Alcibiades and his rowdy friends of committing this sacrilege. Worse, they thought that the angered gods would frown on their expedition and it would fail.

Alcibiades left for Sicily anyway. While he was away, his political enemies continued accusing him of this crime and added that he and his friends had also made fun of rituals worshipping the harvest goddess Demeter. Athenian authorities sent messengers to Sicily to tell Alcibiades to come back to be tried. Saying that it would be stupid to risk a trial when he could just escape, Alcibiades went over to the Spartan side.

Both sides continued to pour troops into Sicily, but the conflict ended in disaster for the Athenians. They were defeated in a naval battle with a great loss of life. Many of the survivors were dragged off to brutal conditions as slaves in the Sicilian city of Syracuse.

The Spartans got just as tired of Alcibiades's antics as the Athenians had been. For one thing, Alcibiades had a romance with the wife of a Spartan king. Worse, he was forming a friendship with Persia. Alcibiades suggested that the Persians (who were helping the Spartans) should stand back while the two enemies fought it out among themselves. Eventually, he reasoned, both sides would grow so weak that Persia could step in and take over.

When Persia stopped helping Sparta, Athens thought that Alcibiades was working on their side and invited him back. He accepted and was elected *strategos* again. He won several important victories for Athens and was admired even by his vanquished enemies, since he treated them with mercy.

But then the Athenians blamed Alcibiades for a defeat and removed him from command. He still had some feelings for his homeland, however. He was sitting in his villa when he saw that the Athenian and

These two soldiers were killed in the Peloponnesian War. They must have been good friends to be pictured together on their funeral monument.



INSTANT MESSENGER, GREEK-STYLE

The first written messages to be transmitted through the air were notes attached to arrows that Greeks shot to each other during a battle in northern Greece.

Spartan fleets were about to have a battle in the bay right underneath his house. He rode down to tell the Athenian leader that the Athenians were in a dangerous place and gave them advice on how to handle themselves better. But they ignored him.

The result was a catastrophe. Plutarch reports in his biography of Alcibiades:

“ Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades*,
about 100 CE

Events soon proved that Alcibiades was right about the situation, for the Spartan admiral fell upon them suddenly, when they weren't expecting it at all. Only the *strategos* Conon escaped, with eight triremes. The rest of the ships, almost two hundred, were captured and taken away, along with their crews, which amounted to three thousand men. These sailors were executed.

Xenophon says in his history *The Hellenica* that when word of this defeat reached the port city,

“ Xenophon, *The Hellenica*,
early fourth century BCE

the sound of wailing passed from Piraeus through the long walls to the city, each person passing the news on to the next. That night no one slept. Rather, they were occupied in grieving not only for those who had already died but also, in fact much more so, for themselves, believing that they would suffer the same treatment they had dealt out to others.

And they had good reason to mourn. Shortly after the battle, the Spartans captured Athens and tore down the city walls. They set up a new government, with a group of pro-Spartan oligarchs ruling the once-proud leader of the Delian League. Except for a brief alliance in the fourth century BCE, it would be more than 2,000 years before Athens once again became a political leader. In the 19th century, when the Hellenic Republic (which most of us simply call the country of Greece) was formed, Athens was chosen as its capital.

Today, newspapers carry lists of people killed in wars. When this inscription of Athenian casualties from the Peloponnesian War was made, a more permanent record was left in stone. Modern historians use documents like this to double-check ancient accounts of battles.

