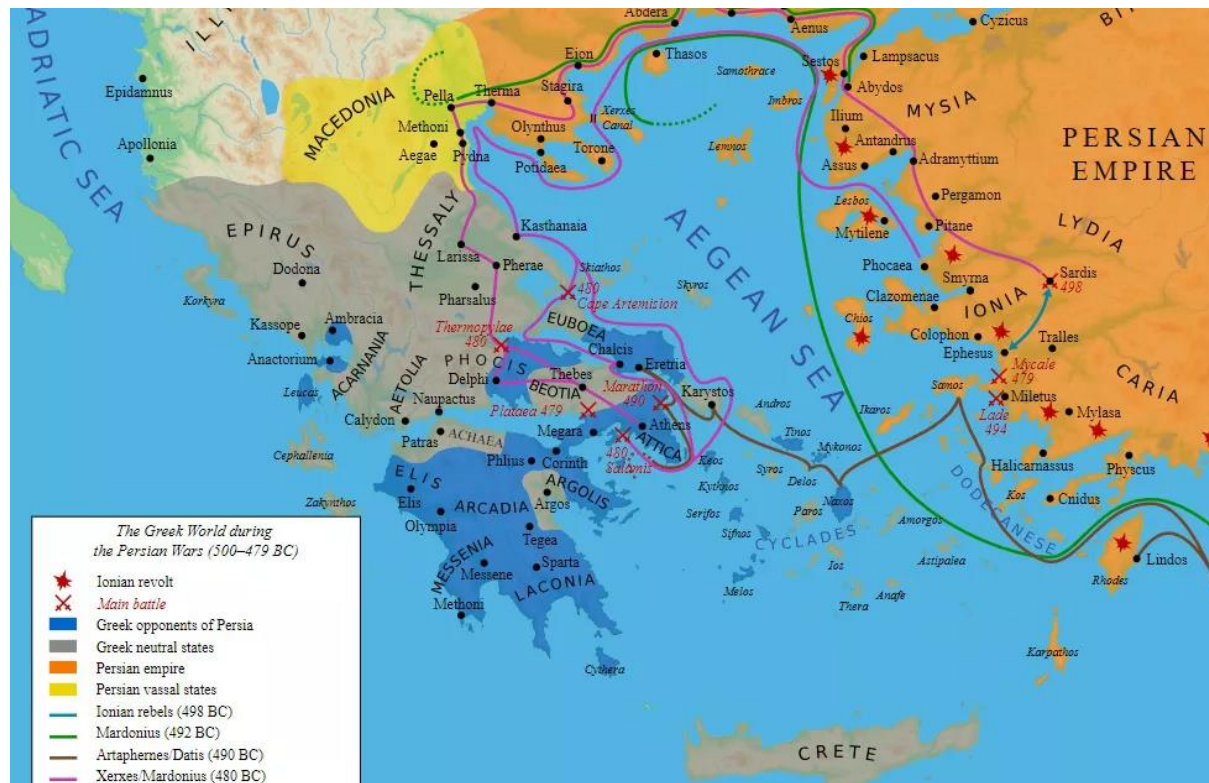


The Classical Age: The Persian and Peloponnesian Wars

Academus Easter Crash Course 2021



The Classical Era: Who is who?



By the dawn of the 5th century BCE, both [Athens](#) and [Sparta](#) were two of the most highly established and prominent city states within the Greek world. In the 5th century [Athens](#) would become a centre for culture, producing some of the best literature of the ancient world, while [Sparta](#) cultivated its reputation for military might and cultural oddities.

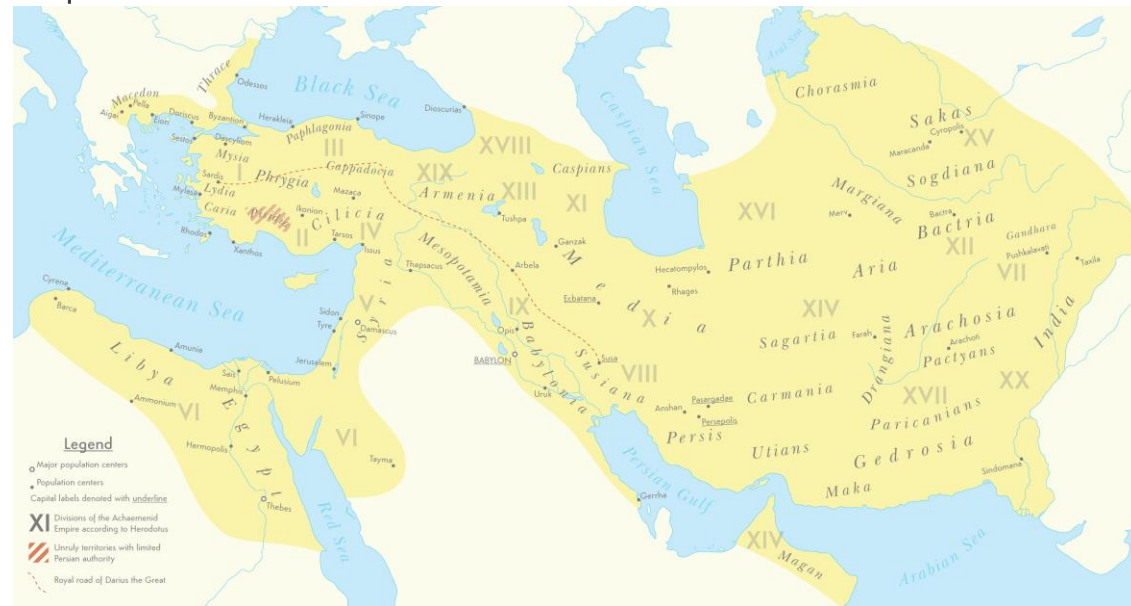
Both these city states would play a significant role in the [Persian Wars](#), a series of conflicts between the [Persian Empire](#) and many Greek city states that began around 499BCE and lasted until 449 BCE.

Who were the Persians?

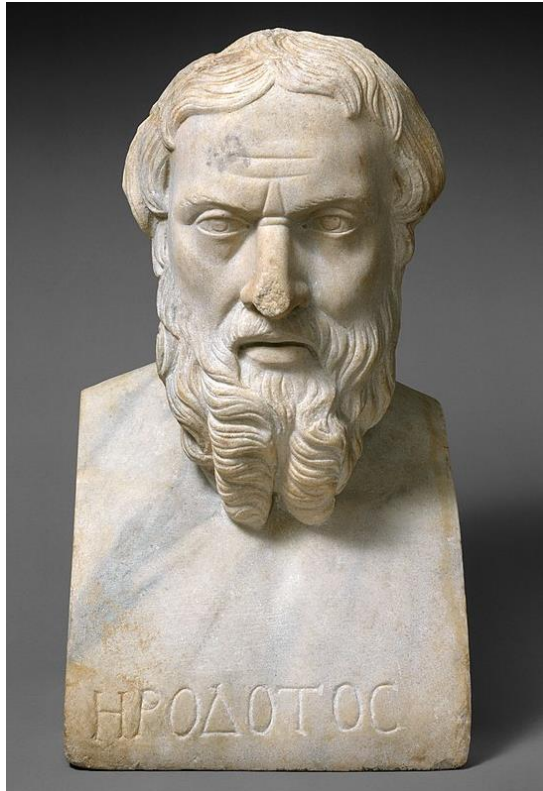


Stone relief depicting Darius I in the Behistun Inscription.

The [Persian Empire](#), also called the [Achaemenid Empire](#), was founded by [Cyrus the Great](#) in the mid-6th century BCE. At the start of the [Classical Era](#) was ruled by [King Darius I](#) who began the conflict against the Greeks, while his son Xerxes I continued it. The [Persian Empire](#) had been consolidating control over the ancient Near East and at the outbreak of the conflicts with the Greek city states it was one of the largest empires in the ancient world.



Who is our main source for the Persian Wars?



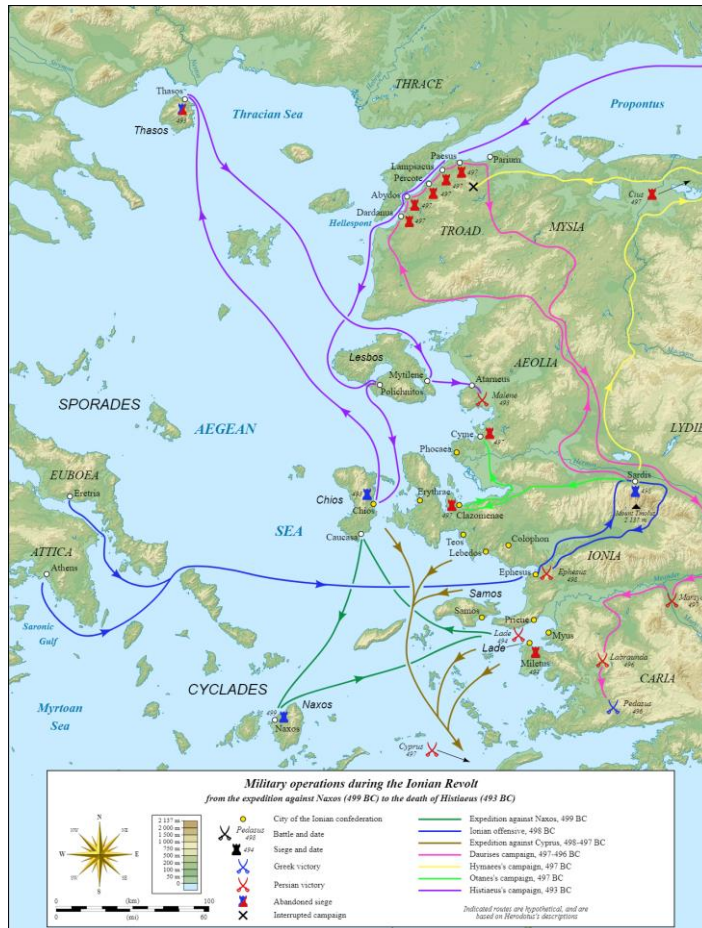
Roman bust of Herodotus,
c. 2nd century CE.

The most prominent literary source for the history of the Persian Wars was written by [Herodotus of Halicarnassus](#) (c.484 – c.425 BC) [Herodotus](#), who became known as the ‘father of history’ wrote his [istoria](#), ancient Greek for inquiry, and stated his intentions as the following:

“This is the display of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that things done by man not be forgotten in time, and that great and marvellous deeds, some displayed by the Hellenes, some by the barbarians, not lose their glory, including among others what was the cause of their waging war on each other.”

[Herodotus](#) presented a long history which illuminated the origins of the [Persian Empire](#), the ancient Greek civilisation, and many other ancient civilisations in order to present a larger picture of what led to this great conflict. Although some criticise his historical method, his work remains the best source on this ancient conflict.

Start of the conflict: The Ionian Revolt



The catalyst for the first conflict in the [Persian Wars](#) was the [Ionian Revolt](#) in 499 BCE. The [Persians](#) had taken control of Greek settlements in [Ionia](#), occupying their farmlands, imposing taxes, and insisting their men serve in the Persian army. The [Ionians](#), knowing they were not capable of defeating the Persian Empire, asked the Greek mainland for help.

[Athens](#) agreed to offer assistance, sending soldiers and ships to fight the Persians in some small battles that were initially successful. The [Athenians](#) returned after their initial success however and in 493 BCE the [Persians](#) defeated the [Ionians](#) and punished them for the revolt.

The Persian King, [Darius I](#), was not impressed by [Athen's](#) interference in their affairs and turned his sights to the Greek mainland in retaliation. This began the first phase of the [Greco-Persian Wars](#).

An Early Victory: The Battle of Marathon



Depiction of Darius I on the 'Darius Vase', 4th century BCE, Archaeological Museum of Naples.

[Darius'](#) invasion attempt of the Greek mainland began in 490 BCE. [Darius](#) had previously sent messengers asking the Greeks to accept Persian rule and had been refused. [Darius](#) sent his large army to Greece and landed at [Marathon](#).

A Greek general, [Miltiades](#), was in charge of convincing the Greeks to stand with the [Athenians](#) against [Persia](#). [Sparta](#) were asked and initially refused. The Greek coalition of soldiers, led by [Miltiades](#), fought the [Persians](#) at [Marathon](#) and won a stunning victory.

It is said they sent a runner, [Pheidippides](#), to take news of the victory to [Athens](#). After running non-stop to deliver the message, [Pheidippides](#) dropped down dead. The modern [Marathon](#) is so named because of this incident.

The Persians Strike Back: Thermopylae

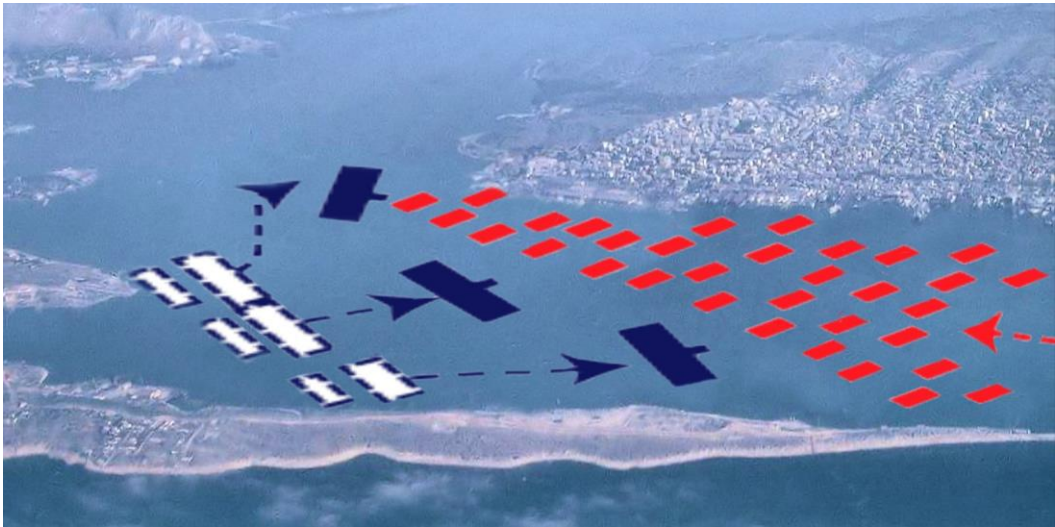


Monument to King Leonidas in modern Thermopylae, erected in 1955.

The [Persian](#) forces retreated after their defeat at [Marathon](#) in 490 BCE. However, 10 years later [Darius'](#) son [Xerxes](#) launched another, far larger invasion attempt. [Xerxes'](#) [Persians](#) were initially very successful, overwhelming many Greek city states. [Athens](#) and [Sparta](#) united to fight the [Persians](#), with [Athens](#) fighting by sea and [Sparta](#) by land. The [Spartans](#) clashed with the [Persians](#) at [Thermopylae](#).

Originally in command of a coalition Greek army of around 6000, [King Leonidas](#) of [Sparta](#) acknowledged that they were outnumbered and allowed the other Greek soldiers to leave. Several thousands did, leaving [300 Spartans](#) plus [400 Thebans](#), [700 Thespians](#), and a [number of helot soldiers](#), who fought and were defeated by the Persians at [Thermopylae](#). While remembered in popular culture as a brave sacrifice, contemporaries to the battle criticised [Leonidas'](#) decision as it did nothing to really delay the advancing Persian army.

Return of the Greeks: The Battle of Salamis



The Persian fleet (in red) entered from the east (right) and confronted the Greek fleet (in blue) within the confines of the strait, a tactic which allowed the Greeks to defeat the Persians despite being outnumbered.

When news of the defeat at [Thermopylae](#) reached [Athens](#), the citizens abandoned the city. Within weeks, [Xerxes](#) had burnt the city of [Athens](#) to the ground. An Athenian general, [Themistocles](#), sought to fight the Persians by sea, utilising Athens' superior navy.

[Themistocles](#) sent a slave to [Xerxes](#)' camp with a message to trick [Xerxes](#), claiming that if [Xerxes](#) attacked now the Greeks would surrender. [Xerxes](#) attacked with haste and the Persian ships were caught in the narrow strait. [Themistocles](#) feigned retreat and was able to draw the [Persians](#) further into the strait where they were defeated by the Greeks.

The [Persian](#) navy was devastated, and [Xerxes](#) fled.

Victory: The Battle of Plataea



In the lead up to the battle both sides were reluctant to engage first, and so the Persians sent a general by the name of Masistius to antagonise the Greeks. Masistius initially inflicted damages to Megarian troops, by a backup force of Athenians managed to kill the Persian, a significant boost to Greek morale. This scene from the Temple of Athena Nike, Athens, may show the fight for Masistius' body.

After [Xerxes](#) fled [Salamis](#), he waited until attacking again by land. [Sparta](#) agreed to assist [Athens](#) in this land battle and the two united for the [Battle of Plataea](#) in 479BCE. Led by Spartan general [Pausanias](#), who succeeded [Leonidas](#) as King, a coalition force of Greek city states defeated the Persian army and ended [Xerxes'](#) invasion ambitions. This battle allegedly took place on the same day as the naval [Battle of Mycale](#), which destroyed the Persian navy.

Although Athens had been devastated by this war, they went on to rebuild and, bolstered by this final victory, took on a prominent position as one of the most powerful city states in the Peloponnese.

The Conflicts Continue: The Delian League



Athenian silver tetradrachm, 454-404 BCE. The Athenian economy was significantly boosted by their exploitation of city states in the Delian League.

After the victory, the [Spartans](#) were keen to end their involvements in the conflict. [Athens](#) however were insistent on going on the offensive and constructed the 'Delian League', so called for its meeting place at [Delos](#).

The [Delian League](#) was a coalition of Greek city states, as many as 150-300, led by [Athens](#). The aims of the [Delian League](#) was to continue fighting the Persians and liberate Greek settlements in Asia Minor, while collecting and distributing war bounty.

As head of the League, [Athens](#) also taxed the other members and began to use the funds for itself, funding extensive building projects in the city. The [Delian League](#) continued fighting the [Persian Empire](#) in various conflicts throughout the 470's and 460's BCE.

Negotiating Peace



Relief of Artaxerxes I, from his tomb in Naqsh-e Rostam c. 5th century BCE.

These smaller conflicts between the [Delian League](#) and the [Persian Empire](#) came to a head at a second [Battle of Salamis](#) in 450BCE, in which the Greeks were again victorious.

Conflict was ended by the [Peace of Callias](#) in 449 BCE. Evidence for the [Peace of Callias](#) is contradictory and patchy, yet it is generally thought that [The Peace](#) was negotiated by [Callias](#), an Athenian politician, and Persian king [Artaxerxes I](#) after the Battle of Salamis in 450 BCE.

The [Peace of Callias](#) gave autonomy to the Ionian states in Asia Minor, prohibited the encroachment of Persian satrapies within three days march of the Aegean coast, and prohibited Persian ships from the Aegean. Athens also agreed not to interfere with Persia's possessions in Asia Minor, Cyprus, Libya or Egypt.

Tensions in the Peloponnese

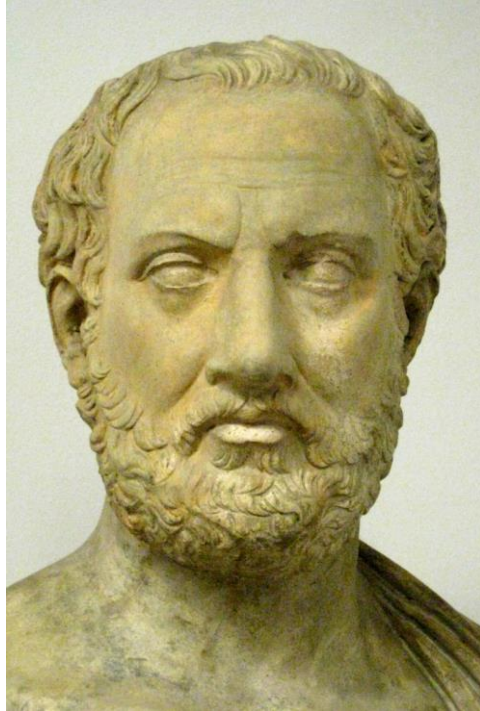


As we have seen, [Athens](#) was becoming increasingly powerful during the period of the [Delian League](#). Athens was accruing money and exercising influence over fellow Greek city states to an alarming degree.

The Spartans had a league of their own, the [Peloponnesian League](#), a coalition of other city states in the [Peloponnese](#) that [Sparta](#) had led since the 6th century BCE.

The growing power of [Athens](#) and her increasingly imperialistic ambitions caused the tensions between the two Leagues to spill into war.

What is our main source for the Peloponnesian War?



Thucydides, Roman bust, copy of an early 4th BC Greek original.

Thucydides (c. 460 – c. 400 BCE) who was personally involved in the Peloponnesian Wars, wrote his history of the Peloponnesian War covering the events of the War until 411BCE, likely he died before he could complete it. His consideration of the Peloponnesian War is one of the most useful, and he is often dubbed the father of ‘scientific history’ due to his impartiality and close analysis of cause and effect. The introduction to his work states his intentions as:

“Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it.”

Other sources for the period include written histories by other Greek authors, including Xenophon and Diodorus. We can also use non-historical writings, such as pieces of theatre produced during this period, as these often dealt with themes and issues that arose as a result of Athens’ citizens living through this conflict.

The First Peloponnesian War



Remains of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, the site of the Second Sacred War (449 – 448 BCE), a conflict of the First Peloponnesian War.

Although the [Peloponnesian War](#) between 431 – 404 BCE is usually referred to in the singular, it is also sometimes called the [Second Peloponnesian War](#). The [First Peloponnesian War](#) was a conflict that arose in 460 BCE until 445 BCE. This conflict mainly consisted of smaller conflicts that occurred for various transgressions in various places, with [Sparta](#) and [Athens](#) often getting involved in conflicts on the behalf of other city states in their Leagues, such as the case in the [Second Sacred War](#), which was a conflict over the occupation of the [Temple of Apollo at Delphi](#).

Thirty Years Peace



A peace was established in 446/5BCE in what was known as the [Thirty Years Peace](#). The conditions of this peace treaty were that both sides maintained their respective empires, with [Athens](#) being more dominant by sea and [Sparta](#) more dominant by land. The peace did not last the Thirty Years as intended, and in 431 BCE the [Spartan's](#) considered that [Athens](#) had broken this peace by being increasingly aggressive towards neighbouring city states, such as [Megara](#) and [Corinth](#).

In 432BCE the [Corinthians](#) called upon [Sparta](#) to step in and condemn [Athens'](#) aggression. The [Spartan](#) assembly voted that [Athens'](#) aggressive behaviour had violated the peace, and so war between the two city states resumed in 431BCE.

Start of the War

Bust of
Pericles,
Roman copy
of a Greek
original c.
430 BCE.



Key early commanders on either side of the war include King [Archidamus II](#) of Sparta, who planned to invade the land around [Athens](#). In response, Athenian politician [Pericles](#) ordered that the citizens of [Attica](#), the farmland surrounding [Athens](#), abandon their farms to move into the fortified city.

[Pericles](#) is famed for delivering his speech, the [Funeral Oration](#), which commemorated those who had died in the first year of the conflict and urged the Athenians to have faith in the greatness of [Athens](#).

This strategy proved devastating however, as overcrowding led to an outbreak of plague within the city which killed over 30,000 people, including [Pericles](#) and his sons.

Increasing Aggression



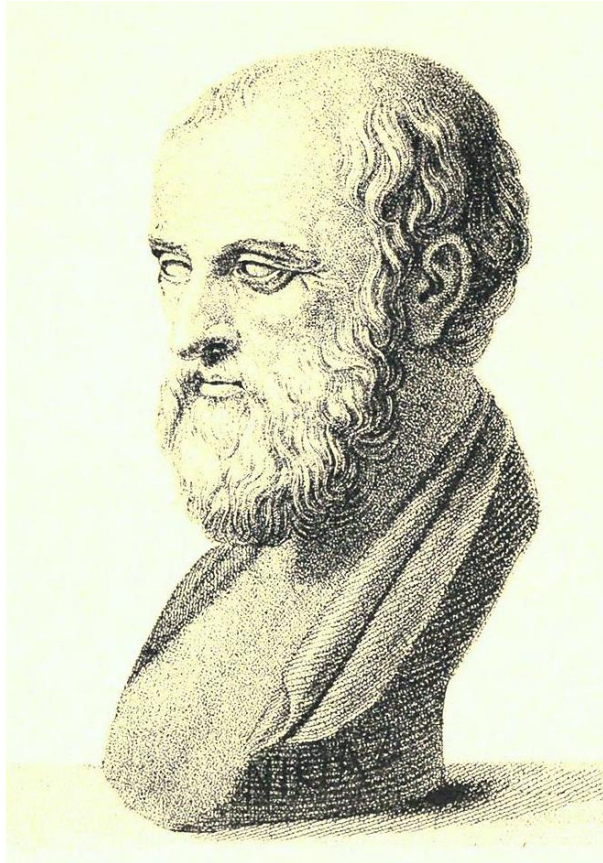
Remains of the ancient site of Amphipolis.

After [Pericles](#)' death, [Athenian](#) politicians decided to adopt a more aggressive policy. One of these prominent Athenians was [Cleon](#), who was responsible for a great victory at the [Battle of Sphacteria](#) in 425BCE in which the Athenians captured 300 elite Spartan warriors.

In retaliation, Spartan general [Brasidas](#) raised an army to capture the Athenian colony [Amphipolis](#), a strategically important area as it controlled several silver mines which provided Athens with important war funds. Both [Brasidas](#) and [Cleon](#) were killed in the ensuing battles to retake control over [Amphipolis](#).

The Peace of Nicias

Sketch of a bust of Nicias in 'The World's Famous Orations, Vol. 1' (1906)



The death of two esteemed leaders on both sides led to negotiations, and an attempt at a peace treaty, called the [Peace of Nicias](#) was signed in 421BCE, so named for the [Athenian](#) politician and general [Nicias](#) who had been a key part of the opposition to [Cleon's](#) more aggressive approach.

This ended the first phase of the [Second Peloponnesian War](#). However, peace did not last long as Athens and Sparta were soon at war again, culminating in the [Battle of Mantinea](#) in 418BCE, a devastating loss for Athens from which they would never truly recover.

The Sicilian Expedition

Roman copy of a late
5th century BCE
Athenian herm.



The [Sicilian Expedition](#) was an attempt by [Athens](#) between the years 415 - 413 BCE was an attempt by [Athens](#) to conquer the whole of Sicily, under the guise of assisting one of their allies on the island against invasion by [Syracuse](#).

This invasion was rallied on by prominent [Athenian](#) statesmen [Alcibiades](#), a popular member of the elite and student of Socrates, however he was called to a trial in [Athens](#) shortly before the expedition left due to an accusation that he mutilated sacred herms.

Soon after, [Alcibiades](#) fled [Athens](#) and defected to Sparta. This was a devastating loss to Athens, and the expedition of which [Alcibiades](#) had been the loudest supporter was doomed to failure.

Sparta Gains An Unlikely Ally

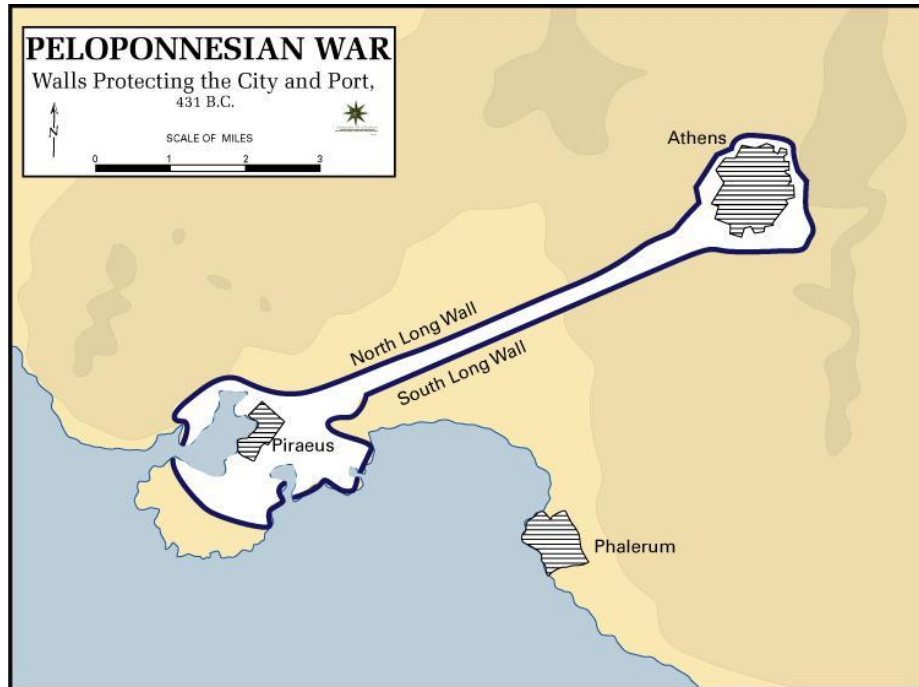


Meeting between Cyrus the Younger and Lysander, by Francesco Antonio Grue (1618–1673)

In the last phase of the [Second Peloponnesian War](#), between the years 414 - 404 BCE, [Sparta](#) continued to gain the upper hand while [Athens](#) suffered more and more losses. In this period [Sparta](#) went to the [Persian Empire](#), now ruled by [Darius II](#) for assistance against the [Athenians](#). The [Persians](#) obliged and help was given, with [Darius](#) sending his son, [Cyrus the Younger](#), to ally with Spartan general [Lysander](#).

The two made a formidable team, and with [Sparta](#) now operating as a land power for the first time, a realm which had previously been dominated by [Athens](#), the [Athenians](#) were soon defeated in battle again and again. [Lysander](#) thoroughly defeated [Athens](#) in the naval [Battle of Aegospotami](#) in 405 BCE and in 404 BCE [Athens](#), weakened by disease and loss, surrendered to [Sparta](#), bringing the [Peloponnesian War](#) to an end.

End of the War and Aftermath



The long walls of Athens, which connected the city to its nearby port the Piraeus, were a key defence of Athens and were destroyed on Spartan orders.

After securing victory, [Sparta](#) stripped [Athens](#) of its defences, known as the long walls, its navy, and its overseas territories. Other city states such as [Corinth](#) and [Thebes](#), who had long been terrorised by [Athenian](#) aggression, demanded that [Athens](#) be destroyed, and its citizens enslaved.

The [Spartans](#) did not indulge their request however, allegedly referring back to the time [Athens](#) had come to the defence of Greek city states during the times of the [Persian Wars](#) and so total destruction was an inappropriate end.

Additionally, [Athenian](#) democracy was briefly overturned, and [Sparta](#) installed a rule of [30 Tyrants](#) in the city. This did not last long, as in 403BCE these tyrants were overthrown, and democracy installed once more.

End of the War and Aftermath 2

Xenophon *Hellenica* 2.2.1 - 2.2.9 - After the Peloponnesian victory at the Battle of Aegospotami the Spartan general, Lysander, sails to various places which admit him, such as Byzantium, Chalcedon and Lesbos. Most the Greek world surrenders to the Spartans, except those who support democracy in Samos.

Xenophon *Hellenica* 2.2.20 - The Spartans choose not to enslave the Athenians. They offer peace on these terms:

- Athens' Long Walls are destroyed
 - Athenians must hand over all their ships except for twelve
 - Athenians should allow their exiles to return
 - Athens should have the same enemies and allies as Sparta
 - It should follow the Spartans over land and sea wherever they may go
-

Xenophon *Hellenica* 2.2.23

The Peloponnesians take down Athens' Long Walls with great eagerness to the sound of flutes playing, believing that this is the beginning of freedom.