

## The Rivalry between Athens and Sparta

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The rivalry between Athens and Sparta was a driving force in the history of Classical Greece, shaping its politics and its military and naval developments. From late in the sixth century (all dates are B.C.) until the end of the fifth, the states came into increasing contact and conflict, until Sparta's triumph in the great Peloponnesian War (431–404) put an end to the Athenian Empire and reduced it to subservience. Even then the rivalry did not stop, for within a decade Athens had recovered enough to join a coalition of states aiming at terminating the new Spartan hegemony in Greece. The Spartans' dominance ended only in 371, when the Thebans crushed their army at Leuctra. By that time Athens had recovered its position as a leading state and the head of a naval alliance that some regarded as a second empire.

When Philip of Macedon put an end to Greek autonomy at Chaeronea in 338, the Athenian army fought stoutly in a battle that could have gone either way, but what remained of the Spartan army took no part at all. In a sense, however, the rivalry has never ceased but goes on in the arguments about the competitors' constitutions and cultures that have continued through the millennia to our own time.

At first Sparta seems not to have been strikingly different from other poleis. About 725, however, the pressure of population and land hunger led the Spartans to launch a war of conquest against their western neighbor, Messenia. The First Messenian War gave the Spartans as much land as they would ever need. The reduction of the work the land that supported them.

**Messenians to the status of serfs, or helots, meant that the Spartans did not even need to** The turning point in Spartan history came about 650 B.C., when, in the Second Messenian War, the helots rebelled with the help of Argos and other Peloponnesian cities. The war was long and bitter and at one point threatened the existence of Sparta. After the revolt had been put down, the Spartans were forced to reconsider their way of life. They could not expect to repress the helots, who outnumbered them perhaps ten to one, and still maintain the old free and easy habits typical of most Greeks. Faced with the choice of making drastic changes and sacrifices or abandoning their control of Messenia, the Spartans chose to introduce fundamental reforms that turned their city forever after into a military academy and camp.

The new system that emerged late in the sixth century exerted control over each Spartan from birth, when officials of the state decided which infants were physically fit to

survive. At the age of seven, the Spartan boy was taken from his mother and turned over to young instructors. He was trained in athletics and the military arts and taught to endure privation, to bear physical pain, and to live off the land—by theft if necessary. At twenty the Spartan youth was enrolled in the army, where he lived in barracks with his companions until the age of thirty. Marriage was permitted, but a strange sort of marriage it was, for the Spartan male could visit his wife only infrequently and by stealth. At thirty, he became a full citizen, an “equal.” He took his meals at a public mess in the company of fifteen comrades. His own plot of land, worked by helots, provided his food, a simple diet without much meat or wine. Military service was required until the age of sixty; only then could the Spartan retire to his home and family.

This educational program extended to women, too, though they were not given military training. Female infants were examined for fitness to survive in the same way as males. Girls were given gymnastic training, were permitted greater freedom of movement than other Greek females, and were equally indoctrinated with the idea of service to Sparta.

The entire system was designed to change the natural feelings of devotion to family and children into a more powerful commitment to the polis. Privacy, luxury, and comfort were sacrificed to the purpose of producing soldiers whose physical powers, training, and discipline made them the best in the world. Nothing that might turn the mind away from duty was permitted. The use of coins was forbidden lest it corrupt the desires of Spartans. Neither family nor money was allowed to interfere with the only ambition permitted to a Spartan male: to win glory and the respect of his peers by bravery in war.

The Spartan constitution was mixed, containing elements of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy. There were two kings, whose power was limited by law and also by the rivalry that usually existed between the two royal houses. The origins and explanation of this unusual dual kingship are unknown, but both kings ruled together in Sparta and exercised equal power. Their functions were chiefly religious and military. A Spartan army rarely left home without a king in command.

The oligarchic element was represented by a council of elders consisting of twenty-eight men over the age of sixty, elected for life, and the kings. These elders had important judicial functions, sitting as a court in cases involving the kings. They also were consulted before any proposal was put before the assembly of Spartan citizens. In a traditional society like Sparta's, they must have had considerable influence.

The Spartan assembly consisted of all males over thirty. Theoretically, they were the final authority, but in practice, magistrates, elders, and kings carried on debates alone, and voting was usually by acclamation. Therefore, the assembly's real function was to ratify decisions already made or to decide between positions favored by the leading figures. In addition, Sparta had a unique institution, the board of ephors. It consisted of five men elected annually by the assembly. Originally, boards of ephors appear to have been intended to check the power of the kings, but gradually they gained other important functions. They controlled foreign policy, oversaw the generalship of the kings on campaigns, presided at the assembly, and guarded against rebellions by the helots.

The system was remarkable both for the way in which it combined participation by the citizenry with significant checks on its power and for its unmatched stability. Most Greeks admired the Spartan state for these qualities and also for its ability to mold citizens so thoroughly to an ideal. Many political philosophers, from Plato to modern times, have based utopian schemes on a version of Sparta's constitution and educational system.

The development of Athens was quite different. Cleisthenes introduced democracy to Athens shortly before 500. As far as we know, it was the world's first democratic government. Final authority in every matter rested with the assembly of adult male Athenian citizens and with the juries of the law courts, also open to all adult male citizens. Debate in the assembly was free and open; any Athenian could submit legislation, offer amendments, or argue the merits of any question. In practice, political leaders did most of the talking, but after a while the Athenians became more confident in their new self-government.

Over the years the Athenians developed their democracy even further; by the middle of the fifth century, led by Pericles, they created an even freer government that gave more power to the ordinary citizen. Within the citizen body, the extent of Athenian democracy was remarkable. Every decision of the state had to be approved by the popular assembly—a collection of the people, not their representatives. Every judicial decision was subject to appeal before a popular court of no fewer than 51 and as many as 1,501 citizens, chosen from an annual panel of jurors widely representative of the Athenian population. Most officials were selected by lot without regard to class. The main elected officials, such as the ten generals (the generalship was an office that had both political and military significance) and the imperial treasurers, were usually nobles and almost always rich men, but the people were free to choose otherwise. All public officials were subject to scrutiny before taking office and could be called to account and removed from

office during their tenure. They were subjected to compulsory examination and accounting at the end of their term. There was no standing army, no police force, open or secret, and no way to coerce the people. These two very different societies were destined to carry on a great rivalry throughout the Classical period of Greece.

In 510 the Spartans first intervened in Athenian affairs by driving out the tyrant Peisistratus, inadvertently producing the world's first democracy under Cleisthenes. When they turned Cleisthenes out in favor of his oligarchic opponent, the people rallied to his side and drove the Spartans from the city in defense of their new regime. So the pattern set early: Athens became the champion of democracy and Sparta the bulwark of oligarchy.

Three decades later the Persian king Xerxes sent a mighty military and naval force to conquer the mainland Greeks. Only thirty-one states offered resistance, led by the Spartans, hegemon of the Peloponnesian League and the mightiest Greek military power. In the decade before the invasion, the Athenians had built the largest and best Greek navy. At Salamis in 480 they played the key role in stopping the Persian advance, and the next spring the Spartans led the Greeks to the decisive victory on land at Plataea.

After Persia's retreat from Europe, the Greeks sought revenge and reparations for the death and destruction brought by the Persians, so they sent a force across the Aegean to achieve these goals under Spartan leadership. The harshness and arrogance of the Spartan commander Pausanias soon alienated the other Greeks. Aristides and Cimon led the Athenian contingent, and their tactful and gentle behavior won the confidence of the allies. The Greeks most threatened by the prospect of a Persian return pressed the Athenians to assume the leadership and they agreed.

The land-locked Spartans, their problems in the Peloponnese always uppermost in their minds, soon withdrew from the leadership of a continuing war against Persia. In the winter of 478/477 the new allies met at the island of Delos in the middle of the Aegean to form a league. Its purposes were to liberate the Greeks from Persian rule and to seek vengeance and material compensation. It was to be a full offensive and defensive alliance, and membership was to be permanent. Although each state had a single vote in the common council, Athens was clearly the designated leader. An Athenian determined the contribution each state would make, the league's treasurers were Athenians, and Athenians commanded all the expeditions.

Trouble between Athens and Sparta began just after the Persian withdrawal. Athens was in a shambles, and almost nothing was left of its defensive ramparts, so the Athenians set to work rebuilding both city and walls. The Spartans did not like walled

cities, for the superiority of their army made defensive walls unnecessary for them, while they found siege warfare difficult. The power and daring the Athenians had shown in the recent war, moreover, made Sparta's allies nervous, and they urged the Spartans to object. Themistocles was the driving force behind the rebuilding of the defenses, and he tricked the Spartans into inaction until Athens' walls were high enough to defend (fig. 1). He then made a defiant speech, rejecting Sparta's claim to leadership and asserting Athenian independence from and equality with the Spartans. Officially, the Spartans made no complaint, but "secretly they were angry." (Thucydides 1.92)

The possession of strong defensive walls was a necessary part of the new role Athens would have to play but hostility toward Sparta was not. The Spartans were divided among themselves as to their policy after the war, and the majority were ready to accept Athenian hegemony in the Aegean under friendly leadership in Athens. They liked and supported Cimon, who reciprocated their attitude completely. He constantly praised the Spartans' simplicity and manners and prided himself on emulating them. He named one of his sons Lacedaemonius ("Spartan") and at some point became Sparta's diplomatic representative in Athens. The Spartans publicly favored him, and he took pride in their support. His policy was to maintain friendly and respectful relations with Sparta while vigorously pursuing the war against the Persians. Themistocles knew there was a Spartan faction that was suspicious and jealous of the growing power of Athens, and he feared the threat they presented. Cimon believed in the peaceful intentions of most Spartans and their tolerance of Athens' leadership of the Delian League. Cimon's policy was more attractive and won the day. Themistocles lost out in the political struggle in Athens. Athens was firmly committed to Cimon's Spartan policy.

For more than a decade there was peace between the two states, but events soon revealed that beneath the apparent goodwill there was a faction in each that was suspicious of, and hostile toward, the other (fig. 2). In 465 Athens was engaged in a siege of Thasos. The Thasians asked for help from the Spartans, who, Thucydides tells us, agreed to invade Attica the next spring. A terrible earthquake in the Peloponnese prevented the Spartans from keeping their promise and encouraged their serflike subjects, the helots, to launch a major uprising. The rebels took refuge in a mountain stronghold where the Spartans could not get at them, and they stubbornly held out. At last, in 462, the Spartans called upon their allies, especially the Athenians, for help.

The proposal provoked a heated debate in the Athenian assembly that showed the continued existence and energy of a faction opposed to Sparta. The democratic leader Ephialtes spoke vehemently in opposition, urging the Athenians, "not to help or restore a

city that was a rival to Athens but to let the pride of Sparta lie low and be trampled underfoot.” (Plutarch Cimon 16.8) Cimon and his policies, however, were still popular, and the champion of Athenian friendship with Sparta had an effective reply to the opposition. He urged the Athenians “not to leave Greece lame nor see their city deprived of its yokefellow.” It was a homely but powerful metaphor that appealed to an assembly made up chiefly of farmers, comparing Athens and Sparta to a team of oxen pulling the Greek plow. It also appealed to the warm memories of cooperation in the common cause against the Persians and to the Panhellenic spirit of the time and it worked. The assembly voted to send Cimon with an army of four thousand hoplites to help the Spartans against the rebels.

For no obvious reason the Spartans singled out the Athenians among their allies, sending them home on the grounds that they were not needed after their first attempt to take the rebel fortress on Mount Ithome had failed. Thucydides discloses the real reason behind this flimsy pretext: “The Spartans were afraid of the boldness and the revolutionary spirit of the Athenians, thinking that . . . if they remained they might be persuaded by the men on Ithome to change sides.” (1.102.3) Sparta was a closed society that normally did not allow outsiders to move about freely in its territory, even as individuals. The Athenian soldiers frightened the Spartans, who were already suspicious and jealous of the Athenian democracy and its power.

The Athenians looked upon their dismissal as an insult, a disgrace, and proof of Spartan hostility. News of the cool treatment the Athenian expeditionary force was receiving in Sparta must have reached Athens before the troops returned, for by the time Cimon led his men back, his opponents had carried out a major constitutional revolution that gave the lower classes more power and produced the fuller “Periclean” democracy. Cimon was ostracized, and the new regime reversed his foreign policy. They withdrew from their old alliance with Sparta that was made to resist the Persians. Then they formed an alliance with Argos, Sparta’s traditional bitter enemy. This move soon produced what modern scholars call the First Peloponnesian War, a contest between the empire commanded by Athens and the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta. It consisted of intermittent fighting on land and sea between about 460 and 445 in a great war that at one point found Athenian forces stretched from Sicily to the Nile delta and more than once forced the Athenians to defend their homeland against an invading army.

The war arose from a conflict between Corinth and Megara, both Spartan allies. On the point of defeat, the Megarians asked the Spartans to intercede but were refused. Taking advantage of the new division between the two great powers of Greece, they

offered an alliance to Athens. Athenian control of the mountain passes of the Megarid, possible only with a friendly Megara, would make it very difficult, if not impossible, for a Peloponnesian army to invade Attica. An alliance with Megara would bring security against attack. On the other hand, accepting a state in rebellion from Sparta into an Athenian alliance amounted to an act of war against the Peloponnesian League. The Athenians did not hesitate to make the alliance. For them the war was a fact and the Megarian alliance was a chance to fight it safely and successfully.

The Spartans held back from serious fighting in the first years of the war, but they fought a victorious though indecisive infantry battle on Athens' Boeotian border in 457 before withdrawing into the Peloponnese. Athens took advantage of this opportunity to dominate Boeotia that year. Since the Athenians dominated the sea, they seemed invulnerable, with control of the only two sources of attack by land in Boeotia to the north and Megara in the west. A serious defeat at the hands of the Persians in Egypt brought an end to this happy condition, causing widespread rebellions in the empire. The war ended when the Megarians defected from the Athenian alliance and returned to the Peloponnesian League, opening the way for the Spartan king Pleistoanax to lead a Peloponnesian army into Attica. A decisive battle seemed certain, but at the last moment the Spartans returned home without a fight. Ancient writers claim that Pericles had bribed the king and his adviser to abort the battle, and at first the Spartans were angry with the commanders, punishing both severely. A more likely explanation is that Pericles offered them acceptable peace terms, making a fight unnecessary. A few months later the Spartans and Athenians agreed to a peace treaty.

The peace, concluded for thirty years, took effect in the winter of 446/465. The Athenians agreed to give up the Peloponnesian lands they had acquired during the war, while the Spartans granted what amounted to official recognition of the Athenian Empire, for Sparta and Athens each swore the ratifying oaths on behalf of their allies. A key clause formally divided the Greek world in two by forbidding the members of each alliance to change sides, as Megara had done to start the recent war. Neutrals could join either side, an apparently innocent and sensible item that would cause a surprising amount of trouble. Another provision required both sides to submit future grievances to binding arbitration. This appears to be the first attempt in history to maintain perpetual peace through such a device and suggests that both sides were serious about avoiding armed conflict in the future.

In spite of crises and disagreements, the peace held for more than a decade, but a quarrel between the neutral island of Corcyra and Sparta's ally Corinth erupted about 435

and soon threatened to embroil the great powers. Corcyra possessed a great fleet, second only to that of Athens, and the Athenians feared that its conquest by Corinth would threaten Athenian command of the sea and the city's security. An Athenian alliance with Corcyra and other countermeasures that angered Corinth and Megara drove the Spartans to defend their allies and launch the war.

The Spartan strategy was traditional: to invade the enemy country and threaten the crops, forcing the enemy to defend them in an infantry battle. The Spartans were sure to win such a battle, because they had the better army and they outnumbered the Athenians at least two to one. Any ordinary polis would have yielded or fought and lost. Athens, however, had an enormous navy, an annual income from the empire, a vast reserve fund, and long walls that connected the fortified city with the fortified port of Piraeus.

The Athenians' strategy was to allow devastation of their own land to prove that Spartan invasions could not hurt Athens. At the same time, the Athenians launched seaborne raids on the Peloponnesian coast to show that Sparta's allies could be hurt. Pericles expected that within a year or two—three at most—the Peloponnesians would become discouraged and make peace, having learned their lesson. If the Peloponnesians held out, Athenian resources were inadequate to continue for more than four or five years without raising the tribute in the empire and running an unacceptable risk of rebellion.

The plan required restraint and leadership that only a Pericles could provide. In 429, however, in the wake of a devastating plague and a political crisis that had challenged his authority, Pericles died. After his death, no dominant leader emerged to hold the Athenians to a consistent policy. Two factions vied for influence: one, led by Nicias, wanted to continue the defensive policy, and the other, led by Cleon, preferred a more aggressive strategy. In 425 the aggressive faction was able to win a victory that changed the course of the war. Four hundred Spartans surrendered. Sparta offered peace at once to get them back. The great victory and the prestige it brought Athens made it safe to raise the imperial tribute, without which Athens could not continue to fight. The Athenians indeed wanted to continue, for the Spartan peace offer gave no adequate guarantee of Athenian security.

In 424 the Athenians undertook a more aggressive policy. They sought to make Athens safe by conquering Megara and Boeotia. Both attempts failed, and defeat helped discredit the aggressive policy, leading to a truce in 423. Meanwhile, Sparta's ablest general, Brasidas, took a small army to Thrace and Macedonia. He captured Amphipolis, the most important Athenian colony in the region. Thucydides was in charge of the Athenian fleet in those waters and was held responsible for the city's loss. He was exiled

and was thereby given the time and opportunity to write his famous history of the great Peloponnesian War. In 422 Cleon led an expedition to undo the work of Brasidas. At Amphipolis, both he and Brasidas died in battle. The removal of these two leaders of the aggressive factions in their respective cities paved the way for the Peace of Nicias, named for its chief negotiator, which was ratified in spring 421.

The peace, officially supposed to last fifty years and, with a few exceptions, guarantee the status quo, was in fact tenuous. Neither side carried out all its commitments, and several of Sparta's allies refused ratification. In 415 Alcibiades persuaded the Athenians to attack Sicily to bring it under Athenian control. This ambitious and unnecessary undertaking ended in disaster in 413, when the entire expedition was destroyed. The Athenians lost some two hundred ships, about 4,500 of their own men, and almost ten times as many allies. It shook Athenian prestige, reduced the power of Athens, provoked rebellions, and brought the wealth and power of Persia into the war on Sparta's side.

It is remarkable that the Athenians could continue fighting in spite of the disaster. They survived a brief oligarchic coup in 411 and won several important victories at sea as the war shifted to the Aegean. Their allies rebelled, however, and were sustained by fleets paid for by Persia. The Athenians saw their financial resources shrink and finally disappear. When their fleet was caught napping and was destroyed at Aegospotami in 405, they could not build another. The Spartans, under Lysander, a clever and ambitious general who was responsible for obtaining Persian support, cut off the food supply through the Hellespont, and the Athenians were starved into submission. In 404 they surrendered unconditionally; the city walls were dismantled, Athens was permitted no fleet, and the empire was gone. The great Peloponnesian War was over.

Victory in the great Peloponnesian War that lasted, with interruptions, from 431 to 404, made Sparta the leading power in Greece. Athens, on the other hand, lost its empire, fleet, walls, and independence. Compelled to make an alliance with Sparta like that of the Peloponnesian states, it was also forced to give up its democratic form of government and endure a brutal, narrow oligarchical puppet regime imposed by the Spartans. It seems amazing that within a decade Athens rose from this disaster and recovered its independence, its democracy, a great fleet and defensible walls, and a position as one of the leading powers in Greece.

In 395, together with Argos, Corinth, and Thebes, supported by Persian funds, the Athenians formed a coalition that aimed to contain Sparta's aggression and destroy its ability to dominate Greece. The Corinthian War that broke out that year was long, hard,

and indecisive. The inability to break the deadlock in the fighting led the Spartans to seek Persian help, and Athens' success in beginning to restore her old naval alliance in the Aegean caused the Persians to change sides. The document that underlay the treaty ending the war in 386 was an open threat to wage war on any state violating the terms laid down by Persia's great king. The alliance between Athens and Sparta had been the backbone of the coalition that defeated the Persians in 479. The lasting rivalry that soon came between them ultimately undid that victory and placed the Persian king in a position to dictate to all the Greeks of the mainland and the Aegean.

A key clause of the King's Peace, as it came to be called, required that all the Greek states be granted autonomy. Backed by Persian might, the Spartans interpreted that to mean the dissolution of all permanent interstate associations except the Peloponnesian League. With major competitors like Corinth, Argos, and Thebes thus weakened, the Spartans were free to pursue an aggressive policy of intimidation, hegemony, and even conquest throughout mainland Greece. Their seizure of Thebes without pretext by a sneak attack in peacetime and a failed attempt to seize Athens' harbor at Peiraeus alarmed and alienated the Athenians, who helped to liberate Thebes and made an alliance against Sparta with the newly democratic Thebans. Athens went even further, forming a Second Athenian Confederation in 378/377, just a century after the foundation of the Delian League. The target of the new league was Sparta, but most of its members were the islanders and states bordering the Aegean Sea that had formed the Delian League.

Thebes was energized as never before by its liberation and its democratic federal constitution, and it soon came to challenge the position of Athens, but its main target was always Sparta. The power of the Thebans grew rapidly, and by 371 they decisively defeated a large Peloponnesian army at Leuctra in Boeotia, a defeat from which Spartan power never recovered. Sparta's population had been declining for more than a century, and at Leuctra their troops amounted to fewer than a thousand, less than a tenth of the Peloponnesian army. The following year a determined Boeotian army under Theban leadership invaded Sparta's homeland, ravaged it unchallenged, and liberated the helots, the thousands of state slaves whose work in the fields had freed the Spartans from ordinary labor and allowed them to become the powerful militarized state that had dominated Greece.

In the decade following Leuctra that scholars call the Theban hegemony, the Thebans established new cities in the Peloponnese. Messene in the west became the home of the Spartans' ever-hostile former helots and Megalopolis in the north became the capital of a newly powerful Arcadian confederation, entirely independent of Sparta.

Although Sparta remained independent, it was never again a powerful force in Greek affairs. Athens took no part in this reduction and humiliation of its ancient rival. By now it was more troubled by the power of Thebes and even made an alliance with the Spartans in the years after Leuctra.

The Theban hegemony came to the end at the Second Battle of Mantinea in 362. Although Thebes won a technical victory, its greatest general was killed in the battle and the victory was too slight to be exploited. The result was complete confusion, no powerful leading state and no union among the chief powers. It was into this tempting weakness that the newly powerful Macedonian army, led by its brilliant warrior-king Philip II, plunged in the years after Second Mantinea. The result in 338 was a major Macedonian victory at Chaeronea that brought an end to the era of the independent Greek polis and the Hellenic period, Greece's most creative epoch. A major cause of this outcome was the continuing rivalry between Athens and Sparta. That story may be the most painful of all Greek tragedies.

Fig. 1. Parts of the Themistocles Fortress in Kerameikos, Athens

Fig. 2. Map: Greece before the Peloponnesian War, 431 B.C. From Bengston 1982, pp. 224–25