5.10: The Classical Period

So far, the story of the Greek world in this chapter has proceeded from a narrative of the fragmented Greek world in the Dark Ages to the emergence and solidification of a Pan-Hellenic identity in the Archaic Period. The story of the Greeks in the Classical Period, by contrast, is best described as the strife for leadership of the Greek world. First, Athens and Sparta spent much of the fifth century BCE battling each other for control of the Greek world. Then, once both were weakened, other states began attempting to fill the power vacuum. Ultimately, the Classical Period will end with the Greek world under the control of a power that was virtually unknown to the Greeks at the beginning of the fifth century BCE: Macedon.

5.10.1: From the Delian League to the Athenian Empire

In 478 BCE, barely a year after the end of the Persian Wars, a group of Greek city-states, mainly those located in Ionia and on the island between mainland Greece and Ionia, founded the Delian League, with the aim of continuing to protect the Greeks in Ionia from Persian attacks. Led by Athens, the league first met on the tiny island of Delos. According to Greek mythology, the twin gods Apollo and Artemis were born on Delos. As a result, the island was considered sacred ground and, as such, was a fitting neutral headquarters for the new alliance. The league allowed member states the option of either contributing a tax (an option that most members selected) or contributing ships for the league’s navy. The treasury of the league, where the taxes paid by members were deposited, was housed on Delos.
Over the next twenty years, the Delian League gradually transformed from a loose alliance of states led by Athens to a more formal entity. The League’s Athenian leadership, in the meanwhile, grew to be that of an imperial leader. The few members who tried to secede from the League, such as the island of Naxos, quickly learned that doing so was not an option as the revolt was violently subdued. Finally, in 454 BCE, the treasury of the Delian League moved to Athens. That moment marked the transformation of the Delian League into the Athenian Empire.

Since the Athenians publicly inscribed each year the one-sixtieth portion of the tribute that they dedicated to Athena, records survive listing the contributing members for a number of years, thereby allowing historians to see the magnitude of the Athenian operation.

While only the Athenian side of the story survives, it appears that the Athenians’ allies in the Delian League were not happy with the transformation of the alliance into a full-fledged Athenian Empire. Non-allies were affected as well. The fifth-century BCE Athenian historian Thucydides dramatizes in his history one particularly harsh treatment of a small island, Melos, which effectively refused to join the Athenian cause. To add insult to injury, once the treasury of the Empire had been moved to Athens, the Athenians had used some funds from it for their own building projects, the most famous of these projects being the Parthenon, the great temple to Athena on the Acropolis.
The bold decision to move the treasury of the Delian League to Athens was the brainchild of the leading Athenian statesman of the fifth century BCE, Pericles. A member of a prominent aristocratic family, Pericles was a predominant politician for forty years, from the early 460s BCE to his death in 429 BCE, and was instrumental in the development of a more popular democracy in Athens. Under his leadership, an especially vibrant feeling of Athenian patriotic pride seems to have developed, and the decision to move the Delian League treasury to Athens fits into this pattern as well. Shortly after moving the treasury to Athens, Pericles sponsored a Citizenship Decree in 451 BCE that restricted Athenian citizenship from thence onwards only to individuals who had two freeborn and legitimately-wed Athenian parents, both of whom were also born of Athenian parents. Then c. 449 BCE, Pericles successfully proposed a decree allowing the Athenians to use Delian League funds for Athenian building projects, and, c. 447 BCE, he sponsored the Athenian Coinage Decree, a decree that imposed Athenian standards of weights and measures on all states that were members of the Delian League. Later in his life, Pericles famously described Athens as “the school of Hellas;” this description would certainly have fit Athens just as much in the mid-fifth century BCE as, in addition to the flourishing of art and architecture, the city was a center of philosophy and drama.

The growing wealth and power of Athens in the twenty or so years since the Persian Wars did not escape Sparta and led to increasingly tense relations between the two leading powers in Greece. Sparta had steadily consolidated the Peloponnesian League in this same time-period, but Sparta’s authority over this league was not quite as strict as was the Athenian control over the Delian League. Finally, in the period of 460-445 BCE, the Spartans and the Athenians engaged in a series of battles, to which modern scholars refer as the First Peloponnesian War. In 445 BCE, the two sides swore to a Thirty Years Peace, a treaty that allowed both sides to return to their pre-war holdings, with few exceptions. Still, Spartan unease in this period of Athenian expansion and prosperity, which resulted in the First Peloponnesian War, was merely a sign of much more serious conflict to come. As the Athenian general and historian Thucydides later wrote about the reasons for the Great Peloponnesian War, which erupted in 431 BCE: “But the real cause of the war was one that was formally kept out of sight. The growing power of Athens, and the fear that it inspired in Sparta, made the war inevitable” (Thucydides, I.23).

5.10.2: The Peloponnesian War (431 – 404 BCE)

Historians today frown on the use of the term “inevitable” to describe historical events. Still, Thucydides’ point about the inevitability of the Peloponnesian War is perhaps appropriate, as following a conflict that had been bubbling under the surface for fifty years, the war finally broke out over a seemingly minor affair. In 433 BCE, Corcyra, a colony of Corinth that no longer wanted to be under the control of its mother-city, asked Athens for protection against Corinth. The Corinthians claimed that the Athenian support of Corcyra was a violation of the Thirty Years Peace, a treaty that allowed both sides to return to their pre-war holdings, with few exceptions. Still, Spartan unease in this period of Athenian expansion and prosperity, which resulted in the First Peloponnesian War, was merely a sign of much more serious conflict to come. As the Athenian general and historian Thucydides later wrote about the reasons for the Great Peloponnesian War, which erupted in 431 BCE: “But the real cause of the war was one that was formally kept out of sight. The growing power of Athens, and the fear that it inspired in Sparta, made the war inevitable” (Thucydides, I.23).

At the time of the war’s declaration, no one thought that it would last twenty-seven years and would ultimately embroil the entire Greek-speaking world. Rather, the Spartans expected that they would march with an army to Athens, fight a decisive battle, then return home forthwith. The long duration of the war, however, was partly the result of the different strengths of the two leading powers. Athens was a naval empire, with allies scattered all over the Ionian Sea. Sparta, on the other hand, was a land-locked power with supporters chiefly in the Peloponnese and with no navy to speak of at the
The Peloponnesian War brought about significant changes in the government of both Athens and Sparta, so that, by the end of the war, neither power looked as it did at its outset. Athens, in particular, became more democratic because of increased need for manpower to row its fleet. The lowest census bracket, the *thetes*, whose poverty and inability to buy their own armor had previously excluded them from military service, became by the end of the war a full-fledged part of the Athenian forces and required a correspondingly greater degree of political influence. In the case of Sparta, the war had ended the Spartan policy of relative isolationism from the rest of the affairs of the Greek city-states. The length of the war also brought about significant changes to the nature of Greek warfare. While war was previously largely a seasonal affair, with many conflicts being decided with a single battle, the Peloponnesian War forced the Greek city-states to support standing armies. Finally, while sieges of cities and attacks on civilians were previously frowned upon, they became the norm by the end of the Peloponnesian War. In short, Thucydides’s narrative of the war shows that the war had a detrimental effect on human nature, encouraging a previously unprecedented degree of cruelty on both sides. It is important to note, though, that as brutal as sieges could be during the Peloponnesian War, Greek siege warfare during the fifth century BCE was still quite primitive, as no tools existed for ramming or otherwise damaging the city gates or walls. Furthermore, catapults, so useful for targeting a city from the outside, first came into being in 399 BCE, five years after the war had ended.
Modern historians divide the Peloponnesian War into three distinct stages, based on the tactics used in each: the Archidamian War, the Peace of Nicias, and the Decelean War. The first stage, the Archidamian War (431 – 421 BCE), is named after the Spartan king Archidamus, who proposed the strategy of annual invasions of Attica at the beginning of the war. Beginning in late spring and early summer of 431 BCE, Archidamus led the Spartan army to invade Attica in order to devastate the agricultural land around the city. The Spartans thereby hoped to provoke the Athenians to a battle. Pericles however, refused to enter into battle against the Spartans, and instead ordered all inhabitants of Attica to retreat within the city. Pericles’ decision was wise, as the Athenians would likely have lost a land battle against the Spartans. His decision, though, had unforeseen repercussions. In 430 BCE, the crowded conditions within Athens resulted in the outbreak of a virulent plague which by some estimates killed as much as twenty-five percent of the city’s population over the following three years. Among the dead was none other than Pericles himself.

The plague had significant repercussions for Athens during the first phase of the war because of not only the loss of fighting men to disease and the consequent lowered morale in the city, but also the death of Pericles, the moderate leader. The subsequent leaders who emerged, such as Cleon, were known as war-hawks. Meanwhile, the Spartans
continued their annual invasions of Attica until 425 BCE, when luck was finally on the Athenians’ side.

In 425 BCE, the Athenian fleet faced a new Spartan fleet in the Battle of Pylos in the Peloponnese. The Athenians won the battle and also managed to trap 420 Spartans on the tiny island of Sphacteria, just off the coast of Pylos. Sending shockwaves through the entire Greek world, the Spartans surrendered. By bringing the hostages to Athens, the Athenians put an end to the annual invasions of Attica. Finally, in 421 BCE, with the death of the most pro-war generals on both sides, the Athenians with their allies signed a peace treaty with Spartans and their allies. Named the “Peace of Nicias” after the Athenian general who brokered this treaty, it was supposed to be a fifty years’ peace; it allowed both sides to return to their pre-war holdings, with a few exceptions. As part of the peace terms, the Spartan hostages from Pylos were finally released.

Despite its ambitious casting as a fifty years’ peace, the Peace of Nicias proved to be a short and uneasy time filled with minor battles and skirmishes. One problem with the treaty was that while Athens and all of its allies signed the peace, several key allies of Sparta, including Corinth and Thebes, refused to do so. Furthermore, Athens made the disastrous decision during this stalemate to launch the **Sicilian Expedition**, a venture that took much of the Athenian fleet to Sicily in 415 BCE.

Syracuse, however, proved to be a difficult target, and the expedition ended in 413 BCE with a complete destruction of the Athenian navy. That same year, the Spartans renewed the fighting, launching the third and final phase of the Peloponnesian War.

![Map of the Sicilian Expedition](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/Book%3A_World_History_-_Cultures_States_and_Societies_t…)

In the third stage of the Peloponnesian war, also known as the Decelean War, the Spartans took the war to Attic soil by occupying Decelea, a village in Attica proper, and transforming it into a military fort. This occupation allowed the Spartans to prevent the Athenians from farming their land and cutting off Athens from most supply routes, effectively crippling the Athenian economy for the remainder of the war. Losing the Sicilian Expedition and the challenge of the Decelean War produced a high level of resentment towards the democratic leaders in Athens. Therefore in 411 BCE, an oligarchic coup briefly replaced the democracy with the rule of the Four Hundred. While this oligarchy was quickly overthrown and the democracy restored, this internal instability highlighted the presence of the aristocratic element in the city as well as the dissatisfaction of at least the aristocratic citizens with the long war.

Remarkably, in a testament to the resilience and power of the Athenian state, the Athenians managed to rebuild a navy after the Sicilian Expedition, and even managed to continue to win battles on sea during this final phase of the war. In 405 BCE, however, the Spartan general Lysander defeated Athens in the naval battle of Aegospotami. He proceeded to
besiege Athens, and the city finally surrendered in 404 BCE. For the second time in a decade, the Athenian democracy was overthrown, to be replaced this time by the Spartan-sanctioned oligarchy known as the Tyranny of the Thirty. The rule of the Thirty proved to be a much more brutal oligarchy than that of the Four Hundred. A year later, an army formed largely of Athenian democrats in exile marched on the city and overthrew the Thirty. The democracy thus was restored in 403 BCE, and the painful process of recovery from the war and the oligarchic rule could begin.

5.10.3: Athenian Culture during the Peloponnesian War

Because it drained Athens of manpower and financial resources, the Peloponnesian War proved to be an utter practical disaster for Athens. Nevertheless, the war period was also the pinnacle of Athenian culture, most notably its tragedy, comedy, and philosophy. Tragedy and comedy in Athens were very much popular entertainment, intended to appeal to all citizens. Thus issues considered in these plays were often ones of paramount concern for the city at the time when the plays were written. As one character in a comedy bitterly joked in an address to the audience, more Athenians attended tragic and comic performances than came to vote at assembly meetings. Not surprisingly, war was a common topic of discussion in the plays. Furthermore, war was not portrayed positively, as the playwrights repeatedly emphasized the costs of war for both winners and losers.

Sophocles, one of the two most prominent Athenian tragedians during the Peloponnesian War era, had served his city as a general, albeit at an earlier period; thus, he had direct experience with war. Many of his tragedies that were performed during the war dealt with the darker side of fighting, for both soldiers and generals, and the cities that are affected. By tradition, however, tragedies tackled contemporary issues through integrating them into mythical stories, and the two mythical wars that Sophocles portrayed in his tragedies were the Trojan War, as in Ajax and Philoctetes, and the aftermath of the war of the Seven against Thebes, in which Polynices, the son of Oedipus, led six other heroes to attack Thebes, a city led by his brother Eteocles, as in Oedipus at Colonus. Sophocles’ plays repeatedly showed the emotional and psychological challenges of war for soldiers and civilians alike; they also emphasized the futility of war, as the heroes of his plays, just as in the original myths on which they were based, died tragic, untimely deaths. Sophocles’ younger contemporary, Euripides, had a similar interest in depicting the horrors of war and wrote a number of tragedies on the impact of war on the defeated, such as in Phoenician Women and Hecuba; both of these plays explored the aftermath of the Trojan War from the perspective of the defeated Trojans.

While the tragic playwrights explored the impact of the war on both the fighters and the civilians through narrating mythical events, the comic playwright Aristophanes was far less subtle. The anti-war civilian who saves the day and ends the war was a common hero in the Aristophanic comedies. For instance, in the Acharnians (425 BCE), the main character is a war-weary farmer who, frustrated with the inefficiency of the Athenian leadership in ending the war, brokers his own personal peace with Sparta. Similarly, in Peace (421 BCE), another anti-war farmer fattens up a dung beetle in order to fly to Olympus and beg Zeus to free Peace. Finally, in Lysistrata (411 BCE), the wives of all Greek city-states, missing their husbands who are at war, band together in a plot to end the war by going on a sex-strike until their husbands make peace. By the end of the play, their wish comes true. Undeniably funny, the jokes in these comedies, nevertheless, have a bitter edge, akin to the portrayal of war in the tragedies. The overall impression from the war-era drama is that the playwrights, as well as perhaps the Athenians themselves, spent much of the Peloponnesian War dreaming of peace.

While the playwrights were dreaming of the things of this world—most notably war—their contemporary, Socrates, was
dreaming of difficult questions. One of the most prominent philosophers of the ancient world, Socrates has not left any writings of his own, but thoughts attributed to him survive in dialogues penned by his student, the fourth-century philosopher **Plato**. In Plato’s writings, Socrates comes across as someone who loved difficult questions and who was not above confronting any passers-by with such questions as “What is courage?”; “What is moral?”; “What would the ideal city look like?” Using what became known ever since as the “Socratic method,” Socrates continued to probe further every definition and answer that his conversation partners provided, guiding them to delve deeper in their reflections on the topics at hand than they had before. As a result of his love of such debates, Socrates was seen as connected to the Sophists, philosophical debate teachers, who (as Aristophanes joked) could teach anyone to convince others of anything at all, regardless of reality or truth. But Socrates radically differed from the Sophists by not charging fees for his teaching. Instead, as he himself is purported to have said, he was a pest-like gadfly that kept disturbing Athens from growing too content and encouraged all with whom he spoke to keep thinking and questioning.

### 5.10.4: The Fourth Century BCE

In 399 BCE, a seventy-year old Athenian was put on trial for impiety and for corrupting the youth, convicted, and speedily sentenced to death. The trial is especially shocking, since the man in question was none other than Socrates, the philosopher who had spent his life wandering the streets of Athens engaging in endless dialogues regarding the meaning of life. Why did the Athenians suddenly turn against this public teacher and judge him worthy of execution? The answer, most likely, is not the openly-stated causes of the trial, but rather the connections that Socrates previously had to oligarchic leaders. In particular, Socrates had taught Critias, who became one of the Thirty in 404 BCE. Fueled by their hatred of all enemies of the democracy and anyone who had associated with the Thirty, the Athenians condemned Socrates to death. This trial shows how deeply the scars went in the collective psyche and how difficult it was for the Athenians to forget the terrible end of the Peloponnesian War. And while, as usual, more information survives about how the Athenians—more than any other polis—dealt with the aftermath of the war, it is clear that for the rest of the Greek world, their life in the fourth century BCE was very much the result of the Peloponnesian War.
The early fourth century saw a power vacuum emerge in the Greek world for the first time since the early Archaic Period. Defeated in the war, Athens was no longer an Empire, while the winner, Sparta, had suffered a catastrophic decline in its population over the course of the Peloponnesian War. At the same time, Thebes had revamped its military, introducing the first two significant changes to the hoplite phalanx way of fighting since its inception: slightly longer spears, and wedge formation. The final key to the Theban military supremacy was the **Theban Sacred Band**, formed in 378 BCE. An elite core of 300 warriors, the band consisted of 150 couples, based on the assumption that the lovers would fight most bravely in order not to appear to be cowardly to their beloved. In 371 BCE, the Thebans demonstrated the success of their military reforms by defeating the Spartans at the **Battle of Leuctra**. They continued an aggressive program of military expansion over the next decade, a period known as the **Theban Hegemony**.

Sometime in the 360’s BCE, a young Macedonian prince stayed for several years in Thebes as a hostage. While there, he caught the eye of the military reformer, Epaminondas, who took the prince under his wing. Circa 364 BCE, the prince returned to Macedon, and, in 359 BCE, he ascended to the throne as king **Philip II**. Up until that point in Greek history, the Macedonians had largely been known for two things: drinking their wine undiluted, which had marked them as complete and utter barbarians in the eyes of the rest of the Greeks, and being excellent horsemen. With Philip at the helm, this estimation was about to change. As soon as he came to the throne, Philip began transforming the Macedonian military into a more successful image of what he had seen at Thebes. Philip further lengthened the already
longer spears used by the Thebans, creating the Macedonian sarissa, a spear of about eighteen feet in length, double that of the traditional Greek hoplite spear.

He retained the Theban wedge formation but also added heavy cavalry to the line, thus incorporating the Macedonians’ strongest element into the phalanx. The results spoke for themselves, as over the next twenty years, Philip systematically conquered all of mainland Greece, with the exception of Sparta, which he chose to leave alone. Philip’s final great victory, which he shared with his teenage son Alexander, was at the Battle of Chaeronea (338 BCE), in which the Macedonian armies defeated the combined forces of Athens and Thebes. Philip’s conquest of the entire mainland was the end of an era, as for the first time, the entire territory was united under the rule of a king.

Figure \(\PageIndex{3}\): Alexander the Great | Alexander fighting Darius in the Battle of Issus (333 BCE). Mosaic from the House of the Faun, Pompeii. Note Alexander on the left side of the mosaic, fighting on horseback, while Darius, almost at the middle, charges in a chariot. Author: User “Berthold Werner” Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

By all accounts, it appears that Philip was not going to stop at just conquering the Greek world. He did not, however, have this choice. In 336 BCE while on his way to a theatrical performance, Philip was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards. His son Alexander, then twenty years old, succeeded and continued his father’s ambitious program of conquests. Alexander’s first target was the Persian Empire, motivated in part by his love of Homer’s Iliad, and the perception among the Greeks that this new campaign was the continuation of the original, mythical war against Asia. Moving farther and farther East in his campaigns, Alexander conquered the Balkans, Egypt, and the territories of modern-day Lebanon, Syria, and Israel before he achieved a decisive victory over Darius III at the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE.

Continuing to move eastwards, Alexander invaded India in 327 BCE, planning to conquer the known world and assuming that he was close to this achievement, since the Greeks of his day were not aware of China’s existence. His war-weary troops, however, rebelled in 326 BCE and demanded to return home (see Chapter 3). It appears that this mutiny was not the first that occurred in Alexander’s army; indeed, over the course of his rule, Alexander had also been the target of a number of failed assassinations. However, this mutiny forced Alexander to give in. Leaving several of his officers behind as satraps, Alexander turned back. In 323 BCE, he and his army reached Babylon, the city that he had hoped to make the new capital of his world empire. There, Alexander fell ill and died at the ripe old age of thirty-three.
While Alexander’s rule only lasted thirteen years, his legacy reshaped Greece and the rest of ancient Eurasia for the next several centuries. A charismatic leader, albeit one prone to emotional outbursts, Alexander redefined what it meant to be king and general. His coinage reflects this reinvention. On one coin minted during his lifetime, for instance, appears Alexander dressed as the hero Heracles, while Zeus, whom Alexander alleged to be his real father, appears on the other side.

In addition, by conquering territories that were previously not part of the Greek world, Alexander spread Greek culture farther than had anyone else before him. At the same time, by marrying several non-Greek princesses and encouraging such marriages by his troops, Alexander also encouraged the creation of a “meltingpot” empire; he further cemented this creation by founding new cities named after himself all over his new empire. In particular, Alexandria, the city that he founded in Egypt, became a center of Greek civilization—albeit with an Egyptian twist—was seen as a new Athens well into the Roman Empire. Alexander’s brief time in India produced a significant impact as well, as in 321 BCE, Chandragupta Maurya was able to unify India into a single kingdom for the first time, establishing the Mauryan Empire (Chapter Three). Finally, in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Greek world, Alexander’s generals divided his conquests into several kingdoms that they and their descendants continued to rule until the Romans conquered these respective areas. It appears that Alexander’s melting-pot empire, burning up as a phoenix upon his death, actually allowed several new empires and kingdoms to arise from its ashes.