ATHENS AND SPARTA

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Philip and Alexander: Kings and Conquerors

The Eagle and the Lion

ATHENS AND SPARTA

THE RIVALRY THAT SHAPED ANCIENT GREECE

ADRIAN GOLDSWORTHY



An Apollo Book

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My aim is to provide an introduction to the subject, but one with depth, even though it is impossible to cover everything in equal detail given such a broad theme. The works cited in the notes will help the interested reader go further, each in turn providing references to yet more of the vast array of scholarship out there. As in all my books, I must express my great debt to the many scholars cited and the others whose work has helped my understanding of the period more generally. I will single out three by name, although it could as easily be thirty, and the frequency of references to particular scholars will give some idea of how much I have learned from their work. When it comes to Sparta, the numerous conferences and subsequent volumes organised by the late Anton Powell and his collaborators have been especially inspiring, for the questioning of almost all that the scholarly consensus had concluded about the Spartans. Whether or not the revisionist views convince, this greatly stimulated the debate on so many topics. I should also mention the work of J. E. Lendon on the central role played by honour and perception of status, themes that, as a result, run throughout this book. It has also been my greatest good fortune to turn to this project at a time when Paul Rahe was completing his series on the Grand Strategy of Sparta, surely one of the most ambitious and successful projects in modern classical scholarship.

At times I may take a different view to that presented by these and other scholars, for that is the nature of the evidence, where certainty is rarely possible, but I never do this lightly. More often, I found that they had anticipated anything I thought might be original, reminding me of a comment by the late Brian Dobson, referring to the study of Hadrian's Wall but just as applicable here: 'Again and again as we strive to express some truth . . . we find that it has already been said, better and clearer. If ever we imagine we glimpse some new truth . . . it is simply because we stand on the shoulders of giants.' At the very least I hope that this book will make a wider audience aware of the wealth of scholarly work that has been—and continues to be—done in the study of the ancient world, much of it often known only to specialists.

Thanks must as always go to my agent, Georgina Capel, for making things happen and creating the circumstances where I can hope to do justice to the topic. Also, many thanks to my editors, Holly Harley and Richard Milbank at Head of Zeus and Lara Heimert at Basic Books, and their respective staffs in London and in New York as they turn the raw manuscript into the handsome volume that one day will arrive through the post. Even after all these years, there is something special about holding a book for the first time. As always, the staff at the Institute of Classical Studies Library in London have been both welcoming and very helpful, as much of my research has relied upon the collection there. More personally, I am once again very grateful to the friends who have spared the time to help. Kevin Powell read and commented on a full draft, doing so in double-quick time and as always very helpfully. My thanks to him. Over the three years or so it has taken to research and write this book, Dorothy King has listened with patience to many of the ideas as they took—very rough—shape in my mind, often improving them or pointing me in directions that have greatly improved the end result. I am very, very grateful.

ATHENS AND SPARTA

PROLOGUE

Sometimes one book leads to another. A few years ago, while I was writing a biography of Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great, I kept looking for a fairly recent and accessible history of what had come before—essentially how the Greek world had come to be as it was when Philip was born c. 382 BC. There was only so much space to talk about what the world was like at the beginning of the story, so I hoped to be able to point readers in the direction of one book that would give them a reasonably detailed view of this. I could not find one and do not believe that one has been written since then. There are plenty of books about the Persian Wars, when the Greeks led by the Spartans and Athenians repulsed invasions by the greatest empire of its day, Achaemenid Persia, and there is also a lot of good stuff about the Peloponnesian War fought between Athens and Sparta later in the fifth century BC. Something covering the whole period, rather than just part of it, was lacking, so it seemed a good idea to fill this gap.

This then is that story, the book that I could not find, and, in some ways, it will act as a prequel to the tale of Philip and Alexander. Yet it is meant to be far more than that. Classical Greece is one of the key periods for understanding ancient history, along with Rome in the late republic and early empire. These are eras for which the sources are good—and often for their literary quality and wider influence as well as their historical value—allowing study at a greater depth.

As importantly, these were also times when so much happened that was to have profound consequences for subsequent history and culture. That is not to deny that other eras are also of great interest and importance, but simply to say that these are fundamental. If you wish to gain a deeper understanding of the Greeks and Romans, then you must learn at least something about these periods. That is why they have tended to form the core of ancient history degrees for generations and still should, not least to make sense of any more specific thematic studies. Some framework of events and political developments needs to be there to support any study of narrower topics, for however interesting these may be, they need to be set in a wider context.

Most of my research and writing has been on the Romans, but the influence of Greek ideas and the Greek past on the Romans was so deep that it was always there as background. Yet, in the wider perception of and interest in the ancient world, this is not the case. The Romans tend to get far more coverage in popular culture, and not just in film and drama but in the documentaries shown on television. The last stand of King Leonidas and the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae is an exception, but on the whole most people will recognise the name of Caesar or Nero and have some idea of who they were in a way that they do not for Pericles or Alcibiades. Even Thermopylae tends to be seen in isolation, with little sense of what it was all about. Similarly, the Parthenon, that most recognisable of Greek monuments, has become a symbol rather detached from the reality of fifth century BC Athens. This neglect of Greek history is a shame, and one of my hopes in writing this book is that it will encourage more history enthusiasts to explore and better understand the history and legacy of Classical Greece.

That history is both interesting in its own right and relevant to our own day and age, not least because this era saw the creation of the first consciously democratic systems, as well as the Athenian experiment that gave voters a greater role in day-to-day decision-making

than in any state before or since. In the modern world, the Western idea that democracy is the ideal, indeed even the natural, system for any advanced state is so deeply entrenched that it is taken for granted, and the danger is that this makes what happened in the Greek communities seem less remarkable. Often enough, this is accompanied by a level of disappointment, even scorn, that the Greek experiments with democracy did not follow every modern principle, for instance, excluding women from taking part and accepting slavery as natural. Apart from ignoring the context and considering why things were as they were, such a dismissal ignores the basic truths that this was the moment when democracy emerged and that it did so among the Greeks, not to mention just how rare any variation of it has been throughout the world until very recently.

Context matters, and if we are to understand what Greek communities did and why they did it in the Classical period, we must think about the very nature of those communities and of the wider world. Nothing happened in a vacuum or was a question of pure ideas, and not even the Athenians were conducting a theoretical experiment into the ideal constitution and society. Instead, they were trying to work out how their city could become as powerful, prestigious, and rich as possible, competing with other communities when it came to trade and military dominance. The theorising came later, and the reformers who shaped these political systems were concerned with the here and now and with the immediate future, with no real thought for what others might think two and half millennia later. Athenians celebrated their democracy because Athens flourished and became strong under it. In the same way, the Athenians' greatest and most famous monument, the Parthenon, celebrated the glories of their city and its democratic system, not some abstract sense of Hellenic culture. While in design and decoration this monument—at which we still marvel today—drew upon concepts and taste shared with other Greeks, it was meant to parade the glory of the Athenians as greater and better than everyone else.

History must begin with the effort to understand societies that no longer exist and complex events that happened long ago. Only after this is done to the best of our ability can lessons be learned, let alone judgements passed; this book will do little of the first and none of the second, for the task of understanding is big and important enough in itself. Our aim is to glimpse the lives of human beings living in these societies and see how they behaved as individuals and groups, for this helps us better understand ourselves. While much may appear alien to us at first, for instance the ready acceptance of slavery, the frequency of war, the open and unashamed celebration of victory, and the satisfaction at destroying enemies, the Greeks, Persians, and others in this world were not fundamentally different from us. Indeed, even where attitudes and assumptions seem very different, it is often more a matter of degree than anything more profound, and much that we take for granted may be more recent and less fixed in our own societies than we are inclined to think.

Thus, as mentioned earlier, many readily declare that 'Greek' democracy was flawed because many were excluded on the basis of sex or status in a way that would not be considered acceptable in a modern state. The conclusion that this somehow invalidated any claim that Athens or other cities were 'true' democracies is sterile. Which citizens were granted political rights varied from city to city, with only radical democracies like Athens eventually including all male citizens to some degree. Elsewhere the demos—'the people'—might be a smaller group, those owning a decent-sized farm or more than that, but this could still be a substantial enough group to qualify as a democracy, the rule of the people. In other cases, the group was narrower, requiring more wealth and perhaps high birth to qualify, making it an oligarchy or aristocracy, the rule of the few or the best. Monarchy, the rule of one, was rare among Greeks by the sixth century BC.

While these categories of democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, and monarchy may seem strange and archaic to a modern observer, some

of the rationale behind them is not so very different from ideas openly expressed today. Similarly, although the restriction of voting rights to just a section of the population—excluding the poor, women, slaves, and so forth—may appear odd, it is worth remembering that the movement for women's suffrage succeeded not much more than a century ago in most Western countries. Here in the United Kingdom, it is just over fifty years since the voting age was lowered from twenty-one to eighteen, which meant that many of those who fought to defend democracy in World War II were too young to vote. In some circumstances at a local level in Britain, the voting age has been reduced to sixteen, and there is talk of extending this to national elections. At the same time, successive governments have encouraged children to remain in full-time education until the age of eighteen, the same age at which they cease to be considered minors in law. Thus, while few would argue against the principle that all adults should cast a vote of equal validity, there is argument over what counts as an adult for this purpose. Another source of controversy is whether those who have settled in a country from abroad, whether legally or not, can or should gain the right to vote in some or all elections. While there is much talk of principles when such matters are raised, changes to voting rights and procedures, as well as electoral regions, tend to be introduced by those who feel that they will benefit from them the most. There is no reason to think that this was different in the ancient world, even if few Greeks would have understood the willingness of many modern states to grant the franchise to outsiders who came to work and live in their cities.

More importantly, some of the same justifications for restricting the franchise in the fifth century BC have echoes in views expressed today, regardless of the lip service paid to the principle that all votes are equal. Note how media coverage describing a party or a politician as 'popular' is a compliment, whereas saying 'populist' is a condemnation. Demonisation of those who disagree as the wrong people with the wrong ideas is common, especially when such 'wrong

people' have the impudence to win an election or other vote. Very readily, when our personal views do not prevail, we seem able to convince ourselves that somehow the winners do not have a proper majority. The impact of technology has helped, since the world of social media allows many to cut themselves off from anyone with opposing views or to abuse them without fear of consequences. It also makes easier declaring the success of an opponent as somehow a failure of the democratic system or even a direct threat to democracy itself. Democracy is readily praised when 'our' side or candidate wins and as readily damned when they do not.

Here in the United Kingdom, these sentiments were particularly common before, during, and after the vote on EU membership that led to Brexit. The Leave vote won, and opponents readily dismissed those who had voted in this way as old, parochial, poorly educated, or all of these things and worse, which, given the overall numbers, was clearly at the very least a gross exaggeration. It really was surprising to hear the frequently expressed view that 'ordinary people'—which essentially meant everyone holding a different opinion to the speaker—were simply too bigoted, ignorant, and unqualified to decide on such an important matter and that they really ought to leave it to their elected representatives, who were naturally wiser and more knowledgeable in every way. The last claim was especially surprising, since enthusiasm for and confidence in parliamentarians are rare sentiments in any other circumstances among those on either side of the debate. Although indirect and largely unconscious, the argument in favour of an oligarchy of right-thinking people was blatant and appears to be a deeply human instinct—what we think must be right and is the only answer. This should help us to understand the arguments and revolutions within Greek states—how readily neighbour could turn on neighbour because of a sense that the wrong people were in charge.

People are and were as emotional and impassioned as ever, and while they can also behave rationally, that reasoning may develop

from a range of basic assumptions to lead to very different conclusions about what is right and sensible. For all the modern scorn poured on the Athenians and other Greeks for the limits they imposed on who could vote and stand for office, they would surely have shown matching dismay for many aspects of modern states. In particular, they would not have understood the idea of delegating authority and decision-making to elected officials in the long term, let alone to institutions like permanent courts and judges, who have the right to say that people must do as they are told. Greek city-states possessed elected councillors and magistrates, but their tenures were limited, usually to a year, and they were far more directly accountable to voters, in part because the communities were smaller in the first place. By modern standards an institutionalised state did not exist as something separate from and over the citizens. Those eligible to vote did so regularly and, apart from elections, gathered to decide on other issues and pass laws. The majority of those present decided what was to be done, virtually instantly, with none of the prolonged process of implementation required today. Like everything else, this had good and bad consequences, and at times voters proved themselves irrational and fickle. Law could be changed or created, and only a citizen could take anyone to court, where the case would be heard by fellow citizens and not by a specialist judge or judges. Again, much of this was a legacy of the originally small size of such communities, where once everyone had known everyone else.

Unlike in modern states, where such decision-making is delegated, Greeks assembled to decide whether to start or end a war, and indeed how to fight one, so that both war and politics run through this story. While this may seem strange to modern readers, recent events will make this uncomfortably relevant. For Westerners, inclined to feel that warfare is something consigned to the past, or at least fought at a great distance against technologically inferior opponents, times have changed and, with them, the perception of threats to peace and stability. My last book was finished a few months after the 2022

Russian invasion of Ukraine. That conflict continues to this day, although just possibly peace may be within sight in the form of a compromise giving neither side all that they wanted at the start. At the least, this recent example is a reminder of how plans go awry and how much harder it is to end a war than to start one. It also has shown how difficult achieving a decisive victory on the battlefield can be and how greedily and quickly a full-scale war devours men and matériel. The peace negotiations also emphasise the difficult balance between the practical and the physical—control of land and resources—and the symbols of status, independence, and power.

Hopefully by the time this book is published, almost a year from now, the tensions between India and Pakistan that have flared in recent days will have been calmed without major conflict. What will have happened in Gaza is less easy to predict, while the world pays less attention to other conflicts, such as the one in Sudan. I am writing this prologue on Thursday, 8 May 2025, as my own country and plenty of others mark the eightieth anniversary of VE Day, the end of World War II in Europe. It is good that they do this, remembering far bigger and more costly conflicts. World War II—or at least the way it tends to be remembered—provides an example of a clearly just and truly decisive conflict, which destroyed aggressive political systems in National Socialist Germany, Fascist Italy, and—months later after VJ Day—Imperial Japan.

Like many I am fascinated by World War II, in part because for me it was just one generation away, so that I grew up around so many people who had lived through it, something less and less true for those born later. My late father was serving in the army in Palestine under the British Mandate on VE and VJ Days, while my mother was at school and remembers the celebrations and the sheer relief that it was over at long last. Recently, constant talk of the war and scenes of ruined buildings on the television news have given her bad dreams about the Blitz on Cardiff, which was at its height in the winter of 1940–1941. The memory and fear of bombing raids and cold nights

in the air raid shelter remain fresh after so many years. As I have said elsewhere, while I share a deep interest in 'the War', as my parents' generation called it—and indeed have written a novel about it—the historian in me sometimes worries that our simplified popular image of that great conflict makes it harder to understand other wars, most of which lacked such an ideological basis, were less morally clear, and did not prove as decisive. Far more common throughout history has been a pattern of the same states going to war with each other generation after generation and sometimes allying with a traditional enemy against others when it seemed to be of mutual advantage. This was typical in Classical Greece, with each city driven by what it judged most to its advantage. Often these were wars against traditional enemies, where the objective was to gain an advantage for negotiation rather than the opponent's total destruction, and where at times an enemy could become a friend before reverting to being a rival and an enemy once again.

War is still with us, politics is still with us, and the readiness of neighbours to bicker and disagree, even to vilify each other under the conviction that they alone are right, has not dimmed since the fifth century BC. For all the distance in time and attitudes, a good deal about the story of Athens, Sparta, and the other Greek cities still resonates.

INTRODUCTION

Some stories remain famous down the ages because they deserve to be told and retold.

In 480 BC, Xerxes, the great king of Persia, then by far the most powerful empire in the known world, attacked Greece at the head of an immense army drawn from the finest fighting men to live under his rule. Some said that more than a million souls marched to war under the great king. Blocking their path through the narrow pass at Thermopylae was a small force of Greeks led by King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans. For two days the Spartans threw back wave after wave of enemies until the Persians learned about a track that led around behind the pass. Sending most of his force away, Leonidas and the Spartans stayed behind, and on the third day they did not simply defend their position but attacked and for a while drove the invaders back, until the vastly superior numbers told. The Spartan king was killed, and eventually his surviving men retired to a little hill and formed a circle of shields, refusing to surrender. Reluctant to close with them, the Persians shot clouds of arrows at them and kept on shooting until all of them were dead. Later, an inscription set up over their graves bore these famous words: 'Passer-by, go tell the Spartans that here we lie, obedient to their orders.'

Weeks later, the grand fleet that had accompanied the Persian army rowed its galleys into the narrow stretch of sea between the

Athenian coast and the island of Salamis. They were confident, for not only did they have numbers on their side, but false information fed to them by a wily Athenian admiral led them to expect that they need only chase a fleeing enemy. Instead, the Greeks were ready to fight, and Xerxes watched as more and more of his ships were sunk or captured, and the morale of the Persian fleet was permanently broken. A year later, the great king long since returned to his empire, the Spartans, the Athenians, and their allies routed the army he had left behind. The Persian attempt to add the Greeks to the empire had failed and was never repeated. Instead, the Greeks remained independent and free, and the culture that was to have such a deep influence on the world was able to flourish.

It is a remarkable story, and the broad outline is true up to a point, even if the whole truth was a good deal more complicated. Other Greeks apart from the 300 Spartans stayed to the end and fought to the last at Thermopylae. Last stands of the vastly outnumbered are amongst the most dramatic of all stories, and that made by Leonidas and his men has in many ways become the quintessential one. By comparison, the great victory at Salamis is a little less well known, at least these days when the classics have lost their once central role in education in the West. Plataea, the land battle fought in 479 BC, has faded even further from the popular memory, even though it involved the biggest army ever mustered by the ancient Greeks.

Xerxes's grand invasion of Greece failed because of the battles of Salamis and Plataea, and as a result Greece remained free. Yet, in the modern sense, there was no Greece as a country; instead, there were hundreds of distinct and fiercely independent communities. The people of the area spoke the Greek language, shared many beliefs and stories, and competed against each other at festivals such as the Olympic Games, but the sense of being Greek was vague. Far more important was the sense of being a Spartan or Athenian, a Corinthian or a Theban, a Plataean or a Thespian.

These were the communities that mattered, and it was for these that men were willing to fight and die. At the end of it all, just thirty-one communities were recognised as having stayed the course and held firm to an alliance to defend against the Persian threat. Many more Greek communities submitted to Xerxes, and most of these sent men or ships or both to fight as part of the invading horde. Still others stayed aloof throughout the war, and each community acted as it thought best, so in many ways, that as many as thirty-one cooperated to fight against Xerxes was remarkable, and that they bickered, disagreeing about how and where to oppose the invaders, was unsurprising.

The Spartans led the alliance against the Persians, and after them the Athenians won most credit for making the victory possible. None of the other cities involved, not even Corinth, could compare with them when it came to numbers and sheer military strength, making Athens and Sparta the biggest players and the main focus of this story. These two cities were not natural allies and had in the past waged war against each other, while the decades that followed the defeat of the Persians saw tension between them, which in time led once again to open war, most intensively from 431 to 404 BC, a conflict subsequently known as the Peloponnesian War. In itself this may not seem surprising, since these were very different societies, almost polar opposites in the organization and operation of their political and social systems. Yet these conflicts had no ideological basis, and in general these and other Greek communities made alliances and fought wars without too much consideration of such matters. One central theme of this book is that competitiveness lay at the heart of these societies. Within their own communities Greeks vied for prominence, prestige, and power, while collectively they were just as eager to assert their city's status and show its superiority to all the other cities out there. All this came naturally, for the most prominent men in every community tended to be wealthy aristocrats, the same class that met together every four years to

compete in the Olympic Games, as well as on other occasions at similar festivals.

Classical Greece has had a profound influence on the history and culture of the Western world, and two cities and one era stand at the heart of this. Athens and Sparta became the two greatest powers in the Greek world. United, they helped lead the Greeks in defeating the great Persian invasion. Divided, they spread conflict and destruction throughout the eastern Mediterranean, culminating in the horrors of the Peloponnesian War. They were not simply rivals for power but polar opposites in culture and ideology, with Athens the outward looking, radical democracy and maritime empire and Sparta the militaristic, rigidly disciplined, and brutal society. Both were experiments in how to run a state, extremes of the Greek longing to excel.

The roots of these different cultures lay back in a past with Solon at Athens and the semi-mythical Lycurgus in Sparta, but changes late in the sixth century BC exacerbated the differences between them and set them on the path to collision. Yet it need not have been so, and in 510 BC a Spartan army answered a call for help from Athenian aristocrats, allowing them to expel the tyrants ruling Athens. Soon afterwards the Athenians began to take the nascent idea of democracy and push it further than ever before. A generation later, after the Persian invasions had been defeated, Sparta gained huge prestige and then turned in on itself, while the Athenians built on their success at sea to create an empire, predominantly of the many islands in the Aegean. Most communities at first welcomed Athenian protection, then resented it as it became more and more oppressive. The same transition occurred at Sparta, where the Athenians were first praised for protecting the Greeks against future Persian aggression and then seen as arrogant and dangerous rivals. In the meantime Athens developed its own democracy to the extreme, while becoming more and more aggressive and unwilling to grant rights to others.


LANDS AROUND THE AEGEAN
IN THE FIFTH CENTURY BC
Danube
BLACK SEA
Mount Haemus
THRACE
ILLYRIA
Axius
Strymon
MACEDONIA
Philippopolis
Philippi
Mount Pangaeum
Perinthus
Byzantium
SEA OF MARMARA
LYNCESTIS
Pella
Amphipolis
Mieza
ORESTIS
Aegae
Stagira
THASOS
SAMOTHRACE
Sestos
Dion
Olynthus
Mount Pindus
ELIMIOTIS
Potidaea
Mount Athos
HELLESPONTINE PHRYGIA
Mount Olympus
EPIRUS
TROAD
Larissa
Dodona
THESSALY
AEGEAN SEA
ASIA MINOR
Mytilene
LESBOS
Thermopylae
LYDIA
Sardis
Delphi
EUBOEA
CHIOS
Thebes
Ephesus
Corinth
Athens
SAMOS
Priene
Olympia
Argos
Miletus
CARIA
Sparta
Halicarnassus
COS
RHODES
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
CRETE
0
100
200
Miles

Beset by plague, farming and trade crippled by war, the two rivals fought themselves to exhaustion. In the greatest irony, the heroes of Greek resistance against Persia went to the current Persian king, and only through his aid and subsidy was the impasse broken. Sparta defeated Athens but was so weakened that her own supremacy was short-lived.

Athens, the aggressive, immensely self-confident, radical democracy, was often brash and even vulgar as well as cruel; yet it also gave the world so many ideas, comedy and drama that moved audiences in ways unlike anything that had come before, and art that has provided inspiration ever since. Spartans did not innovate, while Athenians threw out ideas constantly—some good and some bad. No other major state has allowed thousands to join in debates where anyone could propose a law and see it enacted. This was a society capable of remarkably clear thinking and such pointless savagery as executing Socrates for challenging accepted ideas at a time of general nervousness and political uncertainty.

Sparta and Athens were bigger and more powerful than other Greek cities but also had a lot in common with them. Everywhere there was a striving to excel, to stand out and be accepted as superior to others. Most of the time, men strove peacefully for status and office within their home cities, and similarly cities did everything to assert and prove their strength and valour while stopping short of actual warfare. Yet violence was common enough to be a real possibility in each case, something that could well follow whenever the competition intensified. Revolutions occurred in a high proportion of the hundreds of Greek cities during the period covered by this book, and in a lot of cases the same community experienced several; those that proved stable generation after generation were the exception, while such political struggles tended to be savage, as neighbour slaughtered neighbour with scant sign of reluctance. At the same time Greek communities went to war with each other fairly often, fighting and killing to control land and protect their prestige.

Thus, having fought alongside each other against the might of Persia, Athenians and Spartans became rivals and enemies when they felt it was in their interest to do so. Such changes of attitude were common enough throughout the history of Classical Greece, and indeed much of the history of the wider world. The struggle with Persia had been a great moment for both cities, and for others as well, even if the part these had played was smaller. Spartans were justly proud, and others understandably admiring, of the willingness with which Leonidas and his men sacrificed their lives in the common cause and of their prowess and courage as they bore the brunt of the fight at Plataea. The Athenians had also played a major role in that battle on land—and also, with help from just a single ally, had defeated an earlier Persian invasion at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC. They had served with distinction on land, but even more importantly, their naval strength and leadership had made the victory at Salamis possible. Even more remarkably, the 200 warships they had provided—well over half the combined fleet—were recently built because the Athenians had decided to turn themselves into a sea power just a few short years earlier. All of those who took part in repulsing the Persian invasion naturally and reasonably celebrated this as among the greatest achievements in their cities' histories. This had been a struggle of the weak against the strong, where the weak had prevailed, and while many communities thrived under Persian rule, it is unlikely that Sparta, let alone Athens, would have done so. Subjects of the great king would not have built the Parthenon to parade their own glory and power.

Repulsing the Persian invasions was a remarkable achievement, long remembered and justly celebrated. Yet, by 431 BC, as war between Athens and Sparta loomed, the Spartan leadership enthusiastically discussed seeking Persian aid to fight against their former allies and fellow Greeks. It did not work out, but later in the war, alliances were made, and it was Persian gold sent to Sparta that allowed the Spartans to create a succession of fleets and win

the war. By that stage the Athenians had tried and failed to convince the Persians to switch sides and fund them instead. After the war, allegiances changed at a rapid pace. Athens sided with Corinth and Thebes against Sparta, then with Sparta against Thebes, and all the time the key players did their utmost to get Persian backing. They even agreed to a peace, supposedly guaranteed by the great king, although this did not last, and the Persians did nothing to enforce it. In one sense the empire had won in the end and could claim that the Greeks had submitted, although this never went as far as receiving tribute, let alone imposing direct rule. Ironically, the Persians had turned from a deadly threat to the liberty of the Greeks into a very attractive and rich ally, all in the space of just a couple of generations.

Explaining how this happened is at the heart of this book, and to do that, it will deal with the Persian Wars themselves and the subsequent conflicts between Athens and Sparta, particularly the Peloponnesian War, since these are intimately linked, apart from being dramatic in their own rights. This is the story of Athens and Sparta over more than a century of their history. Each was large and powerful by the standards of the Greek world, but they were very different in terms of their political systems, societies, and economies, all of which were reflected in the way they treated others. The focus is overwhelmingly on politics, diplomacy, and war, which may seem strange to the modern reader. Partly this is because the mental picture that most have of the ancient Greeks emphasises cultural and intellectual sophistication, which in turn, to the modern mindset, is usually held to be incompatible with enthusiasm for violence—or even the acceptance of violence as sometimes necessary. Yet, in many respects, the Greeks were as much a warrior culture as the Romans or Gauls or other races from the ancient world seen as far more warlike. War was frequent and could be brutal, and it was fought between communities living very close together. Even the biggest and most determined rivals lived within easy reach of each other. For instance, in 490 BC a messenger ran from Athens to Sparta, covering almost

140 miles in two days, and a little later 2,000 picked Spartan troops marched the same distance in three days. Events were concentrated in a very small area.

The aim of this book is to explain who the Spartans, Athenians, and other Greeks were, how their communities developed, and why they did what they did. This is a narrative history because this is the best way to understand a period and also because it is how all people live their lives, however confusing each person's personal story may feel. Events occur and follow each other, and a thematic approach all too easily forgets this, turning people into bland groups or categories rather than lots of individuals. This is also mainly a story of politics, empire, revolution, and war. Along the way there are chances to consider other aspects of life, but I had to resist the temptation to dwell too much on art, culture, and society. Such things did not exist in isolation, and concentrating on the thoughts and creativity of the few is dangerously misleading. Most Greeks were not artists, philosophers, or writers, any more than they were Olympic athletes. So much of the evidence for social attitudes comes from Athens and from the perspective of the wealthier citizens that it may not reflect what everyone else felt about such things even in that city, let alone elsewhere.

There is a lot of politics, although, because of the scope, covering well over a century, at times I must skim over the details. From the start it is worth reminding the reader that the Greek cities under discussion were not modern states; instead, they were communities, the largest still very small by modern standards. Each community was made up of citizens—the modern understanding of the term varies and is rarely identical to the fifth century BC concept, but this remains the best word to use. The community was everything. Membership came through the family to legitimate children produced by the marriage of two citizens and was often tied to owning a set level of property. It was very rare for an outsider to move to a settled community and become a citizen, and even those allowed to reside,

perhaps for generations, were not granted political rights, especially at Athens.

Alongside politics, there is much about warfare, and here again, this was not waged by institutionalised armies or navies. When a war was fought, it was fought primarily by citizens, serving alongside each other. Risking their lives in this way was the basis of their claim to political rights; it was not a rare or theoretical experience but something that usually occurred more than once in a man's life. Losses from heavy fighting bit deep into the community, in a way reminiscent of the Pals battalions recruited from the same districts in Britain's industrial cities during the Great War. Politics was not an abstract thing; nor was war distant for the Greeks. Some readers may not care for long descriptions of conflicts, but these are essential to understand the events properly.

Much has changed since the fifth century BC, and aspects of politics and war are very different. Yet people have not changed, for all that society shapes aspects of their behaviour, and at its heart the study of history is the study of human beings. Understanding what they did and why relies on the sources, and for the ancient world these always present problems of interpretation and also fail to tell us much that we would wish to know. The only approach is to try to understand them and gauge their reliability, asking questions even if we cannot give firm answers. Frustrating though some find this, for certainty is reassuring however false, my approach is to make clear what is guesswork and how confident the guesses are and also to admit what we do not know. This is the only worthwhile and honest way to study history.

The Athenians were open and liked talking about themselves, whereas the Spartans were secretive, which means that most of the evidence reflects an Athenian perspective. Some of the material was written soon after events, while other authors wrote much later, admittedly with access to earlier works that have not survived. All of them tended to assume that any reader would know a lot in the first

place, so that there was no need to explain the commonplace. Surprisingly often, an important aspect of custom or society is attested in a single or at most a handful of passages, some of them very distant in time from what they describe. One great danger of this is that a particular practice mentioned—for instance, this is what the Spartans did—raises many questions that are difficult to answer. The first is whether or not the author himself or his source—most likely in each case an outsider to Sparta—possessed and passed on correct information. Even harder to judge is whether the statement that 'they did something' meant that they did it 'sometimes', 'often', 'nearly all the time', or 'always and without exception'.

All too often scholars make the most of such a nugget of information by assuming a very rigid 'always', which is one reason why it is important to consider everything from a practical point of view and place it in the context of what else we know. An author or the original source may well have assumed that any reader would understand the background, so automatically add a 'sometimes' rather than assuming 'always'. For a modern analogy, we might say that a university student spends three or four years at a particular institution studying a subject to gain a degree. At the same time, we would know that this does not mean that all 365 days of each year were spent in this place doing that and only that. Apart from the other activities of student life, the individual might well work, travel, spend time at home during the vacations, and so forth. Two and a half thousand years later, the same statement might be read as the whole truth, especially if it were the only surviving piece of information for what young people did at that stage of their lives. In approaching history, it is vital always to think of the context, even if this must be inferred, and the practical aspects of any activity.

As is so often the case for the ancient world, the evidence is varied but limited. All types of sources, whether in the form of works written in the ancient world, inscribed texts that have survived, or archaeological exploration of sites from the period, provide

different challenges of interpretation. Taken as a whole, very many gaps remain in the evidence for understanding this period. At times, dates are uncertain, even for major events, and further details about what actually happened can be meagre. Inscriptions were set up for a reason, not to provide an unbiased and full explanation for a phenomenon, while the data provided by archaeology, already reduced by chance of survival and excavation, offers only a glimpse of what once was. The literary sources provide the framework for everything, since only they describe events, and at the same time provide different challenges. Two predominate, with Herodotus essential for the Persian Wars and Thucydides for the Peloponnesian War, while both offer significant amounts of other material as well.

Herodotus came from Halicarnassus in Asia Minor, where many Greeks lived as part of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. Later he travelled to Athens and lived there for a while, at a time when a fair number of folk who had taken part in the struggle with Persia were still alive. Dubbed both 'the father of history' and 'the father of lies', he loved a good story and included much that is fanciful because it was entertaining, while his account is full of omens and dreams. In contrast Thucydides served as an Athenian general in the Peloponnesian War until he was exiled for failure, and his style is far more sober, as he attempted to understand how and why things happened. While scholarly opinion changes almost with the tides—or at least with the generations of work done in the field—Thucydides continues to be seen as more inherently reliable than Herodotus, although both have their critics, and no one accepts all of what they say. They are supplemented by Xenophon for the final stages of the Peloponnesian War and its aftermath, and much later by the likes of Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch, who wrote in the Roman period.[1]

The aim here—to understand what happened and why—is best achieved by a narrative structure, dealing with events in turn. Along the way, this offers the chance to explore other aspects of life and society, not least because these help to explain the course of events.

Still, this cannot hope to deal with every aspect of this era in detail, or indeed with every event, so I must skim over much for simple reasons of space. On the whole, I mention names only when they are essential; at other times, I will simply say that a leader, magistrate, or commander did something. This is a question of clarity and keeping the narrative as simple as possible. In the same way I have limited the number of Greek terms and expressions. The sheer beauty of the language and the complexity of meaning of many words make peppering the text with them tempting, but this is intimidating to a reader without a classical background. Instead, I use modern expressions that are close enough, and in the same way I anglicise names, so Achilles rather than Achilleus, Pericles rather than Perikles, Cleon rather than Kleon, and Spartans rather than the variety of terms applied to them, such as the Lacedaemonians. Where appropriate, I discuss points of detail, at least to an extent, but often I cannot cover debates over the specific form of a political institution, the terms of a treaty, or the precise chronology of events, let alone the complex manoeuvres of a battle. Each and every chapter of this book could be given a book-length study of its own, and the references will point the interested reader towards the literature on a topic.

Dates present a different problem. Each Greek community tended to have its own calendar, or sometimes more than one, for instance at Athens, where the political year was divided into ten units, while other systems of measuring time marked festivals and the agricultural seasons. Usually, all calendars were based in some form or other on the lunar cycle and had to be balanced to keep even broadly synchronised with the solar year. More widely the measurement was in Olympiads, the four years between each Olympic Games, but there are doubts about when this system was created and how reliable the attribution of many events to an Olympiad actually was. As a result of all this, precise dating by year is not always possible. Even when it is, the use of lunar calendars and the choice of when a year began tends to mean that the period of a year in the sources does

not correspond precisely with the reckoning based on the modern system. Convention expresses this as, for instance, 481/80 BC, where the annual cycle for a community began part way through the modern concept of 481 and ended at the same point early in 480 BC. This is sometimes used, whenever it seemed significant.

This then—after all the caveats—is a history of the relationship between the Spartans and the Athenians from the latter part of the sixth century BC until the early stages of the fourth century—in essence, a long fifth century BC. It is a story of ambition and pride, of diplomacy, politics, and war, but like any history, it matters because it is a story of human beings, produced by very different cultures to those of the modern world but still essentially the same as people today. As with any other civilization and more than most, the story of the Classical Greeks highlights the best and the worst of the human experience.

History is worth understanding in its own right, because it reveals so much about how humans behave, and the distant past is a reminder that the range of possibilities is very broad. Thucydides claimed that his work would always be relevant for this essential reason. There may, as he claimed, be lessons to learn from the ancient past applicable to every age, but first it is vital to try to understand the history on its own terms and in its own context. Complete freedom from bias and preconceptions is an impossible goal, but the aspiration to do this as far as is possible must remain the aim of any serious history.[2]