

## **The Peloponnesian Wars ("The Great War" 431-404 BC)**

The Peloponnesian Wars were a series of conflicts between Athens and Sparta. These wars also involved most of the Greek world, because both Athens and Sparta had leagues, or alliances, which brought their allies into the wars as well. The Athenian Thucydides is the primary source of the wars, as he fought on the side of Athens. Thucydides was ostracized after the Spartans decisive victory at the Battle of Amphipolis in 422 BC, where Thucydides was one of the Athenian commanders. Thucydides wrote a book called *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. From 431 to 404 BC the conflict escalated into what is known as the "Great War." To the Greeks, the "Great War" was a world war, not only involving much of the Greek world, but also the Macedonians, Persians, and Sicilians.

The Peloponnesian Wars were ugly, with both sides committing atrocities. Before the Peloponnesian Wars, wars lasted only a few hours, and the losing side was treated with dignity. The losers were rarely, if ever, chased down and stabbed in the back. Prisoners were treated with respect and released. Thucydides warns us in his histories that the longer wars go, the more violent, and less civilized they become. During the Peloponnesian Wars, prisoners were hunted down, tortured, thrown into pits to die of thirst and starvation, and cast into the waters to drown at sea. Innocent school children were murdered, and whole cities were destroyed. These wars turned very personal, as both Athens and Sparta felt that their way of life was being threatened by the other power.

As you read in the last chapter, Athens, along with about 150 other city-states, formed the Delian League as a way to protect against a possible Persian invasion. If any one of the Delian league members was attacked, the other league members would come to their support. In 466 BC, an important battle took place at Eurymedon, off the coast of Asia Minor. The Delian League navy crushed the Persian navy so badly, that some of the Delian league members thought the threat by Persia was gone, and the league was no longer necessary. Some of the islands in the Aegean wanted to leave the league, they no longer wanted to pay money and provide ships. Athens stepped in and did not permit these Greeks to leave the league. Athens treated these city-states harshly by tearing down their walls, taking their fleet of ships, and insisting they continue to pay the league taxes. Apparently it was easy to join the Delian League, but impossible to back out, and the league was beginning to look more like an Athenian empire.

The Pentecontaetia "the period of fifty years" (a word created by Thucydides) was the time from the end of the Persian Wars to the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides tells us that this was a time of distrust between Athens and Sparta. Thucydides tells us that Athens greatness during this period brought fear to Sparta.

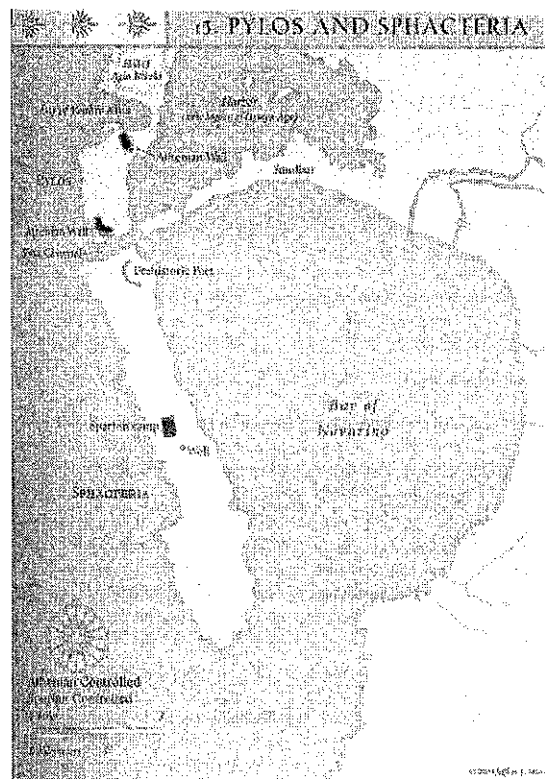
What is interesting about that statement is that for the first time in history, emotion is said to be the cause of a war.

Let me give you one example of the distrust between the two city-states. As you read in the last chapter, a great earthquake rocked Sparta in 465 BC. The desperate Spartans asked Athens for help, but when the Athenians sent hoplites to Sparta, the Spartans, having second thoughts, sent them back to Athens. The Spartans put down the helot rebellion on their own, but could not remove a band of helots from high on a mountain top fortress. A deal was struck where the Spartans promised the helots they could leave the citadel peacefully, if the helots promised to move outside of Spartan territory. Thinking that the helots would scatter, the Spartans were alarmed to find out that the Athenians allowed all of these helots to settle in Naupactus, an Athenian controlled harbor city on the Corinthian gulf, directly across from Peloponnesian. Here, the helots were free to do great harm to Sparta and her allies by controlling the gulf.

Athens had everything going for it before the outbreak of the "Great War." Athens controlled the Aegean Sea, and bullied the Delian League, so that only two other city-states in the league had their own navies. In 454-53 BC, Athens moved the Delian League treasury from Delos to Athens, creating a bank in the back of the newly-built Parthenon on the Acropolis. Athens then demanded 1/60th of the league money for a "donation to Athena," which really meant it was a tax on the league members going directly to Athens. The Athenians had allies all around them by land, including an alliance with Megara, a former Peloponnesian League friend of Sparta. Athens also and controlled the seas.

### **Phase One of the Great War - The Archidamian War (431-421 BC)**

The Peloponnesian League met in 432 BC. Corinth, a city-state in that league, complained that Sparta was not doing enough to control Athens. Sparta decided to go to war with Athens. Pericles, whom we read about in the last chapter, was the clear leader of Athens at this point, replacing Cimon, who had been ostracized, and later, after returning to Athens, had died fighting the Persians. Pericles was confident in a quick Athenian victory. If the Spartans and their allies should invade Athenian territory, the Athenians could hide behind the Long Walls. Pericles knew that the Spartans had no knowledge of siege warfare, or destroying walls. The Spartans could destroy the farmland of Attica (Athenian territory), but grain would continue to flow from the Black Sea to the port of Piraeus, and then into Athens.



In 431 BC, King Archidamius of Sparta invaded Athenian territory. The Spartans only stayed for a few months, cut down some olive trees, and then headed back to the Peloponnese. They repeated this in 430 BC. In that same year, Pericles gave his famous "Funeral Oration," in which he praised the dead Athenian soldiers for giving their lives for Athens. Pericles went on to say that Athens would win, because Athens' way of life was clearly better than Sparta's.

Pericles felt Athens would win a quick victory over Sparta. Pericles felt that after a few years of raiding the Athenian countryside, the Spartans would eventually become frustrated by the Long Walls and agree to peace on Athens' terms. But then, something went terribly wrong for Athens. In 429 BC, a plague hit Athens. Some of the grain coming into Piraeus was tainted, and people started to die in the streets. Athens had become over-crowded as all of the people of Attica were now cramped into the city, fearful of the Spartans. Disease spread quickly, and the Long Walls became a prison, rather than a fortress. Around 30,000 Athenians died, including Pericles, the Athenian leader. Thucydides contracted the plague, but survived. The Spartans quickly left Attica, fearful that they may catch the plague as well. The war dragged on.

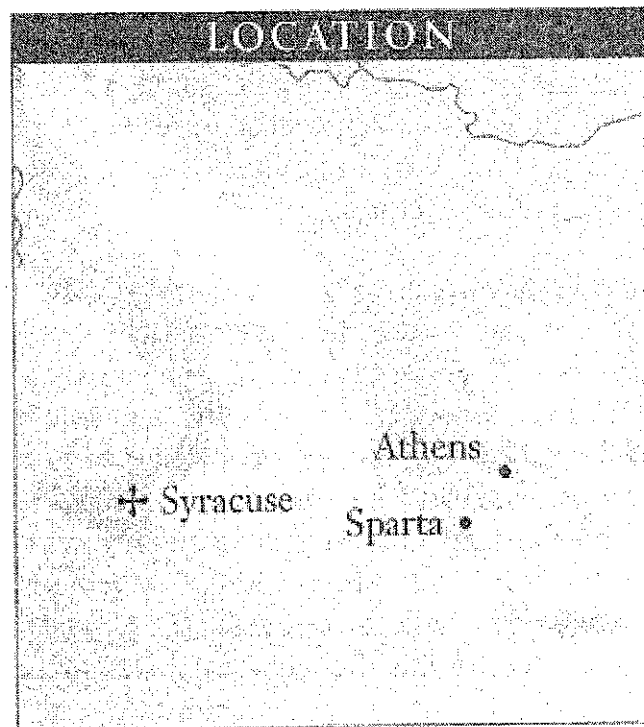
In 428 BC the Athenians had gained a foothold in the Peloponnese, by taking the old City of Pylos. When the Spartans tried to regain the city, 400 Spartan hoplites became trapped on the nearby Island of Sphacteria. The Athenians starved the Spartans into

eventual surrender and brought 120 Spartan hoplites back to Athens. They placed these Spartan hoplites on display in a human zoo, as no Athenian had seen a Spartan hoplite up close. Sparta was desperate to have these warriors returned, and was willing to come to terms with Athens.

### **Phase Two – Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition (421-413 BC)**

In 421 BC, a 50-year peace treaty was signed by Sparta and Athens, the treaty was called the Peace of Nicias, named after the Athenian who made the treaty. One of the terms was that the captured Spartan hoplites be allowed to return home. It was a shaky peace at best, and in 420 BC, the Spartans were accused of marching hoplites into Elis during an Olympic year. Sparta was not allowed to compete in the Olympic Games. At this time some of the Peloponnesian League cities decided to rebel against Sparta, and were helped by Argos, the long-time enemy of Sparta, and by Athens. In 418 BC, the largest land battle of the war took place in the Peloponnese at Mantinea. Here Sparta defeated Argos, Athens and their Peloponnesian allies, and returned them to the Peloponnesian League. During the war, Athens always won at sea, but lost on land. Some historians compare Athens to the whale, and Sparta to the elephant.

### **416-413 BC – The Sicilian Expedition**



The Island of Sicily was 800 miles to the west of Athens.

In 416 BC, Alcibiades, a young Athenian and follower of the philosopher, Socrates, convinced the Athenians to take the war to Sicily, by attacking the city-state of

Syracuse. Syracuse was a colony of Corinth and friendly to the Peloponnesian League. Alcibiades was very convincing, as he was an excellent public speaker. Alcibiades made the point that if Athens should take Syracuse, all of Sicily would fall, a give Athens new riches and power. It would only be a matter of time before Sparta would surrender. Sicily was 800 miles away from Athens, and it would take several ships in the Athenian navy to attack Syracuse.

The night before the expedition set sail, the sacred statues of Hermes were vandalized. Alcibiades and his friends were accused of drinking and then smashing the statues. This was awkward, because Alcibiades was the leader of the expedition. Alcibiades was allowed to set sail with the Athenian fleet, but when the fleet arrived at Thurii, a Greek colony on the southern coast of Italy, a messenger ship from Athens caught up with the fleet. This small boat was to take Alcibiades back to Athens, as he had been tried and convicted of smashing the statues. Unwilling to return, Alcibiades, along with his pet dog, jumped ship and swam to Thurii.

### THE OPPOSED FORCES

#### SYRACUSANS

Hoplites:	12,000
Cavalry:	1500
Light troops:	2600
Local tribesmen:	1000
Sailors:	20,200
Triremes:	101
<b>Total:</b>	<b>37,300</b>

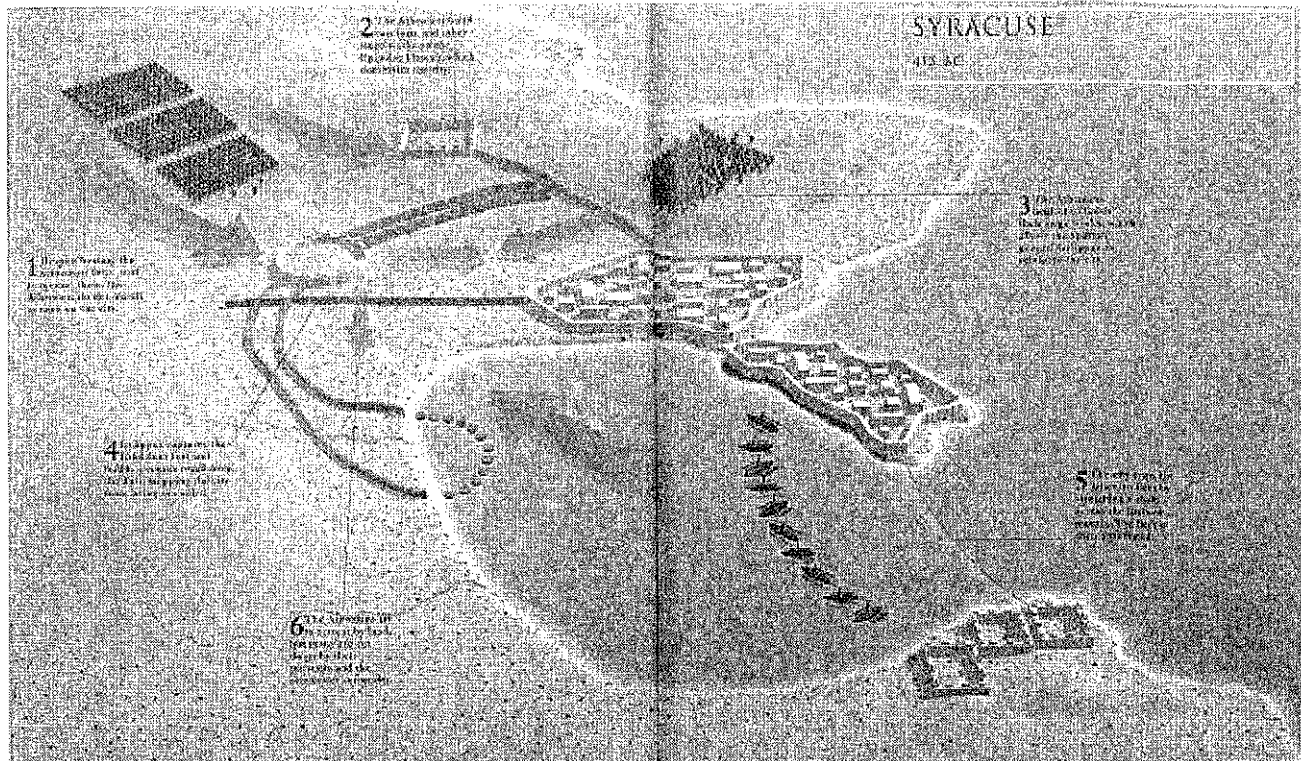
#### ATHENIANS

Hoplites:	12,000
Cavalry:	650
Light troops:	3250
Local tribesmen:	1000
Sailors:	52,800
Triremes:	264
<b>Total:</b>	<b>69,700</b>

Nicias was now in charge of the attack on Syracuse, even though he had argued against it back in Athens. When the Athenian fleet landed in Sicily, close to Syracuse, the unwilling Nicias dragged his feet. The Athenians were slow to make the necessary

walls to close off Syracuse by land, even though the mighty Athenian Fleet had closed off Syracuse by the sea.

Meanwhile, Alcibiades fled to Sparta, where he convinced the Spartans to help the Syracusans. Sparta sent one boat to Syracuse with a commander by the name of Gylippus. Gylippus raised an army in Sicily and defeated the Athenians. Foolishly, Nicias asked Athens to send reinforcements. When the new soldiers arrived, the Athenians finally decided the war was lost and to head back home. A rare lunar eclipse prevented the Athenian fleet from leaving the harbor, and during that delay, the Syracusans placed a metal chain across the harbor, trapping the Athenian fleet. The Athenians fled by land, but were hunted down, killed or thrown into pits to starve. Oddly, the Syracusans admired the tragedies of the Athenian playwright, Euripides, and any Athenian prisoner who could give a good performance of lines of Euripides, was released. Nicias was killed, and the Athenians lost most of their fleet. This was the turning-point of the war.



The Battle of Syracuse on the Island of Sicily, 800 miles to the west of Athens. 1) Despite defeating the Syracusan forces sent to meet it, the Athenian invasion force fails to move toward the city. 2) The Athenians build two forts that overlook the city of Syracuse. 3) The Athenians fail to build siege works, which allow the Spartan Gylippus to land on Sicily. 4) Gylippus captures the Labdolum "Square Fort," and builds a counter wall, stopping the city from being encircled. 5) The Syracusans trap the Athenian fleet by stretching a chain across the Harbor. 6) The Athenians try to escape by land and are cut down and captured.

### **Peloponnesian War Phase Three: The Ionian War (412-404 BC)**

At the advice of Alcibiades, the Spartans built a permanent fort in Attica so they could destroy the Athenian countryside year-round. This also cut off the access to the silver mine, and the Athenians were running out of resources. Alcibiades was flirting with the queen of Sparta while her husband was in Athenian territory, as Alcibiades had suggested, year-round. When the Spartan king found out about this, he returned to Sparta, only to find that Alcibiades had fled again, this time to Persia.

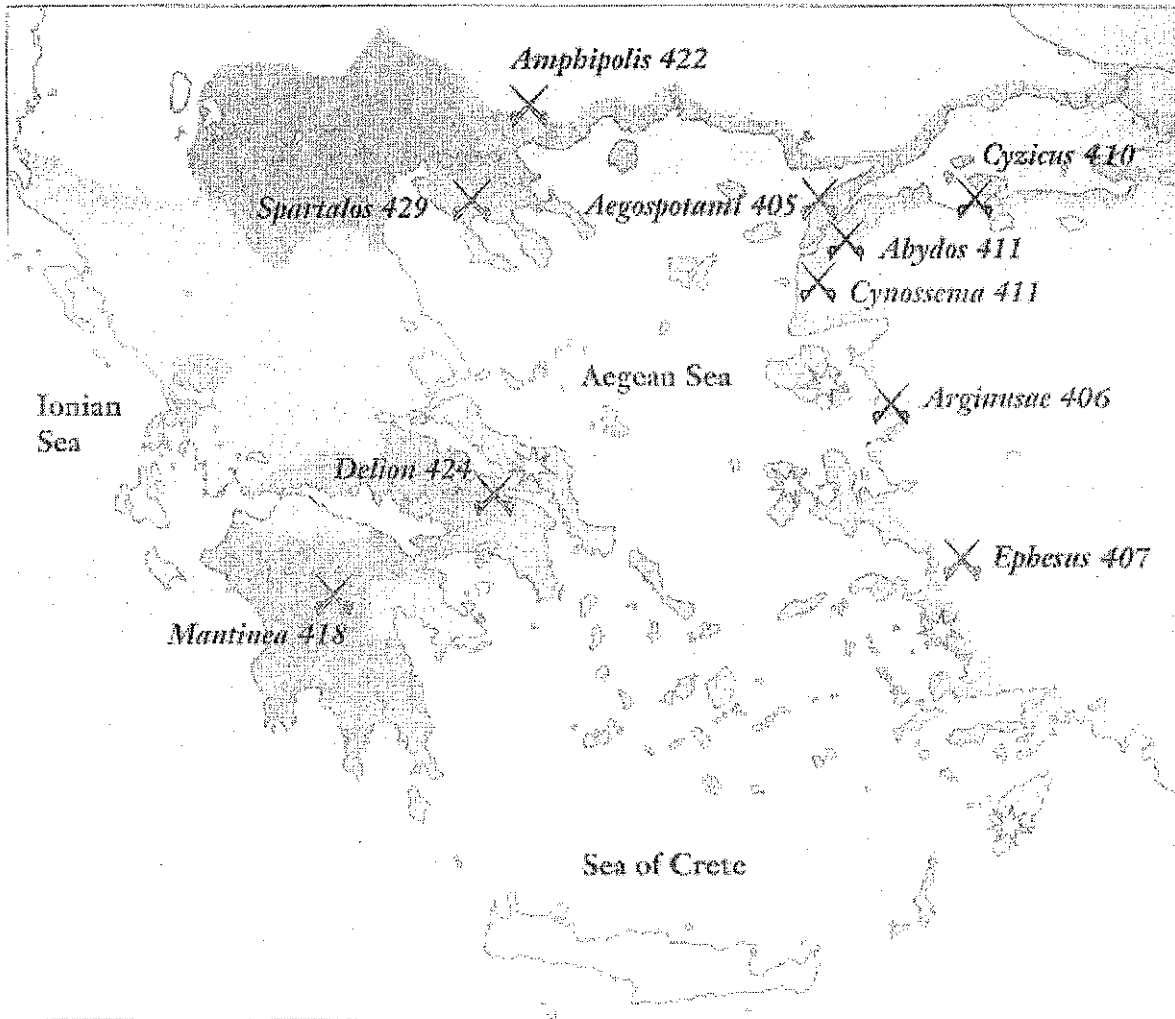
Now living in the Persian Empire, Alcibiades convinced the satrap of Lydia to slow down payments to Sparta, which the Persians had used to help Sparta gain a fleet of warships. Alcibiades was now no friend to Sparta, and he told the Persian satrap that by keeping Athens and Sparta even in power, they would eventually wear each other out, leaving the way clear for the Persians to gain power.

Seeing the influence Alcibiades had with Persia, Athens made it clear they wished for him to return and become a general. Athens was hopeful Alcibiades could convince the Persians to give aid to Athens. The Delian League was beginning to crumble, and Athens needed new allies. Alcibiades eventually returned to Athens to a hero's welcome. The charges brought up against Alcibiades for smashing the statues were dropped.

Alcibiades had great victories at the sea battles of Abydos and Cyzicus, keeping Athens in control of the Hellespont, but in 406 BC, at the Battle of Notium, Alcibiades was defeated by Lysander, a Spartan who was comfortable at sea. This Spartan warrior would go on to become famous, while Alcibiades was recalled to Athens. Rather than face a trial, Alcibiades retired.

In 406 BC, the Athenians won the Battle of Arginusea, but the commanders of the fleet did not attempt to rescue sailors from the sea. Back in Athens these commanders were put on trial and sentenced to death. Socrates, the father of philosophy, protested this outcome. Socrates was no fan of democracy, as he felt it led to mob rule, and poor decision making.

Finally, in 405 BC, at the Battle of Aegospotami, Lysander captured the Athenian fleet in the Hellespont. Lysander then sailed to Athens and closed off the Port of Piraeus. Athens was forced to surrender, and Sparta won the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC.



Gray crossed swords indicate a Spartan victory, Black crossed swords indicate an Athenian victory.  
 Explosion icon: Delian League member revolt; Green: Neutral areas; Yellow: Persian Empire

Spartans terms were lenient. First, the democracy was replaced by an oligarchy of thirty Athenians, friendly to Sparta. The Delian League was shut down, and Athens was reduced to a limit of ten triremes. Finally, the Long Walls were taken down. Within four years, the Athenians overthrew the "Thirty Tyrants" and restored their democracy. Looking for someone to blame for the loss to Sparta, the Athenians placed Socrates on trial. He was found guilty of corrupting the minds of young Athenians, and not believing in the gods. Socrates was sentenced to death by hemlock, a slow acting poison that you drink from a cup.

The Peloponnesian War had a lasting effect on the Greek world. Both Sparta and Athens were weakened. Thebes, defeated Sparta at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BC to become the most powerful Greek polis, and then, Philip II of Macedonia defeated Thebes and the Greek allies to become master of the Greek world. We will learn more about Philip and his son Alexander in the next chapter.