# *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*

[ B O O K   I ]

Thucydides of Athens wrote the war of the Peloponnesians and the [1] Athenians, how they waged it against each other.[1] He began writing at its very outset, in the expectation that this would be a great war and more worthy of account than any previous one. He based this judgement on the grounds that both sides came into the war at the height of their powers and in a full state of military readiness; and he also saw that the rest of the Greek world had either taken sides right at the start or was now planning to do so. This was certainly the greatest ever upheaval among the Greeks, [2] and one which affected a good part of the barbarian[2] world too – even, you could say, most of mankind. In respect of the preceding period and the [3]

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[1] I have translated this first sentence very literally since this is effectively Thucydides' title-page. The key word is *sunegrapse*, 'he wrote', and 'the war' is its direct object; that is, 'he wrote the war' and he does not here or elsewhere call his work a 'history' (in contrast to Herodotus, see introduction, pp. xvi and xxiii), though he does go on to say that it is *axiologotatos*, especially worthy of a *logos* (a discussion, description or reasoned account). See glossary (pp. 637 and 634) on *sungraphein* and *logos*.

[2] He presumably has particularly in mind the non–Greek-speaking peoples immediately affected by the war (like the Thracians). The distinction between Greek and barbarian and the sense of identity that came from this was a matter both of language and culture and was largely formed in the fifth century in the aftermath of the Persian Wars. See further I 3.3 below and VI 18.2n; also 'barbarian' in glossary and more generally E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek definition through tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 1989) and E. S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

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still remoter past, the length of time that has elapsed made it impossible
to ascertain clearly what happened; but from the evidence I find I can
trust in pushing my enquiries back as far as possible, I judge that earlier
events were not on the same scale, either as regards their wars or in other
respects.

It is evident that long ago what is now called 'Hellas'[1] had no stable  **2**
settlements; instead there were various migrations in these early times
and each group readily abandoned their own territory whenever forced
to do so by those with superior numbers. For there was no commerce  [2]
and people were insecure about making contact with each other either by
land or sea, so they each lived off their own land just at subsistence level
and neither produced any surplus goods nor planted the ground, since
they had no walls and never knew when some invader might come and
rob them. They took the view that they could secure their daily needs
for sustenance anywhere, and so were not exercised about uprooting and
moving on, with the consequence that they had no cities of any size or
other general resources to make them strong. It was always the finest land  [3]
that was most subject to changes of population: namely, what is now called
Thessaly, Boeotia, most of the Peloponnese excluding Arcadia, and the
best parts elsewhere. And the quality of the land gave some groups more  [4]
power than others, and that led to internal conflict,[2] which destroyed
them and at the same time encouraged outsiders to have designs on them.
Attica, at any rate, has been free of such strife from the earliest times  [5]
on account of its poor soil and has always been inhabited by the same
people. This is a good illustration of my argument that it was because of  [6]
relocations that other places did not develop in the same way as Attica; for
the most powerful figures from other parts of Greece, who were driven
out either by war or internal conflict, resorted to the safety of Athens, and
by becoming citizens right from the very earliest times they so increased
the city's population that Attica could not contain them and the Athenians
later sent out colonies to occupy Ionia as well.

A strong indication of the weakness of ancient peoples is this. Before the  **3**
time of the Trojan War Greece appears not to have united in any common
action. Indeed, as far as I know, there was as yet no name for the country  [2]
of 'Hellas' as a whole, but before the time of Hellen son of Deucalion

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[1]  *Hellas*, the ancient as well as the modern Greek name for the country, which I use here
because of the word-play on its origins in I 3.2 below. Elsewhere I use the more familiar
'Greece' and 'Greeks'.

[2]  *Stasis*, see further glossary p. 637; the classic discussion of *stasis* is at III 82–84.

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## I 3–4

that actual appellation did not even exist and different places took their names instead from the various tribes, predominantly the Pelasgians; however, when Hellen and his sons became powerful in Phthiotis and were called in to help other cities, one by one these now tended to be called 'Hellenes' by association, though it was a long time before that name prevailed among them all. Homer provides the best evidence for [3] this. Though born much later even than the Trojan War he never uses this name to refer to them all collectively nor to any of them separately, except for the followers of Achilles from Phthiotis, who were in fact the first Hellenes; instead he calls them 'Danaans', 'Argives' and 'Achaeans' in his poems. Moreover, he does not speak of 'barbarians' either – in my view because the Hellenes had not yet been identified by some contrasting name. These various 'Hellenes', then – whether they acquired the name [4] one by one as they came to understand the same language or were later called that collectively – because of their individual weakness and their lack of contact with each other, failed to achieve anything together before the Trojan War. And they only came together for this expedition because they were by then becoming more experienced seafarers.

Minos was the earliest known figure we hear about to acquire a navy **4** and he made himself master over most of what is now called the Hellenic Sea;[1] he ruled over the Cyclades and was in most cases the first to found colonies in them, driving out the Carians and installing his own sons as governors. He probably also cleared piracy from the seas as far as he was able, to enable his revenues to get through to him more easily. For in **5** earlier times the Greeks and those of the barbarians who lived on the coast of the mainland or on the islands turned to piracy as soon as the passage of ships between them built up. They were led in this by their most powerful men, who acted both for their own gain and to provide for the needy. They directed their attacks at cities that were unwalled and consisted of village settlements and raided these, making most of their living from this activity, which was not yet regarded as anything to be ashamed of but had a certain prestige. The same attitude is illustrated by [2] some people on the mainland even today who glory in such exploits, and by the early poets who invariably ask the same question of those arriving anywhere by sea – whether they are pirates, the assumption being that neither would those questioned disavow the practice nor would those concerned to know the answer blame them for it. On the mainland too [3]

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[1] That is, the present-day Aegean Sea.

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men raided each other, and even up to the present day many parts of
Greece live by the old ways: the Ozolian Locrians, the Aeotolians, the
Acarnanians and that part of the mainland generally. The habit of bearing
arms in these mainland communities is a survival from the old practice
of piracy. Indeed in the whole of Greece men used to go around armed, **6**
since their settlements were unprotected and travel between them was
unsafe, and so they got used to carrying weapons in their everyday life,
just as barbarians do. The parts of Greece that still live this way are an [2]
indication of practices once universal everywhere.

The Athenians were the first of the Greeks to put aside their arms and [3]
adopt a more relaxed and comfortable lifestyle.[1] This taste for indulgence
meant that only recently did the older men among the well-off give up
wearing tunics of linen and pinning their hair back in a knot fastened with
golden cicada brooches. The older generation of Ionians had, through
their kinship with the Athenians, adopted the same style of dress and it
persisted a long time among them. The Spartans[2] on the other hand were [4]
the first to adopt a simpler form of dress in the modern fashion, and in
other respects too the better off among them made every effort to share
the lifestyle of the ordinary people. They were also the first to strip naked [5]
for exercise in public and anoint themselves with oil afterwards. The
old way, including at the Olympic Games, was for athletes to compete
wearing loincloths to cover their genitals and this practice only ceased
a few years ago. There are still those among the barbarians even now,
particularly those from Asia, who wear loincloths for their boxing and
wrestling contests. Indeed, one might point to many other respects in [6]
which the customs of Greece long ago resemble those of the barbarians
today.

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[1] Sections 3–4 may look like a curious digression on social mores and fashion, but several of
the details connect with important later themes: cicadas were 'earth-born' and therefore
symbolic of the Athenian belief that they were the aboriginal inhabitants of Attica (see I
2.5 and II 36.1); the 'kinship' with Ionians is frequently invoked later in the formation and
management of political alliances (see glossary under *suggeneia*); and the comparison of
the Spartans prefigures lengthier contrasts the interested parties on both sides will make
between the Athenian and the Spartan cultures (most famously the Corinthians at I 68–71
and Pericles at II 36–41).

[2] I translate *Lakedaimonios* as 'Spartan' throughout, as a more familiar term than 'Lacedae-
monian' and often interchangeable with it, and in the relatively few (27) places where
Thucydides uses *Spartiates* and may be intending a distinction I translate as 'Spartiate'.
Laconia or Lacedaemon was the district in the south-east Peloponnese in which Sparta
was the dominant city.

## I 7–9

The cities that were more recently established, at a time when seafaring **7** was getting easier, were starting to have more ample resources and so were fortified with walls and were built right on the coastline; and they occupied isthmuses with a view to trade and to strengthen themselves against their neighbours. Ancient cities, by contrast, because of the long persistence of piracy were usually built away from the sea, whether on islands or on the mainland (since the pirates used to raid non-seafaring communities on the coast as well as plundering each other), and to this day these are still inland settlements.[1]

The islanders were just as much involved in piracy – these were Carians **8** and Phoenicians, who had settled most of the islands. There is evidence for this. When Delos was purified by the Athenians in the course of this war and all the graves of the dead were dug up, they found that more than half of them were Carian, recognisable from the style of the weapons buried alongside them and the manner of their burial, which is still practised today. When the navy of Minos was established, however, travel between [2] places by sea became easier (since he cleared the wrongdoers out of the islands in the process of colonising most of them). So those who lived [3] on the coast were now more able to pursue the acquisition of wealth and lived in greater security, some even building walls round their cities on the basis of their newfound prosperity. In their desire for material gain the weaker submitted to the domination of the stronger, while the stronger, with the advantage of more resources, made the smaller cities subservient. This was already largely the situation when they later made [4] the expedition against Troy.

In my view Agamemnon was able to assemble his expeditionary force **9** more because he was the most powerful figure of his day than because the suitors of Helen whom he was leading were bound by oaths of loyalty to Tyndareus.[2] According to the clearest traditional account of the [2] Peloponnesians, Pelops was the first to achieve power there and, despite arriving as an immigrant, he gave his name to the place because of the great wealth he brought from Asia, coming to a people without means.

[1] Examples of the newer cities on the coast would be colonies like Samos and Syracuse, and examples of the older ones on land would be Argos and Athens; but archaeological discoveries have since complicated this distinction (see Hornblower I, pp. 27–8 and his references).

[2] An early signal (with 9.3) that Thucydides will look for explanations of events in more general terms than the sort of personal motives which figure so prominently in Homer, the tragedians and also in Herodotus. Tyndareus was the father of Helen of Troy and the suitors were supposed to have sworn to protect her.

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And later his descendants were even better off. Eurystheus was killed in
Attica by the Heracleidae, but Atreus was his uncle on his mother's side
(having been banished by his father Pelops for killing Chrysippus) and it
was to Atreus as his kinsman that Eurystheus had entrusted Mycenae and
his realm when he left on his expedition. But when Eurystheus failed to
return Atreus took over Mycenae and the whole of Eurystheus' kingdom.
He was supported in this by the Mycenaeans, who feared the Heracleidae
and also recognised Atreus' abilities and his popularity with the masses
that he had courted. And so the descendants of Pelops became more
powerful than those of Perseus.[1]

In my view then Agamemnon, with the combination of this inheritance [3]
and his superior naval strength, was enabled to put together and launch
this expedition less by good will than by the fear he inspired.[2] For he [4]
evidently came with the largest contingent of ships himself and in addi-
tion supplied the Arcadians with theirs, as Homer has stated clearly –
if he constitutes sufficient evidence; and in his account of the handing-
down of the royal sceptre he further says that Agamemnon was 'lord over
many islands and the whole of Argos'.[3] Being based on the mainland
Agamemnon would not have held power over any islands except local
offshore ones (which would not have been 'many'), unless he possessed
a significant navy. And it is on this expedition that we must base our
assumptions about what earlier ones were like.

Now, just because Mycenae was a small place – or because some other **10**
township of that period does not now seem to amount to much, that is
not a valid reason[4] to doubt the size of the joint force as reported by the
poets and as traditionally accepted. For just suppose the city of Sparta [2]
were wiped out and all that was left were its shrines and the foundations
of its buildings, I think that years later future generations would find it
hard to believe that its power matched up to its reputation. Yet in fact

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[1] The essence of this complicated little story (made more complicated in the Greek by being
just one long sentence through section 2) is that power shifted from the descendants of
Perseus through those of Pelops through this sequence of family feuds and misfortunes. See the
list of deities (pp. liv–lvi) for some of these figures.

[2] Fear as a motivating political cause recurs repeatedly throughout Thucydides, though
usually as the explanation for antagonism rather than compliance (see, for example, the
notes on I 23.6 and 75.3 and under *phobos* in the glossary p. 635).

[3] Homer, *Iliad* II 108. The sceptre was the symbol of royal power, passed in succession in
this passage from Zeus to Pelops, Atreus, Thyestes and then to Agamemnon.

[4] Literally, 'anyone using exact evidence (*akribei semeio*) would not doubt', another reference
to his self-consciously 'scientific' approach (see also I 22).

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## I 10–11

the Spartans occupy two-fifths of the Peloponnese and are leaders of the
whole of it as well as of many allies beyond it. Nevertheless, because they
are not united in one city[1] and have no lavish shrines or public buildings
but instead live in village settlements in the traditional Greek manner,
they would be underestimated. On the other hand, if the Athenians were
to suffer the same fate they would be thought twice as powerful as they
actually are just on the evidence of what one can see.

One should therefore keep an open mind and not judge cities by their [3]
appearances rather than by their actual power; and one should accept
that the Trojan expedition was the greatest of any up to that time but
smaller than modern ones, assuming again that we can trust Homer's
account here too, which as a poet he may well have exaggerated for effect,
though even on his reckoning the expedition was comparatively small
by our standards. He puts the size of the fleet at 1,200 ships and gives [4]
the Boeotian contribution as 120 men a ship and that of Philoctetes as
fifty a ship, thereby indicating in my view the maximum and minimum
figures – at any rate he has not recorded the size of any other vessels in
his Catalogue of Ships.[2] That the rowers were also all fighting men he
has made clear in the case of Philoctetes' ships, for he describes all the
oarsmen as archers. It is unlikely that there were many passengers apart
from kings and others of high office, especially since they were to make
the sea-crossing with military equipment on board and their boats were
not fitted with upper decks but were built in the old pirate style. So if [5]
you take a middle point between the largest and the smallest vessels you
can see that not so many men went to Troy, considering that this was a
combined expedition from the whole of Greece.

The reason for this was not so much shortage of men as shortage of 11
means. Because of their lack of supplies they took quite a modest army,
limited to the size they thought could live off the land while on active
service. After they won a battle on arrival, as they clearly did – otherwise
they could not have fortified their camp[3] – even then they evidently did
not exploit their power to the full but through their lack of provisions got
diverted into farming the Chersonese and into plunder. With the Greek
forces split this way the Trojans were enabled to resist them in battle for

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[1] A 'synoecised' city, here with the emphasis on being physically concentrated in one place
rather than politically unified (see glossary on *sunoikismos* and compare II 15.1 and 16.1).

[2] The inventory of the Greek fleet in Homer, *Iliad* II 484ff.

[3] This seems inconsistent with *Iliad* VII 336–40. See G. S. Kirk's *The Iliad: a commentary*,
vol. II (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 276–8.

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ten years, since they were a match for whatever force remained behind. If the Greeks had come with additional supplies at the outset[1] and had [2] applied their whole force to the war continuously, without resorting to plunder and farming, they would easily have prevailed in battle and captured Troy, since even with less than their full force they held the Trojans off with whatever part of the army was to hand; and if they had been able to settle down to a siege they would have taken Troy in less time and with less effort. But instead, just as a lack of resources led to the weakness of previous expeditions so this particular expedition, despite its great celebrity, demonstrably fell well short of its reputation and of the received tradition derived from the poets.

Of course, even after the Trojan War Greece was still undergoing **12** population changes and settlement, so there was no period of peaceful development. The long-delayed return of the Greeks from Troy caused [2] great political turmoil, and there was widespread civil strife in cities, causing the departure of exiles, who founded new cities. For example, the [3] present-day Boeotians were driven out of Arne by the Thessalians in the sixtieth year after the fall of Troy[2] and settled the land that was once called Cadmeïs and is now Boeotia (a proportion of them were settled in this land earlier and it was some of these who went on the expedition against Troy); and in the eightieth year after the fall of Troy the Dorians and the Heracleidae occupied the Peloponnese. After a long course of time Greece [4] emerged from her difficulties to enjoy a period of peace and security with a stable population. They then started to send out colonies, the Athenians colonising Ionia and the majority of the islands, the Peloponnesians most of Italy and Sicily and some places in the rest of Greece. All these colonies were founded after the Trojan War.

As Greece grew more powerful and became more active than before in **13** the acquisition of wealth, tyrannies[3] were established in the cities in most places (where previously there were hereditary kingships based on fixed

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[1] Rather an offhand remark. The supply of fresh food must have been a problem for all invading armies of this period and all will have resorted to foraging to some degree. See V. D. Hanson, *A War Like No Other*, p. 329 n40, Gomme I, p. 16, and the difficulties reported at I 112.4, IV 27.1 and VII 13.

[2] We don't know exactly when Thucydides thought that was but inferences from other references suggest that he was assuming a date of about 1250 BC (see Hornblower I, p. 38 for the calculations).

[3] *Turannoi* were autocratic rulers and were a common phenomenon in Greek cities during the seventh and sixth centuries. The word did not acquire a pejorative connotation, however, until late in the fifth century. See glossary.