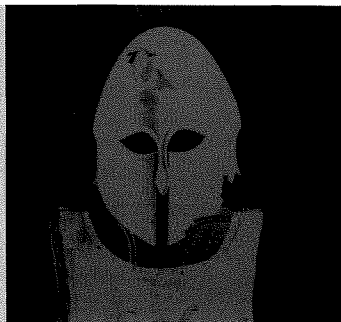


ANCIENT GREEK CIVILIZATION



Second Edition

David Sansone

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THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR: A TALE OF THUCYDIDES



For Athens, the late fifth century BC was both the best of times and the worst of times. Athens was at the pinnacle of its intellectual and artistic creativity, but it was also involved in a prolonged and, ultimately, disastrous war with Sparta and its allies, the Peloponnesian War. This war served as the subject of perhaps the greatest historian of the ancient world, the Athenian Thucydides, who fought in the war himself and recorded its progress in great detail. But it is not the detailed description of events that makes Thucydides' work a landmark of historical investigation. Rather, it is the historian's conviction that intense, objective observation of human affairs can contribute to an increased ability to foresee the outcome of current events. In this respect, Thucydides was reflecting current trends in the science of medicine, of which Thucydides' contemporary Hippocrates is often considered to be the founder. A large number of medical treatises preserved under the names of Hippocrates and his followers are devoted to the detailed observation and description of the symptoms of diseases, in the expectation that the more we know about the progress of morbid conditions the more successful we will be in anticipating and averting an unpleasant outcome. At the same time as the Athenians were engaged in the war that provided Thucydides with his material, they were creating the most notable architectural monuments in their illustrious history. The buildings on the acropolis had been destroyed by the Persians when they occupied Athens in 480 BC. Now, in the second half of the fifth century, the revenues from the Delian League enabled the Athenians to rebuild their temples and other monuments on the acropolis on a magnificent scale. The Parthenon, in particular, is regarded as definitive of "the classical" in art, not only because of the elegance and refinement of its architectural proportions and detail, but because of the sculptural frieze, created under the direction of the Athenian artist Phidias, that decorated the building. The Parthenon frieze depicts a ritual procession of the sort that formed one of the central events in the religious life of contemporary Athenians. Finally, the chapter closes with a brief consideration of the nature of religious practice in Athens and in ancient Greece generally.

**Thucydides and the
Writing of the
Peloponnesian War**

Diagnosis and Prognosis

**The Invention of "the
Classical"**

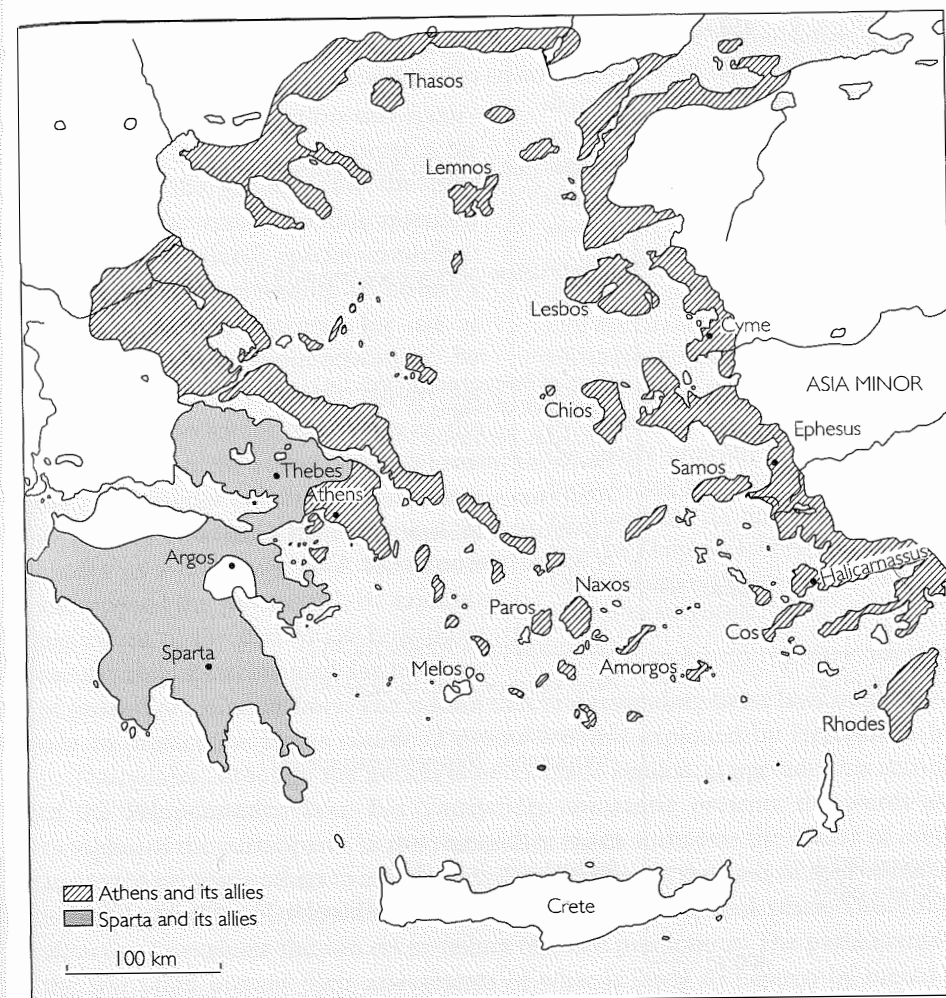


The influence of Herodotus, the “Father of History,” began to be felt almost immediately, not only because the importance of his work was readily apparent but because events in the late fifth century BC created a need for continued historical analysis. We saw earlier (p. 138) that after the Persian Wars Sparta retreated from a position of leadership among the Greek poleis and Athens stepped in, creating an alliance that gradually became virtually a maritime empire. Many Greeks, including the Spartans, felt that the “allies” of the Athenians had in fact become the Athenians’ subjects and that something needed to be done to “liberate” them. Sparta was clearly the only polis with the resources and prestige adequate to take the lead in limiting Athens’ power, but the Spartans were notoriously slow to take action. Eventually, however, the war that for long seemed inevitable broke out, in 431 BC, between two coalitions of Greek poleis: Sparta and its allies, mostly located in the Peloponnese, and Athens and its allies, mostly located in and along the coast of the Aegean Sea (map 13).

The war, which continued with interruptions until 404 BC, is generally known as the “Peloponnesian War” because our primary source of information regarding the war is the detailed history written by the Athenian Thucydides, who was a contemporary of, and briefly a participant in, the conflict. Although Thucydides may have begun work on his history while Herodotus was still alive, his work could hardly be more different from that of the older historian. Indeed, the difference may well be deliberate, as Thucydides seems in many ways to be in competition with Herodotus and to be trying (although he never mentions Herodotus by name) to improve upon Herodotus’ method of writing history. Whether it is an improvement is a matter for debate; what is beyond doubt is that Thucydides, by concentrating on strictly political and military history and ignoring the cultural and ethnographic details that often fascinated Herodotus, set a fashion that was to be followed by historians for centuries to come. In this chapter, we will look at the war between Athens and Sparta through Thucydides’ eyes (the only way that event can be viewed), and we will compare Thucydides’ methods with those of his contemporaries, the earliest Greek medical writers. We will also see how Athenian material prosperity before and during the war created an atmosphere in that city that encouraged the flourishing of the visual arts, as exemplified by the classical buildings on the Athenian acropolis.

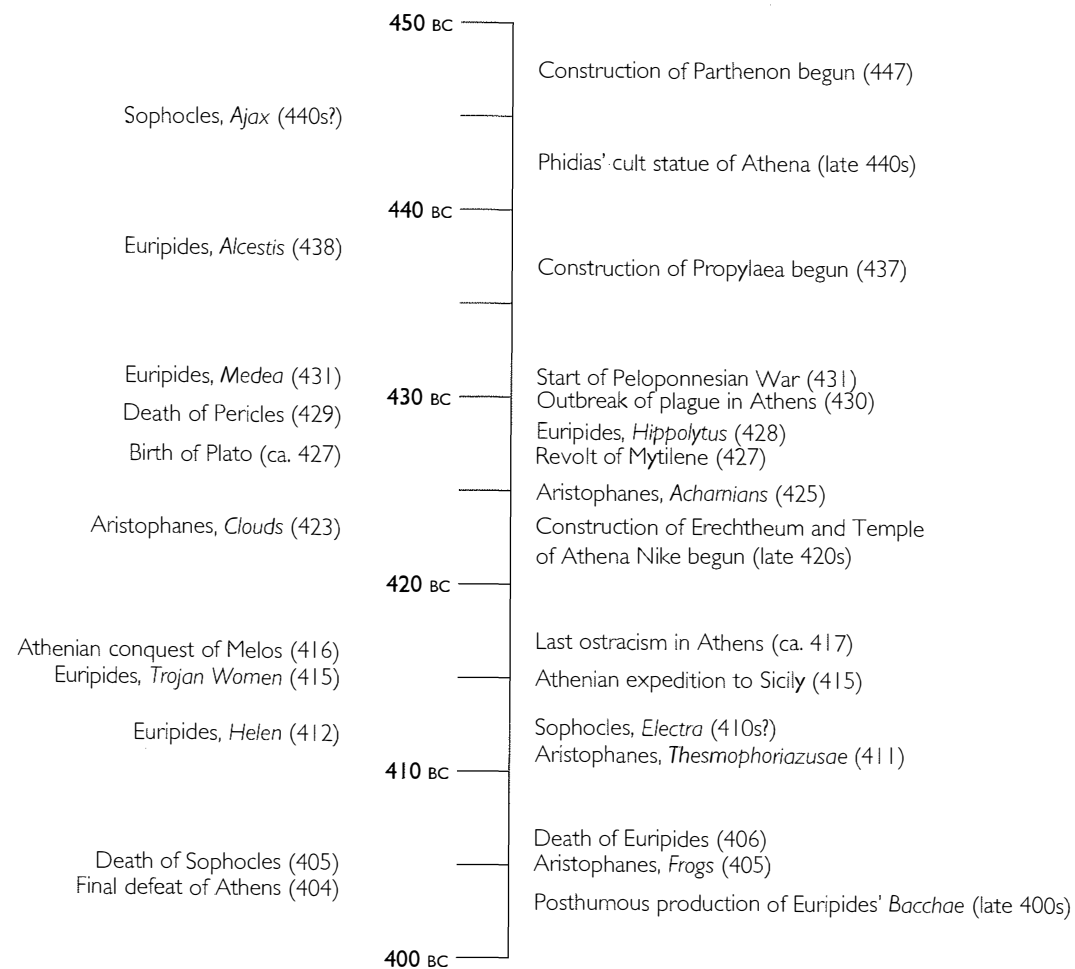
Thucydides and the Writing of the Peloponnesian War

Just as the first two words of Herodotus’ work were “Herodotus” and “Halicarnassus,” so Thucydides begins with “Thucydides” and “Athenian”: “Thucydides the Athenian wrote up the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians.” He does not use the word *historia* here or anywhere else in his account. He does, however, emphasize the written character of his history and he tells us that he began work



Map 13 Athenian and Spartan alliances at the start of the Peloponnesian War.

on his narrative as soon as the war began, “in the expectation that it was going to be a major war and that it would be more deserving of renown than any previous war.” Thucydides then spends the next few pages (or columns of text in its original format) telling us what led him at the start of the war to expect that it would eclipse previous wars by its magnitude. In the course of his explanation he mentions the Trojan War, the setting of Homer’s epic poems, and the Persian Wars, the object of Herodotus’ investigations, making clear his ambition to rival those two of his predecessors who had produced the works of literature that were greatest both in terms of repute and length. (As it happens, Thucydides’ history is about 20 percent shorter than Herodotus’; if he had lived to complete it – his work breaks off in mid-sentence, with the events of the last six years of the war still to be related – Thucydides’ history would surely have surpassed Herodotus’ in size.) The Trojan War, according to Thucydides, fell far short of what could be expected of the war



Timeline 6 The late fifth century BC.

between Athens and Sparta because of the size and might of the respective combatants: even if we ignore the likelihood that Homer, being a poet, engaged in exaggeration, the number of soldiers that he represents as having taken part in the Trojan War was much smaller than the number prepared to fight on either side in the coming conflict between Athens and Sparta. In the case of the Persian Wars, of course, Thucydides could not hope to be believed if he claimed that Athens, Sparta, and their various Greek allies were more numerous than the Greek and Persian forces that had participated in the Persian Wars, so he abandons his aim of explaining why he thought at the beginning of the war that the Peloponnesian War would surpass the Persian Wars. Instead, he hopes to get away with saying, in effect, that the Peloponnesian War *turned out to be* more prolonged and more destructive than the Persian Wars, “which were quickly resolved by two battles by sea and two by land.”

Why has Thucydides begun his history with a prediction about the future course of the war, followed by a demonstration that the prediction was accurate (even if he has to equivocate a bit concerning the grounds for the prediction)? The answer to this question reveals Thucydides' special contribution to the understanding of history's value, namely its potential for use as an instrument of prognostication. By telling us at the very start about his forecast of the future magnitude of the war and about the success of that forecast, Thucydides enlists our confidence in him as a reliable historian and in history as a diagnostic tool. Herodotus had opened the way for this by examining events of the past to see how those events could be accounted for in terms

of general or universal laws. The notion that understanding those laws might allow one to predict the future course of events was not exploited by Herodotus, but in Thucydides, although the notion is never made explicit, it pervades his account of the Peloponnesian War. For Thucydides constantly presents the words and thoughts of the participants in the war as they try to anticipate the course of events and try to persuade others to act in one way or another on the basis of their confident expectations. Then, by describing what in fact subsequently took place, Thucydides allows us to evaluate the success or failure of those predictions. The participants in the war often present their assessments of what is likely to happen by means of formal speeches that Thucydides features as a prominent element of his history. These speeches often take the form of a general's address to his troops or of contributions to a debate in a public assembly. In the latter case, the speeches frequently occur in pairs, in which one speaker expresses support for a policy or a course of action and another speaker opposes it, with each speaker generally providing reasons why he – all the speeches in Thucydides are delivered by men – is confident that events will turn out as he predicts. In this way it becomes relatively easy to see, in the light of Thucydides' description of subsequent events, which of the major players in the conflict had a good understanding of the situation at the time.

Among those whom Thucydides represents as being especially acute in his ability to forecast the future is the Athenian Pericles, three of whose speeches are presented in the opening books of Thucydides' history. Pericles was the leading figure in Athens at the time the Peloponnesian War began. He rose to prominence in the 450s as a champion of popular democracy by supporting the introduction of pay for service on Athenian juries. This measure had the effect of increasing participation in

“Consider also, if you follow the advice of Cleon, how much you shall offend likewise in this other point. For in all your cities the commonalty are now your friends, and either revolt not with the few, or if they be compelled to it by force, they presently turn enemies to them that caused the revolt: whereby when you go to war, you have the commons of the adverse city on your side. But if you shall destroy the commonalty of the Mytilenaeans, which did neither partake of the revolt, and as soon as they were armed presently delivered the city into your hands: you shall first do unjustly, to kill such as have done you service; and you shall effect a work besides, which the great men do everywhere most desire. For when they have made a city to revolt, they shall have the people presently on their side; you having foreshewn them by the example, that both the guilty and not guilty must undergo the same punishment.” (Thucydides, translated by Thomas Hobbes, *The Peloponnesian War* 3.47.1–3, Diodotus opposing Cleon's view that all the Mytilenaeen rebels should be executed)

"Nevertheless you must know, that of necessity war there will be; and the more willingly we embrace it, the less pressing we shall have our enemies; and that out of the greatest dangers, whether to cities or private men, arise the greatest honours. For our fathers, when they undertook the Medes, did from less beginnings, nay abandoning the little they had, by wisdom rather than fortune, by courage rather than strength, both repel the barbarian and advance this state to the height it now is at. Of whom we ought not now to come short, but rather to revenge us by all means upon our enemies; and do our best to deliver the state unimpaired by us to posterity." (Thucydides, translated by Thomas Hobbes, *The Peloponnesian War* 1.144.3–4, Pericles addressing the Athenians before the start of the war)

well as any other. This process also ensured that no one individual could be repeatedly elected to public office merely as a reward for pandering to the electorate (the practice preferred by representative democracies today). But there was one office that was immune from selection by lot, and immune as well from the provision that restricted service in many areas of Athenian government to no more than once or twice in a lifetime. That was the office of general, which the Athenians thought required experience and expertise. Every year, 10 generals were chosen by popular election, one from each tribe, and there was no limit to the number of times an individual could be elected to serve in that capacity. While it was not unusual for a prominent citizen to serve as one of the 10 generals on one or two occasions – for example, the poet Sophocles was elected general in 441 BC – Pericles was elected every year or almost every year from 443 BC until his death in 429 BC. As general, he could speak with some authority in the assembly concerning military matters and matters of public policy generally. In addition, he was known to be an especially accomplished public speaker.

There is a heated debate among scholars today regarding the accuracy of Thucydides' reporting of the speeches that he includes in his history, so that it is unclear to what degree he is reproducing Pericles' actual words. Since Pericles' speeches were delivered in public, to an audience that included many of Thucydides' readers, it is reasonable to assume that the general content at least is fairly accurately represented in Thucydides' account. Nonetheless, Thucydides also reports verbatim many speeches at which he was not present, and it is clear that he uses all the speeches for dramatic effect in his own writing. This tends to support the view that, while Thucydides expresses the general content of the actual speaker's words, we must imagine that the specific structure and diction are Thucydides' own. Furthermore, Thucydides himself naturally controls the placement of the speeches in his narrative. For example, in the first book of his history, Thucydides recounts a speech that Pericles delivered in the Athenian assembly before hostilities between

public affairs among those who needed to be paid for their time; that is, the less affluent Athenians. This group did not include Pericles himself, who belonged to one of the most prominent Athenian families and whose mother was the niece of the democratic reformer Cleisthenes. Pericles' wealth enabled him to serve in the highest public offices in Athens, which he did with some regularity. At this time, the mid-fifth century BC, most public offices at Athens were filled by a process of drawing names at random from among those eligible to serve, on the theory that, in a true democracy, any citizen can serve the public interest as

Athens and Sparta actually broke out. In it, Pericles recommends that the Athenians vote in favor of going to war, gives an assessment of the likely progress of the war, and advises his fellow citizens regarding what they ought to do in order to be successful against the Spartans. At the same meeting of the assembly there were many other speakers who, Thucydides tells us, expressed very varied points of view. Pericles' speech, however, is the only one that is reported, partly no doubt because Thucydides wishes to hold it up as a model of clear and sensible thinking, and partly because subsequent events in Thucydides' account will be seen to confirm the accuracy of Pericles' assessment. Pericles predicts that the war will last longer than most people expect. He is confident that the Spartans, lacking in naval resources and experience, will be reluctant to challenge Athenian supremacy at sea, but instead will invade Attica with their superior land forces and destroy the Athenians' crops. But Pericles encourages the Athenians not to be disheartened by these invasions: as long as they maintain control of the seas they will be able to supply themselves from their overseas allies as they keep safe behind the walls that connect the city of Athens to its harbor. In fact, Pericles tells the Athenians that he has great confidence in Athens' prospects for success in the war "as long as you are willing to refrain from further acts of conquest while you are at war and from importing dangers of your own devising; for I am more afraid of our own lapses of judgment than of our enemies' schemes." All of Pericles' predictions will later be confirmed by Thucydides' narrative: the war lasted well beyond anyone's expectations; the Spartans did, indeed, invade Attica nearly every year during the course of the war, but the Athenians were able to supply themselves by sea; as long as the Athenians concentrated their efforts on the war they were in fact successful.

The Athenians' success suffered a disastrous setback precisely when they took it into their minds to expand the war in hopes of extending their control to include the territory of Sicily. This was in 415 BC, after Pericles had died and was no longer available to provide sensible advice.

Thucydides makes explicit the contrast between Pericles and those who became the leaders of Athens after Pericles' death: whereas Pericles had only the best interests of the people at heart, those men were for the most part more interested in securing their own personal advancement, and so they threw their support behind whatever appeared to be attractive to the people. The campaign against Sicily was so attractive that Thucydides describes the eagerness of the Athenians using the word *eros*, the Greek word for sexual passion or lust. Both young and old were aroused by the prospect of conquest. In particular, the military and

"Let not the speech of Nicias, tending only to laziness, and to the stirring of debate between the young men and the old, avert you from it: but with the same decency wherewith your ancestors, consulting young and old together, have brought our dominion to the present height, endeavour you likewise to enlarge the same. And think not that youth or age, one without the other, is of any effect, but that the simplest, the middle sort, and the exactest judgments tempered together, is it that doth the greatest good; and that a state as well as any other thing will, if it rest, wear out of itself; and all men's knowledge decay; whereas by the exercise of war experience will continually increase, and the city will get a habit of resisting the enemy, not with words, but action." (Thucydides, translated by Thomas Hobbes, *The Peloponnesian War* 6.18.6, Alcibiades supporting the expedition against Sicily)

the lower classes were convinced that the wealth of Sicily would provide the Athenian state with limitless funds to confer lifelong employment on all its citizens. According to Thucydides, only the general Nicias recognized that, as Pericles had warned more than 15 years earlier, expansion of the theater of operations was likely to lead to disaster. But Nicias lacked Pericles' charisma and his effectiveness as a public speaker. Those qualities were, however, possessed in abundance by another of the Athenian generals, Alcibiades, who hoped to enhance his political career by leading a successful and profitable attack on Sicily. Thucydides gives the speeches that both men delivered in the assembly, Nicias sensibly urging his fellow Athenians to abandon their ill-conceived plan to invade Sicily and Alcibiades depicting the Sicilian expedition as necessary to ensure Athenian security and hinting that it will prove to be the first step in Athens' eventual domination of all Greece.

Having heard what it wanted to hear from Alcibiades, the Athenian assembly voted to mobilize what Thucydides describes as "the most lavishly funded and most impressive military force deployed by a single Greek city up to that time." Thucydides further describes the magnificent spectacle of the fleet's departure and the unbounded confidence of the Athenian people who witnessed it. The contrast with the utter catastrophe that the expedition suffered two years later could not be greater. Herodotus would presumably have explained the Athenian defeat, at least partially, in terms of divine punishment for the Athenians' overconfidence. There is not the slightest hint of this in Thucydides' account, which presents the Athenian failure instead in terms of poor planning and indecisiveness, particularly on the part of Nicias. In fact, on one crucial occasion, that indecisiveness arose out of Nicias' conventional religious outlook: on August 27, 413 BC, when things were going very badly for the Athenian forces in Sicily and they decided to remove themselves to a more secure location, an eclipse of the full moon took place. Nicias, whom Thucydides characterizes as being "excessively superstitious," refused to order his troops to move until a period of 27 (= 3³) days had elapsed, the period of time prescribed by the seers. As a result of this delay, the size and morale of the enemy forces were allowed to increase. The Athenians, finding themselves blockaded, were disastrously defeated in a naval battle and were forced to retreat into the interior of Sicily, where many of them, including Nicias, were killed and the remainder taken prisoner.

For Thucydides, then, success in political and military matters depends upon how well men are able to foresee the outcome of their own actions and those of others and how well they are able to convince others of the accuracy of their predictions. Pericles, for example, knew that it would be disastrous for the Athenians to expand the scope of the war; the mass of the Athenians did not know that, and so they embarked on an expedition to Sicily that resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of Athenian lives. What distinguishes men like Pericles from the masses and enables them to excel at predicting the future course of human events? First, extensive experience of the way in which humans behave under various circumstances and, second, a detachment that prevents them from allowing personal bias to color their assessment. (Pericles' aloofness was such as to earn him the nickname "The Olympian," as though he were one of the Olympian gods.) Naturally, experience

of human behavior is best acquired directly, by observing events as they unfold and by noting the reactions that they provoke. Most people, however, are limited by personal circumstances and do not have the opportunity to observe as wide a variety of events as they might desire. This, then, is the value of a work like Thucydides' history. Thucydides was himself a general who held command during the early part of the war but, he tells us, because of his failure to hold a strategically important city against the Spartans in the winter of 424 BC, he was exiled (not ostracized) from Athens for 20 years. During that period of exile he had numerous opportunities to observe the events of the war from both sides of the action. Thucydides' account of these events is presented in a strictly chronological narrative divided into successive winters and summers, which helps give the impression that the war is recorded in the most detached and objective way possible. The aim is to give the reader the impression of having witnessed the events personally, thereby acquiring the experience necessary to be able to predict future occurrences that arise out of similar circumstances.

Diagnosis and Prognosis

Some things, of course, cannot be readily predicted, like the sudden appearance of a storm at sea that may affect the outcome of a naval engagement. Thucydides, unlike Herodotus, never suggests that events like these arise from anything but natural causes. One such event was the epidemic that began to afflict Athens in the summer of 430 BC, at the beginning of the second year of the war. The account that Thucydides gives of the disease and its disastrous effects on the Athenians is a model of clinical objectivity. Thucydides himself contracted the disease, but survived; tens of thousands of Athenians, including Pericles, died in the epidemic, whose effects were intensified by the overcrowding within the walls of the city as a result of the Spartan invasion of the Attic countryside. Thucydides does not attribute the disease to any divine visitation and, in fact, he refuses to speculate as to its causes, leaving that instead to the physicians and anyone else in a position to know. For his part, Thucydides will merely record in detail the symptoms, "from which, if the disease should ever recur, someone would best be able to recognize it, by combining observation with foreknowledge."

Observation and foreknowledge figured prominently in the medical literature that was beginning to be written just at the time Thucydides was alive and was to continue being written throughout antiquity. We possess today a large collection of medical treatises written in Greek that circulated in

"In Thasos Crito was walking normally when he was overcome by acute pain in the big toe. Immediately took to his bed, shivering, suffering from nausea, somewhat feverish. Toward nightfall became delirious. Day two: swelling of the entire foot, slight redness along with rigidity about the ankle, small black blisters, high fever, delirium. Passed rather frequent stools of a purely bilious nature. Died on the second day after the onset." (Hippocrates, *Epidemics* 1, patient no. 9)

antiquity under the name of Hippocrates. The works in the collection were written over a period of some centuries, beginning at around the time of the Peloponnesian War, so that they are manifestly not the work of one person. There was a physician named Hippocrates, who was a contemporary of Thucydides, but it is impossible to tell which of the works in the collection are his, or even if any of them are by him. Hippocrates came from the island of Cos, just off the southwest coast of Asia Minor, where there was an important school of medicine and a major shrine dedicated to the healing god Asclepius. Hippocrates, like physicians generally in ancient Greece, was considered to be a “descendant of Asclepius,” but the Hippocratic writings do not concern themselves with divine influences when discussing either the causes or the cures of diseases. One of the earliest medical treatises, almost certainly written by a contemporary of Thucydides, is entitled *On the Sacred Disease* and deals with epilepsy. The author of the treatise is concerned to show that this disease is caused not by some divine visitation (the belief that gave it the popular name “the sacred disease”) but by environmental factors. This treatise and the others in the Hippocratic collection are written in the Ionic dialect and are clearly influenced by the early Ionian philosophers and natural scientists, who were similarly interested in discovering causes and who lived in the same general region of Greece as the authors of the medical treatises. While much of early Greek medical writing is taken up with theorizing about the causes of disease, some of the authors of the earliest treatises recognized as well the importance of case studies. So, for example, the earliest portions of the work called *Epidemics*, also dating from the late fifth century BC, consist largely of detailed clinical case histories that record the day-by-day symptoms of various individuals, in very much the same way Thucydides details the progress of the plague that struck Athens in 430 BC. (The title of the work does not refer to what we call “epidemic diseases,” but means “visits to foreign cities”; ancient physicians traveled from city to city and the case histories in *Epidemics* are drawn from various locations along the coast of the northern Aegean.)

“To the best of my ability and judgment I will employ procedures that are intended for the benefit of the sick. If asked I will not supply anyone with a drug that causes death, nor will I provide advice regarding such a matter. Likewise, I will not give a woman a drug to cause an abortion. I will maintain a pure and holy life and practice. I will not perform surgery, even on those suffering from the stone, but I will yield this practice to the specialists.” (Hippocrates, *The Oath* 12–18)

patient’s age, constitution, place of habitation, and so on. This seems to be Thucydides’ purpose as well, not just in his description of the plague but in his history generally. By recording as accurately as possible the progress of the

The purpose of compiling medical case histories is to preserve a record in as objective a way as possible of the timing and the sequence of changes in the patient’s status. This is necessary both in order to diagnose the disease and to give a well-founded prognosis. In addition, by noting variations among instances of the same disease, the physician can begin to determine how the progress of the disease is affected by treatment or by such factors as the

Peloponnesian War, Thucydides makes it possible for future readers to compare the events of 431–404 BC with the progress of future conflicts, enabling his readers to foresee and perhaps even alter the course of events in their own time. It is the essence of a science to be able to predict successfully what will result from given circumstances, and it is in this sense that Thucydides’ history is “scientific.” This is the cause of a curious paradox that inevitably strikes Thucydides’ readers: the inherently optimistic character of scientific thinking contrasts jarringly with the grim events to which it is applied in Thucydides’ work. Thucydides chronicles not only the horrible destructiveness of the Peloponnesian War in terms of human and material loss, but also the deterioration in moral standards that accompanied the protracted and bitter conflict. Thucydides portrays a Greece that has abandoned human decency and is motivated by nothing but self-interest.

Nowhere is this more horrifyingly displayed than in the section known as the “Melian Dialogue,” Thucydides’ record of negotiations between the representatives of the Athenian army and of the people of Melos. Melos is an island in the Cyclades, of no particular strategic importance, that wished to remain neutral in the war. In 416 BC the Athenians attacked the island and gave the Melians the option of becoming members of the Athenian alliance either by choice or by force. To the Melians’ objection that it is not right for the Athenians to use force on a sovereign people, the Athenians reply that the question of right or wrong is relevant only among those who have equal power. Since Athens is clearly vastly more powerful than Melos, the only means available to the Melians is to persuade the Athenians that it is not in the Athenians’ interests to add Melos to their alliance. Since Melos was not a democracy, its representatives lacked the facility in debate for which the Athenians were famous and, in any event, it manifestly was in Athens’ best interests to have as many allies as possible, so the Melians fail to persuade the Athenians to let them maintain their neutrality. Being confident that neither the gods nor the Spartans will allow the Athenians to conquer their island, the Melians choose not to join the Athenian alliance. Later that year, the Athenians conquered the island of Melos, killed all the men, sold all the women and children into slavery, and resettled the island with Athenian colonists.

A dozen years later, the Athenians, exhausted and desperate, surrendered to the Spartans, finally ending a war that had lasted almost a generation. The decisive defeat, in 404 BC, does not form part of Thucydides’ account, which breaks off, unfinished, with the events of 411. Thucydides does recount the disastrous outcome of the Athenians’ Sicilian campaign, and he does refer occasionally in passing to the final defeat of 404. It would have been easy, then, for Thucydides to present the Athenians’ defeat as, in some sense, a punishment for their immoral dealings, or even as a visitation of divine judgment. He does not do that. Instead, he portrays Athens’ downfall as an intellectual failure, as an inability on the part of its leaders to foresee accurately what needed to be done in order to secure the

“Life is short; science is vast; opportunity is fleeting; experimentation is risky; judgment is difficult.” (Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*, 1.1)

victory that the Athenians would undoubtedly otherwise have won. In what sense, though, is it legitimate to speak of Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War as a "downfall"? What Thucydides demonstrates, throughout his account of the war, is the remarkable resilience of the Athenian people, who repeatedly managed to absorb devastating setbacks and responded by renewing their efforts to continue the war. Even after the disastrous Sicilian campaign, which cost Athens an army and a navy, the Athenians regrouped and fought on for nearly 10 more years, winning some significant military victories against Sparta and its allies before finally surrendering in 404. And even then Athens did not lose its independence, although it was no longer in a position to extort financial contributions from its allies. In fact, the end of the Peloponnesian War no more represents the downfall of Athenian society than the end of the Second World War marks the downfall of German or Italian or Japanese society. Yet there has long been a tendency to regard the conclusion of the war as putting an end to a "Golden Age" of Greek, and particularly Athenian, culture. Thucydides' history is in part responsible for inspiring this tendency: its relentless realism and its insistence upon treating the events of the Peloponnesian War from the perspective of the pathologist have conditioned us to think of the war as a symptom of decay. War is, as we know all too well, an inevitable concomitant of human society, just as disease is of the human body. And, just as we sometimes dread a visit to the doctor, fearing that some morbid condition will be disclosed rather than trusting the doctor's capacity for minimizing the effects of any disease that might be found, so our attention is drawn more to the grimness of Thucydides' narrative than to its theoretical promise of enhancing our ability to predict future human actions.

The Invention of "the Classical"

In fact, many of the most glorious achievements of Greek, and particularly Athenian, culture were yet to come. The works of Greece's most influential philosophers, prose stylists, mathematicians, scientists, sculptors, and architects were created in the fourth and the following centuries. But the works that were created in the fifth century, between the beginning of the Persian Wars and the end of the Peloponnesian War, have always been felt to possess a special status, as embodying "the Classical," particularly in the visual arts. Nor has anything been seen to typify "the Classical" more comprehensively than the buildings that were added to the acropolis in Athens between the middle and the end of the fifth century BC (figure 43). When the Persians occupied Athens in 480 and again in 479 BC, they destroyed the temples and other buildings on the acropolis and threw down the many statues that had been dedicated there. Just before the battle of Plataea, the Greek forces that were prepared to resist the Persians swore an oath that, according to some sources, included the following clause: "I will in no manner rebuild any of the temples that have been burned and demolished by the barbarians, but I shall allow them to be left as a reminder to

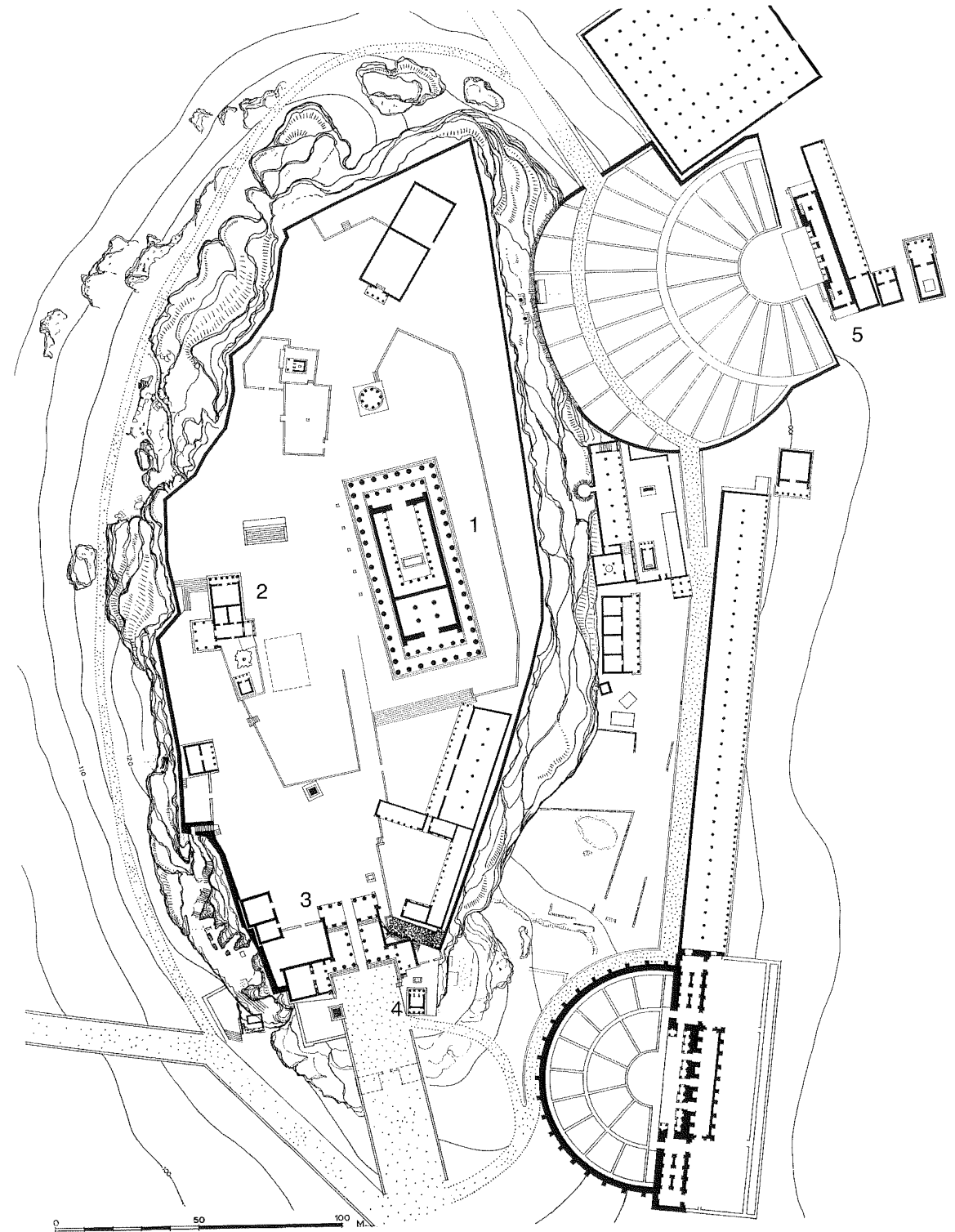


Figure 43 Plan of the acropolis in Athens in the second century AD (1 = Parthenon, 2 = Erechtheum, 3 = Propylaea, 4 = Temple of Athena Nike, 5 = Sanctuary and Theater of Dionysus). Reproduced from J. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (New York 1971), 71.