

History of the Peloponnesian War Study Guide

History of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides

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Plot Summary

The incomplete text recounts the history of the Peloponnesian war and famously ends mid-sentence in 411 BC, several years prior to the conclusion of the war. The Peloponnesian war was fought in ancient Greece from 431 to 404 BC between the Athenian empire and the Peloponnesian League, an alliance of city-states led by Sparta.

For approximately fifty years prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 431 BC, the city-state of Athens had accumulated enormous monetary reserves and extensive political influence in the Aegean region and beyond. Athens' political supremacy led to empire and her traditional enemies, as well as some of her vassals, viewed Athenian ascendancy with suspicion. Opposition to Athenian empire coalesced around Sparta, the nucleus of the Peloponnesian League. For several years political tensions mounted as various diplomatic failures occurred until hostilities broke out. The war sputtered into life as Athens and Sparta took opposing sides in several minor local outbreaks. Over the next several years Sparta's superior land forces conducted annual destructive invasions of Attica while Athens' superior naval forces conducted constant raids along the coast of the Peloponnesus. Additionally, the war rapidly spread into adjoining geographical areas. The first phase of the Peloponnesian war, ranging from 431 to 421 BC, was marked by a series of destructive but inconclusive engagements and came to a conclusion in an uneasy armistice. This phase of the war is sometimes referred to as the Archidamian war and concluded with the Peace of Nicias.

However, both belligerents continued intense political and diplomatic maneuvering, accompanied by occasional minor military actions. Within a few months, the Peace of Nicias began to disintegrate until 415 BC, when Athens launched a massive military attack upon Syracuse in Sicily. Due to various factors, including an incompetent leader, the Athenian attack proved disastrous and most of the Athenian armed forces were annihilated in 413 BC. This second phase of the Peloponnesian war thus resulted in a decisive and irreversible setback for Athens.

The third phase of the Peloponnesian war, ranging from 413 to 404 BC, is often referred to as the Deceleian War, or the Ionian War. During this period Sparta gained notable assistance from Persia and successfully encouraged many Athenian subject cities to revolt. The net result was a gradual but inexorable undermining of Athenian political power and a remarkable decline in Athens' naval military power. Following a disastrous defeat at Aegospotami, Athens surrendered. The net effects of the war included widespread economic depression, the transfer of effective political leadership from Athens to Sparta, and the establishment of far-ranging political systems which ensured numerous minor civil wars for the next several decades. Simultaneously, the technologies employed in warfare were revolutionized. Historians nearly universally agree that the Peloponnesian war marked the end of the Golden Age of Greece.

Book 1

Book 1 Summary and Analysis

The incomplete text recounts the history of the Peloponnesian war and famously ends mid-sentence several years prior to the conclusion of the war. The Peloponnesian war was fought in ancient Greece from 431 to 404 BC between the Athenian empire and the Peloponnesian League, an alliance of city-states led by Sparta.

The text of Thucydides has been exhaustively studied from a variety of scholastic viewpoints. It has been translated into English on several occasions and nearly every new edition or version incorporates additional linguistic elements or constructions. The structure of the text is therefore particularly well understood, and to aid scholars and readers a traditional approach to paragraph enumeration has been used for decades; many modern editions feature running paragraph notation. Scholastic editions carry this idea forward and feature traditional sentence enumeration as well—these editions are particularly useful as they allow differing translations or editions to be compared with relative ease. Note that Thucydides adopts a unique dating system which is adapted to his history; modern versions almost universally 'standardize' Thucydides dates to the modern calendar. Years are then divided into summer and winter segments—in general, winter is a period of light activity whereas most campaigns and military matters are prosecuted during the summer segment. Thucydides describes his chronological methodology more fully in 5.20.

Book One establishes background to the remainder of the text and attempts to examine the underlying causes of the Peloponnesian war. The introduction is comprehensive but sprawling and consumes roughly sixteen percent of the finished text—the longest book in the text. Book One has historically been subdivided into two named segments although these do not exist as such in the text itself: the much-studied paragraphs one through twenty-three are scholastically referred to as the "Archaeology" and in this segment Thucydides examines his aims and methodology; paragraphs eighty-nine through 118 are scholastically referred to as the Pentecontaetia and in this segment Thucydides examines a period of roughly fifty years leading up to the formal outbreak of hostilities; the intervening paragraphs, running from twenty-four to eighty-eight, examine a four-year span of events immediately before the war and are not scholastically named. Much of the difficulty in reading Book One results from the organization of material along thematic lines rather than along a strict chronology. Additionally, the geographic scope of Book One, particularly throughout the Pentecontaetia, is vast and shifts rapidly. Book One begins with events from 435 through 432 BC, then in the Pentecontaetia reverts to a more formalized examination of events from 479 through 431 BC. Although roughly chronological, the Pentecontaetia features frequent non-chronological leaps backward in time and spans Attica, the Peloponnesus, Western Hellas, and Thrace in addition to various other outlying regions. Book One concludes in the winter of 432/431 BC before the immediate outbreak of hostilities.



After the c. 479 BC defeat of the Persian invading army, Athens enjoys a long period of prosperity and political prominence in the historically fragmented Greek societies. Athens' political power is offset only by Sparta's military power. Led by Themistocles' political machinations, Athens diverts Sparta's attention whilst walls are constructed, fleets are consolidated, and alliances are formalized. At roughly the same time the prominent Spartan general Pausanias briefly becomes politically powerful and enjoys military successes—but then suffers calamitous political reverses due to his arrogance. These processes eventually lead most of the Greek city-states to accept Athens as the political leader of Greece and Sparta acquiesces; the end result is a series of political treaties binding most Greek cities-states to Athens, resulting in the formation of the Delian league. Over the next several years, the Delian league takes several political and military actions against rivals, with the result being that Athens' power is further consolidated. In about 467 BC the Athenian army defeats a huge Persian force, but then Athens' attempt at colonization of Amphipolis fails.

The ever-present rivalry between Athens and Sparta is showcased in the events of c. 466 BC. A powerful earthquake causes widespread damage in Sparta and causes the Helots—a huge class of institutionalized slaves—to revolt. Athens sends troops to Sparta to assist in putting down the revolt but Sparta insultingly refuses assistance and sends the Athenian troops home. Over the next several years Athens resettles some Helots and forges a strong alliance with Megara, which splits from Corinth. In 460 BC, Athens sends a fleet to assist an Egyptian rebellion against Persia. The next year sees much military action including an Athenian defeat of a Corinthian force. In c. 454 BC, the Athenian fleet in Egypt suffers a catastrophic defeat and is destroyed, while nearly simultaneously, Pericles leads a separate Athenian fleet to some minor victories. In c. 451 BC, Athens again defeats a Persian army at Cyprus while Athens and Sparta vie for political ascendancy, which results in the signing of a five-year peace treaty.

During 447 through 446 BC, Greece is embroiled in much infighting. Boeotia successfully revolts against Athens and regains her independence. Megara and Euboea revolt against Athens and tentatively join Sparta's Peloponnesian league. In support, a Peloponnesian army ineffectively invades Attica. The culmination of this military activity comes in 446 BC when Athens and Sparta conclude a thirty-year peace which, in the event, will hold for roughly fourteen years. In c. 441 BC, Athens is again involved in political and military intrigue against Persia and once again emerges victorious. In 435 BC, Corinth and Corcyra engage in military hostilities; both enjoy some successes but Corcyra appears to gain the advantage. Both cities send envoys to Athens to plead their respective case; after consideration, Athens determines to support Corcyra and subsequently engages the Corinthian fleet off Sybota, preventing a complete rout of Corcyraean forces. Simultaneously, Athens begins to worry that Potidaea plans a revolt but temporarily is prevented from sending a fleet by Potidaean envoys—meanwhile Sparta promises to support any Potidaean revolt by invading Attica. When the Athenian reinforcements arrive in Potidaea in 432 BC, they discover the city already in open revolt and a siege ensues. Corinth openly supports Potidaea and various envoys travel to Sparta to argue for or against general war with Athens. In the end, Sparta decides for war. In the winter of 432 BC, Athens and Sparta exchange envoys who demand various socio-political actions to ostensibly avert war; their true purpose is to stall military



mobilization. The various 'curses' and so forth which are discussed make interesting reading but have little significance to the remainder of the text. Thucydides concludes by stating that Sparta chose war to eliminate the politically powerful Athens.

Major topics covered in Book One, which spans 479 to 432 BC, include a brief early history of Greece; an examination of Thucydides' methodologies; causes of the Peloponnesian war; the congress of the Peloponnesian League at Lacedaemon; the political history of Greece for the approximately fifty year period prior to the commencement of hostilities; the second congress of the Peloponnesian League at Lacedaemon; an examination of diplomatic maneuvering; and Pericles' first speech.

Book 2

Book 2 Summary and Analysis

Book Two begins Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian war, proper, and resorts to the successful chronological presentation of events which is generally pursued throughout the remainder of the text. Book Two considers the events of 431 through 429 BC; although events are presented chronologically, the geography of events varies widely and readers would do well to obtain a detailed theater map if such is not presented in their edition of Thucydides. Most significant events occur throughout the text in one of five major geographical spheres. The first area is the Attica-Euboea-Boeotia area of Greece—that area directly North of the Peloponnesian Isthmus. The second area is the Peloponnesus itself—that area directly South of the Peloponnesian Isthmus. A third area is Western Hellas, including Arcanania, Ambracia, Corcyra, Epidamnus, the Ionian Islands, and Naupactus, among others. Much early activity occurs in the Thrace, a fourth geographical center, though these activities generally are tangential to the main focus of the text. The fifth major area is far-reaching and includes various other localities such as Persia, Italy and Sicily, and the Aegean seas and islands.

Fairly early in the development of Book Two (e.g., 2.9), Thucydides enumerates the initial allies of Athens and those of Sparta. A review of the initial participants quickly illustrates that Athens appears to be in a nearly unassailable position of supremacy—her allies are more numerous, richer, and better positioned to prosecute hostilities against the largely agrarian Spartans. Whereas Athens' allies are bound by treaties and traditions, many of Sparta's significant allies are allies only because they are enemies of Athens. This situation is somewhat ameliorated by Sparta's customarily acknowledged superiority in matters of warfare. Furthermore, Athens' sea supremacy comes only at the cost of considerable expenditures, whereas Sparta's economic situation allows for prolonged deployment of land forces without undue financial distress being placed upon the city. Sparta's historic dependence upon Helot labor and the resulting tenuous relationship between Spartans and Helots, however, demands that considerable Spartan military force be always retained at or near the home territories. To some extent Sparta recognizes her position of long-term military inferiority by courting a tentative alliance with the Persian Empire—normally a hated foreign influence.

The actual advent of hostilities comes about through a Theban surprise attack against Plataea. What could easily have remained a local conflict is immediately seized upon for diplomatic and political reasons, as well as for pursuing various alliances and interests. Athens and Sparta both embrace the Theban attack as the justification for, and opportunity toward, a greater conflict. Sparta quickly begins earnest preparations for war by attempting to conclude a political treaty with Persia and by demanding that her various allies, Greek and non-Greek, construct a massive fleet. This is once again a clear indication that Sparta realizes Athenian sea power will be a decisive element in any conflict unless quickly neutralized.



A huge Peloponnesian army is assembled at the isthmus leading to Attica, which is then invaded. The Athenians abandon Attica and retreat inside the walls of Athens. Pericles delivers a rousing address which prevents the Athenians from sallying out to meet the Peloponnesian forces—instead, an Athenian fleet ranges along the Peloponnesus. Athens consolidates finances and raises a reserve fleet. After several weeks of ineffectual siege, the Peloponnesian army returns home. This sequence of events will become repetitive throughout each ensuing year of the war. The Spartan-led Peloponnesian army is considered to be invincible in the field. Although the Athenians desire to sally against the Peloponnesians, Pericles clearly realizes that such an adventure would be disastrous. Instead, under his leadership, Pericles causes the Athenians to suffer the Peloponnesian invasion. Athens can well-tolerate the widespread destruction of primarily crops because her sea empire allows supplies to enter the city and her vast financial resources allow for the uninterrupted purchase of necessities. Indeed, Thucydides postulates that the Athenian citizenry could survive more or less indefinitely in a state of siege. The Sparta leadership appears to believe this is also the case and, as the harvest season approaches, the Spartan siege is abandoned. The impact to Athens is nominal.

Meanwhile, Athenian naval raids continue along the coast, and, in general, Athens appears to enjoy the advantage. The Athenian raids aim at destruction of higher-value targets and utilize hit-and-run tactics to avoid prolonged engagements. Sparta's lack of a sufficient navy prevents, at this point in the war, any meaningful defense. Athens concludes alliances with Odrysian Thrace and Macedonia and, under Pericles, invades Megara. The Athenians also fortify the island of Atalanta. Corinth enters the war against Athens but, as yet, not formally wholly allied with Sparta. Athens occupies Aegina and ejects the citizens who are subsequently resettled by Sparta in Thyrea. This Athenian-forced displacement is an early example of what will become a major theme throughout the text—that is, the dehumanizing influence of warfare. A solar eclipse occurs, which many mark as a significant religious omen. Thucydides considers all presumed supernatural events to be spurious to historical analysis; he mentions them because they impact the considerations and actions of others but he does not attribute them with any direct consequence otherwise.

Pericles delivers his famous and deliberately elaborate funeral oration—probably the best-known of all the 141 speeches recorded in the text. In the oration, Pericles ostensibly eulogizes the war dead of the previous year, but he also uses the occasion to deliver a rousing political speech about Athens itself. Meanwhile, the Corinthian fleet engages in several raids. In the summer of 430 BC, the Peloponnesian army again invades Attica and destroys property for a period of about forty days. The plague appears in Lesbos, then Athens, and then Potidaea. Modern medical research has failed to conclusively demonstrate the causative pathogen, even though Thucydides describes the progress of the disease in clinical terms. The plague continues to ravage Athens for many months; coupled with early land defeats, it is particularly demoralizing to the Athenian citizens. Once again the Athenians are prevented from taking the field by Pericles, although he urges a continuation of the war amidst a failed peace envoy to Sparta. The Athenians levy a fine on Pericles but nevertheless re-elect him. Thucydides extemporizes on Pericles' virtues as a leader. The Peloponnesian fleet makes a few



smaller raids. A Peloponnesian envoy to Persia is captured in Thrace; they are executed without trial at Athens. During the winter months Athens sends triremes to Naupactus under the command of Phormio and Potidaea surrenders.

During the final year considered by Book Two, the Peloponnesian army attacks Plataea but the city remains loyal to Athens. Thucydides describes the military assault on Plataea with some consideration. In Chalcidice the Athenian army wins a victory but then suffers a defeat against light troops and cavalry—an indicator of the evolution of military technology. The fleet under Phormio's command enjoys several victories and his raids continue throughout the winter. Conversely, the Peloponnesian fleet is largely ineffectual. Military activities extend into Thrace. Book Two concludes without a notable gain for either Athens or Sparta—whereas Sparta remains strong on land, Athens is clearly in control of the seas.

Major topics covered in Book Two, which spans 431 to 428 BC, include the commencement of war; an account of the mobilization of the two allies of the two principle combatants; the first invasion of Attica; the Athenian naval counter-attacks along the coast of the Peloponnesus; Pericles' funeral oration; the plague at Athens; the second invasion of Attica; Pericles' third speech; activities in Thrace, the fall of Potidaea, and the investment of Plataea; naval activities of Phormio; and the Thracian campaign in Macedonia.



Book 3

Book 3 Summary and Analysis

In the summer of 428 BC, the Peloponnesian army once again invades Attica. As usual the Athenians do not provide massed resistance; though the Peloponnesians destroy large expanses of crop land Athens is not adversely affected by this to a marked degree—her financial empire and sea power allow for continuous supply by sea. Lesbos revolts against Athenian rule and the city of Mytilene requests assistance from Sparta and secures an alliance. The Mytilene revolt consumes a large amount of the subsequent text and becomes a central focus of Athenian politics in the short term. Mytilene, the largest and most-important city on Lesbos, effectively leads the entire island into revolution. This is particularly significant to Athens because the Lesbians, unlike most other participants in the Delian League, have traditionally contributed ships and sailors instead of money. Thus, the revolt of Mytilene threatens to simultaneously deprive Athens of a significant number of triremes and provide Sparta a much-needed boost in naval power; it is not merely a financial situation. As with most revolutionary foment, the events at Mytilene involve a number of non-homogenous political goals. Thucydides' analysis makes it fairly clear that the upper political class desired escape from Athenian influence whereas the common citizenry did not find Athenian alliance objectionable. This is reflected in the action of the commons—once armed to defend against Athenian attack, they seize power and insist that the city be delivered to the Athenian army.

Athens dispatches a fleet which blockades Mytilene. Phormio's son Asopius commands another Athenian fleet which raids along the coast of then Peloponnesus—as usual, concentrating on the destruction of high-value targets by utilizing hit-and-run tactics to avoid prolonged engagements. Another Athenian fleet is dispatched to deter Peloponnesian assistance for Mytilene, bringing the total deployed fleet of Athens to an astounding 250 triremes. Thucydides comments on the vast amount of funds that Athens must discharge to maintain such an enormous fleet. Indeed, the Athenian treasury before the war was huge, but wartime expenditures quickly drain away the Athenian reserves. The 250 Athenian triremes illustrates why Sparta, in the opening days of the war, had requested a combined 500 triremes be constructed by all of her allies (refer to 2.7 - 2.8). Even so, the Peloponnesians were never capable of fielding such a giant navy. Athens also sends 1,000 hoplites to siege Mytilene. The Greek hoplite was the standard military troop at the beginning of the war—armed in thick bronze breastplate and helmet, the hoplite carried a large circular shield and used primarily heavy spears. Greek hoplites fought in rank and file formation as a phalanx with each man's shield providing cover to both himself and his neighbor. At the beginning of the war the hoplite phalanx was widely considered to be more or less unassailable and combat tactics frequently focused on shock-tactics and overwhelming charges. As the war developed, new equipment forced a constant rethinking of tactics; latter defeats of hoplites by peltasts—unarmored men throwing darted missiles—shocked the Greek world. During the winter some of the surviving Plataeans break out



of the Spartan siege and escape to Athens. These escaping soldiers will, history proves, be considered the lucky ones. Sparta also sends an envoy to Mytilene to encourage continued resistance to Athens. Note that in ancient Greece envoys enjoyed the special privilege of passage through tradition; thus an envoy could usually cross through hostile blockade without trouble.

The next year the Peloponnesian army conducts its annual ravages in Attica and Sparta also dispatches a fleet to Lesbos. While the fleet is at sea the people of Mytilene seize power and surrender the city to Athens; when the Peloponnesian fleet discovers this they return to Sparta. Much of Book Three is then devoted to a consideration of the after effects of the Mytilenian revolt and recapture. The mass execution of all Mytilenian males is considered by the Athenians but ultimately is rejected—instead, 1,000 prominent leaders are executed, the walls of Mytilene are razed, and most of the land of Lesbos is allotted to Athenians. Meanwhile Plataea finally capitulates and the Spartans execute all of the surviving forces. These events contribute to Thucydides' secondary theme of a consideration of the dehumanizing aspect of warfare. That is, the Athenians congratulate themselves on being merciful and showing restraint for deciding to execute 'only' 1,000 Lesbian agitators. The seizure of land and subsequent settlement by Athenian soldiers was a common practice throughout the war and was utilized by Athenians and Spartans alike.

This year also sees the outbreak of revolution in Corcyra. A Peloponnesian fleet engages the Corcyraean fleet and is ephemerally victorious but nearly immediately routed by an Athenian fleet. After Athenian control is once again established, violence of all kinds sweeps through Corcyra and mass murder is enacted for political and personal reasons. Thucydides describes the evils of revolution and warfare in considerable detail and at length (see e.g., 3.70 - 3.85 and elsewhere). Although these evils had been noted in various locales previously, the extent to which they emerged at Corcyra was truly shocking to Thucydides. During the winter, plague returns to Athens but does not prevent Athenian troops from raiding in the Aeolian Islands.

In 426 BC, the Peloponnesian army is prevented from ravaging Attica by a series of earthquakes, viewed as religious omens, near the isthmus. The earthquakes also trigger a tsunami near Euboea. During the year the Athenian fleet operates near or raids Melos, Tanagra, Oropus, and Naupactus, and Athenian troops captures a few small cities in Sicily and Locris in Italy. The Spartans found Heraclea and Thucydides considers their putative rationale for so doing. Much of the latter campaign season is consumed by Athenian attacks upon Aetolia which in the end prove rather inconclusive. Various military operations counter each other without decisive effect, though the Aetolian envoys to Corinth and Sparta enjoy some success in urging a combined attack upon Naupactus—an attack which is, however, thwarted by Acarnanian troops. It is worth noting that the precise chronology of these events is somewhat confusing and in some cases it is impossible to establish a decisive order of events; because of this, the political situation also appears somewhat confused. During the winter, Athenian activity in Italy continues and Mount Etna erupts, which is viewed by many as a religious portent. Due to various religious convictions, the Athenians purify Delos. Demosthenes leads Athenian troops and allies to victory over a combined Peloponnesian and

Ambraciot army. Later, Demosthenes returns triumphantly and the Athenians decide to reinforce Sicily, an action which continues to lay the groundwork for their eventual defeat.

Major topics covered in Book Three, which spans 428 to 425 BC, include the annual invasions of Attica; the revolt of Mytilene; the alliance between Lesbos and Sparta; the Mytilene surrender and debate; the fall of Plataea and the ensuing upheaval; revolution at Corcyra; Thucydides' lengthy examination of the social evils caused by revolution; the Athenian campaigns in Sicily; the campaigns of Demosthenes; the establishment of Heraclea; and the Athenian purification of Delos.



Book 4

Book 4 Summary and Analysis

In 425 BC, an Athenian fleet departs for Sicily but takes a circuitous route to accomplish several political and military goals. By a fairly accidental confluence this Athenian fleet fortifies Pylos in Sparta and the fortification becomes a focus of Spartan military attention. The Athenian fleet's stop at Pylos is occasioned by the necessity of frequent land-encampment for naval forces. Triremes were designed for warfare and prolonged seaborne action was not their strength; crews needed space to cook, sleep, and relax; embarked soldiers similarly needed space; provisioning was required; and the trireme's hull needed to dry out to allow for good handling characteristics and speed—indeed, hauling out was a primary and constant concern of every naval commander. Thus, Demosthenes and the fleet lands at Pylos for what generally would have been a short encampment. After seeing the excellent defensive geographical features, Demosthenes argues that the place should be fortified but is overruled by his fellow officers. Ironically, the land stay leads the soldiers and sailors into boredom and as an amusement they fortify the place—at first haphazardly but later with serious intent. Thus, Pylos becomes an Athenian strongpoint rather through accident; even so, its existence has far-reaching effects on the larger war. In fact, the annual Spartan invasion of Attica returns home after learning of the presence of the Athenians in Pylos; the leading general fears an Athenian advance deep into the Peloponnesus. The Spartans also dispatch a fleet to Corcyra where famine is causing widespread starvation—the fleet is however diverted to support a land assault on Pylos; elements of the Athenian fleet destined for Sicily also diverts to Pylos.

The Spartans launch a combined land and sea assault on Pylos which remarkably holds under the leadership of Demosthenes. As the Spartan marine assault stalls, one commander distinguishes himself through bravery—Brasidas enjoins his fellow Spartans to close in the assault and runs his own trireme aground where he attempts to lead his entire ship's force ashore. Brasidas receives numerous wounds in rapid succession, however, and loses consciousness before he can turn the battle. Thucydides comments on the multi-layered irony of Athenians defending Spartan soil against a naval assault by Spartans and also comments on the obvious bravery of Brasidas. As the Spartan attack falters, the Athenian navy arrives and routs the Spartan navy, which causes most of the Spartan land forces already ashore to be marooned on the island of Sphacteria. The fortification at Pylos is uniquely situated to control evacuation from Sphacteria.

As the weeks go by, conditions on Sphacteria degenerate and the Spartans at home, eager to save their men, send peace envoys from Pylos to the Athenians and, later, send envoys to Athens. This is clearly a decisive moment in history—if Sparta's offer for peace is accepted, the war will end. However, under the persuasion of Cleon, the Athenians reject Sparta's offer of peace. The Athenian military attack on Sphacteria stalls and the situation is reconsidered. Cleon insists that the attack has stalled due to a



failure of field leadership—to demonstrate his claim he takes the field, takes command, and rapidly drives the attack to successful completion, which forces a massive local Spartan surrender. Thucydides' particular dislike of Cleon causes him here to perhaps not give sufficient credit to Cleon's leadership qualities. Late in the season an Athenian fleet under Nicias raids Corinth. An Athenian fleet also arrives at Corcyra where the pro-Athenian faction gains control and then engages in a wholesale slaughter of political opponents. Corcyra's internal strife thus continues and Thucydides makes it apparent that the city is wracked with evils; this continues the text's secondary theme development. In Sicily, Syracusan forces occupy Messana—what here seems a strange focus on distant affairs will indeed become critically important to the history of the war.

In 424 BC, an Athenian fleet under Nicias raids through the Peloponnesus. Sparta demonstrates significant military evolution by formalizing defensive units of archers and cavalry. This admission by arch-conservative Sparta that the phalanx is not the ultimate formation to answer all situations demonstrates how rapidly the widespread warfare has impacted Greek military theory. Setbacks at Sicily result in the political punishment of returning Athenian generals—a common procedure. Athens orchestrates an attack on Megara but fails to respond to a quick reaction force under the leadership of Brasidas and thus does not gain its objectives. The Athenian war expands and political intrigues continue while Demosthenes enjoys some military successes in distant theaters. Thucydides describes Spartan atrocities perpetrated against Helots. The Helots occupied a position fairly akin to abject slavery—although theoretically the properties of the Spartan state, in reality Helots were the property of individual Spartan landowners. Helots were given acreage and a quota and were expected to deliver crops sufficient to meet the quota. Penalties for failure were extreme and severe. Sparta lived in constant fear of Helot uprising as the Helots significantly outnumbered the Spartans. Spartan tradition called for an annual formal but formulaic 'declaration of war' by the Spartan state against the Helots—this allowed individual Spartans to murder particular Helots, presumably including all political rabble-rousers, without legal implication. Such an arrangement was obviously fairly objectionable to the democratic citizenry of Athens (even though slavery was also widely practiced in Athens)—not to mention the Helots!

The Spartan general Brasidas is active during the year and enjoys notable military and political successes in some areas. In Sicily the war winds down and Athenian forces, released from combat, sail home. In the winter months, Athens attempts to capitalize on diplomatic maneuvering by assaulting Boeotia, but the attempt is initially largely unsuccessful and later disastrous as the Athenian army is defeated. Demosthenes suffers some minor setbacks, but Brasidas continues a series of victories. Thucydides objectively notes his own participation at Eion. Athens is thrown into political upheaval by the results of the winter campaigns.

In 423 BC, Athens and Sparta agree to a one-year truce which holds, more or less. Athens engages in some minor military ventures in Attica, however. Brasidas enjoys additional victories both before and after learning of the truce, and much political wrangling is enjoined over the fates of Mende and Scione which defect to Brasidas after he has knowledge of the truce. In the end, Athens retakes Mende and sieges Scione. During the winter, Brasidas mounts an unsuccessful attempt to recapture Potidaea.



Major topics covered in Book Four, which spans 425 to 422 BC, include the annual invasion of Attica; the failed Spartan attack on Pylos and subsequent diplomatic negotiations; political changes within Athens resulting from the siege of Sphacteria; the battle of Sphacteria; an Athenian attack on Corinth; the end of the Corcyraean revolution; political developments in the war; the ineffectual Athenian attack on Megara; the capture of Nisaea; the invasion of Boeotia; the battle at Delium; Brasidas' march through Thessaly and Thrace and the fall of Amphipolis; and a one-year armistice and the break-down of the truce.



Book 5

Book 5 Summary and Analysis

Book Five is fairly short and, among other events, relates the treaty of alliance between Sparta and Athens during the winter of 422 to 421 BC, scholastically referred to as the 'peace of Nicias'. In modern review this event marks the culmination of the first phase of the Peloponnesian war, often referred to scholastically as the 'Archidamian war'; such a historically sterile review was impossible for Thucydides, however, and he relates the events as part of, but a lull within, a continuous military struggle. Although the modern scholastic division is fairly arbitrary, Thucydides presents the truce as a more-or-less military event devoid of any political chance of long-term success. However, the 423 BC one-year truce is formalized in 422 BC and the procedure, from historic distance, appears to be a gradual cessation of hostilities. Indeed, the next years through 413 BC are marked by a generally less-intense conflict where Athens and Sparta fight against each other in distant theaters or largely by engaging allies of the principle opponent. Had the Athenian fleet not been decisively destroyed in Sicily during the winter of 413 BC, it is possible that the shaky truce might have held for much longer than it did; such, however, is scholastic speculation.

Also of note in Book Five, Thucydides discusses his methodology of assigning chronological and historical events to years and seasons rather than using one of the numerous extant and peculiar calendars. Most modern editions of Thucydides will 'normalize' his chronology to the current calendar—thus, this summary places the Spartiate-Athenian truce during the winter of 422 BC. For Thucydides, however, the event took place in the tenth year of the war. Thucydides clearly intended his text to become generally available beyond Athens—in fact, beyond Greece—and indeed states his belief that it will endure for many, many years. Thus, instead of using the local Athenian calendar to date events he creates his own chronological system. Thucydides, exiled by this time for a marginal military failure, also discusses his methodology for writing the history from exile. Thucydides commentary on writing from exile has generated a huge amount of scholastic discussion about historical methodology in general. Book Five is also peculiar for spanning more years than usual, largely due to the truce and general reduction in open hostilities between Athens and Sparta. This can pose some challenge to casual reading as it is easy to assume erroneously that the pace of events described is much accelerated. For example, the Boeotian alliances and campaigns are spread out over several years though described in relatively few paragraphs.

In 422 BC, the one-year Spartan-Athenian truce concludes and Athens recommences military activity on a somewhat limited scale. By this time the pre-war Athenian treasury has been largely expended and private subscriptions and extra taxes have been utilized for military expansion. Cleon leads an Athenian expedition to Thrace where he recaptures some areas formerly subjugated by Sparta; although this definitely increases Cleon's popular appeal the political significance is otherwise fairly minimal. At



Amphipolis, Cleon is defeated by an audacious attack by Brasidas—and both generals are killed in the fighting. Whereas Thucydides appears to believe that Athens is rather better off without Cleon, the loss of Brasidas to Sparta is significant. Meanwhile the Boeotians enjoy military success in Attica. An Athenian diplomatic envoy to Sicily unsuccessfully attempts to create an anti-Syracusan league. During the winter Athens and Sparta first sign a peace treaty and then develop an alliance of sorts. The political theory behind the alliance suggests that the combined might of Athens and Sparta will be so obviously inviolate that no aggressors would dare challenge it. In this Sparta and Athens probably overestimate their military formidability following a decade of constant war; in any event, the alliance is short-lived and fairly inconsequential.

Much of 421 BC is passed by political machinations resulting from the Athenian-Spartan alliance. Corinth, in particular, is alarmed as are numerous other cities and a series of alliances begins to develop. Due to the alliance, Athens withdraws troops from Messina and performs various other actions in response to requests from Sparta or from oracular pronouncements. Although Thucydides does not value oracular pronouncements or other supernatural forces as causative agents he realizes the significance of religious belief within politics; that is, though the oracle may be inconsequential if enough Athenians believe it to be significant it will result in political action. This can be easily seen throughout the text as one city or another expends a great deal of effort on ritual cleansing or purification of sites of religious significance. Athens retakes Scione and executes the men and enslaves the women and children—the Plataeans then settle Scione. Once again Thucydides illustrates the theme of the degenerative influence of warfare upon civilization—even in a time of relative peace Athens willfully commits mass murder as a political reprisal. During the winter Boeotia declines an alliance with Sparta and establishes a separate series of alliances.

In 420 BC, Alcibiades engages in political machinations to create an Athenian-dominated anti-Spartan alliance in the Peloponnesus. Alcibiades is perhaps the most charismatic diplomat, save Pericles, treated by Thucydides and is also impetuous and highly erratic in his behavior. In 419 BC, the Boeotians occupy Heraclea-in-Trachis and Alcibiades leads a small force through much of the Peloponnesus, and the Athenians return military forces to Pylos; these events are clearly contrary to the Spartiate-Athenian alliance. In 418 BC, various small military conflicts occur in the Peloponnesus. From 418 through 416 BC, Argos vacillates between being pro-Spartan and pro-Athenian. After political upheaval, Athens exiles numerous Argive agitators. Melos then engages Athens in political rhetoric and refuses to yield to Athenian demands. Athens responds by siege. After Melos surrenders, Athens executes the men, enslaves the women and children, and resettles the island—by now an all-too common series of atrocities. The segment of text from 5.85 through 5.113 is often referred to as the 'Melian dialogue' and has received a large amount of scholastic attention largely due to its notable stylistic departure from Thucydides' norm. The dialogue pits liberal ideals against realistic ideals in what is often described as a theatrical dialogue. In the discourse Athens offers Melos two options—pay tribute or be wholly destroyed. Melos argues that its neutrality must be respected and argues for Athenian restraint along several other lines of reason. Athens responds with the infamous statement "...the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (5.89); in the end, Melos

refuses to become a voluntary subject and Athens destroys the city. Meanwhile, minor raids from Pylos incite Sparta. This several-year period is thus marked by minor but constant friction between Athenian and Spartan interests.

Major topics covered in Book Five, which spans 422 to 415 BC, include the death of Cleon and Brasidas; the peace of Nicias; political and diplomatic developments; the battle of Mantinea; the Melian dialogue; and the fate of Melos.



Book 6

Book 6 Summary and Analysis

Book Six features the curious inclusion of the story of Aristogiton and Harmodius— notable mainly as a nearly unique authorial digression from the history of the war itself. Thucydides' text is generally regarded as finely crafted, highly focused, and consistently on-topic. Thus the 6.54 through 6.59 textual digressions are particularly notable. Although the text remains tightly focused on the principle topic of the Peloponnesian war, it does provide enough corollary materials that it has been the subject of scrutiny across a diverse field of studies. Political analysis, for example, considers early examples of *realpolitik*, and social analysis considers the early development of democratic institutions. Indeed, Thucydides' work is considered so reliable that nearly any aspect of ancient studies will somehow touch upon it.

Stylistically, Thucydides' text is complex and extraordinarily dense, which often leads to difficulty with clear interpretation of issues. Many scholars presume that Thucydides died while the text was still in progress, which would at least theoretically account for the occasional unevenness in style and tone. Some passages within the text contradict others and this is usually explained by theorizing that Thucydides developed the various sections of the text over a prolonged period of time; thus, he revised his opinions and understanding but did not always update all relevant textual passages—and possibly died before producing a final and wholly updated revision. Whether these speculations are true, the fact is that the text presents an extremely complex, difficult, and at times obtuse presentation of facts and is thus particularly helped by a robust translation and annotation. The amount of focus given to Peloponnesian events markedly increases between Books One through Four and Books Five through Eight; this is arguably because Thucydides' exile somehow gained him greater access to Peloponnesian sources, though once again this is scholastic speculation; however, such a shift in focus is apparent in Book Six.

One of the curious features of Thucydides is the authorial assertion of knowledge about the thoughts of individuals at key moments within the history. Additionally, the 141 speeches presented in the text are usually worded as if Thucydides possessed first-hand and intimate knowledge of the address. Scholars universally conclude that such is not the case and that Thucydides' presentation is often—if not always—a stylistic rendering of information. Although such techniques would today be unacceptable as rigorous scholastic history, for Thucydides' time they would have been the norm and expected by an audience steeped in the oral tradition. Of course, as a wealthy Athenian citizen and military general, Thucydides was undoubtedly involved personally in much of the early action described and probably was an eyewitness to many speeches and other events. His methodology, however, does not differentiate between events in which he was involved and events in which he was not a participant. Also, Thucydides is remarkably reticent to divulge sources.



In 416 BC, Athens decides to send another fleet to Sicily; Thucydides describes the history of Greek involvement with Sicily. Another Athenian fleet raids Macedonia while the Spartans attack Argos. In 415 BC, Athens engages in political debate regarding involvement in Sicily—what will prove to be their ultimate undoing. Nicias delivers two speeches and Alcibiades delivers one speech. Nicias argues against Sicilian intervention, and Alcibiades argues for it. The Athenians vote to send an enormous fleet to Sicily. Nicias responds by demanding an incredibly large military excursion—dwarfing even Pericles' expeditions—which is granted. Curiously, Nicias is then appointed leader against his wishes. Prior to the sailing of the fleet, the Hermae of Athens are vandalized by having their phalluses hacked off; the offense popularly is charged against Alcibiades. Alcibiades offers to stand trial but the fleet sails before such is brought about. Scholastic opinion about Alcibiades' culpability in the affair of the Hermae varies. It seems somewhat unlikely, however, that he would strenuously support the massive military venture and then at the last moment attempt a half-hearted effort to stop it. Thus, his involvement in the affair—if any—must be considered from a more subtle angle.

In his absence, Alcibiades' political opponents bring other charges of blasphemy. Syracuse readies for the impending assault and the Athenian fleet assembles at Corcyra; Thucydides describes the Athenian forces. The Athenian fleet arrives in Italy, bases at Catana, and receives a cool reception. The Athenians are almost immediately engaged in various political intrigue; they attack and take Hyccara and sell the inhabitants into slavery. Political intrigue in Athens causes Alcibiades' recall to face charges of blasphemy—instead of returning home, he defects to Sparta and sails to the Peloponnesus. In the winter of 415 BC, the Athenians and Syracusans fight a major battle after various interesting ruses are enacted. The Athenians win but not decisively and at high cost; they respond by asking for reinforcements. Athens votes additional funding and reinforcements. Syracuse readies for assault and attempts to ally with Sparta and Corinth. Corinth accepts and, after Alcibiades intervenes, Sparta also accepts. An Athenian attack on Messana fails due to betrayal by Alcibiades. The Spartans dispatch Gylippus and renew the war with Athens by fortifying Decelea.

In 414 BC, the Spartans twice invade Argos. Athens allies with Argos and fights against Sparta; Sparta uses this as a political excuse to resume hostilities with Athens. In Sicily, Athenian forces hesitatingly prepare to assault Syracuse and circle the city in circumvallation walls. Many feel that Nicias is unnecessarily inactive during this period. In fact, Thucydides hints that had Nicias taken an immediately aggressive stance the Athenian campaign could have taken dramatic steps toward victory, and catastrophe could have been avoided. Recall that similar sentiment toward Nicias' reticence to action was felt by many—including Cleon—during the siege of Sphacteria described in Book Four. Gylippus arrives in Italy as the Syracusans begin to lose hope. Gylippus' arrival forms a major turning point in the confrontation. Prior to his arrival many Syracusans were advocating a settlement with the Athenians; after his arrival the Athenians are thrown on the defensive. Thucydides clearly credits individual men—such as Gylippus—with the ability to decisively change major historical events.

Major topics covered in Book Six, which spans 416 to 414 BC, include the Sicilian Expedition; the Hermae affair; the story of Harmodius and Aristogiton; the disgrace of Alcibiades; inaction among the Athenian army; Alcibiades' activities at Sparta; and the investment of Syracuse.



Book 7

Book 7 Summary and Analysis

Book Seven is the shortest book in the entire text, accounting only for approximately ten percent of the page count; it tells of the ultimate destruction of the Athenian navy and army at Syracuse. In 414 BC Gylippus arrives in Syracuse and saves the city from defeat. Syracuse and Athens then fight two battles—in the first Athens is victorious but in the second Gylippus uses cavalry to gain victory. This is another example of evolving military tactics; the Greek hoplite phalanx is no longer considered to be the inviolate and unyielding example of military force, and even the conservative Spartan Gylippus uses cavalry to gain a victory. Syracusan-sapping activities force the Athenians to the defensive. The Syracusan counter-siege extends a wall which meets and then crosses the Athenian's circumvallation wall and thus largely defeats the Athenian siege strategy. This passage of the text is often studied in analyses of ancient military siege tactics and is particularly interesting. An Athenian attempt on Amphipolis fails. In the winter, Nicias sends correspondence to Athens; after debate, the city decides to send more reinforcements and new leadership. Demosthenes prepares to lead a fleet to Sicily while another Athenian fleet raids along the Peloponnesus. The Spartan presence in fortified Decelea causes difficulty in Athens, and Sparta sends reinforcements to Syracuse. Athens responds by raiding inland in the Peloponnesus. Meanwhile, the Syracusans build a fleet and attack the Athenian navy—although the attack is unsuccessful, a simultaneous land battle wins a notable victory at Plemmyrium. It is interesting to note how the Athenians respond to setbacks in this far-flung theater of operations. Rather than accepting a possible defeat in a distant land, the Athenians continue to outfit new forces and send them overseas in an ever-escalating attempt to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. The initial Athenian expedition was massive and successive waves of reinforcements have been sent. Clearly the Athenians are very heavily invested but their strenuous efforts are not achieving decisive results—fairly the opposite, in fact.

In 413 BC, an inconclusive engagement is fought off Erineus; it is notable for involving newly outfitted Peloponnesian triremes. Thucydides describes these triremes as possessing a reinforced prow with strengthened rams. A trireme was so-named because it was outfitted with about 174 oars in three banks, each oar operated by a single sailor. Although the ships carried sail they were generally operated by oars, particularly in battle. The decks were largely open and the ships usually carried only a small contingent of marines. The ship's plan was based around a large central ramming strut extending from the bow. Their principle method of attack was to use the ram to pierce the hull of an enemy ship. Subsequent to the ram, a boarding action would generally take place. Ramming was exceptionally damaging to the target ship but was also often fairly damaging to the ramming ship. The ramming ship would attempt a speed of at least ten knots and would optimally ram the enemy's stern quarter. The goal was to pierce the enemy's hull or, even better, to open a large seam in the enemy hull. The enemy ship would thus founder, swamp, and be combat ineffective if not sink



outright. The Peloponnesian vessels at Erineus demonstrated an evolution in military weaponry because of their strengthened prows which presumably let them engage in more vigorous ramming without suffering equivalent damage.

Near Syracuse, the new Syracusan navy wins a victory and then Athenian reinforcements arrive, though Demosthenes suffers military setbacks. Demosthenes then argues for an immediate withdrawal of Athenian forces from Syracuse but Nicias, once opposed to any military action in Sicily, disagrees. Thucydides once again portrays Nicias as an incompetent—first he argued against the entire expedition, then when elected leader proved fairly incompetent to the task, and finally when faced with apparent defeat he rejects a considered plan to salvage remaining forces. Nicias' inaction is reinforced by a lunar eclipse which is then interpreted by the Athenians as an omen to delay their withdrawal. The Syracusan navy wins another victory. The repetitive naval defeats of Athens are startling. The Athenian navy, the foundational power of the world's first great thalassocracy, is considered to be the finest seaborne power of the era. The Syracusan navy consisted largely of newly-constructed ships and relatively inexperienced crews. Gylippus' demand for naval construction thus proves nearly prescient as the relative newcomers of Syracuse repetitively defeat the Athenian navy.

Thucydides then inserts an enumeration of the various forces and their rationale for being involved in the conflict. To a modern reader, this section is particularly interesting as the rationale for Athens' involvement in apparently distant Sicily is not obvious from a modern standpoint, though Messina, Syracuse, and other Sicilian and Italian cities were originally founded by seafaring Greeks and had a hundred-year history of peripheral involvement in Greek affairs. In the winter months, the Athenian navy prepares to withdraw from Syracuse. Thucydides critically analyzes the prolonged period of preparation used by the Athenians who should have been very practiced at quickly executing such a basic maneuver as massed withdrawal. Nicias and Gylippus both address their respective fleets and then a massive naval battle is enjoined in the harbor—startlingly, it ends in disastrous defeat for the Athenians.

The stranded Athenian army then attempts a forced march to their prepared base of Catania, but they are blocked by the Syracusans, including mobile forces of cavalry. A series of skirmishes are fought as the Athenians then retreat south, abandoning material and supplies, and suffer heavy casualties. The textual description of the slaughter of the Athenians as they retreat is vivid and forms one of the most sensational and emotional segments of the entire text. Finally, at the Assinarus River, the Athenian army surrenders. The captured soldiers subsequently are used as slaves in quarries and there are numerous deaths and injuries. Thucydides expresses some outrage at the harsh treatment of the Athenian captives—however, given Athens' prolonged series of atrocities perpetrated upon subjugated peoples, the treatment is not particularly shocking in the greater context of the war.

The decisive and catastrophic defeat of the Athenian combined forces marks an obvious turning-point in the war; modern scholastic investigation credits the defeat with the end of the second phase of the Peloponnesian war—from this point forward Sparta clearly becomes ascendant while Athens attempts, usually unsuccessfully, to simply hold on to



the fragments of a crumbling empire. Beyond the military reality of the loss of a vast army and navy, the news of Athens' overwhelming defeat spreads quickly and carries with it profound political ramifications—numerous other cities view Syracuse's victory as the end of Athenian empire.

Major topics covered in Book Seven, which spans 414 to 413 BC, include the arrival of Gylippus at Syracuse; the fortification of Decelea; Syracusan successes; the arrival of Demosthenes; the defeat of the Athenian army; the prolonged battle in the Great Harbor; and the ultimate failure, retreat, and destruction of the Athenian army.

Book 8

Book 8 Summary and Analysis

Book Eight marks a significant shift in the geographic focus of events within the text. The Athenian defeat and rout at Syracuse effectively removes Sicily and Italy from further significance within the text. The Attica-Euboea-Boeotia-Peloponnesus Theater remains significant as the seat of power, but various islands gain a clear ascendancy in military focus. Samos, Chios, and Sardis are all areas of dominant military action in this segment of the text. Miletus, Lesbos, and Asia, as well, are areas of significant focus. As the Athenian empire loses cohesion, the war widens into outlying areas and political intrigue gains great significance.

Although shocked by the news of the defeat the Athenians—apparently not yet realizing the full implications of the disaster—vote to build more ships and press forward with the war. Meanwhile the Peloponnesians plan a decisive action against Athens. Revolution begins to foment throughout the Athenian empire and Euboea, Lesbos, and Chios send envoys to Sparta to request assistance in revolting against Athens. Recall that Lesbos possesses a powerful navy which is all the more significant with the recent destruction of numerous Athenian ships. Likewise, Chios is a state in the Delian League which has traditionally supplied ships and men instead of financial payments and thus is an important component of regional naval power. Thus, the Lesbians' and the Chians' political rupture with the Athenians proves to be a significant shift in the regional balance of power. Tissaphernes, the Persian satrap, also sends an envoy to Sparta. Apparently the Persian Empire views Athens' defeat as an opportune moment to deliver a decisive blow to an ancient enemy. Nevertheless, the canny satrap nearly simultaneously commences political discussions with Athens—they ultimately prove fruitless—and even as he declares an alliance with Sparta he begins to cut material contributions to the Peloponnesians.

In 412 BC, the Athenians and Spartans fight several small sea battles. The revolt of Chios, incited by Alcibiades, is viewed in Athens with alarm and the remaining Athenian funds are expended to equip a new fleet. A combined Athenian and Argive force achieves a victory at Miletus but then retires as a larger Peloponnesian relief force approaches. The fact that Athens still retains a significant military force demonstrates her previous military ascendancy in the region. On Samos, Athenian military assistance leads to revolution and the Athenians prosecute counter-attacks at Lesbos and Chios. Anti-Athenian revolution continues to spread throughout the general region. Meanwhile the Spartans and the Persians complete the first steps of an alliance. In the winter the Athenian assembly considers establishing an oligarchy. Alcibiades attempts to subvert an Athenian army in the field at Samos. Sparta and Persia advance their alliance while Athens gains a few minor victories at sea, as does a Peloponnesian fleet. Various political intrigues continue throughout the region.



In 411 BC, the last year considered by Thucydides' history, various engagements are fought in the Hellespont. Then, the Athenian democracy collapses under the pressure of assassinations and military defeat. The transient new government, referred to as the Four Hundred, rules by force. An alliance with Agis is rejected and then a peace alliance with Sparta is seriously considered. Various pro-Athenian cities consider abandoning democracy for oligarchy and political intrigue is commonplace and widespread. This political upheaval establishes the profound political fallout of Athens' catastrophic defeat in Syracuse. Most Greeks condemn the wave of anti-democratic oligarchy which sweeps through the region, but the realities of political power allow the strong to seize control.

In a surprising twist of history, the patriotic Athenian army faction on Samos recalls Alcibiades and elects him general. His pending charges of blasphemy have been discarded and, surprisingly, his treasonous defection to first Sparta and then to the hated Persians has been overlooked. Alcibiades has been instrumental in numerous serious setbacks to the Athenian cause—as recent as 412 BC, he had incited revolution on Chios and during the early winter months of 411 BC, he had coldly advised Tissaphernes to allow Sparta and Athens to exhaust each other in war. Yet suddenly he is recalled to Samos and accepts the appointment as general for Athenian forces. His is a strange political career indeed.

A large Phoenician fleet appears, momentarily, to join combat against the Athenians but in the event remains neutral; Alcibiades later claims his personal influence has averted Phoenician involvement though the claim appears somewhat disingenuous. Strife runs through Athens but the Athenians do join together to defend the city from attack. A Peloponnesian fleet defeats an Athenian fleet near Euboea; Euboea revolts and the ensuing panic in Athens restores democracy by causing the collapse of the Four Hundred. Alcibiades arrives in Samos. The Athenian and Peloponnesian fleets search each other out, finally meeting near Point Cynossema, where the battle is won, but not decisively, by the Athenians. Thucydides' account of the Athenian fleet sailing from Samos to Lesbos in an unsuccessfully attempt to encounter the Peloponnesian fleet at Lesbos is dry but humorous. The text famously ends mid-sentence, seven years prior to the conclusion of the war.

Major topics covered in Book Eight, which spans 413 to 411 BC, include the revolt and war in Ionia; the intervention of Persia; the intrigues of Alcibiades; the oligarchy in Athens; the behavior of the Athenian army at Samos and the recall of Alcibiades; the revolt of Euboea; the downfall of the Four Hundred; and the battle of Cynossema.



Characters

Thucydides

Themistocles

Pausanias

Pericles

Demosthenes

Brasidas

Cleon

Nicias

Alcibiades

Gylippus



Objects/Places

Athens

Athens was and is a city in Attica in Greece. During the time of the Peloponnesian war, Athens was widely regarded as embodying Greek ideals of equality and democracy. Although by modern standards the roughly 10% of Athenians who qualified as voting citizens would not be regarded as truly democratic, during the 5th century BC that amount was uniquely high. Much of Book One of the current text considers the history of Athens and, as one of two principle combatants, Athens is prominent within the text.

Sparta

Sparta was and is a city in the Peloponnesus in Greece. During the time of the Peloponnesian war, Sparta was universally regarded as the finest military state in Greece; Spartan hoplites were nearly invincible and Spartan generals were considered to be the best leadership available to any armed force. Sparta did not particularly value democracy was administered by a complicated system of hereditary and elected officials. Much of Book One examines the history of the rivalry between Sparta and Athens and, as one of two principle combatants, Sparta is prominent within the text.

Delian League

The Delian League was an alliance of Greek cities during the 5th century BC; Athens was the unquestioned leader and in the years leading up to the Peloponnesian war many felt that the league was simply a euphemism or pretext for Athenian empire. Most league members contributed monetary payments to Athens in exchange for a guarantee of safety. As the Peloponnesian war persisted for year after year various members of the Delian League parted way with Athens, nearly always after military revolution.

Peloponnesian League

The Peloponnesian League was an alliance of Greek cities during the 5th century BC; Sparta was the obvious leader. Never as centrally and rigidly organized as the Delian League, however, the Peloponnesian League was nevertheless older and more or less controlled by Sparta. During the period of time considered by the text, the Spartans and the Peloponnesian League fought against the Athenians and the Delian League.

Corinth

Corinth was and is a city in the Peloponnesus near the Isthmus of Corinth. Its location was of strategic importance and its military strength at the time of the Peloponnesian



war was considerable. Corinth typically maintained a great deal of independence from both Athens and Sparta. During the period of time considered by the text, Corinth is militarily and politically active and pursues a course of self-interest which places it largely in opposition to Athenian ascendancy.

Persia

Persia was a vast and incredibly wealthy nation on the fringe of the Greek world. Prior to the Peloponnesian war, Persia and the Greek city-states fought numerous wars. Persia was centrally organized and, compared to Greece, enjoyed a formidable bureaucracy and powerful government. Persia was divided into large regions called satraps which were administered by appointed bureaucrats. During the Peloponnesian war, Sparta and other Greek cities attempted to gain some advantage by various alliances with Persia and Tissaphernes, the Persian satrap, plays a major role in Book Eight.

Helots

Helots were serfs of Sparta; the practice was also followed in Thessaly and Sicily. Marginally better off than abject slaves, Helots suffered under numerous restrictions, had no political rights, and were not considered free. Legally, Helots were the property of Sparta and were assigned out to individual land owners. Helots always outnumbered Spartans by a goodly margin and thus much of Sparta's internal political maneuvering was focused on how to control the 'enemy within' the state.

Trireme

A trireme is a particular class of warship used by all participants in the Peloponnesian war; the Greek root word is often translated as *galley* in older revisions of the text. The ships had three rows of oars on each side, each oar being manned by a single sailor. The ships also featured a single mast. They fought principally by ramming, followed by boarding actions. Particularly light, triremes were frequently hauled out to allow the hulls to dry which greatly improved their sailing quality.

Sicily

Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. Thucydides takes special care to establish the long history of Greek settlement on and around Sicily. At the time of the Peloponnesian war the largest Sicilian city was Syracuse, hostile to Athens. Largely under the influence of Alcibiades, Athens sent a vast naval and land force to Sicily to subjugate Syracuse. Led by Gylippus, the Syracusans routed the Athenians and gained a signal victory which effectively ended Athenian ascendancy in ancient Greece.

Pylos

Pylos' exact location is somewhat unknown today; however, in the text it is a defensible promontory which was occupied by Athenian forces under the command of Demosthenes dispatched by Cleon. The Athenians built a fortification to control the bay. The Athenian presence at Pylos caused a dramatic alteration to Spartan military plans. Demosthenes' skilled defense of Pylos against a combined land and sea assault led him to fame and also isolated a large number of Spartan troops on the nearby island of Sphacteria. Their subsequent capture led the Spartans to accept the Peace of Nicias.



Themes

The Peloponnesian War

By any standard, the dominant theme of the text is a critical presentation of the history of the Peloponnesian war. Indeed, the tight focus on the war (coupled with a rigorous standard of investigation) is the very reason the text has persisted for two and a half thousand years. This theme is highlighted by several narrative components, including a strict and defined chronology, a neutral point of view, and a nearly complete discounting of supernatural causative agents. While Book One does consider a period of roughly fifty years prior to the outbreak of war, it retains a tight focus on political and military events which Thucydides deems contributing factors to the war—generally, the building of the Athenian empire and the Spartan response. Books Two through Eight are tightly focused on events in the war and, with rare exceptions, do not divagate from a strict presentation of chronological history. In fact, segments of the text—such as the story of Harmodius and Aristogiton in Book Six—which wander from the tight thematic focus on the war are notable as being nearly unique.

Secondary themes which support this dominant theme include political maneuvering which impacts the war, social upheaval resulting from the war, and often quite detailed descriptions of advances in military technology which impacted the prosecution of the war. These discussions of military advances are largely focused on advances in siege works and naval architecture but also include discussions of modifications made to troop types and mixes in combined-forces operations.

The Degenerative Effects of War Upon Humanity

Thucydides' secondary thematic focus in the text concerns the effects of war upon humanity and he almost always concludes that such effects are degenerative. He is especially concerned when Greeks perpetrate evils upon other Greeks but also notes some instances involving Greeks and non-Greek combatants. Thucydides discusses, in numerous passages, the war-spawned lawlessness which contributes to various atrocities. One early example is the investment and assault on Plataea—some forces stage a costly but successful breakout; those who remain behind eventually surrender and are slaughtered. Later in the war similar episodes become rather commonplace—vanquished city populations are segregated by gender and age—adult men are executed *en masse* and adult women and children are sold into slavery. The vacated city is then resettled with conquering soldiers. This contrasts markedly with the vicissitudes of war—for example, Thucydides describes but hardly condemns the brutal conditions and wholesale slaughter of the retreating Athenian army in Sicily. In contrast, he roundly condemns the subsequent murder and brutal slavery imposed on those Athenian soldiers captured in the same engagement. Thucydides not only describes but also condemns the horrific cargo of war which results from hatred, greed, and unmitigated power. One particularly long and vivid description is found in Book Three,



3.18 through 3.85, where the Corcyraean revolution is discussed. Far from simply a description of political upheaval, Thucydides focuses on factional massacres and all manner of lawless vices. Indeed, one aspect of the enduring appeal of Thucydides' history is its essentially correct valuation of human morality.

Empire

Most of Book One is devoted to an analysis of historical events which led to the creation of the Delian League and the subsequent gradual but constant change within the league towards the political reality of Athenian empire. By the eve of the Peloponnesian war, Athens was the center of a vast empire which challenged—economically, politically, and militarily—other power centers such as Sparta and Corinth. The Delian League was originally created as a mutual-defense compact among Greek city-states. As the cost of equipping and maintaining a large navy was prohibitive to smaller political entities, they preferred to contribute to the common defense by making cash payments to the league in lieu of contributing ships or arms. Within a few years these cash payments were formalized into a levy system and Athens became the primary beneficiary as well as the primary contributor of ships and arms. Athens eventually became so dominant that the league treasury was removed from Delos to Athens and virtually all league business was determined by Athens alone. Thus evolved the Athenian Empire. The remainder of the text considers the constant struggle by Athens to retain its preeminent position within a vast empire and Sparta's attempt—successful in the end—to unseat Athens as the head of regional power.

As an Athenian, Thucydides exhibits a certain affinity for Athens which has attracted recent scholastic comment. Although in general considered neutral and objective, modern opinion indicates that Thucydides did perceive events as an Athenian historian. This is perhaps illustrated best by Thucydides' presentation of the Athenian empire which he regards as almost entirely a positive political construction.

Style

Perspective

Thucydides, son of Olorus from Halimous, the author of the text, was also a participant in the military conflict. He is thought to have been born c. 460 and died c. 395 BC, though dating is speculative. The *History of the Peloponnesian War* is his only work in existence. He is often considered to be the founder of rigorous historical investigation as he enforced a high standard of evidence and approached his material largely with a neutral bias. The author was an Athenian general who led forces in the war, contracted the plague, and was ultimately exiled by the Athenians.

Thucydides, in the introduction to the text, gives his reason for writing as a desire to record a history of events which he considered to be of monumental importance. Indeed, the very presence of so many translations, editions, and revisions of the text twenty-five centuries after its completion validates Thucydides' opinion. As an actual participant in the events, Thucydides is in a unique position to relate them with an authoritative perspective. He additionally had broad access to any number of participants and claims to have conducted extensive interviews and consulted various extant documents during the writing of the text though his willingness to make attributions is restricted. Although these claims cannot be independently verified they are generally accepted as valid. The text is famously incomplete and ends mid-sentence and prior to a consideration of the conclusion of the war; however, textual elements make it obvious that the war had ended by the time of writing of some portions of the material. No reason for the abrupt ending has been established.

Tone

The tone of the text is academic, impressive, and reliable—if difficult and occasionally obtusely difficult. Thucydides is traditionally considered to be an objective and severely detached historian who provides the reader with the first truly-modern historical account of political and military events. A more recent view suggests that the text can be better understood as a work of literature which attempts to be an objective record. Obviously, the two views are not mutually exclusive and a current scholastic synthesis is broadly underway. In any case, Thucydides is a masterful author in clear possession of his material. He marshals facts, thought, and opinion and presents them in a consistent manner. Thucydides' material is organized in a fairly strict chronology; a marked departure from earlier historical works which were predominantly thematically organized. Although Book One is complicated by a fair amount of non-chronological presentation, it is relatively easy to assign events discussed within the text to a particular year. When Thucydides wrote each city-state in the theater of operations utilized a distinct calendar system—to be as inclusive as possible, Thucydides abandoned the Athenian calendar in favor of a system of his own reckoning: the author selects a base year—the opening of hostilities—and refers to it as the 'first' year of the



history. Nearly all modern publications standardize this year to 431 BC on the modern calendar.

Another peculiarity of Thucydides' work is the extensive presentation of lengthy speeches. Although out of character in modern histories, such presentation would have been familiar to and expected by an audience steeped in oral tradition. Thucydides explains that such speeches are not verbatim transcriptions, but instead are recreations based upon recollections of witnesses and also based upon what must probably have been said in response to prevailing political conditions and the various outcomes observed. Much of the text is based upon eye-witness accounts of events—scholastically referred to as 'autopsy'—and Thucydides was himself probably a frequent witness to events described. Finally, the text is presented from a neutral point of view. Despite being an Athenian military commander in the conflict, Thucydides is usually regarded as being an unbiased historian—most, but not all, scholars feel he presents historical facts without an essential pro-Athenian bias.

Structure

The 713-page text is historically divided into eight 'books' although this division was not noted by the author. Books are further divided into enumerated 'chapters' in many editions. Two sub-sections of Book One bear traditional scholastic appellations. Each book traditionally has been notated with enumerated paragraph numbers, and in most editions, sentences within the paragraphs are also enumerated. This numbering is based primarily upon the original-language text and therefore in translation the numbering may, from time to time, appear somewhat arbitrary, though it has been scholastically maintained for some time. Nevertheless, the fairly consistent book/chapter/section numbering across translations and editions is enormously helpful to textual analysis, comparison, and study.

The text has been translated into English at least nine times; most translations have been published in a variety of formats and editions, and several of the more popular translations have been published in a staggering variety of revisions. Probably the most commonly encountered translation is that of Richard Crawley, 1874, which forms at least the basis of most revisions; this translation is used for the quotes in this summary. The entire texts of at least three translations, including that of Crawley, have been placed in the public domain and are generally available through electronic access. The various translations are often 'normalized' in various ways for each edition or revision. For example, dates are converted to the modern calendar, spellings are nationalized, punctuation is consistently applied, monetary amounts are standardized, and place-names are modernized. For these reasons, two editions of Thucydides based on Crawley's translation will rarely agree in every syntactical particular. Note that the recently-published revision by Robert Strassler is a monumental achievement and it is difficult to imagine how that text could be significantly improved.



Quotes

"Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it. This belief was not without its grounds. The preparations of both the combatants were in every department in the last state of perfection; and he could see the rest of the Hellenic race taking sides in the quarrel; those who delayed doing so at once having it in contemplation. Indeed this was the greatest movement yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes, but of a large part of the barbarian world—I had almost said of mankind. For though the events of remote antiquity, and even those that more immediately preceded the war, could not from lapse of time be clearly ascertained, yet the evidences which an inquiry carried as far back as was practicable leads me to trust, all point to the conclusion that there was nothing on a great scale, either in war or in other matters.

For instance, it is evident that the country now called Hellas had in ancient times no settled population; on the contrary, migrations were of frequent occurrence, the several tribes readily abandoning their homes under the pressure of superior numbers. Without commerce, without freedom of communication either by land or sea, cultivating no more of their territory than the exigencies of life required, destitute of capital, never planting their land (for they could not tell when an invader might not come and take it all away, and when he did come they had no walls to stop him), thinking that the necessities of daily sustenance could be supplied at one place as well as another, they cared little for shifting their habitation, and consequently neither built large cities nor attained to any other form of greatness. The richest soils were always most subject to this change of masters; such as the district now called Thessaly, Boeotia, most of the Peloponnese, Arcadia excepted, and the most fertile parts of the rest of Hellas. The goodness of the land favoured the aggrandizement of particular individuals, and thus created faction which proved a fertile source of ruin. It also invited invasion. Accordingly Attica, from the poverty of its soil enjoying from a very remote period freedom from faction, never changed its inhabitants. And here is no inconsiderable exemplification of my assertion that the migrations were the cause of there being no correspondent growth in other parts. The most powerful victims of war or faction from the rest of Hellas took refuge with the Athenians as a safe retreat; and at an early period, becoming naturalized, swelled the already large population of the city to such a height that Attica became at last too small to hold them, and they had to send out colonies to Ionia" (1.1 - 1.2).

"At first the Lacedaemonians trusted the words of Themistocles, through their friendship for him; but when others arrived, all distinctly declaring that the work was going on and already attaining some elevation, they did not know how to disbelieve it. Aware of this, he told them that rumours are deceptive, and should not be trusted; they should send some reputable persons from Sparta to inspect, whose report might be trusted. They dispatched them accordingly. Concerning these Themistocles secretly sent word to the Athenians to detain them as far as possible without putting them under open constraint, and not to let them go until they had themselves returned. For his colleagues had now joined him, Abronichus, son of Lysicles, and Aristides, son of Lysimachus, with the news



that the wall was sufficiently advanced; and he feared that when the Lacedaemonians heard the facts, they might refuse to let them go. So the Athenians detained the envoys according to his message, and Themistocles had an audience with the Lacedaemonians, and at last openly told them that Athens was now fortified sufficiently to protect its inhabitants; that any embassy which the Lacedaemonians or their allies might wish to send to them should in future proceed on the assumption that the people to whom they were going was able to distinguish both its own and the general interests. That when the Athenians thought fit to abandon their city and to embark in their ships, they ventured on that perilous step without consulting them; and that on the other hand, wherever they had deliberated with the Lacedaemonians, they had proved themselves to be in judgment second to none. That they now thought it fit that their city should have a wall, and that this would be more for the advantage of both the citizens of Athens and the Hellenic confederacy; for without equal military strength it was impossible to contribute equal or fair counsel to the common interest. It followed, he observed, either that all the members of the confederacy should be without walls, or that the present step should be considered a right one" (1.91).

"Most of my predecessors in this place have commended him who made this speech part of the law, telling us that it is well that it should be delivered at the burial of those who fall in battle. For myself, I should have thought that the worth which had displayed itself in deeds would be sufficiently rewarded by honours also shown by deeds; such as you now see in this funeral prepared at the people's cost. And I could have wished that the reputations of many brave men were not to be imperiled in the mouth of a single individual, to stand or fall according as he spoke well or ill. For it is hard to speak properly upon a subject where it is even difficult to convince your hearers that you are speaking the truth. On the one hand, the friend who is familiar with every fact of the story may think that some point has not been set forth with that fullness which he wishes and knows it to deserve; on the other, he who is a stranger to the matter may be led by envy to suspect exaggeration if he hears anything above his own nature. For men can endure to hear others praised only so long as they can severally persuade themselves of their own ability to equal the actions recounted: when this point is passed, envy comes in and with it incredulity. However, since our ancestors have stamped this custom with their approval, it becomes my duty to obey the law and to try to satisfy your several wishes and opinions as best I may.

'I shall begin with our ancestors: it is both just and proper that they should have the honour of the first mention on an occasion like the present. They dwelt in the country without break in the succession from generation to generation, and handed it down free to the present time by their valour. And if our more remote ancestors deserve praise, much more do our own fathers, who added to their inheritance the empire which we now possess, and spared no pains to be able to leave their acquisitions to us of the present generation. Lastly, there are few parts of our dominions that have not been augmented by those of us here, who are still more or less in the vigour of life; while the mother country has been furnished by us with everything that can enable her to depend on her own resources whether for war or for peace. That part of our history which tells of the military achievements which gave us our several possessions, or of the ready valour with which either we or our fathers stemmed the tide of Hellenic or foreign



aggression, is a theme too familiar to my hearers for me to dilate on, and I shall therefore pass it by. But what was the road by which we reached our position, what the form of government under which our greatness grew, what the national habits out of which it sprang; these are questions which I may try to solve before I proceed to my panegyric upon these men; since I think this to be a subject upon which on the present occasion a speaker may properly dwell, and to which the whole assemblage, whether citizens or foreigners, may listen with advantage" (2.35 - 2.36).

"That year then is admitted to have been otherwise unprecedentedly free from sickness; and such few cases as occurred all determined in this. As a rule, however, there was no ostensible cause; but people in good health were all of a sudden attacked by violent heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes, the inward parts, such as the throat or tongue, becoming bloody and emitting an unnatural and fetid breath. These symptoms were followed by sneezing and hoarseness, after which the pain soon reached the chest, and produced a hard cough. When it fixed in the stomach, it upset it; and discharges of bile of every kind named by physicians ensued, accompanied by very great distress. In most cases also an ineffectual retching followed, producing violent spasms, which in some cases ceased soon after, in others much later. Externally the body was not very hot to the touch, nor pale in its appearance, but reddish, livid, and breaking out into small pustules and ulcers. But internally it burned so that the patient could not bear to have on him clothing or linen even of the very lightest description; or indeed to be otherwise than stark naked. What they would have liked best would have been to throw themselves into cold water; as indeed was done by some of the neglected sick, who plunged into the rain-tanks in their agonies of unquenchable thirst; though it made no difference whether they drank little or much. Besides this, the miserable feeling of not being able to rest or sleep never ceased to torment them. The body meanwhile did not waste away so long as the distemper was at its height, but held out to a marvel against its ravages; so that when they succumbed, as in most cases, on the seventh or eighth day to the internal inflammation, they had still some strength in them. But if they passed this stage, and the disease descended further into the bowels, inducing a violent ulceration there accompanied by severe diarrhoea, this brought on a weakness which was generally fatal. For the disorder first settled in the head, ran its course from thence through the whole of the body, and, even where it did not prove mortal, it still left its mark on the extremities; for it settled in the privy parts, the fingers and the toes, and many escaped with the loss of these, some too with that of their eyes. Others again were seized with an entire loss of memory on their first recovery, and did not know either themselves or their friends.

But while the nature of the distemper was such as to baffle all description, and its attacks almost too grievous for human nature to endure, it was still in the following circumstance that its difference from all ordinary disorders was most clearly shown. All the birds and beasts that prey upon human bodies, either abstained from touching them (though there were many lying unburied), or died after tasting them. In proof of this, it was noticed that birds of this kind actually disappeared; they were not about the bodies, or indeed to be seen at all. But of course the effects which I have mentioned could best be studied in a domestic animal like the dog" (2.49 - 2.50).



"Thus every form of iniquity took root in the Hellenic countries by reason of the troubles. The ancient simplicity into which honour so largely entered was laughed down and disappeared; and society became divided into camps in which no man trusted his fellow. To put an end to this, there was neither promise to be depended upon, nor oath that could command respect; but all parties dwelling rather in their calculation upon the hopelessness of a permanent state of things, were more intent upon self-defence than capable of confidence. In this contest the blunter wits were most successful. Apprehensive of their own deficiencies and of the cleverness of their antagonists, they feared to be worsted in debate and to be surprised by the combinations of their more versatile opponents, and so at once boldly had recourse to action: while their adversaries, arrogantly thinking that they should know in time, and that it was unnecessary to secure by action what policy afforded, often fell victims to their want of precaution.

Meanwhile Corcyra gave the first example of most of the crimes alluded to; of the reprisals exacted by the governed who had never experienced equitable treatment or indeed aught but insolence from their rulers—when their hour came; of the iniquitous resolves of those who desired to get rid of their accustomed poverty, and ardently coveted their neighbours' goods; and lastly, of the savage and pitiless excesses into which men who had begun the struggle, not in a class but in a party spirit, were hurried by their ungovernable passions. In the confusion into which life was now thrown in the cities, human nature, always rebelling against the law and now its master, gladly showed itself ungoverned in passion, above respect for justice, and the enemy of all superiority; since revenge would not have been set above religion, and gain above justice, had it not been for the fatal power of envy. Indeed men too often take upon themselves in the prosecution of their revenge to set the example of doing away with those general laws to which all alike can look for salvation in adversity, instead of allowing them to subsist against the day of danger when their aid may be required" (3.83-3.84).

"Soldiers and comrades in this adventure, I hope that none of you in our present strait will think to show his wit by exactly calculating all the perils that encompass us, but that you will rather hasten to close with the enemy, without staying to count the odds, seeing in this your best chance of safety. In emergencies like ours calculation is out of place; the sooner the danger is faced the better. To my mind also most of the chances are for us, if we will only stand fast and not throw away our advantages, overawed by the numbers of the enemy. One of the points in our favour is the awkwardness of the landing. This, however, only helps us if we stand our ground. If we give way it will be practicable enough, in spite of its natural difficulty, without a defender; and the enemy will instantly become more formidable from the difficulty he will have in retreating, supposing that we succeed in repulsing him, which we shall find it easier to do, while he is on board his ships, than after he has landed and meets us on equal terms. As to his numbers, these need not too much alarm you. Large as they may be he can only engage in small detachments, from the impossibility of bringing to. Besides, the numerical superiority that we have to meet is not that of an army on land with everything else equal, but of troops on board ship, upon an element where many favourable accidents are required to act with effect. I therefore consider that his difficulties may be



fairly set against our numerical deficiencies, and at the same time I charge you, as Athenians who know by experience what landing from ships on a hostile territory means, and how impossible it is to drive back an enemy determined enough to stand his ground and not to be frightened away by the surf and the terrors of the ships sailing in, to stand fast in the present emergency, beat back the enemy at the water's edge, and save yourselves and the place" (4.10).

"I certainly all along remember from the beginning to the end of the war its being commonly declared that it would last thrice nine years. I lived through the whole of it, being of an age to comprehend events, and giving my attention to them in order to know the exact truth about them. It was also my fate to be an exile from my country for twenty years after my command at Amphipolis; and being present with both parties, and more especially with the Peloponnesians by reason of my exile, I had leisure to observe affairs somewhat particularly. I will accordingly now relate the differences that arose after the ten years' war, the breach of the treaty, and the hostilities that followed" (5.26.4 - 5.26.6).

Melians. 'To the fairness of quietly instructing each other as you propose there is nothing to object; but your military preparations are too far advanced to agree with what you say, as we see you are come to be judges in your own cause, and that all we can reasonably expect from this negotiation is war, if we prove to have right on our side and refuse to submit, and in the contrary case, slavery.'

Athenians. 'If you have met to reason about presentiments of the future, or for anything else than to consult for the safety of your state upon the facts that you see before you, we will give over; otherwise we will go on.'

Melians. 'It is natural and excusable for men in our position to turn more ways than one both in thought and utterance. However, the question in this conference is, as you say, the safety of our country; and the discussion, if you please, can proceed in the way which you propose.'

Athenians. 'For ourselves, we shall not trouble you with specious pretences—either of how we have a right to our empire because we overthrew the Mede, or are now attacking you because of wrong that you have done us—and make a long speech which would not be believed; and in return we hope that you, instead of thinking to influence us by saying that you did not join the Lacedaemonians, although their colonists, or that you have done us no wrong, will aim at what is feasible, holding in view the real sentiments of us both; since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.'

Melians. 'As we think, at any rate, it is expedient—we speak as we are obliged, since you enjoin us to let right alone and talk only of interest—that you should not destroy what is our common protection, the privilege of being allowed in danger to invoke what is fair and right, and even to profit by arguments not strictly valid if they can be got to



pass current. And you are as much interested in this as any, as your fall would be a signal for the heaviest vengeance and an example for the world to meditate upon.'

Athenians. 'The end of our empire, if end it should, does not frighten us: a rival empire like Lacedaemon, even if Lacedaemon was our real antagonist, is not so terrible to the vanquished as subjects who by themselves attack and overpower their rulers. This, however, is a risk that we are content to take. We will now proceed to show you that we are come here in the interest of our empire, and that we shall say what we are now going to say, for the preservation of your country; as we would fain exercise that empire over you without trouble, and see you preserved for the good of us both.'

Melians. 'And how, pray, could it turn out as good for us to serve as for you to rule?'

Athenians. 'Because you would have the advantage of submitting before suffering the worst, and we should gain by not destroying you'" (5.86 - 5.93).

"Summer was now over. The next winter the Lacedaemonians intended to invade the Argive territory, but arriving at the frontier found the sacrifices for crossing unfavourable, and went back again. This intention of theirs gave the Argives suspicions of certain of their fellow citizens, some of whom they arrested; others, however, escaped them. About the same time the Melians again took another part of the Athenian lines which were but feebly garrisoned. Reinforcements afterwards arriving from Athens in consequence, under the command of Philocrates, son of Demeas, the siege was now pressed vigorously; and some treachery taking place inside, the Melians surrendered at discretion to the Athenians, who put to death all the grown men whom they took, and sold the women and children for slaves, and subsequently sent out five hundred colonists and inhabited the place themselves" (5.116).

"In the midst of these preparations all the stone Hermae in the city of Athens, that is to say the customary square figures, so common in the doorways of private houses and temples, had in one night most of them their faces mutilated. No one knew who had done it, but large public rewards were offered to find the authors; and it was further voted that any one who knew of any other act of impiety having been committed should come and give information without fear of consequences, whether he were citizen, alien, or slave. The matter was taken up the more seriously, as it was thought to be ominous for the expedition, and part of a conspiracy to bring about a revolution and to upset the democracy.

Information was given accordingly by some resident aliens and body servants, not about the Hermae but about some previous mutilations of other images perpetrated by young men in a drunken frolic, and of mock celebrations of the mysteries, averred to take place in private houses. Alcibiades being implicated in this charge, it was taken hold of by those who could least endure him, because he stood in the way of their obtaining the undisturbed direction of the people, and who thought that if he were once removed the first place would be theirs. These accordingly magnified the matter and loudly proclaimed that the affair of the mysteries and the mutilation of the Hermae were part and parcel of a scheme to overthrow the democracy, and that nothing of all this had



been done without Alcibiades; the proofs alleged being the general and undemocratic licence of his life and habits.

Alcibiades repelled on the spot the charges in question, and also before going on the expedition, the preparations for which were now complete, offered to stand his trial, that it might be seen whether he was guilty of the acts imputed to him; desiring to be punished if found guilty, but, if acquitted, to take the command. Meanwhile he protested against their receiving slanders against him in his absence, and begged them rather to put him to death at once if he were guilty, and pointed out the imprudence of sending him out at the head of so large an army, with so serious a charge still undecided. But his enemies feared that he would have the army for him if he were tried immediately, and that the people might relent in favour of the man whom they already caressed as the cause of the Argives and some of the Mantineans joining in the expedition, and did their utmost to get this proposition rejected, putting forward other orators who said that he ought at present to sail and not delay the departure of the army, and be tried on his return within a fixed number of days; their plan being to have him sent for and brought home for trial upon some graver charge, which they would the more easily get up in his absence. Accordingly it was decreed that he should sail" (6.27 - 6.29).

"Accordingly, not wishing to incur expense in their present want of money, they sent back at once the Thracians who came too late for Demosthenes, under the conduct of Diitrephes, who was instructed, as they were to pass through the Euripus, to make use of them if possible in the voyage alongshore to injure the enemy. Diitrephes first landed them at Tanagra and hastily snatched some booty; he then sailed across the Euripus in the evening from Chalcis in Euboea and disembarking in Boeotia led them against Mycalessus. The night he passed unobserved near the temple of Hermes, not quite two miles from Mycalessus, and at daybreak assaulted and took the town, which is not a large one; the inhabitants being off their guard and not expecting that any one would ever come up so far from the sea to molest them, the wall too being weak, and in some places having tumbled down, while in others it had not been built to any height, and the gates also being left open through their feeling of security. The Thracians bursting into Mycalessus sacked the houses and temples, and butchered the inhabitants, sparing neither youth nor age, but killing all they fell in with, one after the other, children and women, and even beasts of burden, and whatever other living creatures they saw; the Thracian race, like the bloodiest of the barbarians, being even more so when it has nothing to fear. Everywhere confusion reigned and death in all its shapes; and in particular they attacked a boys' school, the largest that there was in the place, into which the children had just gone, and massacred them all. In short, the disaster falling upon the whole town was unsurpassed in magnitude, and unapproached by any in suddenness and in horror.

Meanwhile the Thebans heard of it and marched to the rescue, and overtaking the Thracians before they had gone far, recovered the plunder and drove them in panic to the Euripus and the sea, where the vessels which brought them were lying. The greatest slaughter took place while they were embarking, as they did not know how to swim, and those in the vessels on seeing what was going on onshore moored them out of bowshot: in the rest of the retreat the Thracians made a very respectable defence



against the Theban horse, by which they were first attacked, dashing out and closing their ranks according to the tactics of their country, and lost only a few men in that part of the affair. A good number who were after plunder were actually caught in the town and put to death. Altogether the Thracians had two hundred and fifty killed out of thirteen hundred, the Thebans and the rest who came to the rescue about twenty, troopers and heavy infantry, with Scirphondas, one of the Boeotarchs. The Mycalessians lost a large proportion of their population" (7.30 - 7.31).

"As soon as it was day Nicias put his army in motion, pressed, as before, by the Syracusans and their allies, pelted from every side by their missiles, and struck down by their javelins. The Athenians pushed on for the Assinarus, impelled by the attacks made upon them from every side by a numerous cavalry and the swarm of other arms, fancying that they should breathe more freely if once across the river, and driven on also by their exhaustion and craving for water. Once there they rushed in, and all order was at an end, each man wanting to cross first, and the attacks of the enemy making it difficult to cross at all; forced to huddle together, they fell against and trod down one another, some dying immediately upon the javelins, others getting entangled together and stumbling over the articles of baggage, without being able to rise again. Meanwhile the opposite bank, which was steep, was lined by the Syracusans, who showered missiles down upon the Athenians, most of them drinking greedily and heaped together in disorder in the hollow bed of the river. The Peloponnesians also came down and butchered them, especially those in the water, which was thus immediately spoiled, but which they went on drinking just the same, mud and all, bloody as it was, most even fighting to have it" (7.84).

"The prisoners in the quarries were at first hardly treated by the Syracusans. Crowded in a narrow hole, without any roof to cover them, the heat of the sun and the stifling closeness of the air tormented them during the day, and then the nights, which came on autumnal and chilly, made them ill by the violence of the change; besides, as they had to do everything in the same place for want of room, and the bodies of those who died of their wounds or from the variation in the temperature, or from similar causes, were left heaped together one upon another, intolerable stench arose; while hunger and thirst never ceased to afflict them, each man during eight months having only half a pint of water and a pint of corn given him daily. In short, no single suffering to be apprehended by men thrust into such a place was spared them. For some seventy days they thus lived all together, after which all, except the Athenians and any Siceliots or Italiots who had joined in the expedition, were sold. The total number of prisoners taken it would be difficult to state exactly, but it could not have been less than seven thousand.

This was the greatest Hellenic achievement of any in this war, or, in my opinion, in Hellenic history; at once most glorious to the victors, and most calamitous to the conquered. They were beaten at all points and altogether; all that they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army, everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned home. Such were the events in Sicily" (7.87).



"The people were at first highly irritated at the mention of an oligarchy, but upon understanding clearly from Pisander that this was the only resource left, they took counsel of their fears, and promised themselves some day to change the government again, and gave way. They accordingly voted that Pisander should sail with ten others and make the best arrangement that they could with Tissaphernes and Alcibiades. At the same time the people, upon a false accusation of Pisander, dismissed Phrynichus from his post together with his colleague Scironides, sending Diomedon and Leon to replace them in the command of the fleet. The accusation was that Phrynichus had betrayed Iasus and Amorges; and Pisander brought it because he thought him a man unfit for the business now in hand with Alcibiades. Pisander also went the round of all the clubs already existing in the city for help in lawsuits and elections, and urged them to draw together and to unite their efforts for the overthrow of the democracy; and after taking all other measures required by the circumstances, so that no time might be lost, set off with his ten companions on his voyage to Tissaphernes" (8.54).

"Tissaphernes, upon hearing of this act of the Peloponnesians in addition to what had occurred at Miletus and Cnidus, where his garrisons had been also expelled, now saw that the breach between them was serious; and fearing further injury from them, and being also vexed to think that Pharnabazus should receive them, and in less time and at less cost perhaps succeed better against Athens than he had done, determined to rejoin them in the Hellespont, in order to complain of the events at Antandros and excuse himself as best he could in the matter of the Phoenician fleet and of the other charges against him. Accordingly he went first to Ephesus and offered sacrifice to Artemis...

"[When the winter after this summer is over the twenty-first year of this war will be completed]" (8.109).



Topics for Discussion

Thucydides apparently wrote the history as a single unit of text. Later historians divided it into eight 'books'. Later still, scholars divided each book into numerous 'paragraphs' and, eventually, subdivided the paragraphs into 'sections'. This is clearly convenient for scholastic study of the material—especially across various translations and editions. What impact do you think these divisions might have on a modern reader's perception of events?

The first segment of the text (1.1 - 1.23) is referred to scholastically as the 'Archaeology' and is discussed at length in nearly every analysis of Thucydides' work. Why do you think this segment is so important? If it were omitted, what effect might it have on our perception of the remainder of the text?

Pericles' funeral oration is probably the most-quoted and most-famous of all the 141 speeches recorded in the history. What syntactical and thematic aspects of this particular speech contribute to its enduring, timeless quality? You may want to review the speech at 2.34 - 2.46.

During nearly every year of hostilities, a Spartan land force invaded Attica and ravaged the countryside. Meanwhile, an Athenian naval force raided up and down the coast of the Peloponnesus. Thucydides argues that the Spartan invasions were largely ineffectual whereas the Athenian raids proved devastating. What aspects of the Athenian economy rendered it relatively resilient to massive crop loss? Why was Sparta so damaged by transient Athenian raids?

Thucydides relates (e.g., review 4.65) that returning Athenian generals were sometimes punished, fined, or exiled for defeats suffered in combat. In fact, Thucydides himself was exiled for twenty years after failing to hold a city against the Spartan Brasidas. Do you think this treatment of defeated military leaders is fair? What do you think it might have accomplished?

In 5.20, Thucydides discusses his methodology for dating events by year and season (rather than by using magistrates' names or some other peculiar calendar). Do you think that Thucydides' choice was valid and useful? Why or why not?

In 6.27, Thucydides describes the mutilation of the Hermae just prior to the sailing of the Athenian fleet. This is viewed as a negative omen but the fleet sails anyway—to disaster, as a matter of fact. Alcibiades is blamed for the mutilation and recalled to stand trial for blasphemy. Instead, he defects to Sparta and causes great harm to the Athenians. To a modern reader the sophomoric mutilation of the Hermae appears nearly comical and inconsequential, but to the Greeks it was a serious religious affront. What aspects of modern culture or society might be logically or functionally parallel to the Hermae?



Alcibiades was a vocal Greek politician and military leader during the latter events of the Peloponnesian war. He loudly advocated for the huge Athenian expedition against Syracuse and Thucydides considered him instrumental in causing that action. Before the Athenians reached Sicily, however, Alcibiades defected from the Athenian cause and went over to the Spartans, where he remained for several months assisting the Spartans and causing immeasurable harm to Athens. Then Alcibiades left Sparta and joined with the hated Persian Empire where his counsel caused harm to all Greek cities. Surprisingly, he was then recalled to Samos to lead Athenian military forces there. If you were an Athenian hoplite on Samos, would you have voted to recall Alcibiades? Why or why not?

Thucydides presents men of action such as Pericles, Gylippus, Brasidas, and Demosthenes, as essentially positive individuals, even going so far as to gloss over obvious faults. In contrast, he treats other men, such as Cleon and Nicias, fairly harshly—even to the point of mildly denigrating their successes. Do you think that in reality most people are either essentially positive or substantially negative forces in society?

The text was clearly either written or heavily edited after the conclusion of hostilities in 404 BC—and yet it famously ends mid-sentence and mid-year in 411 BC. First, offer several explanations for how this curious circumstance might have occurred. Second, assume that the text was 'complete'—e.g., that it detailed events up to and perhaps even through 404 BC; how might this change the meaning of the text?

Of all the men discussed in the text, which would you most like to meet? Why?

Women are nearly non-existent within Thucydides' text. Does this reflect an essential sexist bias of the author? Or is it simply a reflection of the realities of ancient Greek political and military activities?

In the discussion of the Athenian investiture of Syracuse, Thucydides states that the morale in Syracuse was critically low and that the Athenians were nearly assured a complete victory. And then Gylippus, the Spartan general, arrived in Syracuse to take command of the defense (review 7.1 - 7.2, etc.). Within a few months the Athenian navy was routed, the Athenian army was annihilated, and the regional balance of power had shifted permanently away from Athens. Thucydides seems to credit Gylippus nearly singly for this remarkable reversal of fortune. Do you think that one man can indeed make such a profound impact on the course of history? Discuss.

In the final analysis, is the text simply a sterile and arcane history of ancient events? Or does it hold fundamental lessons which modern readers would do well to heed?