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# The Peloponnesian War

From 431 to 404 BCE, the mighty city-states of Athens and Sparta battled for control of the Greek world. Let's pay a visit to these ancient civilizations—and discover why their differences culminated in the Peloponnesian War.

Though Athens and Sparta were geographically close, their cultures couldn't have been more distant. Athens had risen to prominence around 500 BCE as a center of arts and science. Boys born to upper-class families were encouraged to pursue education or go into business. Sparta, on the other hand, had a singular focus: war. At age seven, boys were required to enter the agoge, a program that trained Spartan citizens to become fearsome warriors. As a result, Sparta became known for its military power, with some of the most talented hoplites, or foot soldiers, of the ancient world.

For decades, conflict had been brewing between the two powers. After holding off repeated assaults by the Persian Empire, Athenian leaders created the Delian League, an association of Greek city-states that agreed to defend one another from invasion. At the same time, Athens was becoming increasingly powerful, subjugating weaker city-states and using funds from the Delian League to expand its cultural and political influence throughout the region. Some city-states, tired of paying tributes to the Delian League, tried to rebel against Athens but were shut down. Spartan leaders exploited the growing resentment of these city-states by positioning Sparta as a liberating force for all of Greece.

The first phase of the Peloponnesian War began in 431 BCE and lasted for 10 years. Commonly referred to as the Archidamian War, a reference to Sparta's king at the time of the war's outbreak, this period was not especially eventful from a military standpoint. Athens constructed a wall that extended all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, which was mostly successful at keeping the Spartans out. Spartan forces attempted to draw out the Athenians by destroying their crop supply, while the Athenians used their powerful navy to attack the Peloponnese peninsula, the Spartan homeland. Just as Athenian victory seemed within reach, a plague breached the city's walls, wiping out a quarter of the entire population—including Pericles, the city's great general and leader.

The Archidamian War ended in 421 BCE, when Sparta and Athens signed a peace treaty. They agreed to protect each other for the next 50 years—but the so-called Peace of Nicias only lasted for six. Tensions rose as leaders from both sides attempted to convince smaller city-states to join their cause. Then, in 415 BCE, the Athenians launched a massive assault on Sicily, hoping to capture the island and secure the resources they needed to fight back against Sparta. The expedition was a disaster: With Spartan forces backing the Sicilians, Athens lost almost its entire navy over the course of four years. Meanwhile, the Spartans continued to expand their domain through political maneuvering and conquest.

Back home, Athens was in turmoil. A series of coups had destabilized the government, and the new leaders continued to refuse peace offerings from the Spartans. It wasn't until 404 BCE, after another decisive defeat at sea and a naval blockade that led to widespread starvation, that the Athenians finally conceded.

Throughout the Peloponnesian War, both sides pioneered battle tactics that would remain a part of warfare for years to come. Both the Spartan and the Athenian armies, which had customarily fought on foot, began using cavalry, or soldiers mounted on horseback. Their navies constructed enormous battleships to be powered by more than 150 rowers. At the same time, a new social class began to emerge: the mercenaries, or professional soldiers from other regions who were paid to participate in battle. It's a tradition that persists in warfare to this day.

Though Athens was allowed to remain a city, it was never restored to its former glory. Instead, it became a center for politics and philosophy. Many influential scholars, including Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, founded their revolutionary schools of thought in Athens following the war. As for Sparta, their victory granted them political dominance in the region—but only temporarily. Within decades, the rival city-state of Thebes rose to crush Sparta, establishing their own dominance over the Greek peninsula.