

III. The Decline and Fall of Greece (431-146 BC)

A. The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC)

1. The main reasons Sparta and Athens went to war were that they had opposite forms of government and that they were rivals for the leadership of Greece.
2. Even though they had agreed to the “Thirty Years Peace,” the war began in 431 BC when Athens agreed to help its ally Corcyra defend itself against Corinth, an ally of Sparta. Sparta decided this was reason enough to fight.
3. This war is famous because of the Greek historian Thucydides wrote the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, but today we don’t need to know the details.
4. The most important result of the war was the defeat of Athens by Sparta, and its effect on Athenian democracy. The Spartans chose thirty aristocrats to be the “Thirty Tyrants” to force the city to follow Sparta’s orders.
5. When the democrats of Athens took over again, they sought to punish anyone connected to the tyrants. The philosopher Socrates was among those critical of democracy, and in c.399 BC the people of Athens voted that he be killed.

B. Sparta and Thebes in Charge (404-362 BC)

1. Sparta was now in command of Greece, and the Spartans decided to send an army of 10,000 Greek soldiers into the Persian empire to help a Persian satrap rebel against the Persian king. This became known as the “Expedition of the Ten Thousand.”
2. Persian answered by encouraging cities like Thebes against Sparta. This tilted the “balance of power” against Sparta.
3. Also a great Theban commander named Epaminondas created a new kind of phalanx.
4. Epaminondas then led the Theban army to victory against Sparta, and for a time Thebes was the most powerful city in Greece.

C. The Rise of Alexander the Great

1. When Epaminondas led Thebes in its conquest of northern Greece, the Thebans had taken hostages from the royal families of their tributary allies, including a backward part of Greece called Macedonia.
2. Epaminondas took one of the hostages, a prince named Philip, into his own household and brought him up. He even taught him the art of war and the nature of Greek politics.
3. When Philip returned home in his later life, he taught the Macedonians to fight in the Theban way, and he then returned to Greece as a conqueror. Thebes had by that point exhausted itself as well.
4. Philip, however, died soon after conquering Greece, so it was his son Alexander who became the most famous of Greece’s Macedonian rulers.

5. As a youth, Alexander had been tutored by the greatest of the Greek philosophers, Aristotle, but he developed no love of wisdom; he preferred lessons in the art of war, and he decided at a young age that he would conquer Persia.

D. Alexander Conquers Persia

1. In 334 BC, Alexander crossed the Hellespont headed east.
2. At the city of Gordium there was a complicated knot attached to a cart within a temple that had never been undone. The myth surrounding the knot was that the man who could undo it would become the ruler of Asia. Alexander considered the knot briefly, and then *cut* it with his sword. (The expression “cutting the Gordian knot” means “finding an a tricky solution to a complicated problem.”)
3. From Gordium, Alexander advanced down to Egypt, where he became the pharaoh, and basically behaved the same way as a Persian king would behave.
4. After the Battle of Gaugamela of 331 BC, Darius fled and was killed by one of his own satraps. Alexander entered the city of Babylon as a “liberator” once again.
5. He burned down the Persian capital of Persepolis as revenge for the sack of Athens, and became the ruler of Persia.

E. Conquest of the East and Final Years

1. Alexander wanted to conquer the world and rule it like an Asian ruler. He demanded that everyone bow down before him.
2. Alexander's own soldiers were humiliated by this requirement, but Alexander insisted on adopting the ways of the people he conquered in order to win their respect and obedience.
3. When the Macedonian army reached India, however, his officers refused to go on.
4. Alexander gave in, and the army returned to Persia.
5. Struck by a mysterious fever, Alexander then died at age 33 in 323 BC.

F. The Greek World after Alexander (323-146 BC)

1. When asked to whom his kingdom should be granted, Alexander answered "to the strongest."
2. No single ruler, however, was able to maintain power. The empire was divided back into the four basic areas from before: Persia, Egypt, Macedonia (and Lydia), and Greece.
3. Sadly, the history of Greece after Alexander never had the same quality as the classical period. It was exhausted by war and its people had lost their creative spark. Since a traditional word to describe things that are truly Greek is “Hellenic,” historians have described this lesser period of decline and cultural mediocrity after Alexander as the “Hellenistic” period.
4. This period lasted all the way until the Roman conquest of Greece in 146 BC.