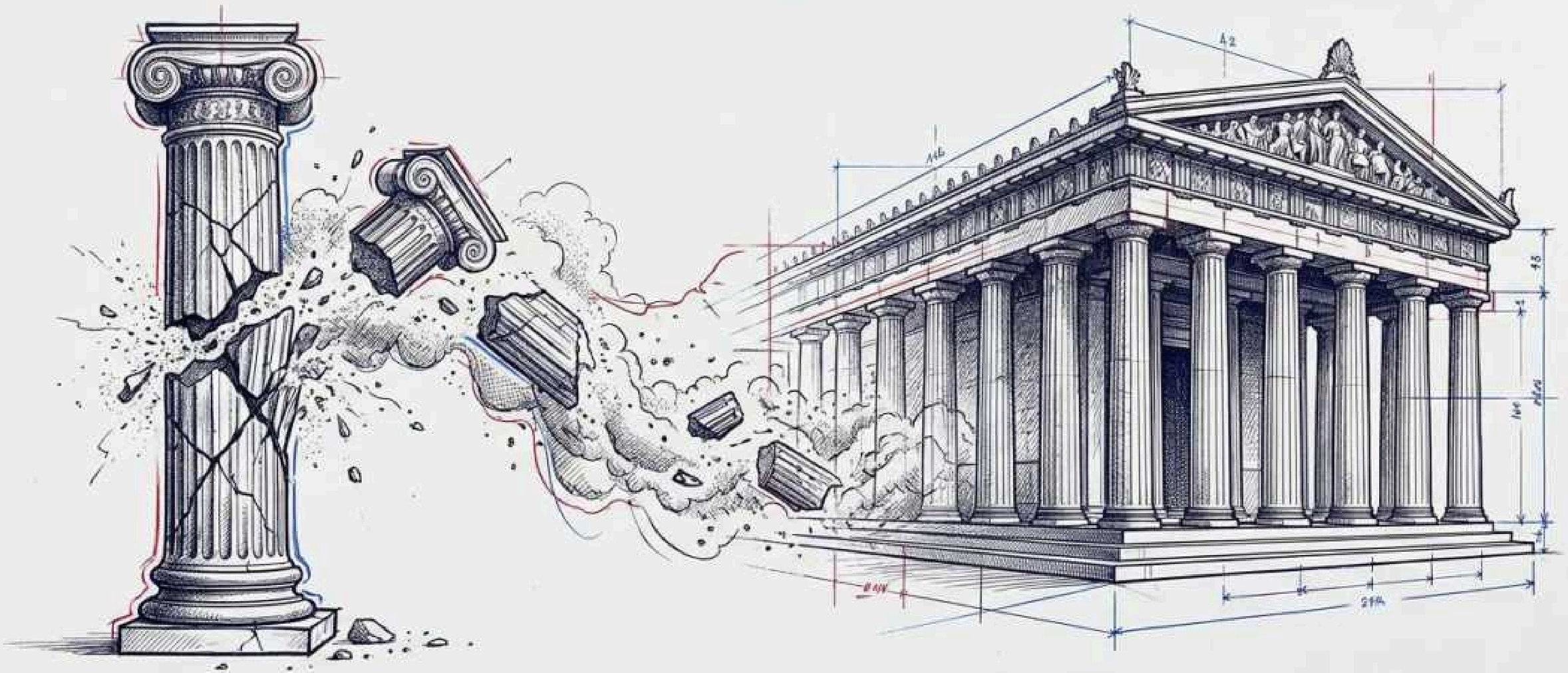
Lecture 2: Empires and the Greek World

1200 BCE to 323 BCE

¶ 2.1



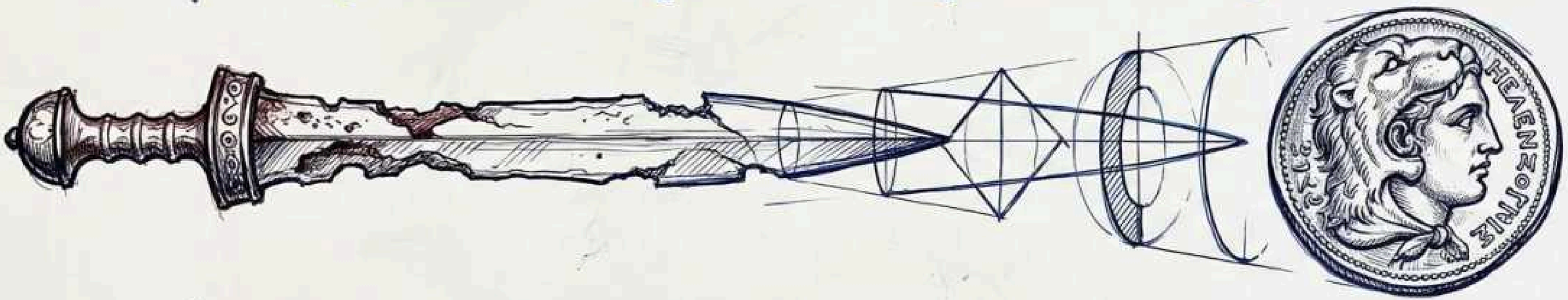
¶ 2.2

Collapse & Recovery

New Alphabets

Huge Empires

The First Democracy



1200 BCE
(Bronze Age Catastrophe)

323 BCE
(Death of Alexander)

"The Scholars Whiteboard" design

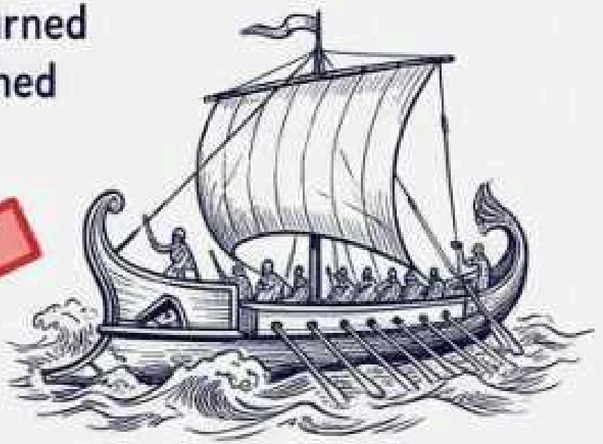
¶ 2.3



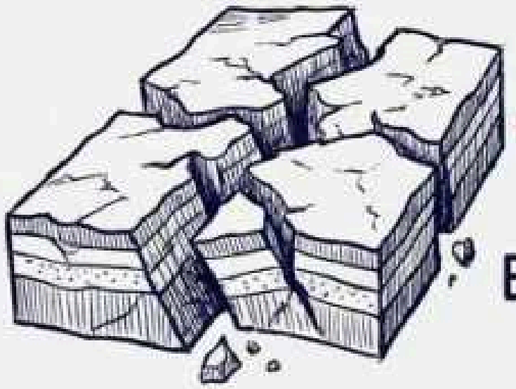
Drought

- Mycenaean palaces burned
- Hittite empire vanished
- Egypt weakened

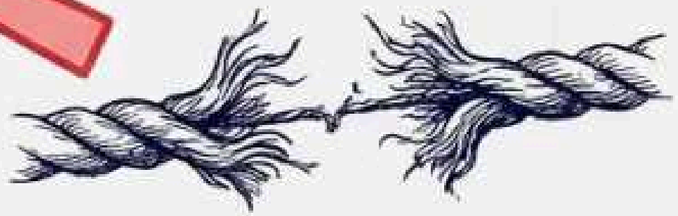
1200 BCE:
State Collapse
(A few short decades)



Invasions by
Sea Peoples



Earthquakes

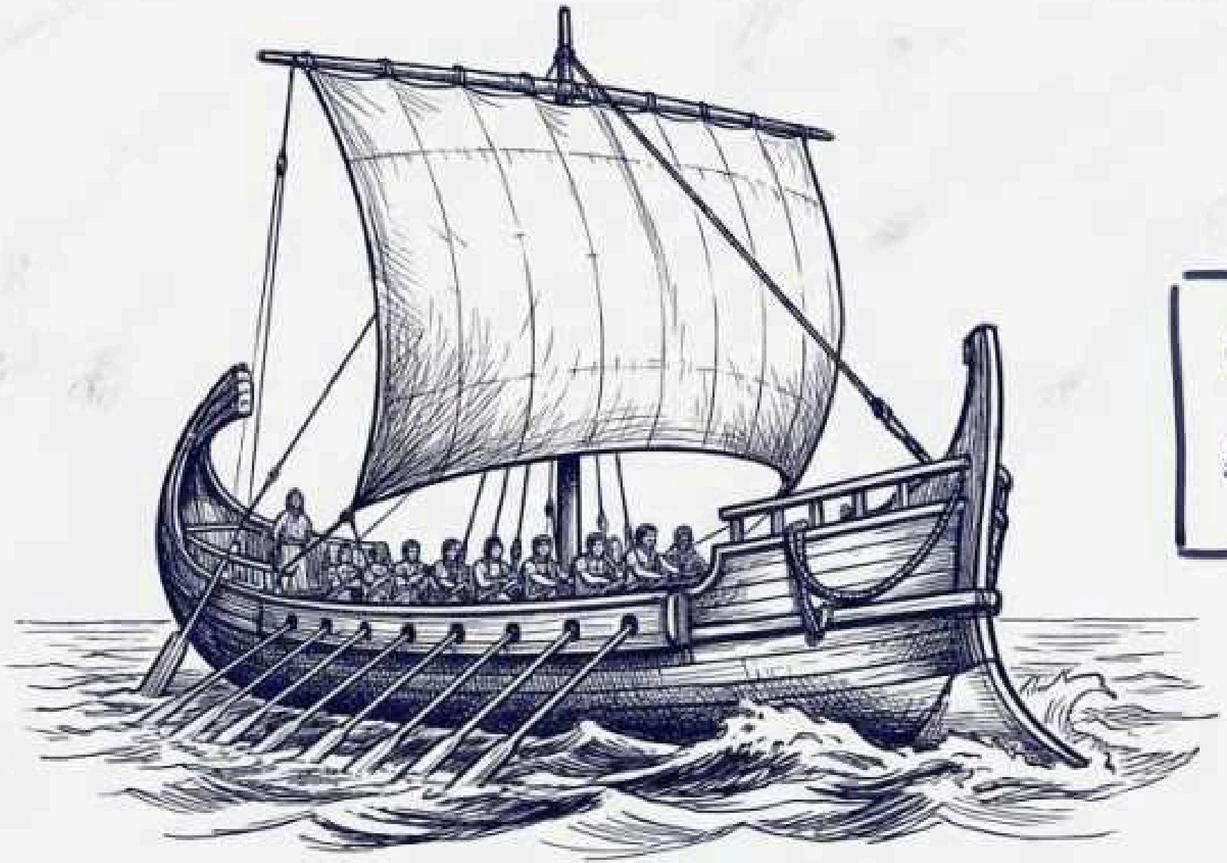


Broken Trade Routes

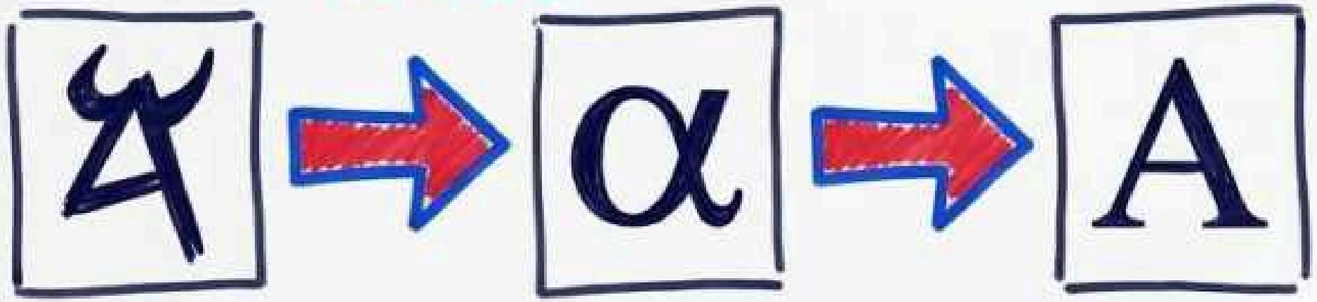
Key Takeaway: A combination of several pressures at once.

¶2.4

Phoenicians (Tyre): Spread a simple 22-letter alphabet. (Easier than cuneiform/hieroglyphs).



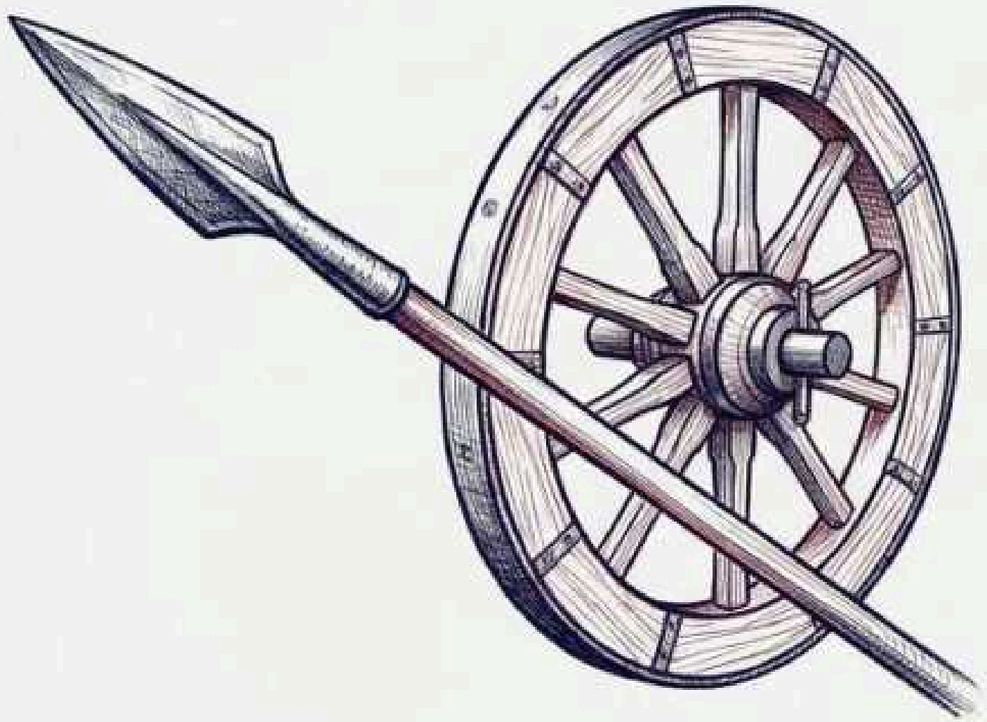
+ Vowels



Greeks: Added vowels to the Phoenician base.

Israelites: Formed kingdoms; compiled scriptures (the Hebrew Bible), becoming central to later religions.

The War Machine (9th–7th C BCE)



- Iron tools/weapons (cheaper than bronze)
- Disciplined armies
- Feared for deportations & brutal punishments

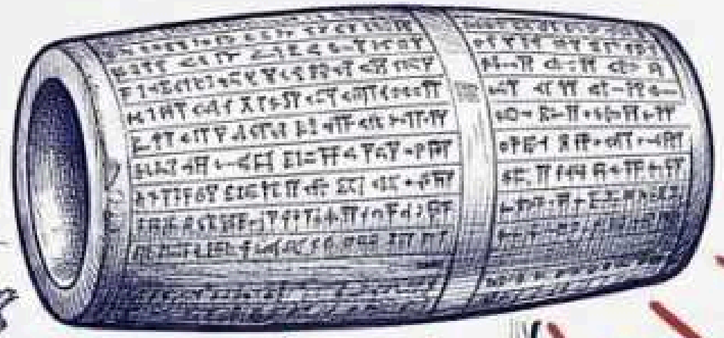
The Libraries

¶2.5



- King Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh
- Thousands of clay tablets gathered
- Still read today

¶2.6



Respect for local gods.

Tolerance

Let exiled peoples return home

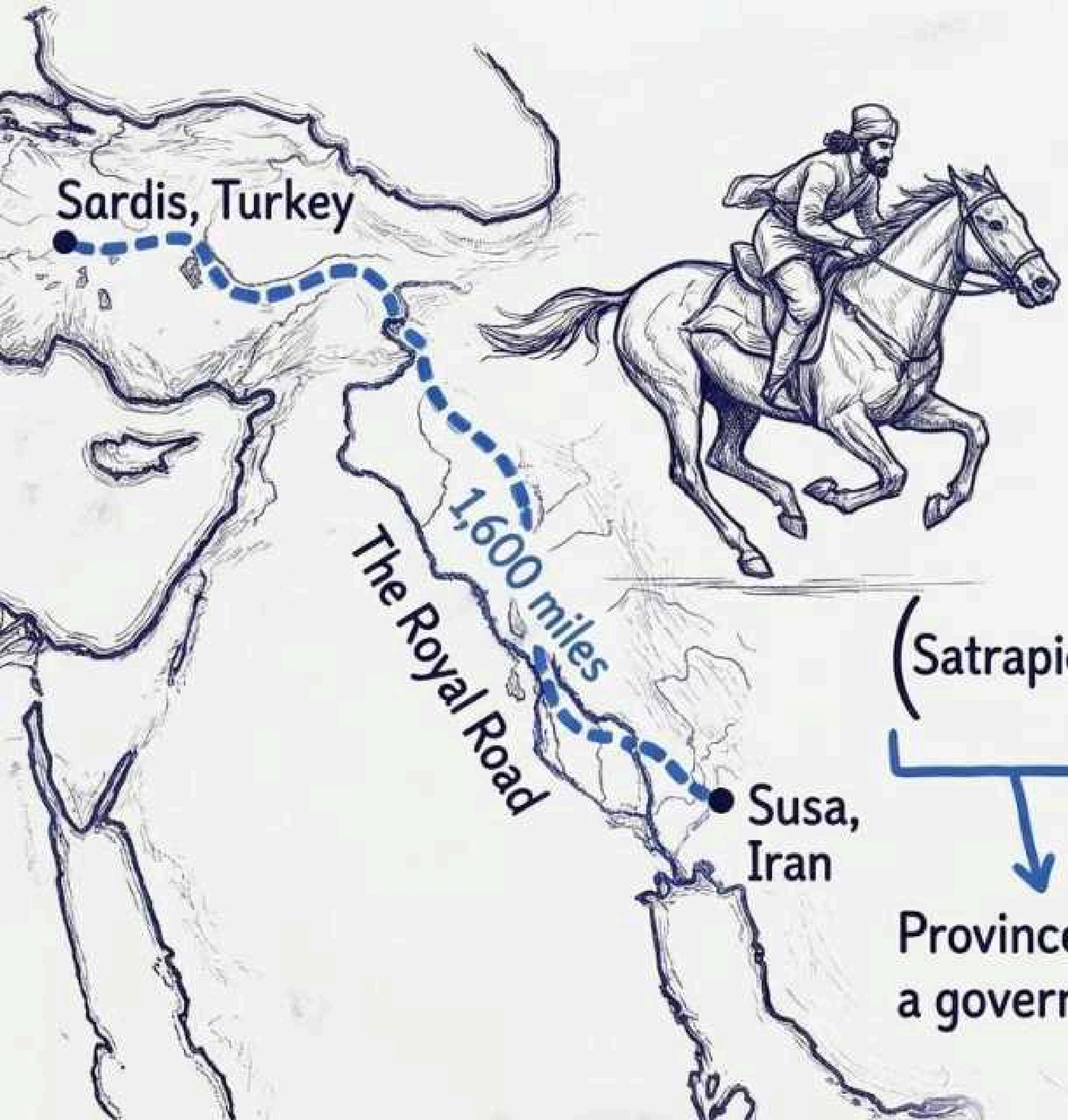
Persian Empire:
Tens of millions of people.

Egypt

Indus River

Key Figure: Cyrus the Great
(Rule: 559-530 BCE;
Conquered Babylon: 539 BCE).

¶2.7



Key Figure: Darius the Great (Ruled from 522 BCE)

$$\left(\text{Satrapies} + \text{Standard Taxes}\right) + \left(\text{Royal Relay} + \left(\text{Local Laws Left Alone}\right)\right) = \text{Imperial Stability}$$

Provinces under a governor.

Fast message transmission across 1,600 miles.

¶ 2.8



Hundreds of independent city-states

Small, separate laws & gods

Quarrelled constantly

The Polis



Shared language

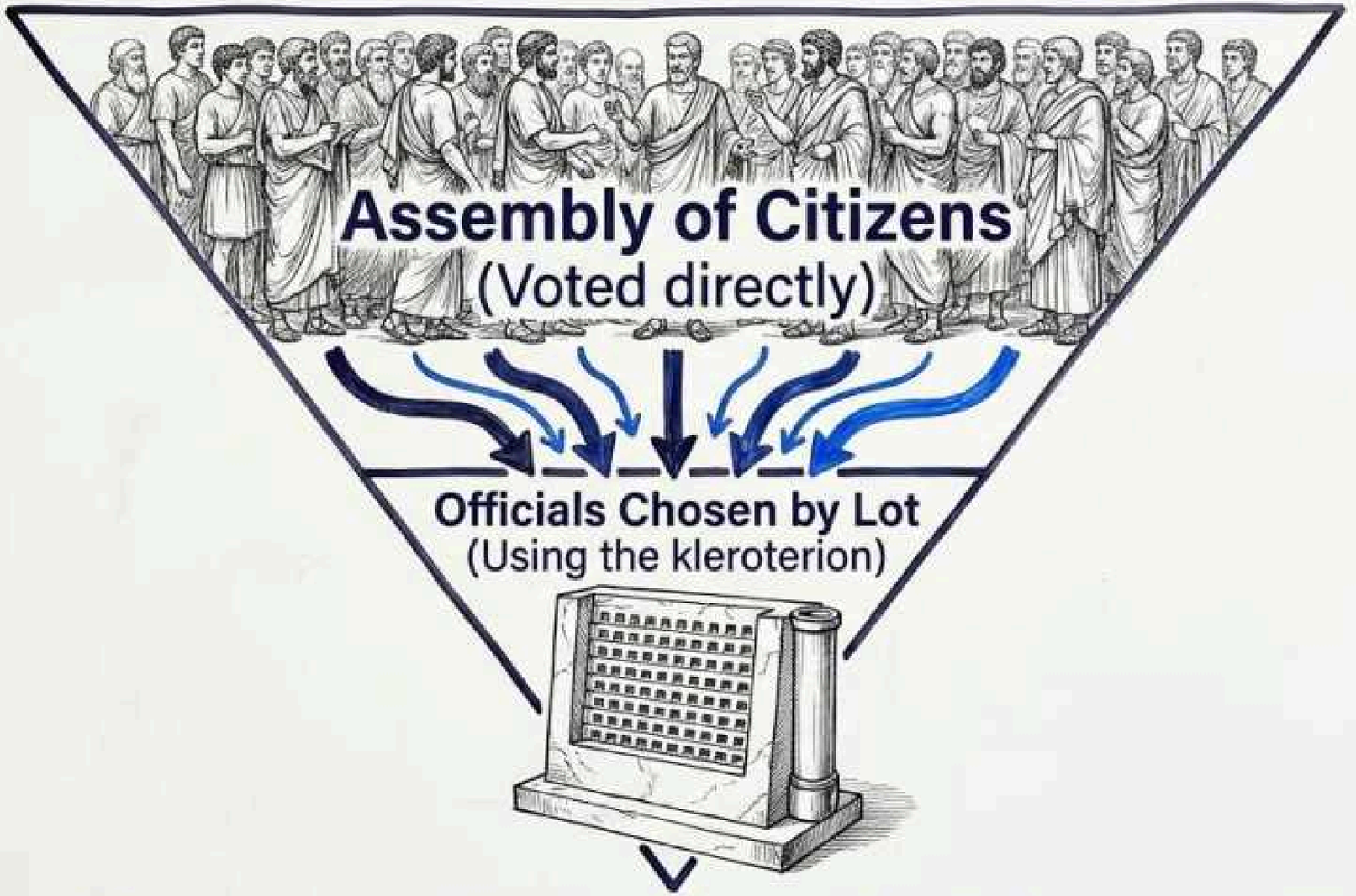
Olympic Games

Religious festivals

Colonies spread culture as far as Sicily and southern France.

Key Figure/Event: **Cleisthenes, 508 BCE.**

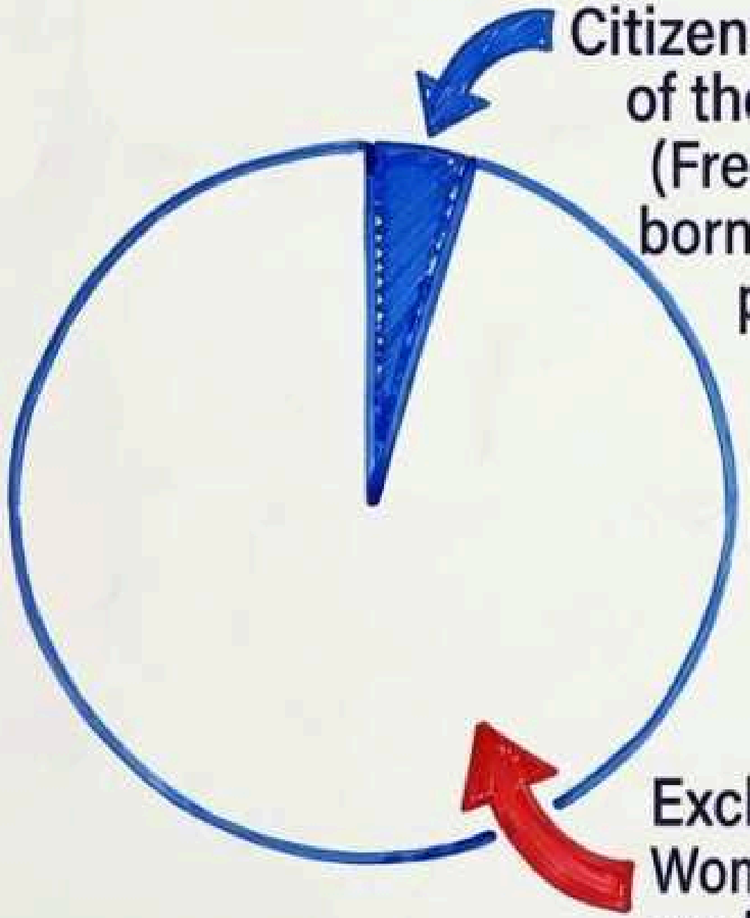
¶ 2.9



Core Definition: Democracy = Derived from Greek for rule by the people (Following years of struggle between nobles and commoners).

¶2.10

Athens
(The Limits)



Citizens = A minority of the population (Free adult men born to Athenian parents).

Excluded: Women, foreigners, enslaved people.

Sparta
(The Alternative)





¶ 2.11

Context: Anatolian Greek revolts lead to war.
Seen by Greeks as a fight for freedom.

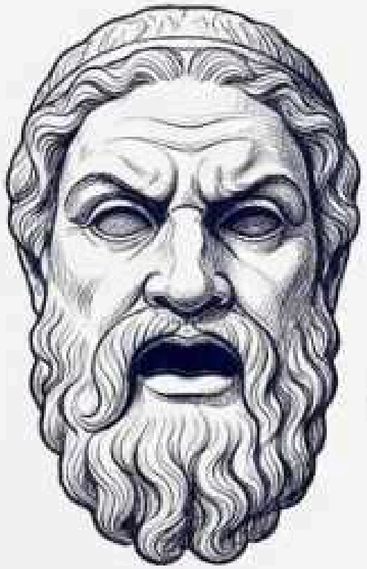


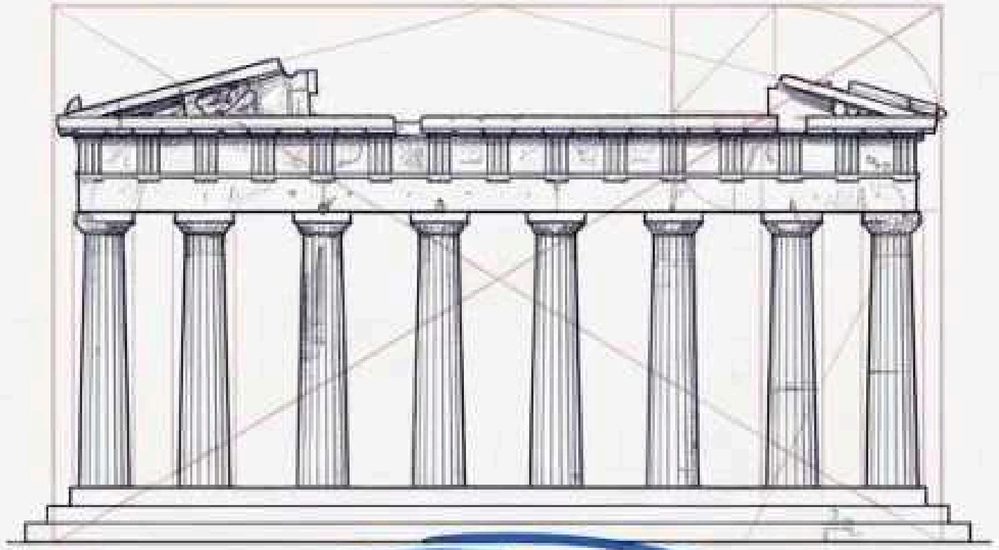
490 BCE: Marathon
(Darius defeated).

480 BCE: Thermopylae
(Small Greek force holds the pass against Xerxes' enormous army)
& **Salamis**
(Greek fleet victory).

479 BCE: Plataea
(Greeks finish the job).

¶ 2.12



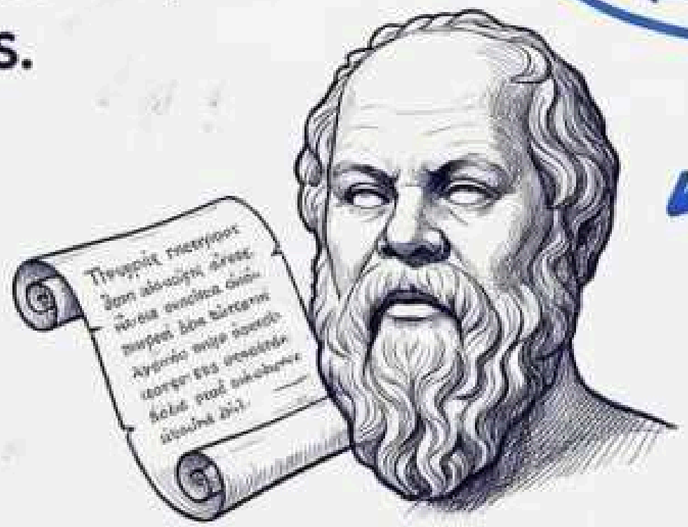


The Classical Age (Led by Pericles)



Theater: Tragedies by Sophocles & Euripides.

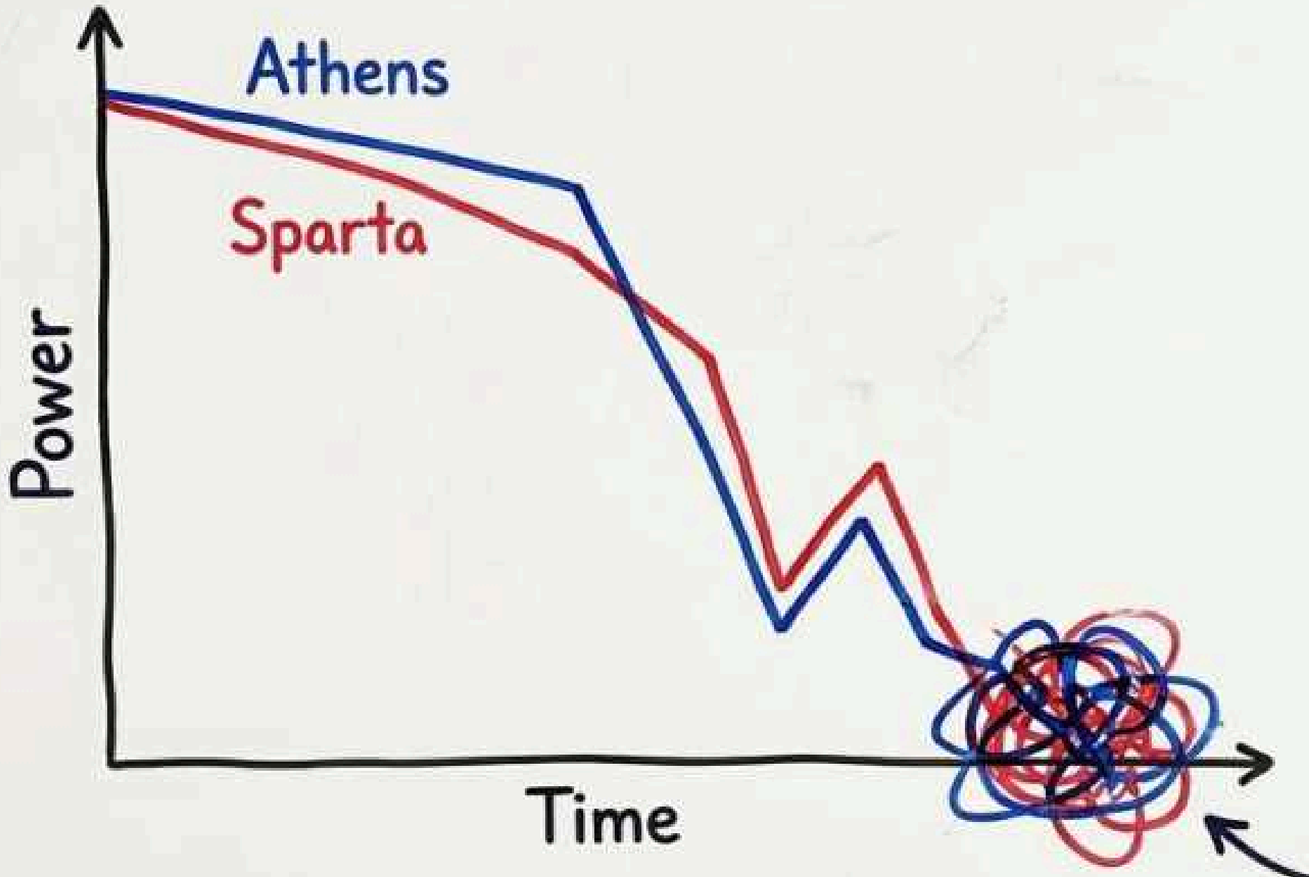
History: Herodotus (first great narrative history) & Thucydides.



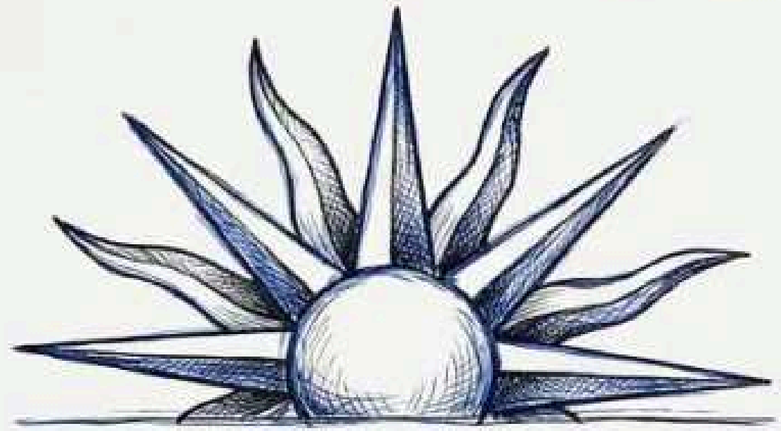
Philosophy: Socrates questioning in the marketplace → Plato's Academy → **Aristotle** (logic, nature, politics).

¶ 2.13

Event: The Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE).



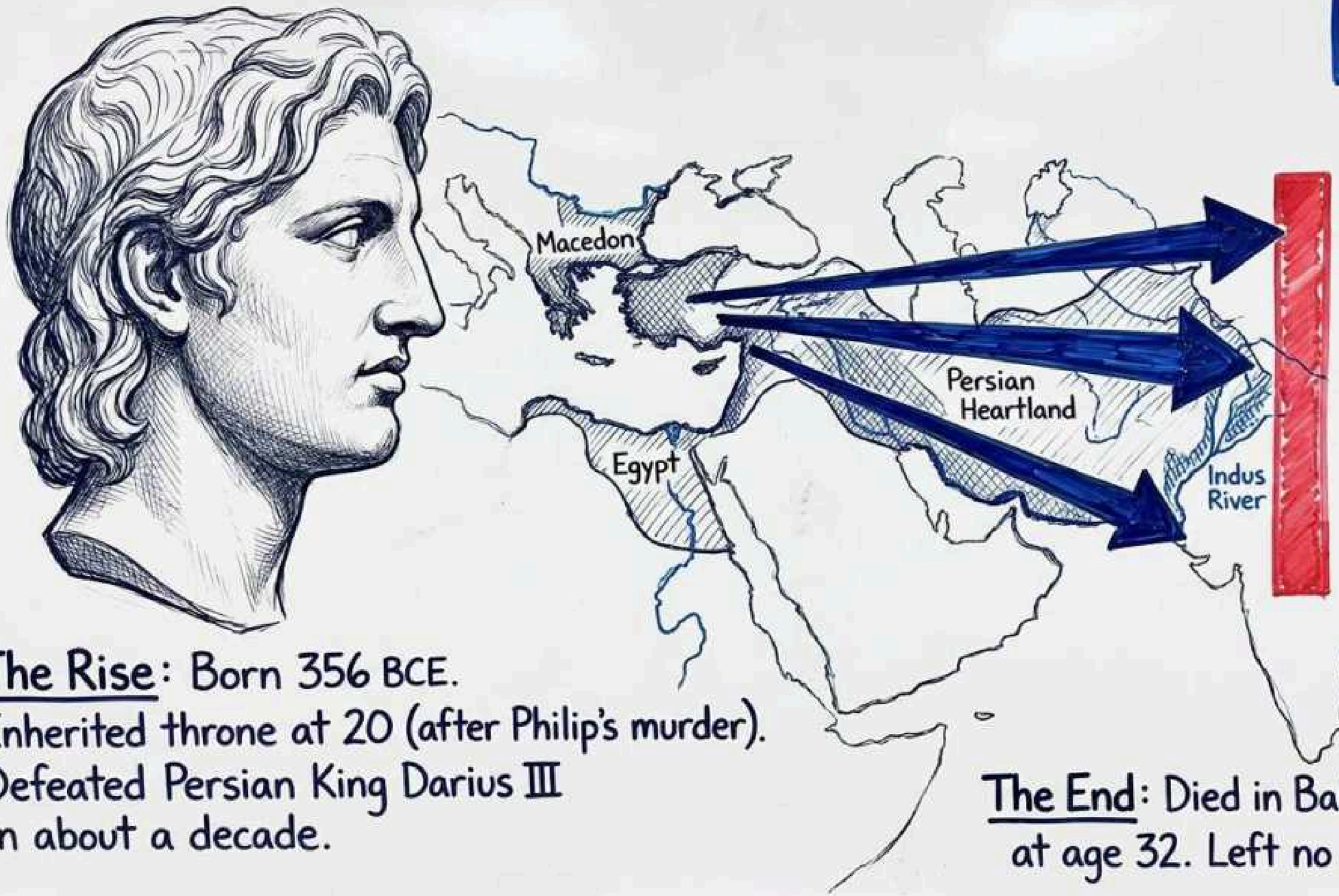
Thucydides' Diagnosis: Fear and ambition drove the conflict.



The Horizon: Macedon (a kingdom on the northern edge) takes advantage.

Result: Sparta won but could not hold power; mutual drain left them fighting each other.

¶ 2.14



The Rise: Born 356 BCE.
Inherited throne at 20 (after Philip's murder).
Defeated Persian King Darius III
in about a decade.

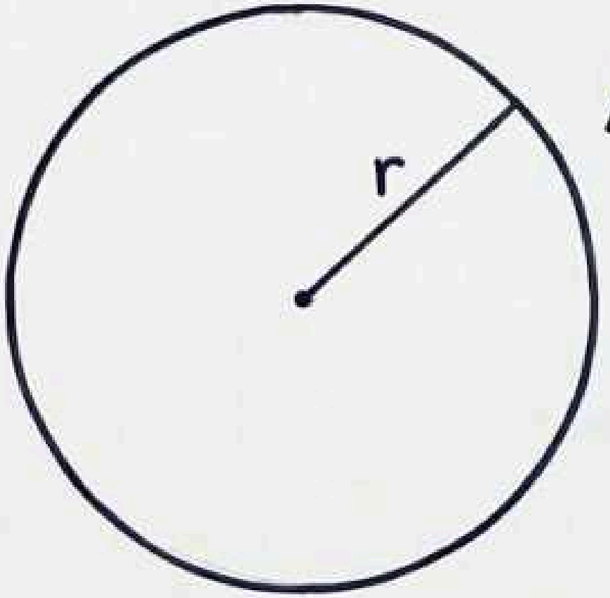
The Limit:
326 BCE:
Soldiers
mutiny/refuse
to go farther.

The End: Died in Babylon, 323 BCE,
at age 32. Left no clear heir.

¶ 2.15

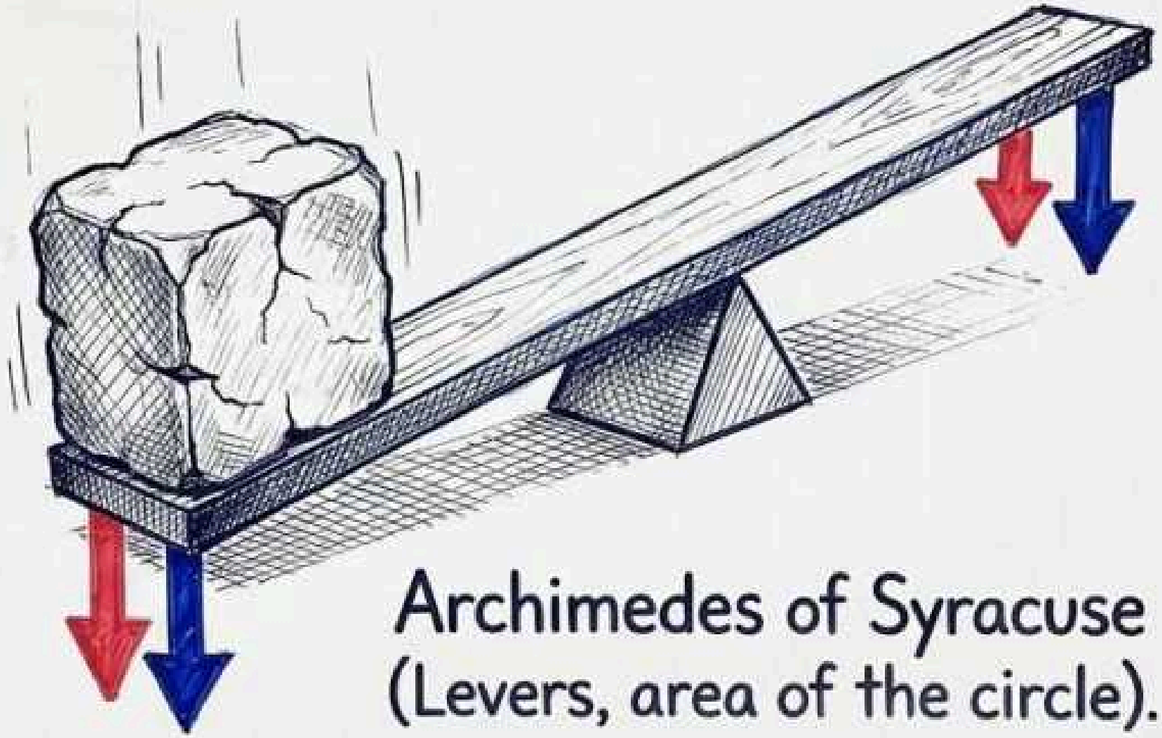
The Division: Empire split among generals: Ptolemy (Egypt), Seleucus (East), Macedon (third line).

The Hellenistic Age: Greek language and ideas spread across the Near East.



$A = \pi r^2$

Innovations: Euclid (Geometry)

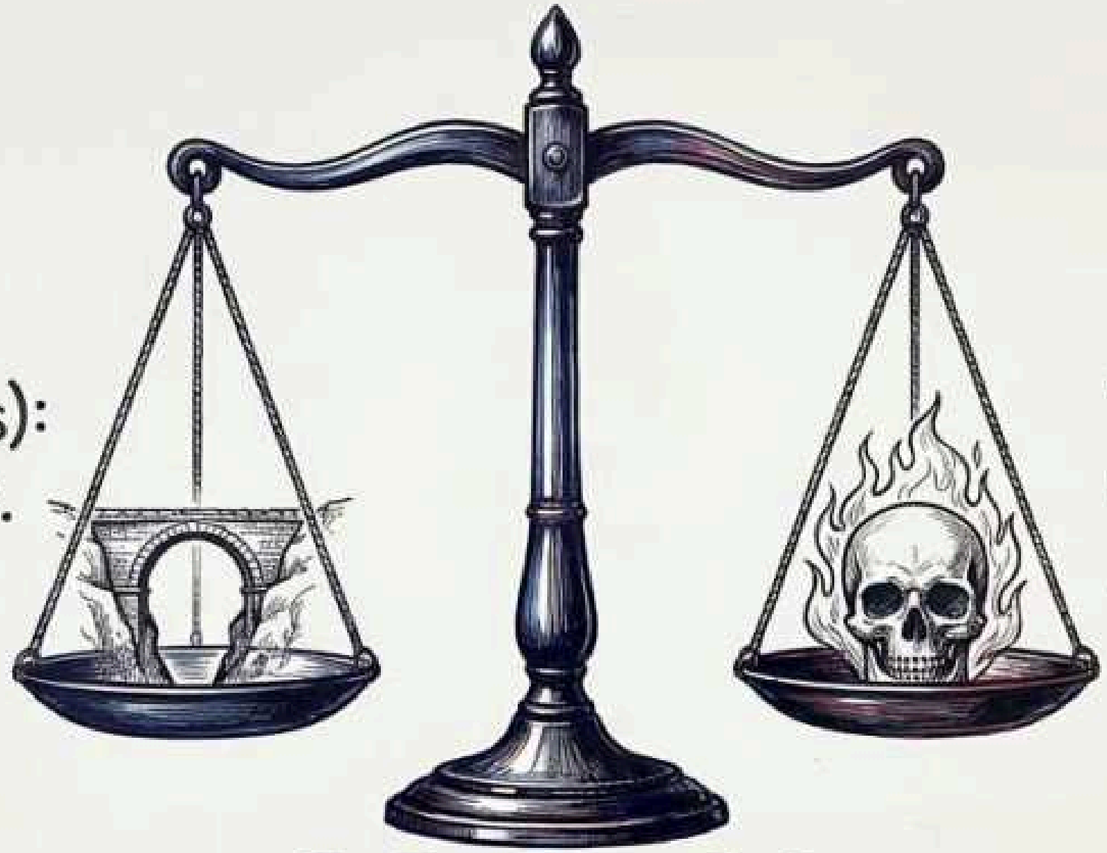


Archimedes of Syracuse (Levers, area of the circle).

Alexandria, Egypt: The great Library and Museum drew scholars.

¶ 2.16

The Unifier (Admirers):
Joined East and West.



The Destroyer (Critics):
Caused immense death and destruction.

$\alpha - \omega$

The Undeniable Result: Greek became a common language across the eastern Mediterranean; the stage was set for the next great power in the west.

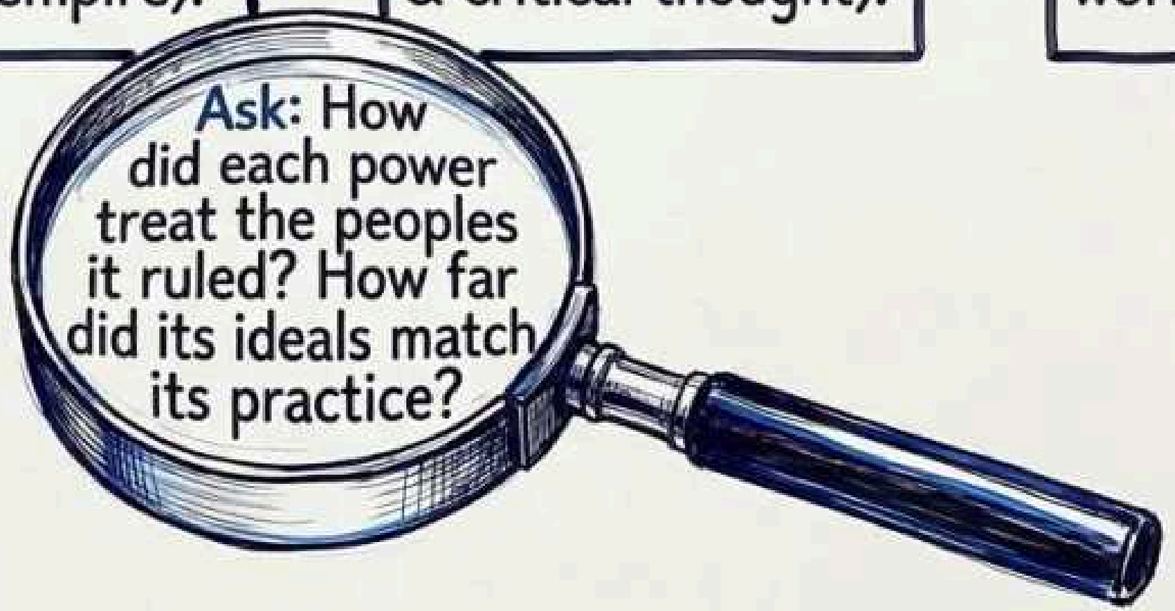
¶ 2.17

Bronze Collapse & New States (Alphabets, Iron).

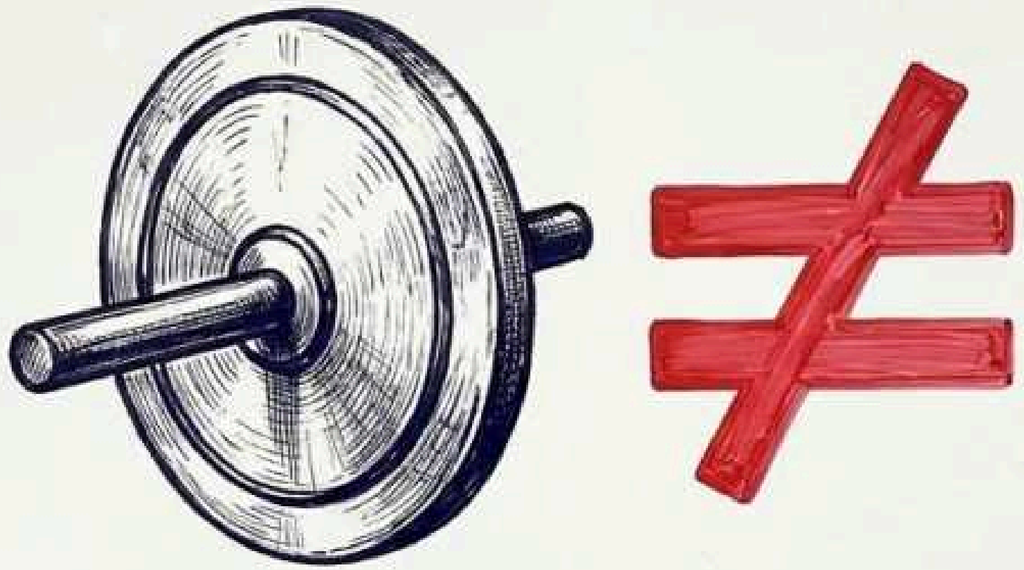
Persia (Ruling a vast, varied empire).

Greece (Citizen government & critical thought).

Alexander (Tying the two worlds together).



¶ 2.18



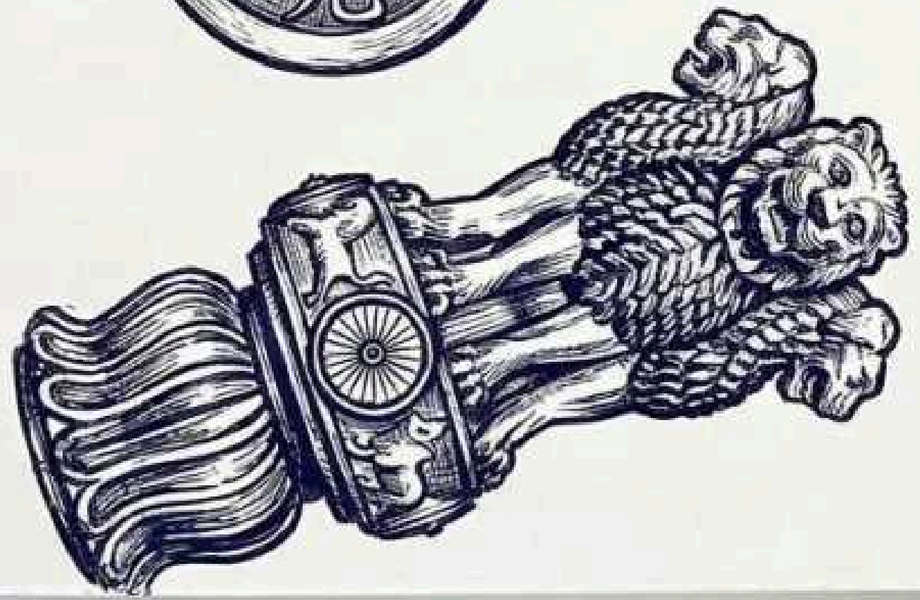
Was Athens truly a democracy if it excluded most of its residents from citizenship?

How should we judge past societies by standards they did not share?

¶2.19







Next Up: Lecture 3

Comparing the great classical empires of Rome, China, and India.