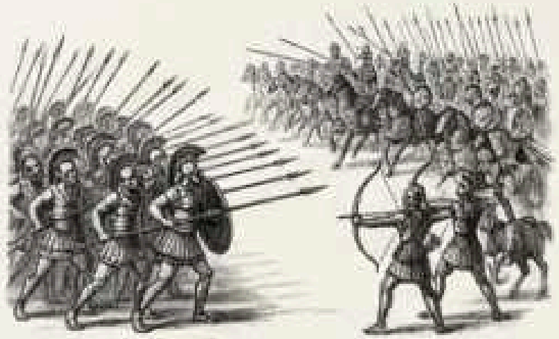
Classical Greece (500–300 BCE): A Two-Century Arc

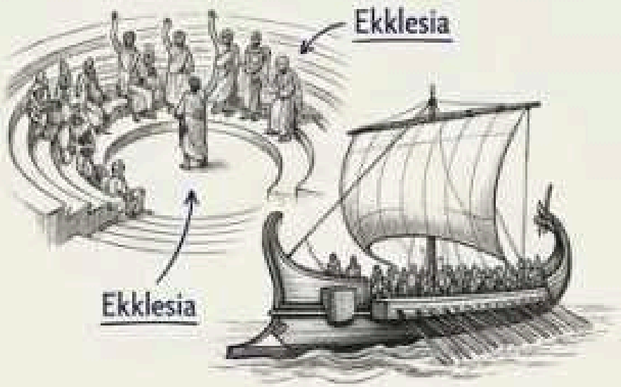
¶ 2.1



The Persian Threat: Repelling a massive, unprecedented empire.



The Athenian Experiment: The mechanics of direct democracy and a coercive empire.



The Spartan Rivalry: A devastating, long war leaving all of Greece weakened.



The Culmination: The trial of Socrates, revealing the absolute strengths and limits of freedom.



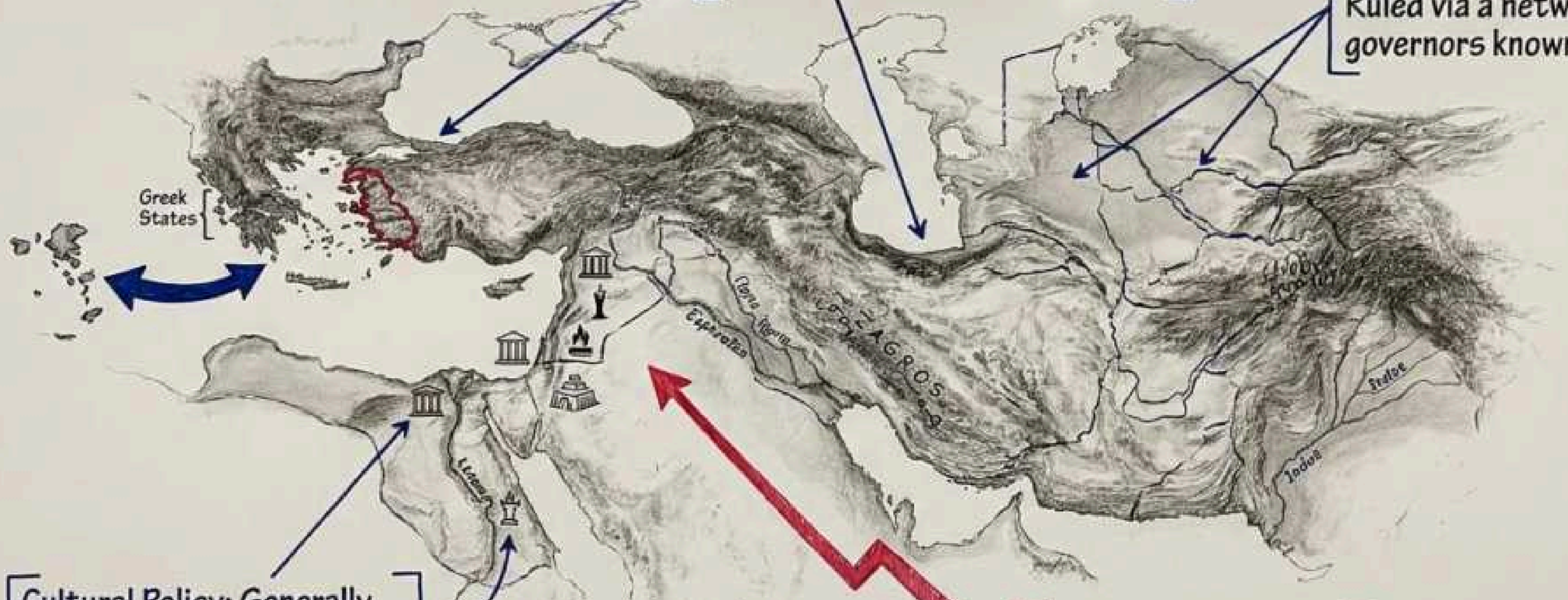
The Persian Empire: An Unprecedented Behemoth

¶ 2.2

$$\text{Area}_{\text{Persia}} \gg \sum \text{Area}_{\text{Greek States}}$$

Foundation: Established by Cyrus the Great (mid-6th century BCE).

Administration Structure: Ruled via a network of provincial governors known as satraps.



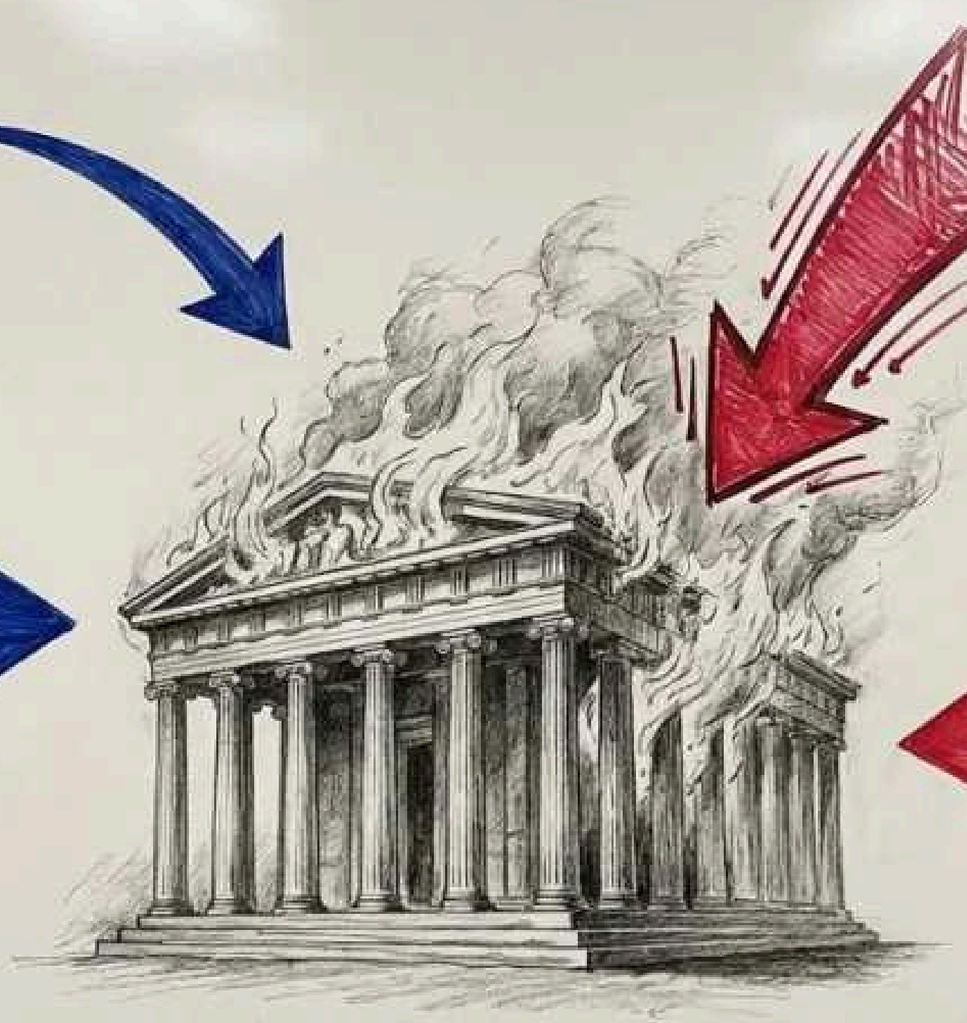
Cultural Policy: Generally tolerant; conquered peoples were permitted to retain their native religions.

The Flashpoint: Greek coastal cities in Anatolia (Ionia) are absorbed under Persian rule.

The Ionian Rebellion (499–494 BCE)

¶2.3

The Spark (499 BCE):
Ionian Greeks launch an armed rebellion against their Persian overlords.



The Suppression (494 BCE):
Persian military forces successfully and brutally crush the revolt.

The Intervention:
Athens and Eretria send small maritime task forces to aid the Ionian rebels.

The Consequence: King Darius I marks Athens and Eretria for severe punishment, authorizing preparations for a massive trans-Aegean expedition.

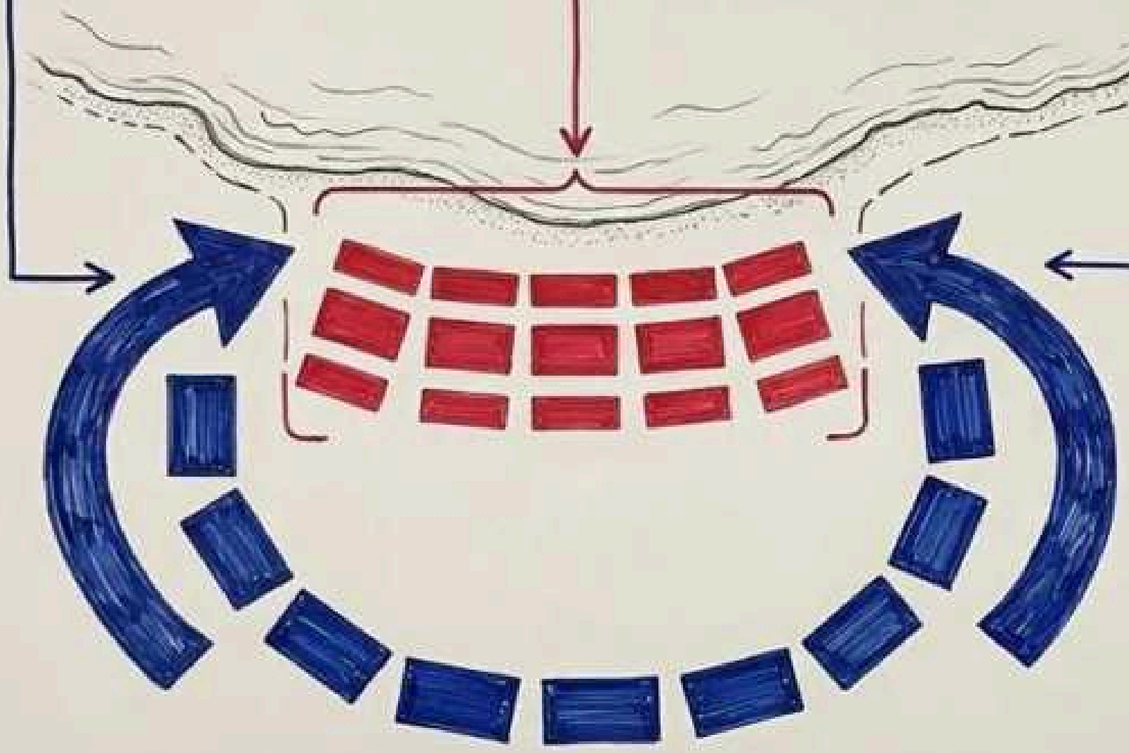
The Battle of Marathon (490 BCE)

¶2.4

$F_{flanks} > F_{center}$

$F_{flanks} > F_{center}$

Miltiades' tactic of weakening the center to strengthen the crushing wings.





- The Landing: Persian army disembarks at Marathon, directly north of Athens.
- The Defenders: General Miltiades leads a vastly outnumbered combined Greek force (Athens + Plataea).
- The Result: A decisive, famous Greek victory that turns back the first invasion.

Xerxes' Invasion & The Stand at Thermopylae (480 BCE)

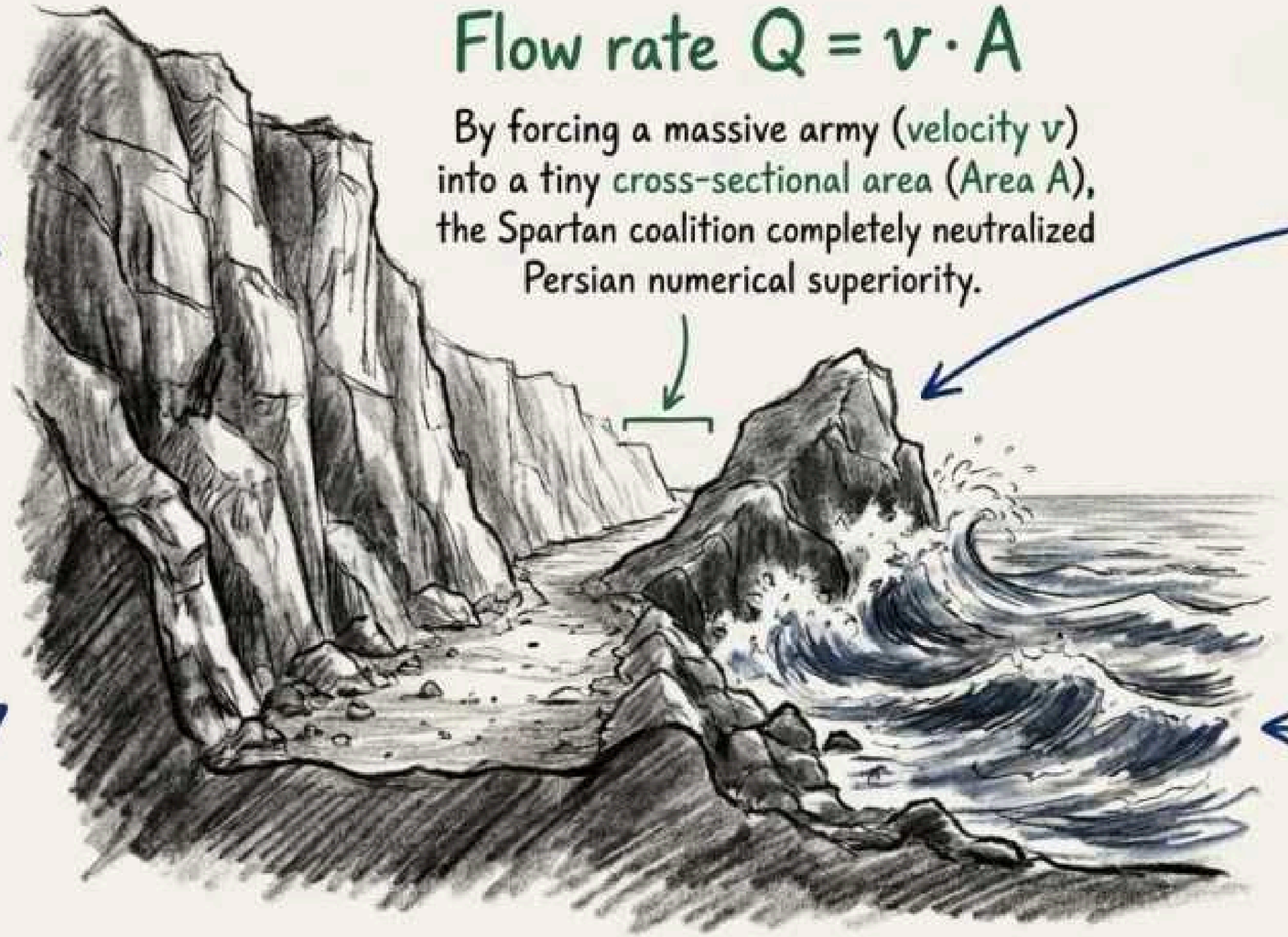
¶ 2.5

The Threat:
Darius's son, Xerxes, invades an overwhelmingly large land army and supporting fleet.

The Resistance:
Sparta leads a unified league of resisting Greek states.

Flow rate $Q = v \cdot A$

By forcing a massive army (velocity v) into a tiny cross-sectional area (Area A), the Spartan coalition completely neutralized Persian numerical superiority.

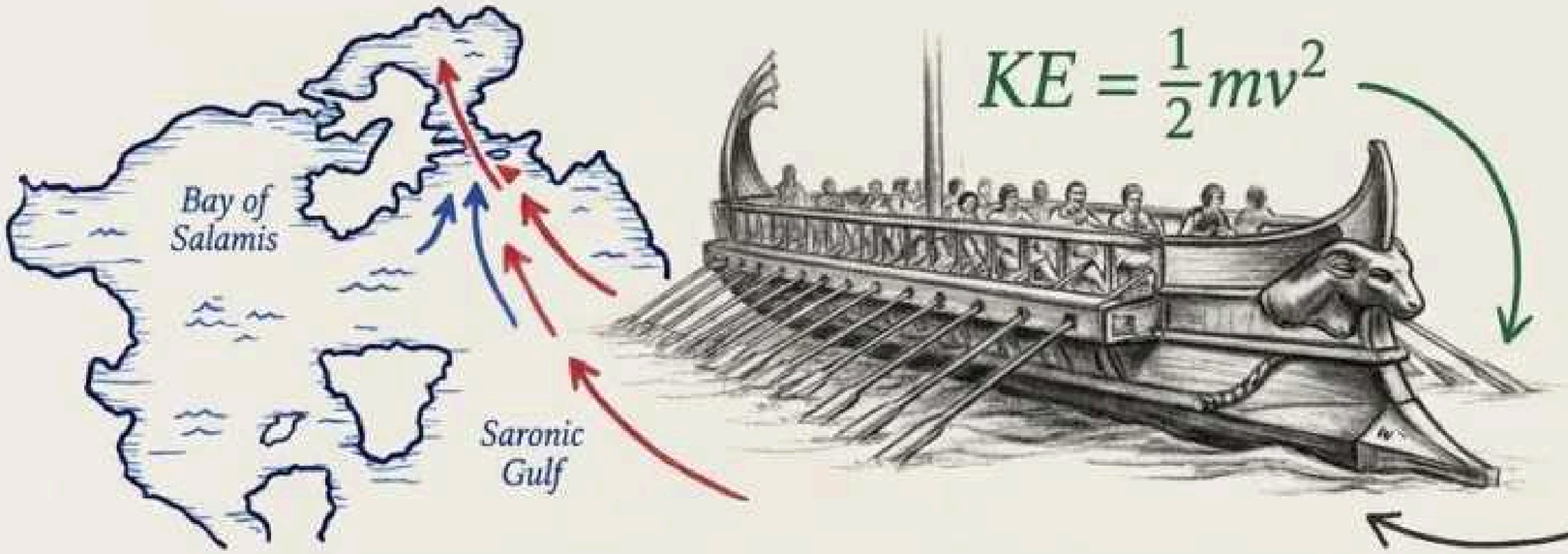


The Stand:
300 Spartans plus several thousand Greek allies hold the pass for days against continuous assaults.

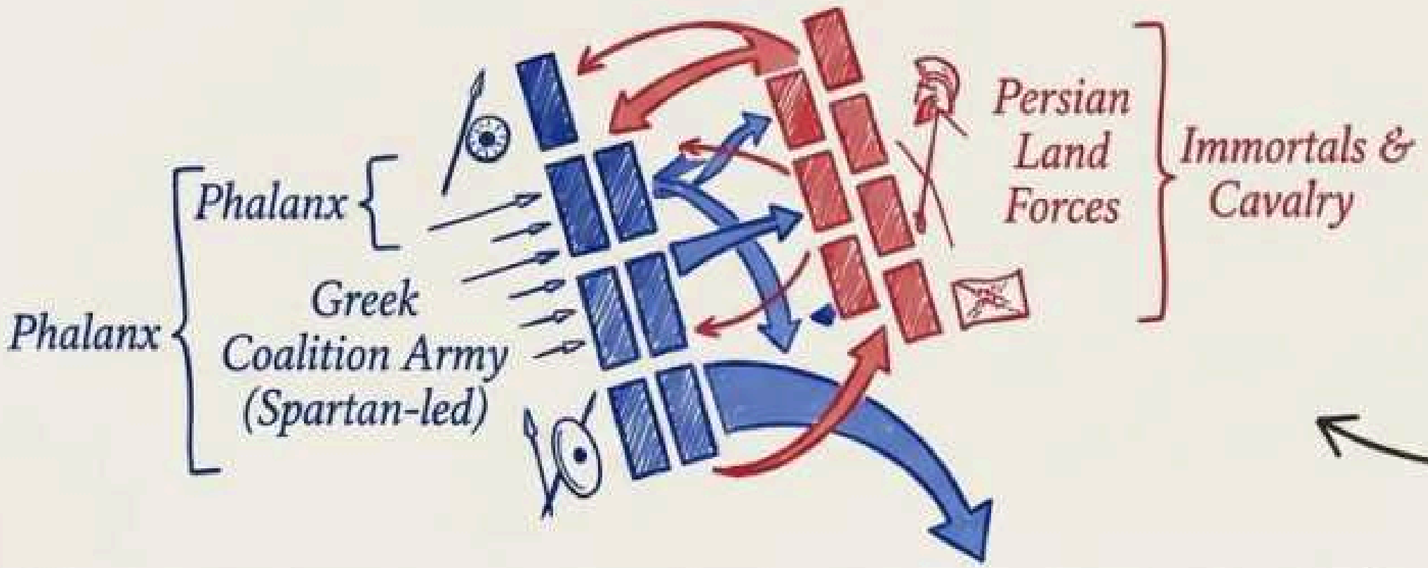
The Fall:
The defensive line breaks only after a local shepherd betrays a hidden mountain path, outflanking the Greeks.

Salamis & Plataea: The End of the Invasion (480–479 BCE)

¶ 2.6



480 BCE (Salamis): Athens is abandoned and burned. However, Themistocles' newly built fleet lures the Persian navy into narrow waters, maximizing Greek impact velocity and destroying the enemy fleet.

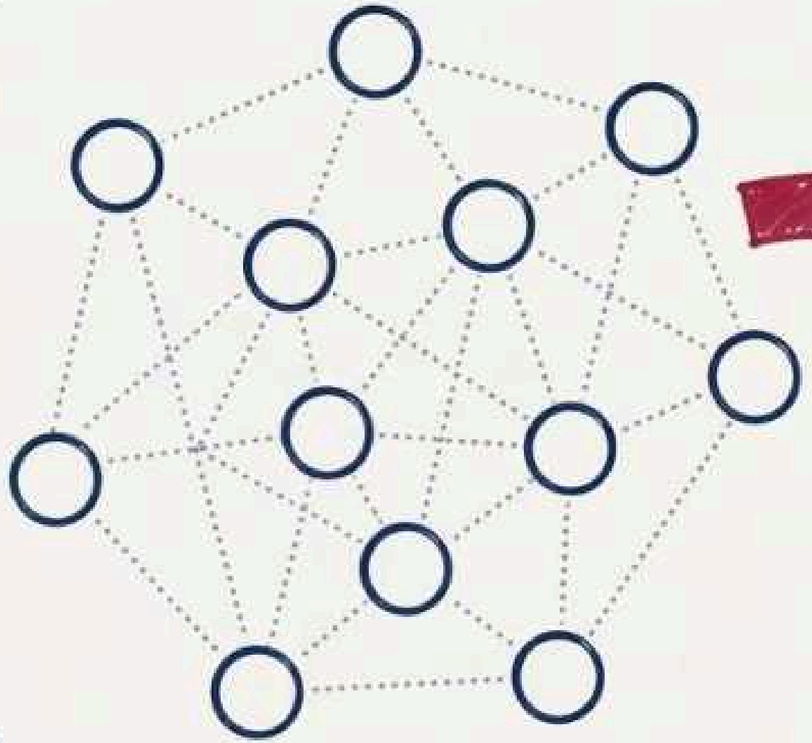


479 BCE (Plataea): A Spartan-led Greek coalition army crushes the remaining Persian land forces. The invasion is permanently halted.

The Delian League: From Alliance to Empire

¶ 2.7

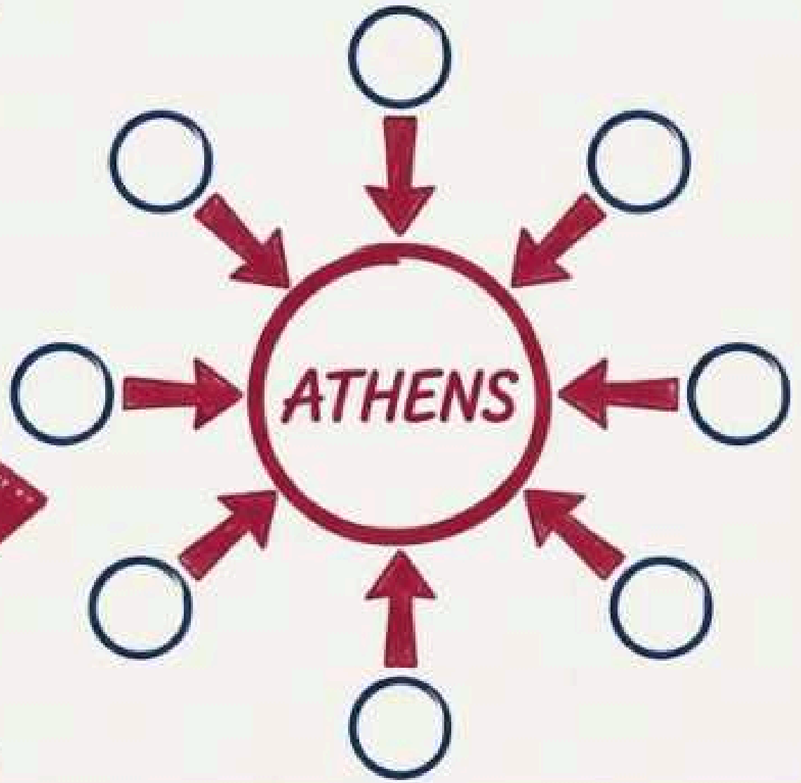
478 BCE (The Alliance)



Formed to continue the fight against Persia; autonomous members supply either money or naval ships.

The Coercion: Athens begins violently punishing secession attempts, effectively converting a voluntary alliance into a tribute-paying empire.

454 BCE (The Centralization)



The collective treasury is physically relocated from the neutral island of Delos to Athens.

The Engine of Athenian Democracy

¶ 2.8



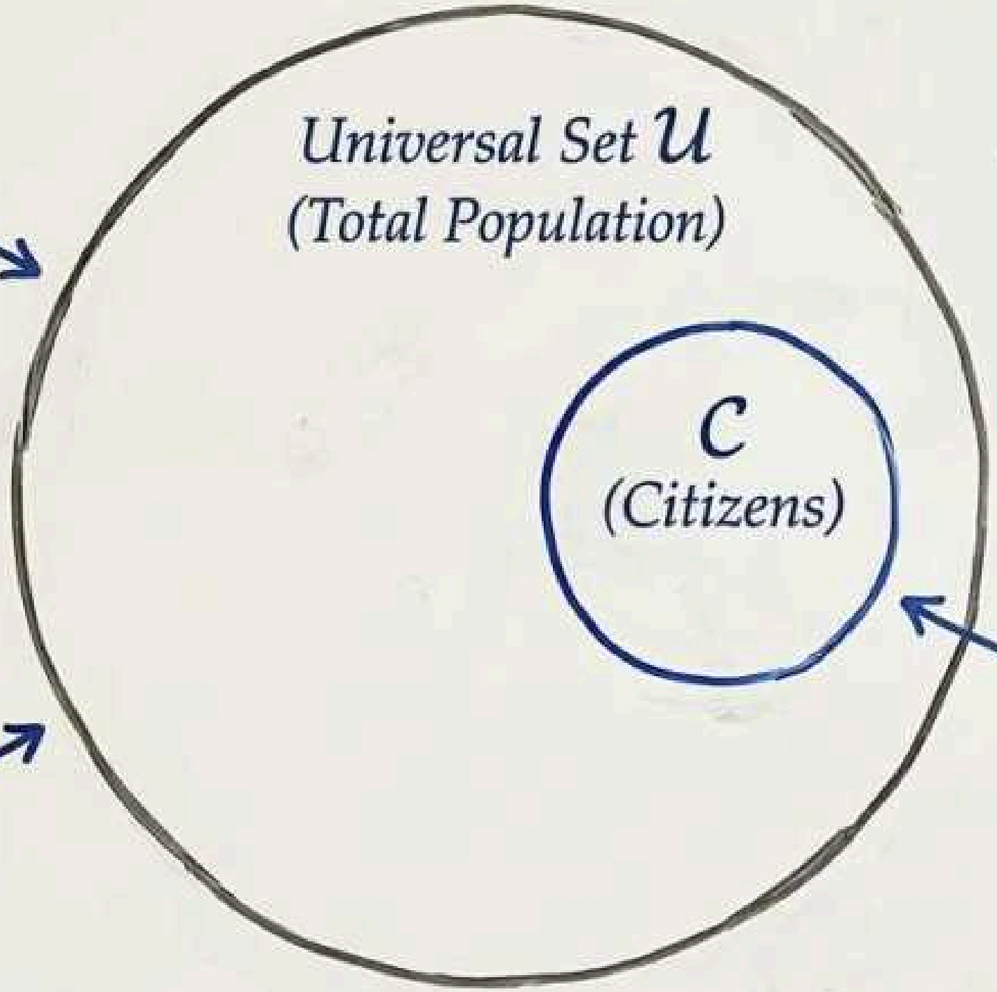
The Exceptions:

While most officials were chosen randomly by lot, Generals were elected—a pragmatic admission that specific military skill mattered.

Direct, Limited Democracy: The Demographics of Exclusion

¶ 2.9

Annotation 1:
System Design:
Democracy was purely direct, not representative.



$C \approx \frac{1}{5}\mathcal{U}$ (representing 30,000–50,000 adult men)

Excluded = {Women, Metics, Enslaved}

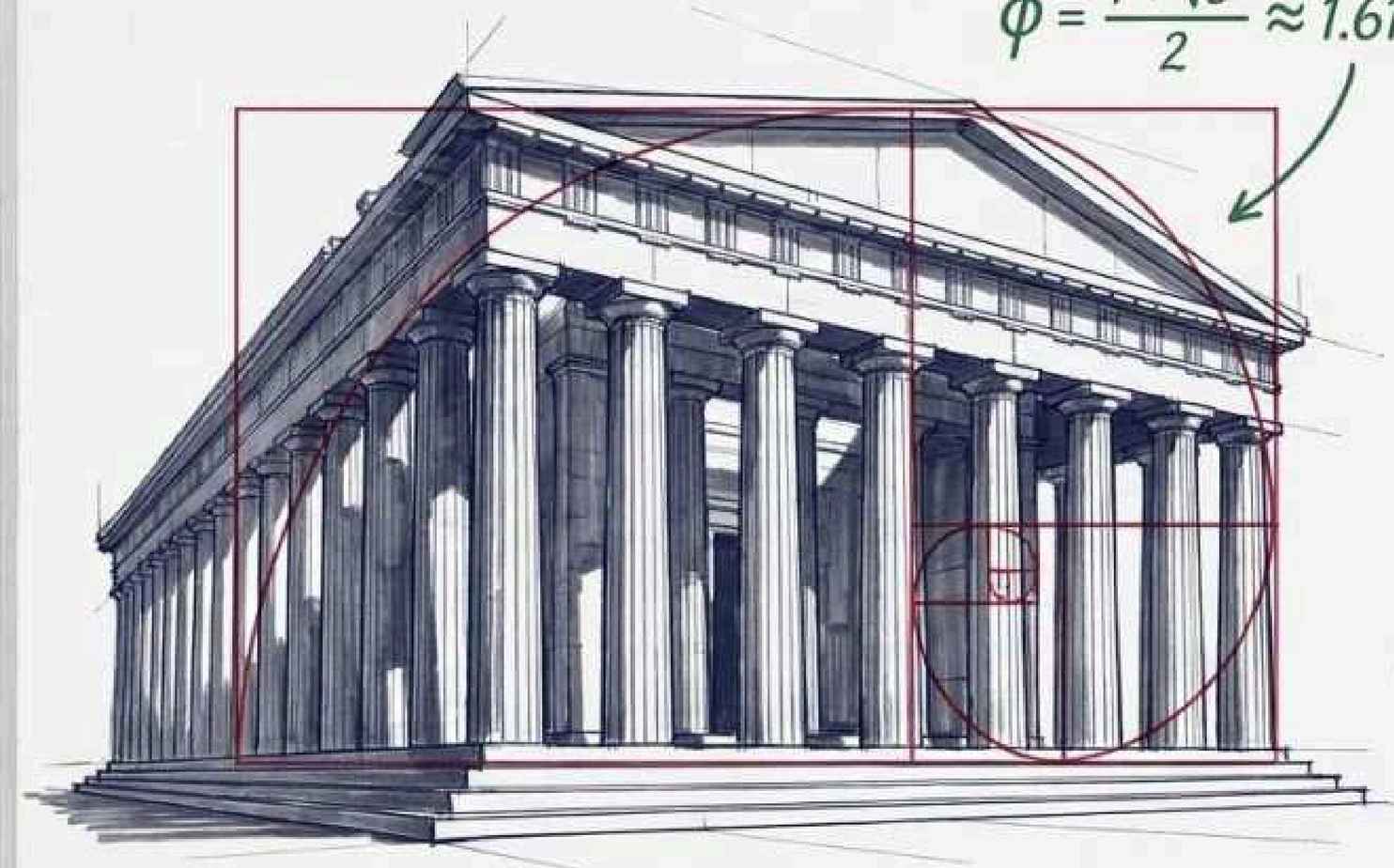
Annotation 2:
The Excluded: Women, resident foreigners (metics), and enslaved people held zero voting power or political rights.

Annotation 3:
The Inclusion Mechanism:
To ensure the poorest eligible citizens could actually participate, state pay for jury and civic duties was introduced mid-century.

Pericles and the Golden Age (Died 429 BCE)

¶ 2.10

$$\phi = \frac{1+\sqrt{5}}{2} \approx 1.618$$





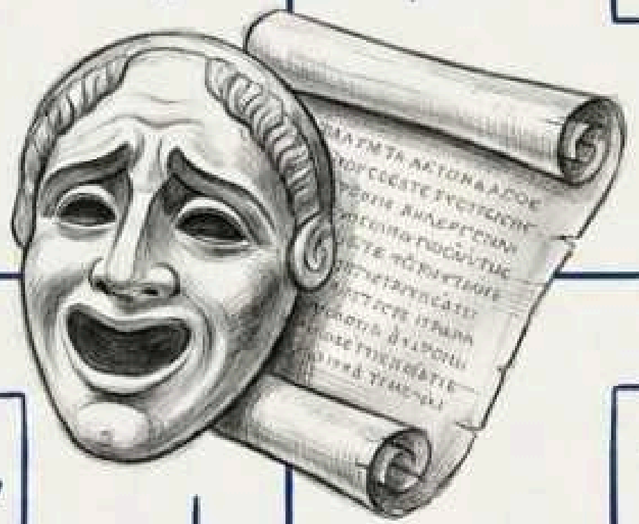
- Leadership: Pericles acted as the leading statesman for approximately 30 years.
- The Funeral Oration: As reported by Thucydides, Pericles praised Athens as a "school for Greece"—a society ruled by the many and uniquely open to talent.

The Cultural Explosion of Classical Athens

¶ 2.11

Tragedy: The legendary playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Their works were performed at the massive civic festival of Dionysus.

Comedy: Defined by the sharp, satirical, and political works of Aristophanes.



Early History: Herodotus, known as the "father of history," who systematically chronicled the sprawling Persian Wars.

Analytical History: Thucydides, who pioneered a harder-edged, highly objective, and analytical account of the Peloponnesian War.

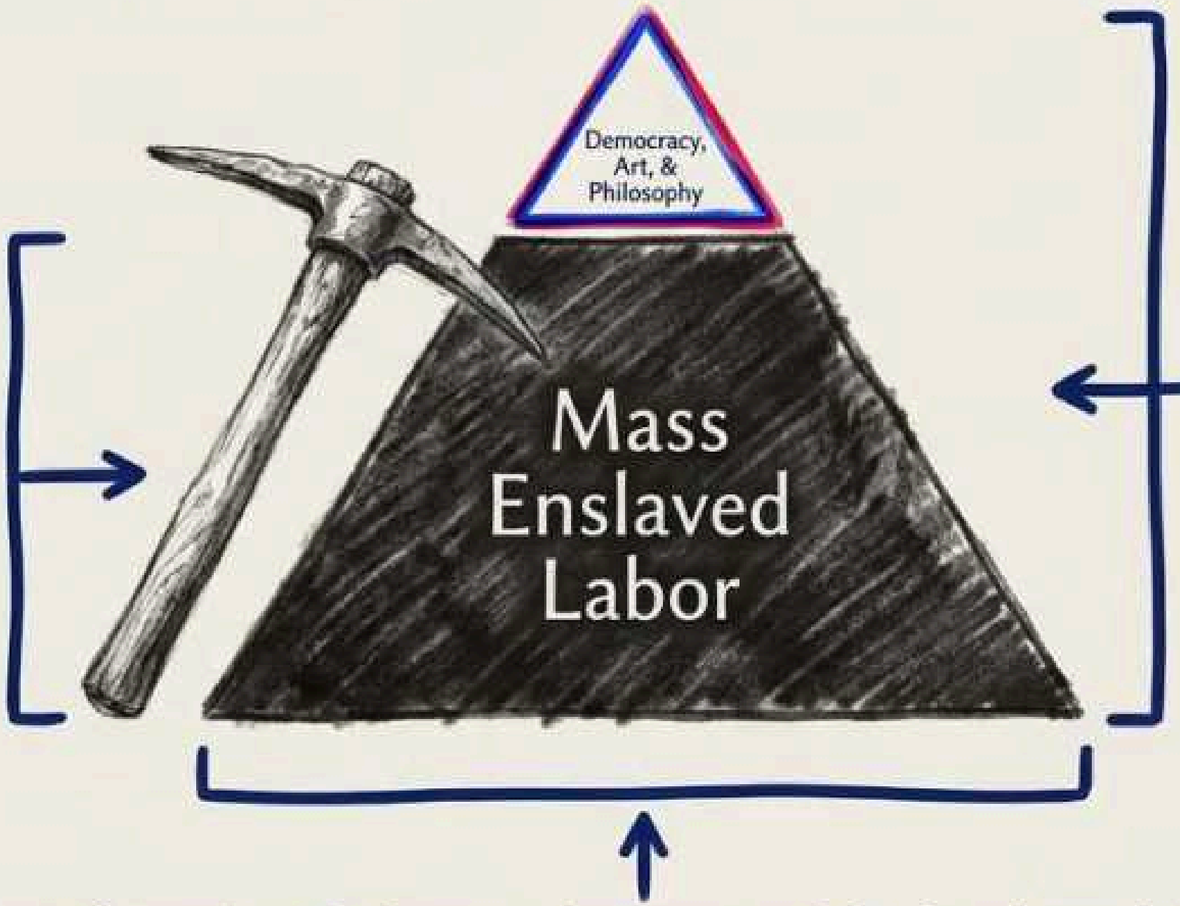
The Lives of Women: Athens vs. Sparta

¶ 2.12

Athens	Sparta
- Primary role: strict management of the household. - Expected to take almost no part in public or civic life. - Legally required to have a male guardian for transactions. - Strictly forbidden to vote or hold office.	- Expected to engage in rigorous physical exercise and athletic training. - Possessed significantly greater daily autonomy. - In practice, some women could and did own land (a rarity in the Greek world).

The Paradox of Freedom and Slavery

¶ 2.13



The Labor Base: Enslaved individuals worked in homes, farms, workshops, and under unimaginably brutal conditions in the Laurion silver mines.

The Justification: Prominent thinkers, including Aristotle, later defended slavery as a "natural" institution, though a sparse few questioned its morality.

The Historical Paradox: The first true democracy and the foundational philosophers of Western thought lived in a society strictly reliant on the ownership of large numbers of people.

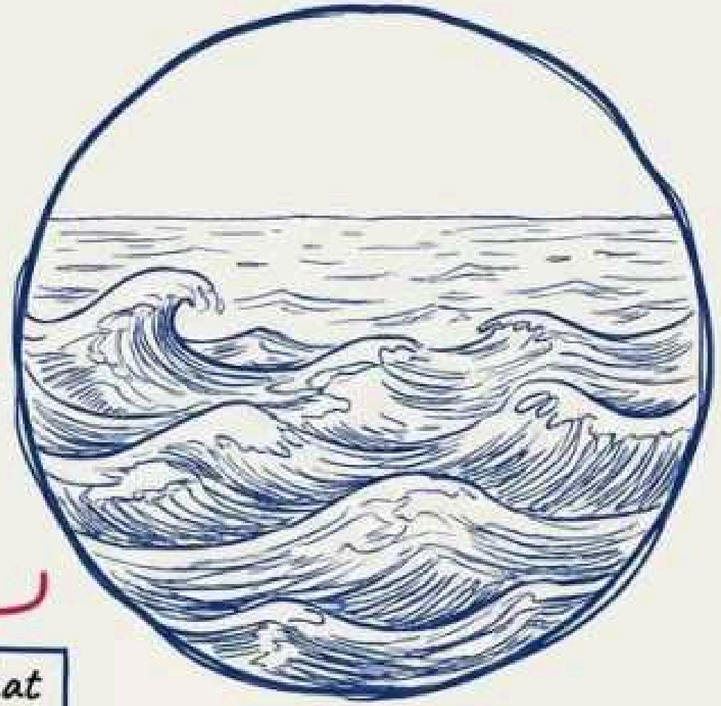
The Road to War: Inevitability vs. Choice

¶ 2.14

$$\text{Tension} \propto (\Delta \text{Power}_{\text{Athens}}) \times (\text{Fear}_{\text{Sparta}})$$







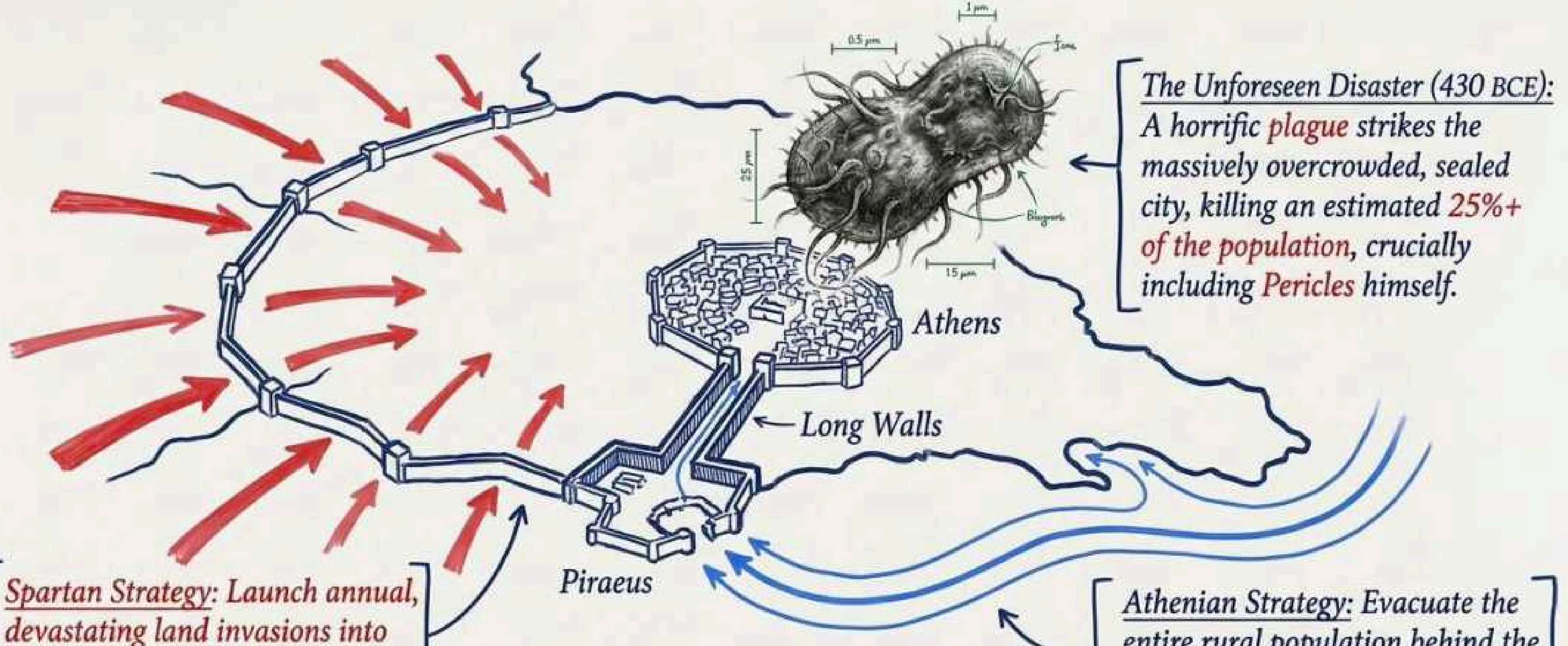
Sparta: Hegemon of the Peloponnesian League, wielding unrivaled land power.

The Core Debate: Thucydides argued that the rapid rise of Athenian power and the inevitable fear it triggered in Sparta made war unavoidable. Modern historians continue to debate if specific leadership choices could have averted the conflict.

Athens: Commander of a vast maritime empire, possessing unrivaled sea power.

The Peloponnesian War Begins (431–404 BCE)

¶ 2.15



The Unforeseen Disaster (430 BCE): A horrific plague strikes the massively overcrowded, sealed city, killing an estimated 25%+ of the population, crucially including Pericles himself.

Spartan Strategy: Launch annual, devastating land invasions into Attica to destroy crops and provoke a ground battle.

Athenian Strategy: Evacuate the entire rural population behind the Long Walls, refusing land battles and relying entirely on the navy for resupply.

¶ 2.16

Disaster in Syracuse & The Fall of Athens

Total Athenian Power

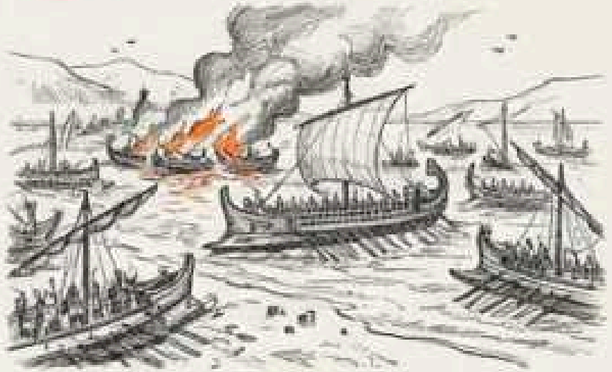
1 415–413 BCE (The Sicilian Expedition)



Athens launches a massive, overly ambitious fleet to attack Syracuse in Sicily. It ends in total, annihilating military disaster.

loss of manpower
resources
prestige

2 405 BCE (Aegospotami)



2 Naval Dominance Lost

Sparta, shockingly funded by Persian gold, builds a rival fleet and decisively destroys the Athenian navy at Aegospotami.

3 404 BCE (Capitulation)



3

Besieged, starved of imports, and defenseless, Athens surrenders. The Spartans order the Long Walls to the sea to be violently dismantled.

415 BCE

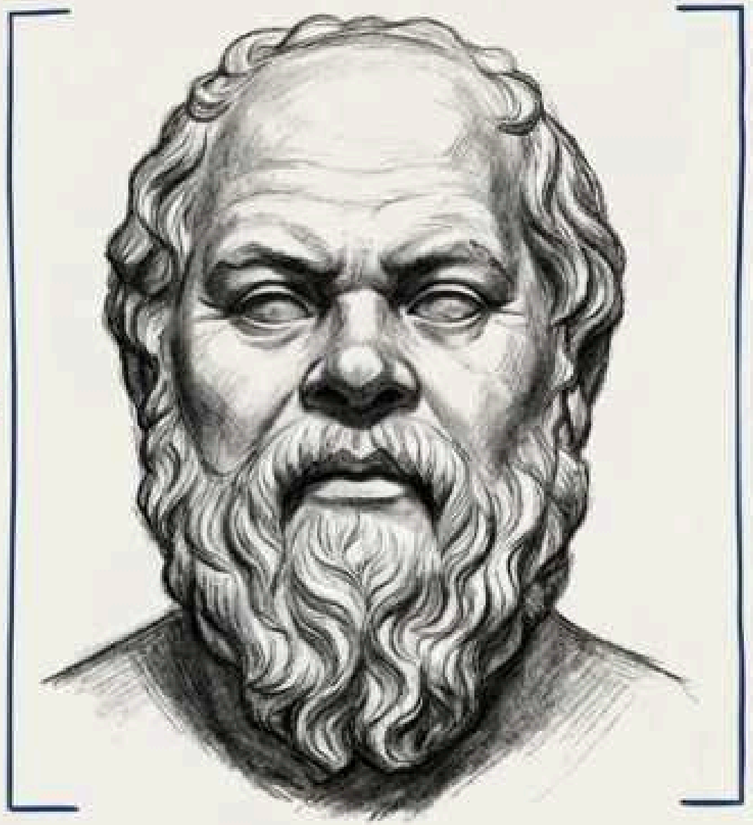
405 BCE

404 BCE

End of the Athenian Empire & Spartan Hegemony Begins

Tyrants and the Trial of Socrates

¶ 2.17



404–403 BCE: Sparta installs "The Thirty Tyrants," a brief, extraordinarily brutal oligarchy that murders numerous opponents before democracy is finally restored.



The Charges: In 399 BCE, a citizen jury formally condemns Socrates to death for "impiety" and "corrupting the youth."

The Reality: The verdict was heavily driven by a toxic, unspoken mix of religious anxiety, political retribution (Socrates was associated with some of the Tyrants), and deep societal trauma following the war's end.

The Aftermath: Spartan Failure and Theban Ascent



Battle of Leuctra (371 BCE) crasche
D = Twig ...mathematically designed to impact and shatter the elite Spartan Spartan right wing before the rest of the battle lines can fully engage.

Spartan Overreach: Sparta attempts to militarily dominate a fractured, post-war Greece but fails to hold the hegemony.

371 BCE: Thebes utilizes revolutionary tactics to permanently crush the myth of Spartan invincibility at Leuctra.

The Power Vacuum: By the mid-4th century BCE, the Greek city-states are left financially exhausted, depopulated, and deeply divided, making them entirely vulnerable to a rising, patient power in the north (Macedon).

Summary: The Arc of Classical Greece

¶ 2.19

1. Triumph

A unified Greece spectacularly repels the Persian Empire (Marathon, Salamis, Plataea).

2. Ascendance

Victory empowers Athens to build a dual legacy: an unprecedented democratic golden age coupled with a highly coercive maritime empire.

3. Ruin

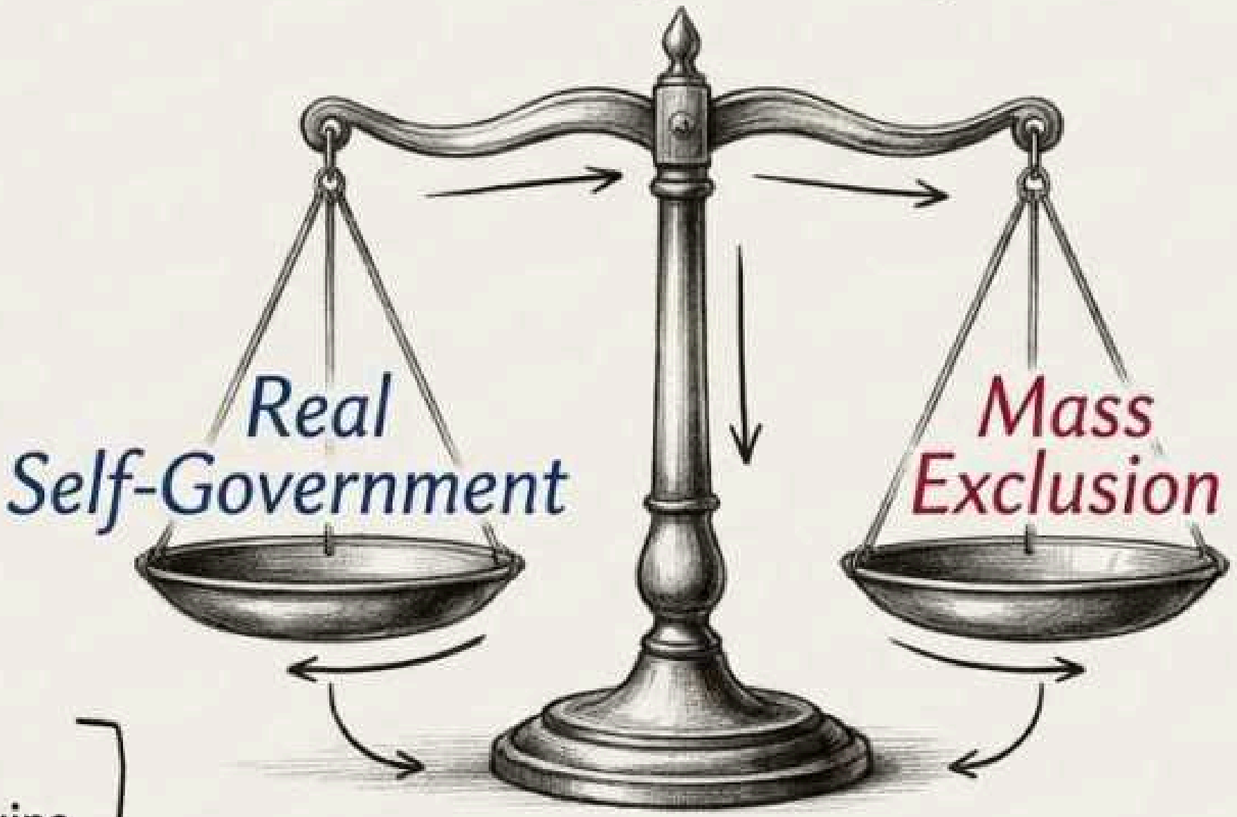
Mutual, unchecked fear triggers the catastrophic Peloponnesian War, concluding in total Athenian defeat (404 BCE).

4. Vulnerability

Decades of endless warfare, plague, and bitter rivalry fatally weaken all leading city-states, paving the inevitable way for Macedon.

A Question for Reflection

¶ 2.20



The Premise: Athenian democracy provided genuine, unparalleled self-government for a select few, built directly upon the systemic exclusion of the many.

The Prompt: Given these constraints, is it fair to call it a "democracy"?

Considerations: Contrast exactly who was empowered to speak against who was structurally silenced.

The Historian's Task: True historical analysis requires balancing deep, justified admiration for their civic and cultural milestones with an unflinching, honest accounting of their absolute moral and societal limits.