The Theban Prelude to Alexander’s Greatness

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The history of Greece during the early fourth century B.C.E. is often overlooked as a mere interlude between the end of the Peloponnesian War and the beginning of the Hellenistic era. It is as if Athens’ defeat in the Peloponnesian War and Macedon’s victory at the Battle of Chaironea almost seventy years later marked a single event: the fall of Athens and the rise of Alexander the Great. While movies and popular literature leave many casual students with the impression that Athens and Sparta comprised a uniformly bipolar classical Greece that was somehow “conquered” by Alexander the Great, this oversimplifies matters. Such editorial devices nicely streamline narratives aimed more at pageantry than precision, but they leave on the cutting room floor many stories every bit as fascinating and significant as Athens’ and Alexander’s own. One such story is that of the Theban hegemony over mainland Greece of 400 to 350 B.C.E. In many ways, this era was the indispensable precursor that foreshadowed the rise of Macedon and Alexander.

After Sparta’s victory over Athens in the Peloponnesian War in 404 B.C., Thebes, like Macedon a state composed of Doric peoples in northern Greece, was waiting to pick up the pieces. For centuries the Thebans had been staunch allies of their fellow Dorian to the south, the Spartans, and they had supported Sparta in the war against Athens. However, unlike Sparta and her other Peloponnesian allies, Thebes’ territory of Boeotia in central Greece had been spared the Athenian raids and depredations carried out along the Peloponnesian coast. Boeotia and Thebes lay north of the Isthmus of Corinth, the land corridor linking the Spartan army with its Attic objectives. Thus, the war’s end left Thebes virtually intact, covetous of adjacent Athenian territory, and envious of Sparta, while the Athenians, and, paradoxically, their Spartan conquerors, both stood exhausted and depleted of manpower and other resources. For the Thebans, the time was ripe.

According to Xenophon, it was Theban diplomats (as well as their fellow Dorians and Spartan allies, the Corinthians) who urged a Spartan assembly, called by the ephors, to raze Athens to the ground. Thebes wanted to destroy Athens and annex her territory. Corinth, the original Dorian agent provocateur of the war and the state most threatened by Athens’ trading prowess, wanted both revenge and the elimination of a costly economic rival. With Athens destroyed, nothing and no one would stand between Thebes and her territorial aims in central Greece. As Donald Kagan argues in The Fall of the Athenian Empire, Sparta was happy to let a humbled Athens dispute with Thebes over central Greece, while the Spartan military retained hegemony over the Peloponnesus undisturbed. It is also his belief that it was the Athenian envoy Theramenes who, in the nick of time, was able to convince the victorious Spartan general Lysander, and then the assembly, to spare the city, most likely as a counterweight to Theban ambitions. The
aristocrat Xenophon characteristically ascribes to the Spartans a nobler motive, a nostalgic desire to make a concession in honor of Athens’ past resistance to Persian aggression. Given the Spartan character, Kagan’s proposal of a less sentimental explanation is entirely credible.

Sparta’s hegemony over the southern mainland did not last long. With most of the Spartan army overextended and fighting the Persians to free the Greek cities of Asia Minor, Corinth soon chafed at the Spartan yoke. In the 390’s, a democratic overthrow of the Spartan backed Corinthian oligarchy required what remained of the Spartan army at home to march north to put down the rebellion. Corinth appealed to the other major city-states, Thebes, Athens, and Argos, for aid. Thebes saw an opportunity to replace Sparta as the hegemon of Greece. Athens was only too glad to support democracy against oligarchy and to exact revenge upon Sparta. Argos had been Sparta’s unfriendly rival for lands and control in the Peloponnesus since the seventh century. All three combined against Sparta in this, the Corinthian War, which was fought to an inconclusive end with a so-called “King’s Peace” brokered by Persia in 386. The upshot was to renew Athenian influence in the Aegean, to end Spartan adventures in Asia, to reduce Spartan influence in Corinth, and to demonstrate the increasing vigor of the Theban military, which demonstrated that it was the class of the alliance.

By the 370’s, growing Theban power was becoming unbearable from the Spartan perspective. In Thebes, as elsewhere in Greece, there was an oligarchic pro-Spartan faction and a democratic anti-Spartan faction. Emulating their Corinthian strategy, the Spartans conspired with a few Theban nobles to stage a coup d’etat and place them in control. Spartan soldiers occupied the Theban citadel (the Kadmeia) and established a dictatorship of their conservative friends. In the winter of 379-378, the Theban general Pelopidas, later commander of the elite Theban Sacred Band, played a central role in toppling this puppet government and restoring Theban democracy. According to Plutarch, Pelopidas was one of many Theban exiles living in Athens who, with twelve others, volunteered to undertake the most daring part of their plan to recover Thebes and install an anti-Spartan government. These twelve snuck into various parts of the city under cover of snow and wind, and joining with 36 other conspirators already in the city, they assassinated the primary leaders of the oligarchy, opened the gates, and summoned their fellow partisans waiting outside. Meanwhile, as rumor of the coup rapidly spread throughout Thebes, Epaminondas and Gorgidas, who had never left the city even though their patriotic reputations always made them suspect to the oligarchy, were the first to come forth armed from their homes and join with the exiles. Probably, it was these same reputations that had protected them and their families from proscription for fear of touching off a popular revolt. Led by the exile Pelopidas and the fifth columnist Epaminondas, the Theban patriots from within and without the city joined together to quickly defeat and expel the tyrants.

For the next twenty years, the Thebans, with the democratic anti-Spartan party firmly in control, repeatedly invaded the Peloponnesus with the objective of destroying Sparta and freeing the Messenian helots and the other southern Peloponnesians oppressed by Sparta for centuries. “Freeing the helots” was not only a useful slogan for anti-Spartan
propaganda but also a key strategic aim in destabilizing the Spartan aristocracy, whose agrarian economy had been based on forced helot labor for centuries. The brief period of Theban hegemony in the fourth century was built upon the success of this Theban policy of bringing about Sparta’s worst fear, a foreign backed revolt of the helots upon whom the stability of her society depended.

Throughout this period, Athens, with a new fleet financed by Persian gold, played a Machiavellian game of power politics. While recovering from the Peloponnesian and Corinthian Wars, Athens acted largely as a makeweight in Greece but taking strong action against anyone threatening to interfere with her maritime interests in Thrace, the Aegean, and around the Black Sea.

The invasion of the Peloponnesus by the Theban army under its general Epaminondas is fully described by Xenophon and by Plutarch. It began as Theban and Boeotian contingents reinforced by Thessalian and other mercenaries, but eventually grew to be 70,000 strong. This army handed the Spartans their first defeat in a pitched hoplite battle, at Leuctra in central Greece in 371. Here Epaminondas arrayed the hoplites in formations four or five times deeper than normal in order to crush the Spartan phalanx. Balance-of-power conscious Athens switched sides from Thebes to underdog Sparta, it having become clear that Thebes was ascendant, while Sparta’s oppressed neighbors flocked to the Theban banner. This Theban-led army liberated the Messenian helots, refounding the Messenian state at Ithome in 369, and it continued campaigning in the Peloponnesus until the death of Epaminondas seven years later in his final victory over the Spartans at Mantinea (362). As the allied army grew during these campaigns, it was composed of Phokians, mercenary and Messenian light troops, and infantry contingents from Arkadia, Argos, and Elis. There were also javelin-armed infantry from Thessaly, and elite Thessalian cavalry, well trained and capable of fighting in the compact or wedge formations later adopted by the Macedonian mounted “companions.”

Xenophon calls the Theban and Thessalian cavalry “the best in the world.” He and the other ancient sources also make clear that Thessalian peltasts and javelinmen were of the highest caliber. Thessaly was a traditional Theban ally, with demographic ties to Macedon, and it would soon provide similar troops to Alexander the Great and his father Philip. Epaminondas’ campaigns with this well-balanced army had huge political consequences. Not only were the Messenian helots emancipated by Theban force of arms, but Epaminondas also created a capital for the Arcadians of the central Peloponnesian wilderness by organizing the city of Tripolis from three rustic villages. Thus two southern Greek provinces were freed from centuries of Spartan control.

In describing the Theban army that dominated politico-military affairs in the first half of the century, we should not fail to mention the "Sacred Band" of approximately 300 supremely well-trained hoplites. They fought in 150 matched pairs of Platonic or homosexual lovers, and were kept under arms and in training year-round in the Spartan fashion. They held the place of honor in the Theban line of battle. It was they who held out to the last man at Chaeronea, making a lasting impression upon Philip of Macedon, who would change forever the organization and equipment of the hoplite infantry
When he did so, he was merely building upon the lighter equipment, deeper formations, and increased use of cavalry and light troops pioneered by his Theban and Thessalian predecessors. Indeed, prior to his kingship, Philip had a perfect opportunity to study these innovations while a hostage of the Thebans. Upon returning to Macedon and assuming the throne, Philip equipped his Macedonian phalanx with even lighter armor and even longer spears than the Thebans had developed, and he arrayed his shock infantry in even deeper formations than had the Thebans. The Macedonian “companion” cavalry lengthened the lances and modified the wedge formations used by the Thessalians and thus achieved a level of close combat effectiveness previously unseen in mounted units. By taking the cavalry and infantry innovations of his Theban and Thessalian neighbors to their logical extremes, Philip was able to hoist them and the other Greeks on their own petards at Chaironea in 338. A few years later, Alexander went on to perfect his father’s innovative instrument of war in his own campaigns of conquest throughout southwestern Asia.

Although the half-century of Theban ascendancy cannot claim the cultural significance of the subsequent Hellenistic revolution in arts and letters, its political and military achievements were nonetheless important and enduring. Sparta’s dominance of Greek affairs was forever ended by the Theban military victories, and by the resulting emancipation of Messenia, the breadbasket of the Peloponnesus. Without their Messenian estates and the helots who tilled them, the Spartans could not hope to maintain their aristocratic, militaristic culture. After Alexander’s death and the wars of his Macedonian successors, a new Greece emerged, dominated by the Achaean League of democratic city-states and its Peloponnesian allies that encircled a weakened Sparta. Key among these newly powerful neighbors were two states established by Epaminondas himself: Messenia and Arcadia, whose respective capitals, and even whose national existence, were restored by him a generation before at the head of the victorious Theban army. Other cities in Achaia, Corinth, and Argos, benefited equally, if less directly, from the Theban army’s achievements. They prospered after Sparta’s loss of dominance. Neither Sparta nor Athens would ever again be powers in the eastern Mediterranean. They were eclipsed not by the Macedonians, but first by the Thebans, who came not as conquerors, but as liberators.

It was these same Thebans who laid the foundations for the military innovations of Philip and Alexander that would transform Macedon into a world power and make the name of Alexander the Great immortal. His fame notwithstanding however, the Theban democratic heroes, Epaminondas and Pelopidas, in many ways better merit our interest and admiration, for although they conquered little, they freed many and built much. Theirs is a tale that deserves to be told.