II. SIEGES

Siege warfare played a prominent role in the mythic landscape of Greek warfare, especially in Attic tragedy and comedy. Its actual importance, however, was much less before classical times. Early Greece lacked the wealth needed to sustain sieges. As a result, walls were generally simple, and sometimes only enclosed the acropolis. Wars tended to consist of raids or set-piece battles between infantry armies. In Homer the Achaeans attempt to storm the walls of Troy and they eventually capture the city through a ruse but they do not lay siege to Troy. Whether or not this reflects Bronze Age reality, the absence of a siege certainly would have resonated with Homer’s audience and its way of war. Defensive technology was somewhat more advanced in the Greek colonies of the eastern and western Mediterranean. Carthaginians, Lydians and Persians all had more resources to mount sieges and better technology than did the mainland Greeks, and Greek colonists and their descendants consequently built better walls than those in the homeland. Beginning in the sixth century BC, these walls included such features as two-storey towers, gate corridors and, at Samos, a harbour mole, a protective ditch in front of lower-lying walls, and an aqueduct tunnelling through a hill to bring water to the city in case of siege. Then and for the next two centuries, walls were generally made of mud brick on stone plinths.

1. Developments in classical siege warfare

As with so much in Greek history, the Persian Wars proved the turning point in siege warfare. When a Persian expeditionary force attacked Athens in 480, the Athenians, except for a few stragglers, abandoned their city rather than risk a siege. The Persians took the city against token resistance and burned its temples. After Greece’s subsequent destruction of Persia’s invading army and navy, the Athenians resolved to refortify their city. They moved quickly and worked cheaply, overcoming Spartan opposition by holding its diplomatic representatives hostage while Athenians threw up walls around both the city and the harbour town of Piraeus. Sparta itself remained famously unfortified, trusting in its army for defence, thereby remaining true to its methods of labour-intensive, money-shy warfare.

The creation in 477 of an Athenian-led naval alliance, however, and its transformation over the next few decades into the Athenian empire, allowed Athens to think big when it came to siege warfare: imperial tribute gave Athens the money to do so. In the 450s, the Athenians built Long...
Walls connecting Athens to Piraeus, a little more than three miles away, to create a circuit of walls of more than twenty-one miles. The Athens–Piraeus complex was able to withstand sieges by land while permitting a steady inflow of supplies by sea.\footnote{Walls connecting Athens to Piraeus, a little more than three miles away, to create a circuit of walls of more than twenty-one miles. The Athens–Piraeus complex was able to withstand sieges by land while permitting a steady inflow of supplies by sea.}

Meanwhile, Athens resorted to siege warfare abroad to maintain control of its alliance. The revolt of Naxos in 470, of Thasos in 465, of Samos in 440, and of Mytilene in 428 all provoked Athenian sieges. The siege of Thasos lasted three years. Samos took only nine months, but it was hotly contested. Ancient sources say that the Athenian besiegers used battering rams (fig. 7.5) and protective sheds, and that they crucified elite Samian prisoners after conquering the town. These points were contested even in antiquity, but it is tempting to think them genuine and evidence of borrowing from Persian siegecraft. More certain is the price paid by Athens in blood. Pericles, the Athenian general and statesman, is said in his funeral oration to have compared the siege to a year without spring.\footnote{On the Athens–Piraeus walls, see Lawrence (1979) 419; Adam (1982) 201–3. Samos: Diod. Sic. 12.26; Plut. Per. 24–8; Winter (1971) 156–7, 307; Lawrence (1979) 41.}
If there were improvements in Greek besieging techniques, the defence kept pace with them. Greek fortification walls tended to become longer, stronger and better protected by towers, gateways and sally ports for sorties by defenders. In general, the defender maintained the advantage, which tended to make sieges long and costly.198

The Peloponnesian War proved a hothouse for siege warfare, with major sieges carried on by the combatants in nearly every part of the Greek world, from central Greece (Plataea 431–427) to northern Greece (Potidaea 432–430/29) to the Cyclades (Melos 416) to the Sporades (Mytilene 428–427) to Sicily (Syracuse 415–413) and finally to Athens itself (405–404). There were many smaller sieges as well. Perhaps the most important was the Spartan Brasidas’ lightning strike on Amphipolis in 424. Within twenty-four hours he achieved the surrender of one of the most strategic positions in the Athenian empire, and without suffering a single casualty.199

Although the help of traitors remained the main alternative to a long siege aimed at starving a city out, some innovative tactics did appear. At Plataea, for example, the Spartans built a large mound on which they attacked the city with battering rams and fire; perhaps the Athenians were the first to introduce this tactic of Near Eastern warfare to the Greek mainland. The Thebans used a flame thrower against the Athenians at Delium (424) and the Spartan Brasidas used a similar device at Torone in 423. None of these machines, however, succeeded in taking a city.200

Perhaps more leverage was applied by another expedient made use of in the war, that is, establishing a fortified position in the enemy’s territory and using it for raids to damage economic infrastructure and foment desertion by slaves or serfs. Athens employed this device at Pylos, on the Messenian coast, from 425 to 409 and the Peloponnesians followed suit at Decelea, in the mountains of northern Attica, from 413 to 404. Although neither side inflicted a knock-out blow, they each gained considerable success from these measures. Athens, for instance, acquired hostages at Pylos that extracted a truce from Sparta and a halt to Spartan attacks on Athenian soil (see below). The Peloponnesians damaged the Athenian economy and hurt Athenian morale.201

Defence also witnessed a great innovation in the Athenian response to the Peloponnesians’ original strategy in the war of invading Attica each summer and ravaging Athenian farms. Rather than making the traditional reply of sending out their own army to fight, the Athenians, led

by Pericles, stayed on the defensive behind their walls (at least on land: they did raid the Peloponnese by sea). Recognizing Athens’ inability to match the Peloponnesian army, Pericles gathered the entire population within the walls of the Athens–Piraeus fortified complex, supplying them with seaborne provisions. This stymied the enemy’s attempt to fight a battle on his terms, but it took a heavy material and psychological toll on the Athenian home front. What is more, the concentration of the population within the walls provided fertile breeding grounds for the epidemic that struck in 430 and which killed between one-fourth and one-third of the Athenian population, including Pericles himself. His successors moved to the strategic offensive.\(^{202}\)

Siege warfare seems to have become more cruel during the Peloponnesian War. In Greek warfare the victor always had absolute rights over the fruits of victory, but he seems to have used them with newfound inhumanity. We have far more examples of the massacre of conquered populations (or at least of the adult males; women and children were usually enslaved) during the war than in the earlier period or, for that matter, than in the fourth century before the rise of Macedon. Caution is advisable because far more evidence survives from the Peloponnesian War than from the earlier period and no surviving history of the fourth century sheds a spotlight on that era equal to the light shed by Thucydides on the late fifth century. Yet Thucydides’ own judgement, that the Peloponnesian War marked a brutalization of Greek warfare, commands attention. Euripides too, writing in the era of the war, condemned the massacre of civilians.\(^{203}\)

Whenever foreign troops entered a city after a siege, whether they had an easy entry or a hard one, it was a dangerous moment for the inhabitants. When traitors opened the gates of Mende to Athenians in 423, the Athenians ‘sacked it just as if they had taken it by storm, the generals even finding some difficulty in restraining them from also massacring the inhabitants’ (Thuc. 4.130.6). When the Athenians stormed Torone in 422 they enslaved the women and children and sent the men to Athens; eventually they made it home in a prisoner exchange (Thuc. 5.3.4). It must have been a rude awakening after Torone’s lenient treatment by Brasidas when traitors handed the town over to his men in winter 424/3 (Thuc. 4.114.3–5). Yet Torone’s mistreatment did not compare to that awaiting other cities in the Peloponnesian War, to say nothing of the Sicilian cities that were bathed in blood by the wars between Carthage and Syracuse.\(^{204}\)

Several massacres following sieges stand out from Thucydides’ pages, among them, on the Spartan side, the execution in 427 of the 200 Plataeans


and 25 Athenians who surrendered after a two-year siege while selling the Plataean women into slavery; the slaughter of the Athenian defenders of Lecythus in 424; and the killing of all the free adult males after the capture of Hysiae in 417. Athenians in 421 massacred the men of Scione after a two-year siege and sold the women and children into slavery; in 415 they did the same to the population of Melos, after a year’s siege. The worst butchery of the war took place in the little central Greek town of Mycalessus in 413, when a party of Thracian mercenaries took the crumbling walls by assault and killed every man, woman and child they found (Thuc. 7.29–30).

Other cities were treated more leniently, particularly if they surrendered without a protracted resistance. Yet even so-called lenient treatment was usually draconian. When Potidaea surrendered to Athens in a state of starvation after a three-year siege in 429, the entire population was forced into exile; the men had to leave with only the clothes on their back, the women were allowed to take one change of clothing (Thuc. 2.70.3). In 427, after the six-month siege of Mytilene, Athens executed only the guiltiest parties, yet these amounted to over 1,000 men (Thuc. 3.30.1). When the Spartan Lysander captured Cedreae in Caria in 405, he sold all the inhabitants into slavery (Xen. Hell. 2.1.15).

The approximate half century between the end of the Peloponnesian War (404) and the rise of Macedon under Philip (359–336) witnessed another revolutionary era in Greek siege warfare. Warfare in Sicily between Carthaginians and Greeks in the late fifth century and throughout the fourth century was the testing ground for new techniques. The Carthaginians brought with them, via their Phoenician cousins, a knowledge of Near Eastern siegecraft, including battering rams and siege towers, and they made extensive use of mercenaries as special attack troops. The Greeks, in turn, quickly learned from their enemy and made advances in artillery. The wars in Sicily were bloody, destructive and expensive. The new ways quickly made their way eastward to the Greek mainland.205

The biggest development in Greek siege warfare in the fourth century was the invention of artillery. Non-torsion arrow-shooters were invented by the engineers of Dionysius of Syracuse in the siege of Motya in 399. Within about a half century, the true torsion catapult had been invented as well. These new machines, when coupled with battering rams and siege towers, made it possible to knock down walls and capture cities in a matter of weeks rather than years. When supplemented by specialized troops like archers or firemen (to put out blazes in the equipment set by defenders), besieging armies could prove devastatingly effective.206

The new technology opened a revolution in fortress building. Engineers designed forts and city walls to be thicker, higher and more stable. Thirty-foot-tall towers featured shuttered windows from which small catapults could be shot. Perhaps most striking of all, the era of full-scale stone walls and towers was at hand. The new city of Messene in 369–368, built by Theban engineers, was the first Greek town whose walls were all of stone. Yet few walls could withstand the siegecraft ability developed by the Macedonians under Philip and Alexander (fig. 7.6). 207

The fourth century also witnessed the building of massive fortresses and watch posts astride the mountain passes between Attica and Boeotia. Although scholars differ on the interpretation, dating and even the identity of these forts – were they Athenian or Boeotian? – perhaps the most convincing theory sees them as an Athenian system to offer stationary frontier defence to the countryside of Attica, perhaps in reaction to the devastation of Attica during the Peloponnesian War. They thus represent a new defensive mentality. Ironically, however, by the time they were tested in war with Macedon, advances in technology had rendered them obsolete. 208

208 For illustrations, plans and a general discussion, see Adam (1982) 203–17; for the theory, Ober (1983b); for a contrary point of view, see Munn (1993); Cooper (2000).
2. The experience of siege warfare

Much of the evidence of ancient siege warfare comes from the archaeological remains of walls and forts. Several detailed literary accounts of siege warfare, however, have survived from fifth- and fourth-century Greece before the Macedonian era, and they are vivid. Thucydides provides detailed accounts of the siege of Syracuse by Athens (415–413) and of the debate on the treatment of prisoners after Athens’ successful siege of Mytilene (428–427). But his masterpiece is the siege of Plataea by the Peloponnesians (431, 429–427) – or perhaps his account of the epidemic that struck the Athenian population under siege, hunkered down behind the walls of the Athens–Piraeus fortified complex, between 430 and 427. To learn about the sieges in the wars between Carthaginians and Greeks in fifth- and fourth-century Sicily, we depend mainly on Diodorus of Sicily, a Roman-era writer who borrowed from earlier Greek sources. Perhaps the most fascinating account of Greek siege warfare, and by far the most idiosyncratic, is the treatise on siegecraft, *How to Survive under Siege*, written perhaps in the 350s. The author of this work cannot be identified precisely, though he might have been the general Aeneas from the city of Stymphalos in Arcadia; he is known today only as Aeneas Tacticus, that is, Aeneas the Tactician.\(^{209}\)

For the attacker, sieges were unpleasant and expensive and it is no wonder that they were avoided when possible. Before the artillery revolution of the fourth century, generally the only way to take a city was to starve it out, which would take months or years. The siege of Potidaea, to take an extreme case, lasted over two years and cost Athens 2,000 talents, which amounted to perhaps 25 per cent of Athens’ financial reserves. As a result, Athens imposed special taxes both at home and in the empire (Thuc. 2.70.2, 3.17.4, 3.19.1).

The attackers usually built a wall of circumvallation around the besieged city, to prevent supplies or reinforcements from reaching it and to thwart break-outs. The Athenians, for example, built a circumvallation wall at Mytilene in 428; the Peloponnesians surrounded Plataea in 429 with a complex, double set of circumvallation walls built of clay bricks and complete with battlement, towers and moats. Infantrymen on siege duty were often drafted into the heavy labour of building walls. A determined and resourceful defender might thwart the completion of a circumvallation wall, as the Syracusans did to the Athenians during their failed siege of 415–413.\(^{210}\)

The besiegers often had to live out in the open, which meant heat in summer, rain from autumn to spring, and in the winter sometimes snow.

\(^{209}\) For an introduction to Aeneas Tacticus, as well as a translation and commentary, see Whitehead (1990); cf. Garlan (1974) 169–82.

Plato’s Alcibiades, for instance, who served at Potidaea in northern Greece, marvels at the endurance of his fellow Athenian soldier there – Socrates:

As for the hardships of winter – and the winters there are very severe – he performed prodigies; on one occasion in particular, when there was a tremendous frost, and everybody either remained indoors or, if they did go out, muffled themselves up in a quite unheard-of way, and tied and swathed their feet in felt and sheepskin, Socrates went out with nothing on but his ordinary clothes and without anything on his feet, and walked over the ice barefoot more easily than other people in their boots.

(Pl. Symp. 220a–b, trans. Hamilton 1967)

Besiegers had to feed themselves by raiding the countryside and by establishing markets to attract traders. They weren’t always successful, however, and some besiegers suffered shortages of food or water. Alcibiades, again, referring to Potidaea, refers to times when supplies were abundant and other times when the soldiers were forced to go without food (Pl. Symp. 219e).

Disease was a possibility, as the Athenians discovered at Syracuse and at Potidaea and as the Carthaginians learned in Sicily. The Athenian army besieging Syracuse in summer 413 was rife with disease ‘owing to its being the sickly season of the year, and to the marshy and unhealthy nature of the spot in which they were encamped’ (Thuc. 7.47.2). At Potidaea in 430, an Athenian expedition lost 1,500 out of 4,000 hoplites in forty days, mainly because of the plague, the now-unidentifiable epidemic that ravaged Athens (Thuc. 2.58.3).211

Faced with these realities, besiegers tried to speed up the pace. The alternatives to digging in and sitting in front of a besieged city were treason, intimidation, trickery and assault. Before the artillery revolution assault was rare and rarely successful. Among the few examples, the Spartan Lysander took Lampsacus on the Hellespont in 405, while the Athenians under Cleon took Torone in 422, thanks largely to the city’s under-strength garrison.212 Several Sicilian cities fell to assault in the wars between Carthage and Syracuse, but these campaigns involved siege engines, specialized troops or artillery.213

Treason and intimidation were far more common ways to take a town. For example, traitors opened the gates of Torone to Sparta in 424 and the gates of Mende to Athens in 423, turned over the Cadmea or acropolis of Thebes to Sparta in 382, turned over the Athenian border fortress of Panactum to the Boeotians in 422, and let down nets from the walls of Chios around the mid-fourth century which were successfully scaled by an enemy (whose identity is no longer known to us).214 The Persians at Marathon in 490 hoped to have the help of traitors in Athens. After the
Persian defeat the remainder of the Persian army rowed around Attica for the city, spurred on by a shield signal, flashed from the mountains by Athenian traitors. The news was that the city was largely undefended; unfortunately for the Persians, the Athenian army beat them back to town by land.

Brasidas, described by Thucydides as ‘not being a bad speaker for a Spartan’, was the master of intimidation (Thuc. 4.84.2). In 424 he talked the people of Acanthus, Stagirus, Amphipolis and other Athenian allies in north-eastern Greece into surrendering to Sparta. He offered favourable terms, appealed to panhellenic ideals, and threatened to ravage the territory of any city that resisted. He also had the advantage of shock and the relative distance of Athenian aid.

Finally, there is trickery. A familiar motif in the history of Greek warfare, common trickery – and not brute force or tactical sophistication – wins the day in Aeneas Tacticus’ description of siege warfare in fourth-century Greece. Or, one should say, wins the night, because in Aeneas Tacticus’ world, nighttime is often the moment of truth. One night c. 362–359, for example, Iphiades of Abydus captured the city of Parium by filling wagons with twigs and brambles and sending them, ‘once the gates were already closed, up to the wall, as if they belonged to the Parians’ (28.6). The wagons were left for the night but Iphiades waited for the right moment to set them on fire. Once the flames spread to the gates, the Parians rushed out to douse them – and Iphiades’ troops took advantage of the distraction to scale the walls at another point and take the city.

So much for the besiegers. The greatest miseries of siege warfare, however, were generally reserved for the besieged. Greek literature is full of descriptions of the horrors of living under siege, a theme of poetry from Homer onward. There is little reason to think the bloody picture represents mere literary licence. The usual plan of the attacker was to starve a city out and when it succeeded, the results were not pretty. Besieged Athenians in 404, for example, thronged negotiators returning from Sparta, desperate for an agreement because of the masses of those who had died of starvation (Xen. Hell. 2.2.22). At Potidaea in 429 the starving defenders resorted to cannibalism (Thuc. 2.70.1). When enemy troops forced their way into a city, whether via assault or treason, the results were usually terrible for the defenders, as discussed in the preceding section.

Within the walls, the besieged had to pay nearly as much attention to fifth columns as they did to the enemy outside. There was always a traitor who might open the gates. For example, Aeneas Tacticus is full of references to plots, conspiracies, treason, class-warfare and coups d’état. The author urges

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215 Hdt. 6.115–16; see Losada (1970).
216 On trickery, see Wheeler (1998); on Parium, see commentary in Whitehead (1990) 179–80.
careful counter-measures, down to and including a ban on taking lanterns to bed, because they might be used to signal the enemy (10.25–6). He paints a picture of a besieged population that is frightened and wriggling under the thumb of a nervous and omni-present élite. In times of siege, as he advises, private meetings have to be banned, weddings and funerals monitored, parades patrolled by armed guards, private arms and armour registered, identity tokens issued, foreigners catalogued by innkeepers, ambassadors trailed, revolutionaries co-opted, stool pigeons encouraged by cash prizes. Sentries have to be rotated, gate-keepers looked over the shoulder, spies and deserters sniffed after by dogs. It all sounds disturbingly modern.

One of the few good things about life under siege was a slight relaxation of the usual restrictions on women’s freedom. For example, when oligarchic traitors let a party of Theban soldiers into Plataea in 431, women played an active military role in the democratic counterattack by going up on the rooftops and throwing down stones and tiles onto the enemy. Slaves joined them in this activity (Thuc. 2.4.2; Aen. Tact. 2.6). Women, slaves and children did the same in the street fighting in the civil war in Corcyra in 428 BC and in the defence of Selinus in Sicily against Carthaginian attack in 411.

Another case comes from around 370 BC when the city of Sinope was attacked by the forces of Datamas, satrap of the province of Cappadocia. Short of men, the Sinopeans adopted the following ruse:

they disguised and equipped the most physically suitable of their women to make them look as much as possible like men, giving them jugs and similar bronze utensils in place of shields and helmets, and promenading them on the side of the wall where they were in fullest view of the enemy.


While letting women play a masculine role, the men of Sinope none the less maintained gender policing by forbidding the women from throwing anything, since ‘a woman is recognizable a long way off by the way she throws’ (40.5). Whether the ruse worked is unclear. Datamas eventually conquered Sinope, but it took him two separate attempts, and it is not known on which one the Sinopeans employed their stratagem.

One wonders what happened to the women of Sinope when the town fell. Greek women were far less likely to be massacred than men. They did, however, face enslavement. Rape, moreover, was always a possibility. The Greek historians do not discuss rape, but Homer and the tragedians


219 Thuc. 3.74.1; Diod. Sic. 13.56.

do. Normally, one would prefer the historians as a guide to what actually happened, but they – especially Thucydides, our most important source on sieges – are often reticent about sex. In any case, unwanted sexual encounters were the common lot of the slave. The enslaved woman of Melos who ended up as Alcibiades’ concubine was considered one of the lucky ones, since he actually brought up the child he had by her (Plut. *Alc.* 16.4). 221