Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization”
Episode Three: “Empire of the Mind”

Transcript of PBS Video - The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization
Part III: Empire of the Mind

0:00 – Episode Introduction

Athens. The world’s first democracy. The most glorious city in ancient world, a city of wealth and power, center of a mighty naval empire. At the head of the state stood one man, a man who seemed to embody all of the Athenians’ achievements: Pericles. But Pericles now risked everything he and the Athenians had built in one great gamble, a war that he hoped would make Athens the undisputed ruler of the Mediterranean. This conflict would indeed transform Athens, but in a way that Pericles could never have imagined. It would make a common Athenian, Socrates, into the ruler of a new empire, an empire that remains the Greeks’ last great legacy, an empire of the mind.

A prison cell in the city of Athens. The year, 399 BC. Socrates, the world’s most famous philosopher, prepares for his execution. Around him lies a city ruined by war, a nation stripped of glory and empire, a people who have lost everything. Socrates is perhaps the one man who perhaps could have saved his fellow citizens from the greatest defeat in their history. Instead they have condemned him to death. How could the Athenians come to execute one of their most brilliant minds? How could they lose everything that had made them great? It is a tale that begins three decades before.

3:00 – Pericles’ Strategy for War with Sparta, 431 BC

In the year 431 BC the city-state of Athens was the greatest power in the Mediterranean. Under the leadership of the patrician Pericles, this tiny state had built a naval empire that stretched across the Aegean. Her mighty fleet of trireme warships was the most powerful of the day. Athens lay at the center of a great trading network that lay as far afield as Britain in the west and India in the east, bringing untold wealth into the city. And Pericles had personally devoted himself to making this city the most glorious of the ancient world. He had commissioned the Parthenon, a mighty temple to the goddess Athena, one of the most extravagant monuments of ancient history. But for all his power and sway, Pericles did not rule the city, for Athens was a democracy.

This is the assembly area of the Pnyx, home of the Athenian democracy, a system that gave every Athenian citizen a say in the running of their state. Here Pericles had to stand before his fellow citizens and win the right to lead. One day in the year 431 BC Pericles took the podium and presented the Athenians with a bold, new plan, a proposal that would offer Athens her final crowning glory. Pericles intended to vanquish Athens’ last great rival, the city-state of Sparta. Sparta was the only other Greek state that matched Athens’ power. The Spartans ruled all of southern Greece and they were fearsome military force. Their citizens were trained from birth in the arts of war. Tension had been building between Athens and Sparta for decades.

To Pericles, it was now time to take on this dangerous adversary, to make Athens the undisputed leader of the Mediterranean: “If we go to war, as I think we must, be determined that we are not going to climb down, for it is from the greatest dangers that the greatest glory is to be won.” The assembly embraced Pericles’ plan. The Athenians were never ones to shrink from a fight.
Paul Cartledge: “The Ancient Greeks as a whole were not by any stretch of the imagination a peace-loving people. Peace was an interruption of war, rather than vice versa, and the Athenians were as bellicose as any other Greeks."

But Pericles knew that any war with Sparta would not be easy to win, for the Spartan infantry were far superior to Athens’ forces. Athens’ strength lay in her navy. So Pericles proposed a strategy of astonishing complexity and sophistication. He convinced the Athenians to abandon all the land around Athens and retreat behind the long walls that stretched down to its harbor at Piraeus. Pericles would supply the city by sea. Merchantmen would bring in grain, wheat and other essential supplies from Athens’ colonies and allies across the Mediterranean, protected by the mighty Athenian fleet. And Pericles would use this great navy to attack the Spartans from the coast. It was a strategy based on a set finely judged assumptions.

Donald Kagan: “Pericles’ expectation was that after a year or two, but no more than three, the Spartans would realize that they could not win the war because the Athenians would never give them the infantry battle they needed in order to win and they had no other device available."

9:00 – Socrates and the Revolution in Thought

Athens’ fleet had always been key to the city’s success. It had won the city great military victories, and it had built her an empire. Pericles was sure that this fleet could now bring Athens her greatest triumph. The Athenians crowded behind the city walls. Confident in their vision of imperial power and glory, they assumed that Pericles strategy could only bring them victory. But among this teeming multitude could be found one man who refused to assume anything. A man unique in Athenian society, a man called Socrates.

Alexander Nehamas: “If you were an ancient Athenian citizen, the first thing you would see is a man who was unbelievably ugly. His head was too big, his eyes were too large, his nose was all the wrong shape. Socrates’ appearance breaks every rule of Classical Greek aesthetics, of the idea of proportion and measure.”

Socrates walked the streets of Athens barefoot, clad only in a dirty robe. He cared nothing of appearance, or of any of the other conventions of his day. Socrates was interested only in the mind. This unlikely figure would become the leader of a revolution, a revolution in thinking that had been gathering strength across the Greek world.

For thousands of years, mankind had assumed that the world around them, the sun, the stars, and the moon, were gods and spirits. Believing they were recording messages from their gods, ancient civilizations such as the Babylonians had gathered great catalogs of astronomical data. This detailed calendar from Babylonia records the ring and falling of the constellations and the gods they represented. This knowledge and study of the heavens had been slowly spreading across the ancient world until it reached Greek colonies on the coast of what is modern day Turkey. There a shattering change occurred, for the Greeks took this astronomical knowledge and transformed it. They took the gods out of the heavens and replaced them with reason.

Alexander Nehamas: “Gradually the Greeks begin to say, ‘These are not persons, these are things. There is an orderly world which the human mind can actually capture. It is subject to our understanding’”
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These Greeks began to calculate and predict the movement of the moon and the stars through mathematics and logic, rather than using gods and spirits to explain everything - it was the birth of science - The first great Greek scientist, a man called Thales, wrote the earliest book of navigation and how to sail using the stars as a guide - and on a journey to Egypt, Thales was the first man to measure the height of the Great Pyramid –

Alexander Nehamas: “Brilliant idea. He stood next to the pyramid until high noon when his shadow was exactly the same length as his height, and at that point he measured the shadow of the pyramid, and accordingly knew the height of the pyramid, which is actually an application of a sophisticated geometrical theorem.” - These Greek scientists would go on to measure the circumference of the world when most people still thought it was flat - to devise, steam engines, water pumps, and suspension bridges

But Socrates was not interested in the mechanics of the physical world. He would use this new way of thinking, using reason and logic to study people.

Alexander Nehamas: “The great change comes with Socrates, who turns his back, so to speak, to the world of nature. What he cares about is the individual. You become an object of study and care.”

Socrates spent his days in conversation, walking the streets of Athens, talking and debating with anyone he met. With over 150,000 people now packed behind Athens’ walls, he was in his element.

Alexander Nehamas: “One of the amazing things about Socrates is that he is the first fanatical urban individual. He loves the city. He makes life in the city one of his major concerns.”

Socrates’ life was spent questioning the assumptions his fellow Athenians held about their lives, what they felt was right and wrong, what was good and bad, and he was happy to turn convention upside down. One of Socrates’ followers records how, at the end of a drunken dinner party, Socrates proved to a fellow guest that he in fact was the better looking of the two: “My eyes must be more beautiful because they bulge out, and therefore I can see better. And by the same account, my nose is more beautiful, because my nostrils flare out and therefore I can gather in more smells.” This is typical Socrates, using reason and logic to examine the world anew.

Alexander Nehamas: “Socrates says, you must make every decision based on your own understanding of what is good, and what is not good, what is right and what is wrong.”

For Socrates, this freedom of thought was paramount, even if it meant upsetting the whole notion of a beautiful nose: “I tell you, let no day pass without discussing all the things about which you hear me talking. A life without this sort of examination is not worth living.”

17:15 – The Early Years of War and the Plague in Athens

But as Socrates spent his days in debate, his city was fighting a war. The Spartans invaded Athenian territory and set about burning all of the farmland around the city. The Athenians became increasingly anxious. They could only watch from the city walls as their fields and crops were destroyed. But such was Pericles’ reputation that he managed to convince the Athenians to stick with his plan. The city
could rely on her fleet and shipments from overseas to survive. Little did Pericles know that this fleet now carried an even greater threat. One year into the war, the grain boats that fed the city brought with them an additional cargo, plague, a disease that would now devastate Athens.

Donald Kagan: “Pericles’ plan couldn’t anticipate difficulties that we now would suggest were rather likely in those circumstances of crowding. And the results were horrendous.”

With the population crammed behind the city walls, the affliction spread like wildfire. The symptoms were horrific. The Athenian historian Thucydides, who lived through these years, recorded its effects: “The body was suddenly seized, first with violent heats around the head and redness and inflammation of the eyes, and then the disease descended into the bowels, producing violent ulceration and uncontrollable diarrhea. The suffering of individuals seemed almost beyond the capacity of human nature.”

Donald Kagan: “The city must have looked terrible, smelled terrible, been awful to be in, and terror must have reigned everywhere.”

Sufferers, wracked with fever and unquenchable thirst, would crawl into the city systems and water mains to die. Thucydides witnessed the scene in Athens’ streets: “The bodies of dying men, they one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets. The catastrophe became so overwhelming that men cared nothing for any rule of religion or law.”

Helen King: “The plague’s effects on Athens were absolutely devastating. The whole fabric of Athenian society broke down. Morally, people saw no point in being good. Why be good, if the good and the evil die just as easily?”

The plague would kill over a third of Athens’ population. And then it struck the city’s figurehead, Pericles. Plutarch, Pericles’ biographer, describes his symptoms: “The plague seized Pericles, not with sharp and violent fits, but with a dull and lingering distemper, wasting the strength of the body, and undermining his noble soul.”

By the end, the patrician hero of the city was reduced to relying on potions and magic in an attempt to cure himself. Plutarch: “He showed one of his friends a charm a woman had hung around his neck, as if to say he was very sick indeed, if he would admit of such foolery as this.”

Finally, after six months of lingering illness, Pericles died in 429 BC. Pericles had planned to make Athens into the Mediterranean’s greatest power, but his carefully calculated strategy had brought only disease and death.

Donald Kagan: “Like most brilliant men, like most people who have had great success all their lives, Pericles simply underestimated the degree to which some things are out of the control of the very best intelligence and thievery best knowledge that there are.”

23:00 – Athenian Democracy after Pericles and the Trial of the Generals

Pericles’ death would have far-reaching consequences. It soon became clear that this one man had been the linchpin of the Athenian state. Plutarch records that the changes were and dramatic: “Those,
who while he lived had resented Pericles’ great authority, now realized that he had been the main protector of public safety, so great a corruption, and so great a flood of mischief and vice followed.”

The flaws in Athenian democracy now became apparent. Without a single strong leader, countless figures now scrambled for the top position, and they were prepared to do anything the people wanted, if it gave them power.

*Plutarch:* “Pericles’ successors, who now wanted to occupy the top position, simply followed the prejudices and passions of the masses in order to gain support.”

Athenian democracy now revealed a new and terrifying potential, the potential to slide into mob rule, crippling her ability to fight a war. As the conflict raged on, an Athenian naval force won a skirmish with the Spartans in rough and storm-tossed seas. The generals who had commanded the force returned to Athens expecting a hero’s welcome. Instead, they were thrown into prison. The storm had forced the Athenian commanders to sail straight back to Athens without picking up any of the soldiers who had fallen overboard during the battle. Rabble-rousing speakers had convinced the Assembly that this failure to rescue the men was a crimes appalling that all the generals should summarily tried and executed. We know of only man who stood up and attempted to calm the fevered assembly, Socrates.

*Alexander Nehamas:* “Socrates, alone and against the very, very serious and vocal, aggressive and mad and furious reaction of the public, stood his ground and said it was the wrong thing to do. He was going to vote against it.”

Socrates’ principle of questioning the society he lived in now had a real and practical purpose.

*Alexander Nehamas:* “He refused to bow to any pressure, and thought for himself, and do the thing his conscience and reasoning told him was the right thing to do.”

But in the end, Socrates was only one voice among the multitude, and he could not sway the assembly. The generals were condemned to death by drinking poisonous hemlock. It would be a terrible loss to Athens’ war effort. With the assembly in the hands of self-interested despots, once-mighty Athens began to lose her way.

*Donald Kagan:* “After the death of Pericles, Athens never again had a political leader with a well thought out, general picture, or a set of goals, that he could pursue with reasonable hope of bringing them to fruition.”

The war against Sparta degenerated into a bitter, dragging conflict that spread over a decade. The Spartans ravaged the land around Athens, and the Athenian fleet kept the city supplied. Neither side was able to defeat the other. Deprived of victory, the Athenians grew increasingly frustrated. Were they not the greatest state in all of Greece? Surely the time must come for Athens to prove her power, once and for all.

**29:00 – The Failure of the Sicilian Expedition, 415 BC**

Then, in the year 416 BC, a daring proposal was put before the Assembly, a proposal which, even if it did not defeat the Spartans, would at least satisfy Athens’ hunger for glory. A small Greek colony on the
island of Sicily had asked for protection, protection from a neighbor allied with Sparta. Why should the Athenians not come to their aid, humiliate their Spartan adversary, and perhaps conquer all of Sicily at the same time? As one Athenian addressed the Assembly: “This is the way we won our empire, and this is the way all empires have been won. Let us set out on this expedition, for it will destroy the arrogance of the Spartans and at the same time, we shall become rulers of all Greece.”

It was a bold plan, to be executed on a vast scale, requiring a great fleet of warships, and landing force of over 10,000 men. The Athenians threw themselves in the project with fervor. Armorers beat out new weapons, soldiers tested out their equipment, stores were loaded onto a fleet of Athenian triremes, and the shipwrights prepared their vessels for the sea. Then, to great fanfare, the mighty invasion force set out to Sicily. Six months later, word came back. The campaign was not going as quickly as hoped, they needed reinforcements. And then, nothing, no news at all.

Then, in the autumn of 413 BC, a sailor arrived in the city, a man who needed a haircut. And as he talked to his barber, he told an appalling tale of a vast and terrible slaughter. It was the story of an invading army that had been pinned where it had landed, of how its leaders had argued with each other about strategy, of how their food and water had run out, of how they attempted to ford a great river in a desperate attempt to escape. “They rushed into it, all discipline lost, and every man wanting to cross first. They fell over each other, and trod each other underfoot, and they drank thirstily, the water was could, but still they went on drinking, mud, blood and all, the dead lying thick in the riverbed.”

This was how the Athenians discovered they had been the victims of one of the greatest defeats in ancient history. Over 50,000 men had been killed, or taken prisoner. Two entire fleets of Athens’ prized triremes had been destroyed.

Victor Davis Hanson: “The Sicilian campaign is a mess for a variety of reasons. First of all, it’s a long way away, over six or seven hundred miles. Once they arrive, they squabble and fight about what to do. But perhaps the biggest problem is that there is not a tactical reason to do it, there’s not a strategic reason to do it. The motivation is highly self-interested.”

The Athenians, entrained by a vision of imperial glory, had in fact engaged in a pointless and vain campaign.

Victor Davis Hanson: “They believed wrongly that they could go quickly in, raze the countryside, and win a quick victory and a rich tributary subject state.”

Thucydides recorded the scale of the devastation: “This was the most notorious action that we know of in Greek history, for they were absolutely, calamitously defeated. The losses were total. Army, navy, everything was destroyed.”

With Athens’ military power now crippled, her enemies began to close in. The Persians, whom the Athenians had humiliated fifty years before, now saw the ideal opportunity for revenge. They approached the Spartans with the offer of help.

Victor Davis Hanson: “The Persians had been watching this carefully and they decide to intervene and subsidize the Spartans, and that subsidy is in the form of manpower for rowing and fleet construction.”
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Where previously the Spartans had never been a naval nation, now they had a fleet, paid for with Persian gold. With Athens’ navy devastated by the defeat in Sicily, the Spartans could now blockade the Athenian harbors. The great grain convoys from Egypt and the colonies could no longer get through. And finally the Athenians began to starve in the streets. The people turned to their patron goddess, Athena. At the height of Athens’ glory, only thirty years before, Pericles had honored her with the most glorious temple ever seen. The goddess could offer no help now. Athens, once so sure of her pre-eminence in the Greek world, was now home to a population ravaged by plague and war, besieged and starving, with her treasuries empty and her once-proud fleet crippled.

In 404 BC, Athens finally surrendered to the Spartan commander, Lysander. The Spartans’ terms were heavy. The great walls which had defended the city, were to be torn down, her fleet was to be destroyed.

Victor Davis Hanson Hanson: “We have this wonderful scene of Lysander sailing into the Piraeus, and dismantling the Athenian fleet. That’s important, because the destruction is symbolically the destruction of the Athenian empire.”

What remained of Athens’ might navy was put to the torch, with only twelve ships allowed to remain. No longer would she rule the Mediterranean.

Josiah Ober: “The Athenians became convinced that they could do, finally, in the end, more than they really could. And I think this is the point in which the potential that Athenian democracy brought about, could turn to tragedy. They could achieve great things they could not achieve all great things.”

But it would still take one more act of vanity and violence before the Athenians could redeem themselves, and their city could be reborn.

39:50 – The Search for a Scapegoat and the Trial of Socrates, 399 BC

Humiliated, their empire lost, the Athenians looked for someone to take the blame for their defeat. They searched for an enemy within their city walls, someone who had dared to question their dreams of supremacy. They searched for Socrates.

Josiah Ober: “Socrates was a critic. He was critical of the thinking and the thought processes of his fellow citizens, and he was critical about the public affairs of Athens.”

For over fifty years, Socrates had been openly questioning and attacking the traditions of Athenian life, and around him he had gathered a group of youthful followers. Surely this must have weakened the city’s moral character, undermined her hunger for victory. On the command of the Assembly, Socrates was arrested on charges of questioning the state religion and corrupting the youth of the city.

Alexander Nehamas: “I am quite sure, that especially in a relatively small society like Athens, someone who is constantly questioning the principles by which the society has traditionally governed itself, will be perceived as a very major danger, by at least some people in the society. You can easily see that a few hundred people might want him out, and they did.”
The Athenians would now put to trial the one who dared to question the way they lived their lives. Socrates’ trial would be held in Athens’ central marketplace, under a canopy to shade the fierce heat of the Greek sun. He would be tried by a jury of his fellow citizens, chosen at random. But this would not be a trial that we would recognize.

Josiah Ober: “The Athenian legal system was remarkably different from a modern system. There are no lawyers involved with this. There is no trained judge involved with this. It is, in some ways, a very frightening system, from a modern point of view. The law did not have the same stature in Athens that it has in a modern society.”

Socrates would be judged by the same kind of group he had watched condemn six generals to summary execution seven years before. He would be given only a limited time to defend himself. All speeches in the Athenian courts were timed by a water clock, one jar of water steadily running into another. But Socrates shows no fear in the face of his accusers. In fact, he is positively stubborn. He explains that, far from corrupting Athens, his life of questioning has done nothing but improve the city.

Socrates: “To put it bluntly, I have been assigned to this city, as if to a large horse, which is inclined to be lazy, and is in need of some great stinging fly. And all day long, I’ll never cease to settle here, there, and everywhere, rousing and reproving everyone of you.”

It is not an approach designed to win sympathy. Socrates is setting himself and his life against the entire Athenian state.

Alexander Nehamas: “He is doing what he thinks is the right thing to do. He thinks the life he has chosen, this life of thinking for yourself, is the best life. As he says in his speech, ‘The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.’”

If Socrates had simply apologized to the court, he might have well have been acquitted. But instead he demands free dinners for life, for all the work he has done.

Alexander Nehamas: “I can just imagine what the jury and the audience must have thought at the time, as they must have been absolutely speechless.”

When the final vote came, the verdict could hardly have been a surprise. The court found Socrates guilty, with the penalty of death. But Socrates reacted with calm and serenity.

Socrates: “Well now, it is time to be off. I am to die, and you to live, but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but heaven.”

Socrates was taken from the court to Athens’ prison. The site of this prison still exists. We can still trace the layout of the cell in which Socrates was probably held. And we still have accounts of Socrates’ last days from friends who visited him in his cell. They are among the most famous Greek writings. For with his death, Socrates would transform Athens. He would show his fellow citizens that the principles of reason, of questioning the world, were something worth dying for.

Socrates would be executed in the traditional Athenian manner, by drinking hemlock. Some of the hemlock cups used for the poison are still preserved. Death by hemlock is excruciatingly painful, causing
gradual paralysis of the central nervous system. But as the moment of his execution drew near, Socrates turned to his friends, treating the whole affair as if it were nothing at all.

Socrates: “For me the fated hour calls. In other words, I think it is about time I took my bath. I prefer to wash before drinking the poison, rather than give the women the bother of washing me when I am dead.”

But as the hemlock was poured, his friends broke down. We have the account of one named Phaedo: “In spite of myself, the tears came pouring down so that I covered my face and wept brokenheartedly. And then everyone in the room broke down, except Socrates himself, who said, ‘Really, my friends, what a way to behave. I am told that one should make one’s end in a reverent silence. Calm yourselves, and be brave.’”

As Socrates lay back on his bed and let the poison take effect, his friends watched in silence. Here was a man who was dying, not for glory, not for fame and honor, but for the sake of his principle, because he believed that man should question the world around him. It was a sight they would never forget.

Alexander Nehamas: “Socrates, in his life and in his death, becomes a completely new Greek hero. From now on, the hero is a person of conviction, a person who will follow nothing but the dictates of his intellectual conscience. And that is a new conception of what a human being is lie, and what a good human being must be like.”

For centuries the Athenians had believed in one ideal, the vision of a martial warrior hero. It had driven them to conquer great foes, to build a mighty empire. But now, in the depths of defeat, they discovered a new figure to venerate. Effigies of Socrates have been found amongst the ruins of the Athenian prison, perhaps offerings to the dead philosopher.

Josiah Ober: “Perhaps the most important lesson that Socrates left, is the need to be critical, and the need to be self-critical. The interesting that I see in Athens in the years after the execution of Socrates, is this same capacity to look at themselves and recognize that they have perhaps gone too far in the past, and indeed to embrace a certain kind of maturity.”

Athens was never again a great imperial power, but neither did her democracy lapse again into mob rule. Instead, she became a city of intellectual inquiry, a haven of study and discussion, where Socrates’ students and his students’ students, slowly began to build a world based on reason. Plato tried to formulate the ideal society. Aristotle studied nature, establishing biology and zoology. And slowly the ideas and work of these Greek thinkers began to spread across the known world.

Alexander Nehamas: “One could say that one major part of the energy of the Athenians turns into building what one might call ‘empires of thought.’ So where before you had Athens sending its ships to the various islands in order to collect taxes, here you have reason extending its dominion over all areas in which our lives are actually lived.”

Socrates’ principles of reason, of questioning assumptions and the world around you, still endure.

In the space of less than two hundred years, the ancient Greeks transformed their world, for amongst these ruins a few great figures carved a mighty empire. They invented democracy and politics, science
and philosophy. They gave us literature and drama, art and monuments which still take our breath away. And ultimately these Greeks taught us how to reason and think. Two and a half thousand years later, their astonishing achievements continue to shape our world.