Thebes in the Fifth Century
Heracles Resurgent
Nancy Demand
In the fifth century BC Thebes, faced with the challenges presented by defeat and disgrace in the Persian Wars — it had sided with the invaders — succeeded not only in regaining its former prominence, but also in laying the groundwork for its hegemony of Greece in the early part of the fourth century.

In *Thebes in the Fifth Century*, first published in 1982, Nancy Demand examines the political and military history of this renowned city, as well as a number of other aspects of Theban culture and society: its physical layout, religious cults, poetry and music, arts, crafts and philosophy.

Other topics of special interest include a chapter on Pythagoreanism in Thebes, an appendix on the evidence for the participation of women in Pythagoreanism, and an investigation, extending throughout the book, of the role of women in Theban society.
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Preface

This book began as a doctoral dissertation, Boeotian Thebes in the Fifth Century (Bryn Mawr College, 1978). To my former supervisor, Professor Mabel Lang, I am principally indebted for its conception and early form. Professor Richard Hamilton also advised me, especially on the material about the poets, and made many helpful suggestions. The present book represents both a change in orientation and a considerable expansion of the material of the dissertation. Professors W. R. Connor, B. S. Ridgway, G. Pinney, and R. F. Willetts have read the manuscript, or portions of it, and made suggestions and comments which have led to these changes. Needless to say, they are not to be held responsible for the results, which are mine alone.

I am much indebted to Indiana University for a Summer Faculty Fellowship, which enabled me to visit Thebes and to complete my research, and to the Indiana University History Department for assistance with typing, and general support and encouragement throughout my work on revision and rewriting. Finally, I owe special thanks to my husband, Erhart, for his patience and encouragement through all the stages of this work.
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1 Introduction

The fifth century in ancient Greece is familiar to us mostly through the great works of Athenian culture: the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; the comedies of Aristophanes; the fine Athenian vases; the Parthenon; the intellectual revolution brought about by the Sophists and Socrates; the historical works of Herodotus and Thucydides. Even Sparta, the city-state most often considered when our gaze lifts from Athens, usually is viewed as a unique and idiosyncratic opponent of Athenian virtue, rather than as one instance in a spectrum of widely varying Greek political and cultural forms. With material on Athens sufficient for more than a lifetime of enjoyment and study, and faced with the relative obscurity of the sources for other Greek cities, it is perhaps no wonder that we fall into the fallacy of equating ancient Greece with fifth-century Athens. But Greece was not only Athens, nor was all Greece, excluding Sparta, a 'cradle of democracy'. A multitude of city-states existed, in Greece itself, in Asia Minor, in southern Italy and Sicily, and on the Black Sea, all with widely varying cultures and political systems, and all just as much a part of Greek civilization as was the city of Athens.

Many of these other city-states had an oligarchic rather than a democratic form of government, and centered their lives upon the land and agriculture, as did the city of Thebes in Boeotia. While Thebes was no more representative of that non-existent entity, the typical Greek city-state of the classical period, than was Athens, nevertheless, as an agriculturally based, almost wholly self-sufficient oligarchy, it provides an interesting contrast to the naval-based democracy of Athens, with its dependence on external trade connections. The two cities perhaps represent the two poles of Greek experience, even though both were more powerful and more significant historically than most other Greek cities. In addition to its existence
as an oligarchic agricultural society, Thebes' place in Greek history, as the power which would finally, in the early fourth century, bring an end to Spartan military supremacy in Greece, gives us good reason to look closely at this particular city-state. And as we look, one question is predominant: How was it that Thebes developed the resources necessary to challenge Sparta with such overwhelming success?

The fifth century in Thebes was an interim period, of the sort not usually focused upon by traditional histories. Its story is that of a society which was rebuilding itself after having been defeated both materially and spiritually in the Persian Wars - having been cast into the category of traitor by its neighbors. In contrast, and to put the Theban achievement into better perspective, we may consider Athens, which had also suffered grievously from a material point of view in the wars against the Persian invaders. For Athens, the astounding fact of victory was the stimulant which lightened the rebuilding process. Pride in Marathon, the folklore of heroes, sparked an almost unbounded optimism which carried the Athenian people not only to recovery but beyond that to empire, daring enterprise, and repeated recoveries from apparent disaster throughout almost the entire Peloponnesian War. In contrast, the Theban task after the Persian Wars was to rebuild while bearing the mark of traitorous medism, to repair and recover from both physical destruction and loss of reputation and influence.

That the Thebans considered this task as Herculean may be suggested by the mid-fifth-century coinage which Thebes issued as it finally regained the hegemony over its Boeotian neighbors. In creating their coins, Greek states usually utilized meaningful symbols: perhaps an ear of corn to indicate the importance of grain for an agricultural community such as Metapontum or a dolphin or a representation of harbor shape for sea-faring cities, or a canting device which made an allusion, perhaps punning, to the name of the city, or an image of the most honored god in the city's cults. In the case of Thebes, the device was traditionally a Boeotian shield, a symbol shared by the cities of the Boeotian league and representing both the league and Boeotian military prowess. In the mid fifth century, however, the city issued a series of coins featuring Heracles on the reverse. (1) The hero is portrayed in a variety of action poses: advancing into combat, stringing a bow, triumphantly carrying off the Delphic tripod after a victory, strangling the serpent as an infant. These coins depicting the labors of Heracles seem especially appropri-
ate to evoke the labors which Thebes itself had recently undergone, and to reflect the continuing determination of the Thebans, a determination which was to lead to further gains during the Peloponnesian War and to the eventual broadening of its power beyond the borders of Boeotia, and, in the fourth century, to all of Greece. Moreover, the hero was himself an appropriate favorite for the Thebans in another sense as well. He too had erred (even if in madness), and had to carry out labors in recompense for his mistake (his slavery to Omphale, in recompense for the killing of his sons). Perhaps it is also not irrelevant that most of his labors, including the most famous series, resulted from the unjust jealousy and persecution of Hera. Thus Thebes, too, labored, paying for a mistake which it did not consider really its own (Heracles acted in madness; Thebes came to see itself as betrayed by a small group of unrepresentative men), and suffering under the burden of unjust jealousy and persecution (of all the medizing cities, the onus seems to have fallen most heavily on Thebes, placed there in large part by the jealousy of Athens). (2)

The qualities which made possible the recovery of Thebes cannot be understood simply by recounting the political and military moves which the Thebans made in the course of this recovery. The reasons why one city, or one individual, laboriously climbs up from the abyss of failure, while another passively succumbs, must be sought in personality and character, rather than in outward actions alone. A corollary of this, that even the stereotypical image of a city, the distorted reflection of its personality in the eyes of others, exerts a powerful influence upon actions and events, was recognized by the Athenians in the fifth century. For Pindar, the old Attic reproach of 'Boeotian pig' was still one worthy of lament. (3) He was right, for it was not overcome even by his own superb poetic abilities. Later in the century, Aristophanes' version of the stereotype was the dumb Theban of the 'Acharnians', who is conned by the sharper-witted Athenian into exchanging his valuable eels for a sycophant packaged as an Athenian vase. (4) Alcibiades as a child, rejecting the flute which prevented conversation, was reported to have relegated it to the Thebans, on the grounds that they could not talk anyway. (5) Even the Theban hero Heracles appears to have undergone a metamorphosis during the Peloponnesian War as Athens grew more anxious about Theban power, becoming the gluttonous and buffoonish character of the 'Alcestis' and 'Frogs'. (6)

Recognizing with the Athenians the importance of image,
we must try to understand Thebes' fifth-century accomplishments in the light of a more accurate picture of its true character, being especially concerned to correct the image where it has been distorted. An initial jolt to the Athenian picture of Thebes is provided by the presence of two Thebans as Socrates' interlocutors in the 'Phaedo' of Plato. It will be worth while to look more closely at this apparent anomaly - philosophical Thebans - as well as at other aspects of Theban culture. The city's poetry, its crafts and its cults, all offer potential sources for a clearer understanding of the spirit which was the basis for its achievements.

The focus of this book will thus extend beyond the usual material of political history to a broader consideration of the cultural and intellectual life of the city. (7) We shall examine a wide range of somewhat disparate material, including poetry, pottery, grave stelai, and philosophical dialogues. From this material, we will attempt to draw a coherent picture of Theban society in the fifth century.

Working with this range of evidence, and attempting to construct a picture of a society and to add depth to our understanding of its history, is much like working on a jigsaw puzzle: the hope is that the individual pieces, which in themselves portray nothing recognizable, may, when arranged together properly, reveal a coherent picture. There are, of course, certain problems inherent in this approach which must be mentioned at the outset. First of all, there are many gaps in the available evidence, which may distort the resultant picture, or even prevent it from appearing. For instance, the physical city of the fifth century is mostly buried beneath the living city and has not been subjected to systematic excavation (excavation has been understandably directed mainly toward the Mycenaean remains, as well as being in the nature of rescue operations). Literary evidence is also fragmentary: for instance, the loss of most of the 'partheneia' of Pindar undoubtedly deprives us of much information about Theban prosopography and cults, and the life of Theban women. Still another problem is one signalled by a defect in the analogy of the jigsaw puzzle. This is the degree of imaginative interpretation necessary, and the inevitably speculative nature of the results when one goes beyond collecting the data and tries to make a coherent picture out of it. Unlike the jigsaw puzzle, in this enterprise an exact fit does not guarantee that the piece really belongs where it has been put, nor is there a picture on the box to verify these placements. The problem is inevitable if one chooses to synthesize; the
5 Chapter 1

question, then, is whether to synthesize. Given the greatly increased significance and interest which the material attains through being part of such a picture, it seems worth while to run the risk that the picture may be superseded by a more accurate one when (and if) more evidence is obtained, especially since those who reject the synthesis may still consider the data in and for themselves.
Fig. 1 Map of Boeotia, with road system, from H.G. Dakyns, Works of Xenophon, vol.1, courtesy Macmillan.
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