

# ANCIENT THEBES

Thebes is a city in Boeotia, Greece since the Mycenaean Bronze Age. It was smaller than Athens, Sparta, and Corinth. Thebes was a little north of Athens, in central Greece. Unlike Athens and Corinth, Thebes was not a seaport. Thebes was a farming city, ruled by an oligarchy of a few rich men who made laws that they were the only ones who could own land.

From before the time of Greece's written history comes the Greek hero Cadmus, legendary founder of Thebes. He was not a Greek by birth, but a Phoenician who brought a 16-letter alphabet from Phoenicia to Boeotia. It was in Boeotia that Cadmus started the Theban royal family that is so familiar to us from Greek tragedy. The Theban line includes a series of important names in the ancient world, such as Antigone, Actaeon, Dionysus and Pentheus.

The legendary hero Hercules was born in Thebes.

During the Archaic period, in the 500s B.C., Thebes and Athens fought over the land between them, especially the town of Plataea. When the Persians invaded Greece in the Second Persian War, 480 B.C., the Thebans sent 400 men to defend the mountain pass at Thermopylae, but then the Persians were about to break through the pass, the Thebans surrendered to them (while the Spartans died fighting). The Thebans surrendered because once the Persians weeded through the pass, they were going to get right to Thebes. So the Thebans saved their city from being sacked and burned. The Thebans even fought on the Persian side at Plataea. After the war was over, and the Greeks had won, all of the other Greeks were mad at Thebes for going over to the Persian side.

In the Peloponnesian War, the Thebans joined an alliance with Sparta against Athens. Their choice turned out better in the Peloponnesian War because Sparta won and the alliance broke up. By 379 B.C., the Thebans had won some smaller wars with Sparta and decided to change to democratic government. In 371 B.C., the Thebans won a bigger battle with Sparta, and ended Sparta's power permanently by freeing Sparta's helot slaves.

After 371, the Theban army was so strong that they also tried to push people around to the north, in Thrace and Macedon. When the Thebans got weaker, the Macedonians invaded Greece instead. The Thebans were a big part of the last stand of the Greeks against the Macedonian invasion of Philip II in 338 B.C. at Chaeronea, and after the Greeks lost that battle, Alexander the Great destroyed the city of Thebes in 335 B.C., and he sold all the people of Thebes into slavery in other cities.