

Can contemporary international relations theories explain the actions of the Greek city state actors in the ancient world?

Fig 1. Epitaph for the Athenian casualties at the Battle of Potidaea, 432 BCE.



The battle occurred just before, and can be viewed as a catalyst for, the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.

This project aimed to:

- Apply, retroactively, relevant concepts used in modern international affairs and politics, to the political organisation of the two main ancient Greek actors; the city states of Athens and Sparta, in the 5th century BCE.
- Assess the need for scrutiny and modernisation of traditional international relation theories, to ensure that they can keep up with the ever-changing, complex world orders, that they purport to decipher.
- Suggest some explanations as to why certain actions were taken by the ancient city states in relation to the contemporary theories' conceptualisations of international politics.
- Demonstrate the value of interdisciplinarity in research as it affords the researcher more versatility and enables them to view their topics of study from multiple relevant angles.

Fig 2. Athenian Coin (Tetradrachm) c. 450-440 BCE.



Athens attempted to standardise the currency used in their empire through a coinage decree. The decree banned city states, allied to Athens, from minting their own coins, as had previously been common practice.

Two Key Theories Briefly Examined

- Structural Realism – Polarity

According to realists, the amount of states that hold hegemonic power in an international system can have a large bearing on the likelihood of wars breaking out. The number of hegemons present dictates the polarity of a system and whether it is considered to be unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. This is relevant to the build up to the Peloponnesian War because cases can be made, both that the international system was a bipolar one and that it was a multipolar one. For a structure of bipolarity to exist there must be two primary actors that are able to dominate the political system by controlling the largest shares of power, the amounts of which are relatively equal to one another, so that no one state can become a sole hegemon. During the period following the Persian Wars, Sparta, being the regional hegemon of the Peloponnese, made up one half of the bipolarity, and Athens, being the regional hegemon of the Aegean, made up the other. In many ways the formation and existence of these two superpowers is similar to that of the world order which emerged directly after the end of the Second World War. The United States and the Soviet Union were forced to engage in international relations without the constraint of a common enemy, the axis powers, to keep them from coming to blows over their own ideological differences. Depending on the realist you ask, this system could, as demonstrated during the Cold War, be beneficial to the prevention of the outbreak of war proper between great powers. Though this does not seem to be the case with the Peloponnesian War. Unlike the aftermath of the Second World War, where the axis powers were subdued to the point that they could not feasibly pose any kind of threat to the two great powers, the common enemy of the Spartans and Athenians; the Persian Empire, still retained large amounts of power. Therefore, the system could be seen to have been more of a multipolarity with three active hegemons rather than just two.

- Liberalism – Kant's Triangle

Loosely summed up in figure 3, Kantian liberalist theory suggests that sustained peace is dependant on three factors, all of which support and bolster each other. If links in the triangle are broken then a peaceful world order becomes endangered. In 5th c. BCE. Greece, the triangle was broken in multiple areas. International organisations were, aside from the coalition formed against the Persians, sparse to non-existent. Couple this with the vast differences between the early democratic government of Athens and the diarchy of Sparta, and these breakdowns, according to Kant's triangle, served to create a volatile and dangerous world order.

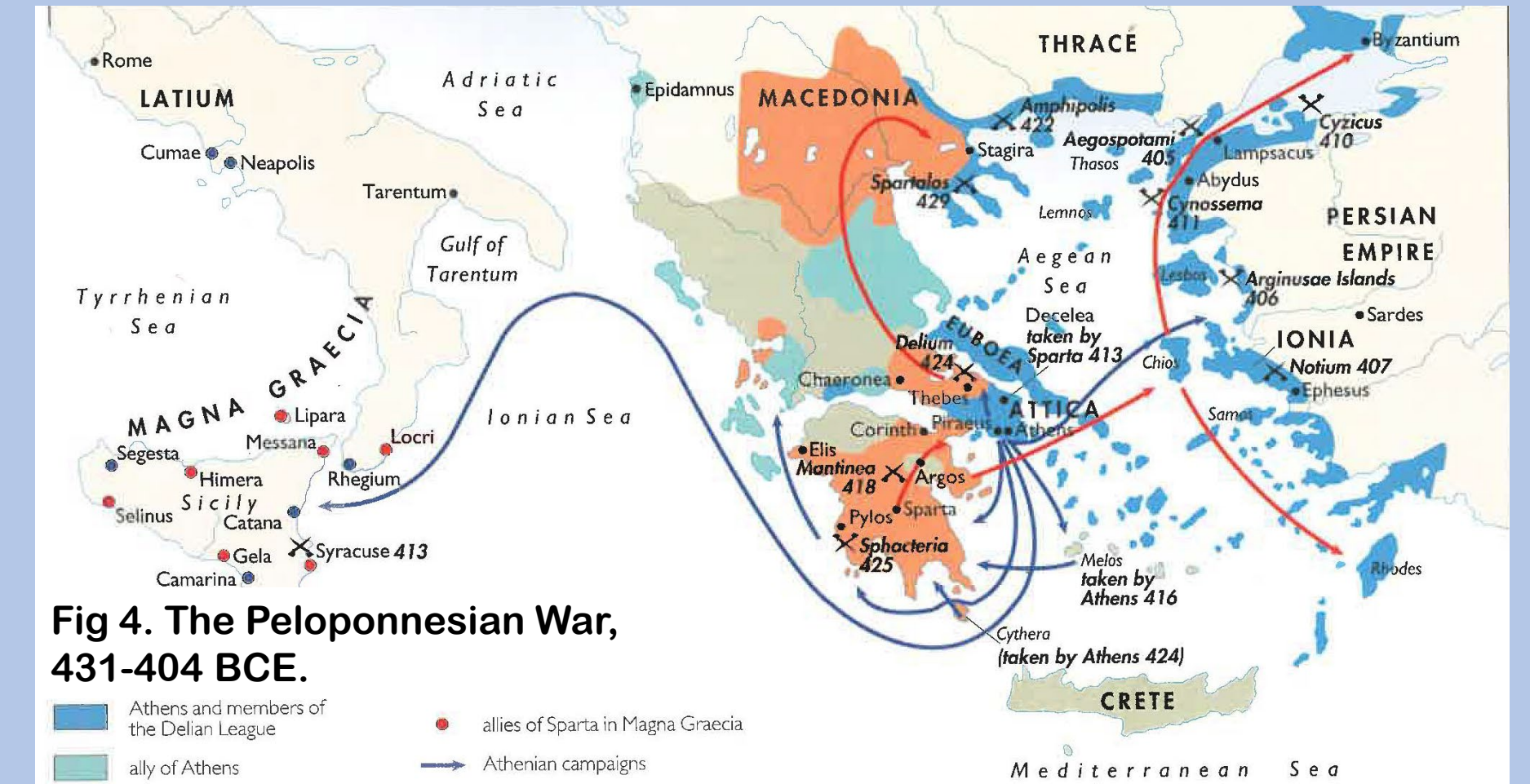
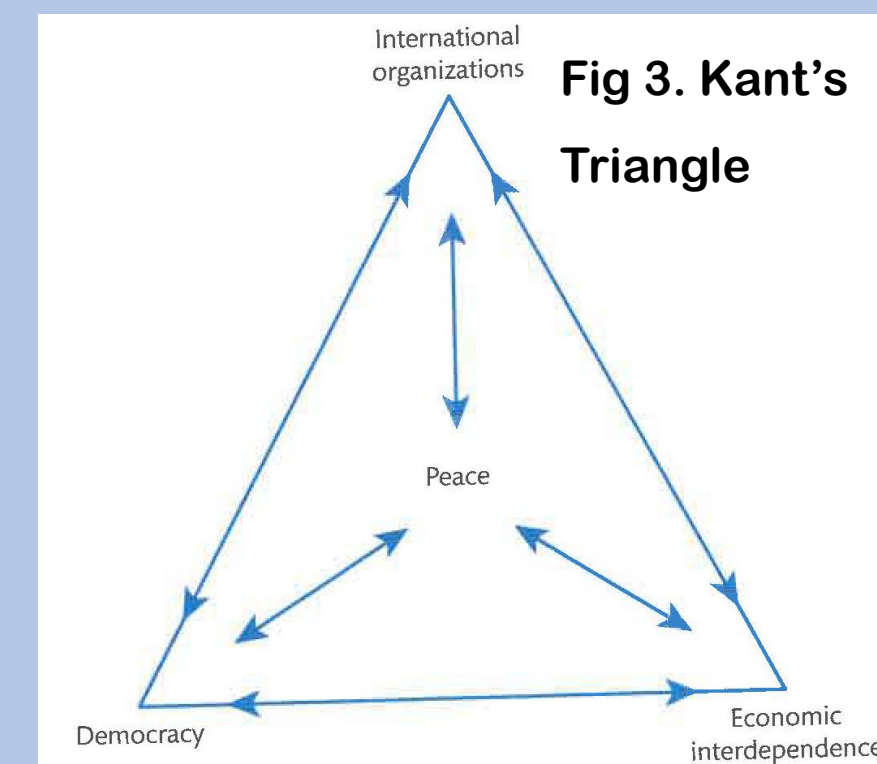


Fig 4. The Peloponnesian War, 431-404 BCE.

Athens and Sparta had been spoiling for another fight ever since the end of the First Peloponnesian War (460-445 BCE.) and the Thirty Years Peace agreement. Athens had turned many of the Greek city states, that had previously come together and formed the Delian League to better defend themselves against the Persian invasions, into an empire from which tribute could be extracted and wealth amassed. Sparta, fearful of the power this gave the Athenians, sought to break up the empire and during the 'peacetime' fought proxy wars with the Athenians by supporting city state revolts and aiding their Corinthian allies in military actions against Athens.

Conclusions

Throughout the project, realist theory has most consistently and effectively provided simple and compelling explanations for the actions of the Spartans and the Athenians. However, when considering the modern world order, it pays to be wary of the simplicities of realism and remember that the Ancient Greek world represented a field of proto-international relations which was in itself much simpler than the system of today. It lacked intricacies such as the nation state actor and multi-national organisations, both governmental and non-governmental. This is not to say that realism should be discounted in the modern field nor that it should monopolise the study of the ancient world. Rather, the most important conclusion of this project is that international systems should be examined using a combination of theories (meta-theory) and we should think of each one as a tool in a toolbox which, when used altogether, allow us to navigate the diverse and difficult field of international relations.