



*Soldiers fight to defend their walls – possibly those of Thebes – from attack on this Attic red-figure kylix or drinking cup attributed to Apollodoros from ca 500 BC.*

## THEBES: THE FORGOTTEN CITY

*Whether you prefer the city of History or the city of Myth, it's high time Thebes reclaimed its place on the map, says **Paul Cartledge***

**T**he Greek city of Thebes is absolutely central, not only geographically, but also culturally. It is central both to the ancient Greeks' achievements, especially political and high-cultural, and to their continuing impact on European, Euro-American and by extension global civilization, now and for the foreseeable future. And yet, for many centuries, the city has been very largely – and quite deliberately – forgotten. While there are a

number of reasons for this oblivion, not all of them bad, the reasons for rescuing it from the condescension of posterity are more powerful.

The first and most obvious reason for oblivion, or confusion, is the existence of the Egyptian Thebes, situated within modern Luxor. This great city was the capital of Egypt during the New Kingdom, the era of Rameses the Great; and of the two namesakes, Egyptian Thebes, which earned a mention in Homer, is far the

better known today. (There was in fact yet another Greek Thebes, but that one *is* eminently forgettable.)

Second, unlike Sparta and Athens, Thebes only briefly drove the ancient Greek political agenda. Indeed, while Sparta and Athens hogged the limelight, Thebes languished in the deep shadow of their incandescence.

Third, and probably most decisive of all, in 480 BC, at a pivotal moment in all ancient Greek and

thus European and Western history, the then ruling regime of Thebes made a fatal mistake – it chose the wrong, that is the Persian, side in the Graeco-Persian Wars. This earned inhabitants of the city an undying reputation as traitors to Hellenism at a time when it really mattered to stand up and be counted politically.

Herodotus was for that reason down on Thebes, and there was no Theban Thucydides to redress the balance. Indirectly, too, this act of treachery brought on Thebes' head 145 years later the most awful retribution – its near-total physical destruction, on the orders of the then master of the Greek world and ultimate Greek culture-hero, Alexander the Great.

What is to be put on the other side of the ledger? As I see it, and as I have written it, there was not one ancient Greek city of Thebes but two: the city of History and the city of Myth. Thebes, the real historical – and indeed prehistorical – city, was a major place in its own right. In the Late Bronze or Mycenaean age of the 14th and 13th centuries BC it boasted an important palace located on what was always the ancient city's most distinctive feature, the Acropolis, later known as the Cadmea (Kadmeia).

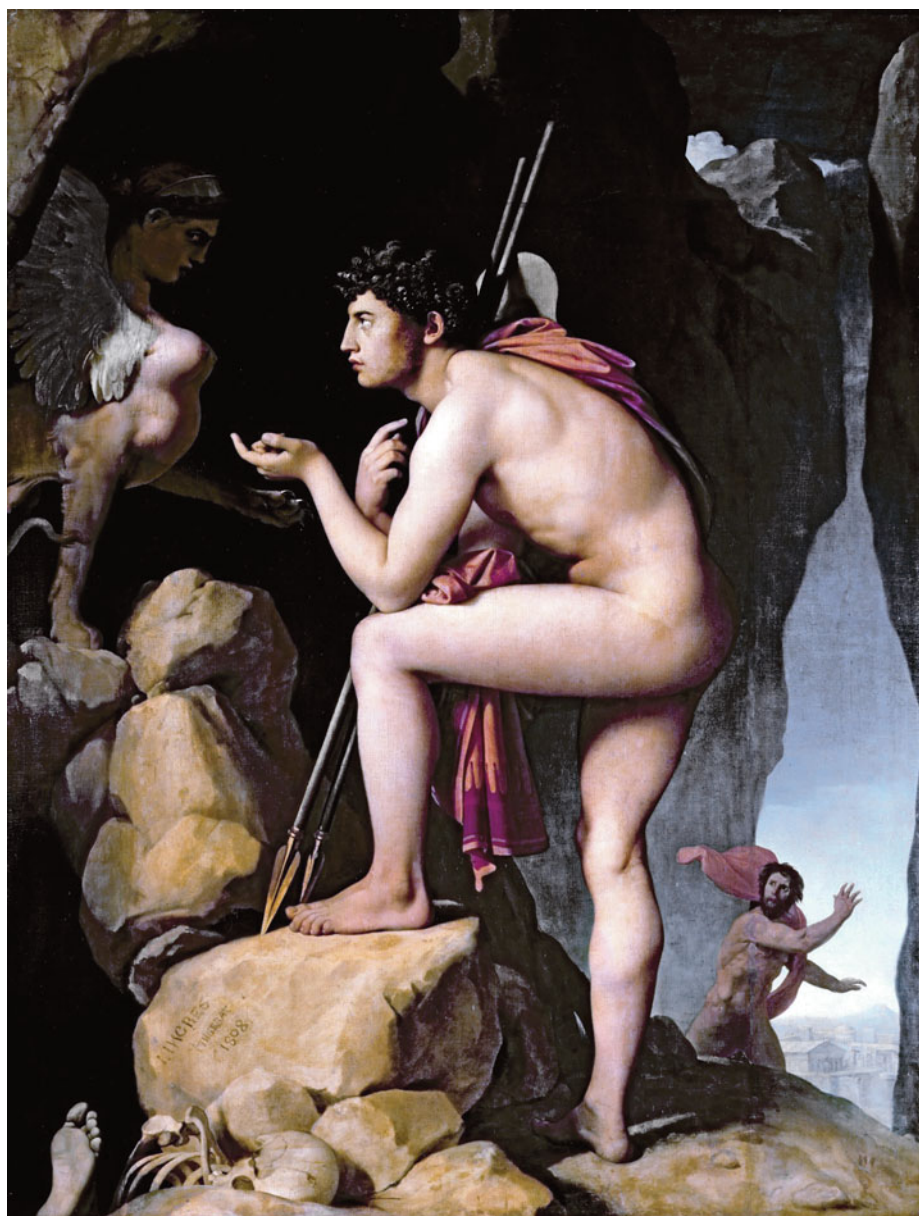
In the sixth century BC, Thebes inaugurated a most fruitful form of political association, namely federalism, one that eventually influenced the world's most powerful democratic state today, the United States of America. In the fourth century BC it produced a series of brilliant political leaders who were also genius generals. Between them – and the chief among them was Epaminondas, whom Walter Raleigh rated the greatest of all the ancient Greeks – they introduced stunning social, military and political reforms, reduced once omnipotent Sparta to a nullity and established Thebes, for a brief but important decade, as the major power of all mainland Greece. It was under this Theban hegemony of 371–362 BC that the original Megalopolis was built, in Peloponnesian Arcadia, and that Messene

was constructed, also in the Peloponnese, as a home and capital city for the now liberated ex-Helot Greeks whom the Spartans had kept enslaved for centuries.

Spanning that decade but originating a few years earlier was one of the most unusual social formations known from all the ancient world: the so-called 'Sacred Band'. This was a crack infantry force of 300 composed of 150 pairs of male 'lovers'. We are not well informed on how it was recruited or maintained. But Thebes was especially renowned – or excoriated, according to taste – for its alleged 'invention' of ritualized pederasty and for its actual practice of male-male homosexu-

ality, so that it was possible to create such a force in such a city. Its creation in 378 BC was credited to one Gorgidas, and it is mentioned in Plato's famous *Symposium* dialogue.

Its most important achievement was its contribution to the Thebans' decisive victory over the Spartans at Leuctra in 371 BC, but its most famous exploit was also its last. At the Battle of Chaeronea in Boeotia in 338 BC, where the Thebans and Athenians were crushed by King Philip of Macedon, assisted by his 18-year-old son Alexander, the Band perished to a man. They were buried on the battlefield as they had fought, in a single body, and the site of their



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, public domain (Wikimedia Commons)

'Oedipus Solves the Riddle of the Sphinx' by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1827.



***‘This mythic Thebes of theatre has been labelled the “anti-Athens”, the upside-down city onto which the Athenians projected everything they weren’t, or didn’t have, or didn’t want to have.’***

communal grave is still marked today by the famous marble Lion of Chareonea. So much for the Thebes of History.

Yet it is the Thebes of Myth that really deserves our commemoration as well as admiration. We might plausibly start our quest from the city’s unique connections with the Orient. Thebes, although it was located in the centre of mainland Greece, was reputedly founded by Cadmus, a Phoenician from Tyre, in what is today roughly modern Lebanon. That intriguing myth enables us to re-examine the whole issue of Eurocentrism – or alternatively, Orientalism – in the study of ancient Greek history, with Thebes as a prime exhibit.

For example, the Greeks themselves attributed their own original creation of a fully phonetic alphabetic script – the ultimate ancestor of our own – to the Phoenicians, in the sense that they called their alphabet ‘Phoenician’ or ‘Cadmean’ letters. The Phoenicians did use an alphabet but did not employ signs for vowels. At the same time, both in their foundational ‘national’ epic, the *Iliad* of Homer, and in later literature, such as the *Histories* of Herodotus, the Greeks portrayed the Phoenicians quite negatively, as ‘barbarians’ embodying cultural traits that were the diametric opposite of good, Hellenic values.

So far as religion is concerned, Thebes had specially intimate and deep connections with major ancient Greek gods, above all Dionysus and Heracles. Both owed at least a part

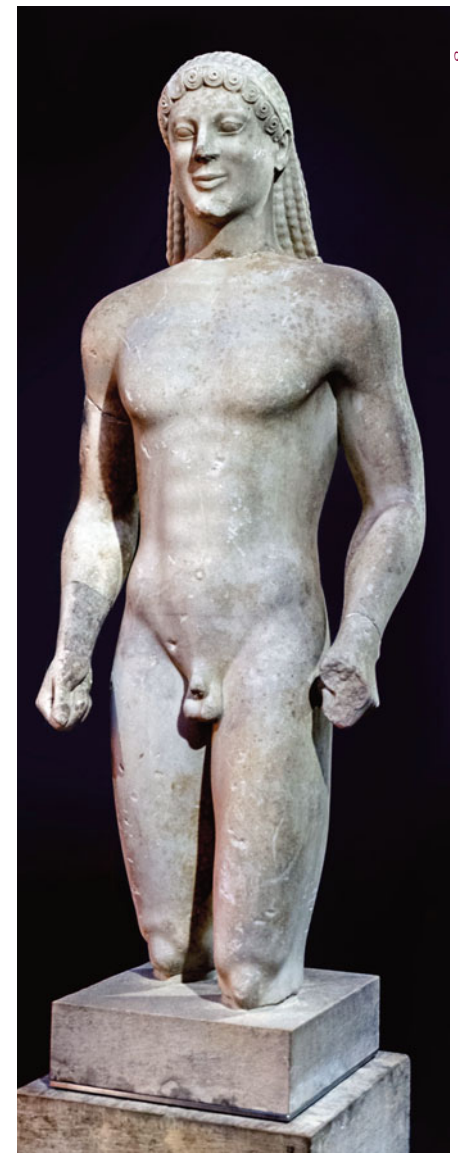
of their birth to Theban personages. One level down from those gods were the heroes – and anti-heroes – of ancient Greek myth. Thebes was notoriously the city of swell-foot Oedipus, the patricide who, misapplying a Delphic oracle, married his own widowed mother and then fathered four children upon her – children who were simultaneously both his sons and daughters and his half-brothers and half-sisters. Horrors.

Oedipus and Thebes became the fount and origin of a thousand myths. Not just those of Cadmus (who with Dionysus turns up in Euripides’ *Bacchae*) and of Oedipus himself (think of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone*, with their brilliant plays on the disorienting role of the Delphic oracle, and the hero’s tragic solving of the riddle of the Sphinx), but also of the *Seven Against Thebes* (the title of a surviving tragedy by Aeschylus, the prequel to *Antigone*) and the two *Suppliant Women* tragedies (again by Euripides and by Aeschylus) and so many more. In fact, this mythic Thebes of theatre has been labelled the ‘anti-Athens’, the upside-down city onto which the Athenians projected everything they weren’t, or didn’t have, or didn’t want to have – tyranny, patricide, fratricide, incest, treason, civil war. You name it. As Sigmund Freud, for one, memorably did: his ‘Oedipus-complex’ has its roots in the complex and complexity of ancient Greek Thebes.

Finally, the snooty Athenians, not content with appropriating sophisticated Theban myths, abused their Theban near-neighbours collectively as ‘Boeotian swine’. Boeotian they certainly were: Thebes was the principal city of the Boeotian ethnic sub-group of Greeks who gave their name to the region of Boeotia. Theban history cannot be properly understood except within its regional, Boeotian context. But swine in the philistine, low-cultural sense they certainly all were not.

In myth, the original city walls with their famous Seven Gates had been built to the sound of music, and

in 335 BC they reputedly came tumbling down on the orders of Alexander to a similar accompaniment. Pindar, the praise-poet of victors at the great Olympic and other panhellenic festival games, was a Theban by adoption if not birth. A younger contemporary of his was Pronomus, the James Galway of his day, though the reeded instrument he blew, called *aulos*, was more like an oboe than a flute. And then there were the Theban philosophers: Simmias and Cebes, followers like Plato of Socrates, whose works have not been preserved, and, not least, Crates the famous Cynic, who opted for a life of poverty on the streets of Athens. There are, in short, many reasons why ancient Greek Thebes not only should not but must not be forgotten.



*Ptoion Kouros.*

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