ATHENS & SPARTA
the 30-second history

Sparta and Athens were the two great powers of 5th-century BCE Greece. Initially allies against Persia, they fought each other in the Peloponnesian War for much of the second half of the century. Literature of the time (usually by Athenians) portrays the two cities as opposites: Athens a varied and vigorous democracy which maintained its political power by means of its fleet; Sparta an oligarchy which kept strict control over every aspect of its citizens’ lives, ruled its serf population with an iron fist and relied on the might of its land army. Yet some Athenian writers, such as Plato and Xenophon, admired Sparta for the stability and longevity of its political constitution, known as eunomia or ‘good order’. Spartan soldiers were a byword for bravery, Spartan women for beauty and wit. But Sparta is most famous for its communal way of life: a few thousand citizen men, trained for military service and unproductive economically, who lived and dined in common and whose everyday needs were serviced by a larger number of periœcì (‘dwellers-around’) and helots (‘serfs’). These arrangements were attributed to the legendary lawmaker, Lycurgus; modern scholars see them as a response to the troubles of governing the Spartan territories of Laconia and Messenia over the Archaic period.