CHAPTER EIGHT

THEBES COMES TO THE FORE (371–362 BC)

A. THE AFTERMATH OF LEUKTRA (371–369 BC)

Few battles in Greek history caused wider or more immediate repercussions than Leuktra. For the Spartans it spelled disaster. It released the tension that had grown up in Greece since the Spartan assumption and subsequent abuse of its ascendancy. It permitted the Thebans to complete the construction of the Boiotian Confederacy and to consolidate the defense of their homeland. The Athenians reacted with consternation at the news of the unexpected and unwelcome event, but they quickly saw it as an invitation to assume the position that Sparta had so dramatically lost. For the Peloponnesians it meant release from the oppression of an aggressive and suspicious neighbor. Nothing like it had happened since the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War. No one in 371 could have foreseen the consequences of this one day. The Spartans bore their catastrophe with their usual stoicism, which they displayed in their treatment of the survivors. Owing to their numbers, political, and social status the remnants of Kleombrotos’ army could not usefully be publicly humiliated more than they already were. More importantly the losses sustained in the battle gave them an increased importance in the defense of the city. In their perplexity the Spartans made Agesilaos law-giver, even though many now recalled the warning about crowning a lame king. His simple and effective solution permitted the laws to sleep for a day, thereby pardoning those who would otherwise have been punished. For the moment, however, the plight of Sparta, though dire, was ameliorated by some sparks of hope. The Thebans did not immediately pursue their advantage which afforded the Spartans some time to recuperate. Many of their Peloponnesian allies remained obedient, and Athens quickly attempted to salvage the King’s Peace that had lasted only twenty days. The bleak situation suggested at least that Sparta had weathered the worst of the blast, but the serious loss of trained and experienced men boded ill for the future.¹

¹ Xen. Hell. 6.4.16–18; Plut. Ages. 29. Buckler, TH, 66–68; E. David, Sparta between
The victors meanwhile dealt with more serious and nearer concerns than then the distant and vanquished Spartans. They first completed the expansion and consolidation of the Boiotian Confederacy, which opened the opportunity to spread their influence throughout the rest of central Greece. Success in this venture meant that they could make this region a center of strength capable of preventing the intrusion of either Spartan or Athenian, a situation previously unknown in classical Greek history. First, however, the problem of the Thespians demanded immediate attention. Upon their withdrawal before Leuktra the Thespian hoplites retired to the strong position at Keressos, the location of which is still unknown, where they took refuge. Epameinondas drove them from the spot; but given his unwillingness to shed the blood of fellow citizens, he probably allowed them to remain on the land in political subservience to Thebes and their immediate neighbors. The Orchomenians, long faithful allies of the Spartans, again found themselves exposed to retribution. Epameinondas successfully led his victorious army against the city but refused to reduce it to slavery. It too he placed under the jurisdiction of its neighbors while denying it any political power. As clement as these gestures were, they also served Theban purposes; for the neighbors who assumed control over Thespiai and Orchomenos now depended more heavily upon Thebes to shield them from insurrection. It proved an easy way to draw closer ties between the western Boiotian states and Thebes.  

With Boiotia secured, the Thebans next established a system of alliances in central Greece. Epameinondas moved first against the Phokians, now isolated from their allies and vulnerable to attack through the Kephisos valley. Content to use his army as an instrument of belligerent diplomacy, he concluded a defensive alliance with them. At the same time the Euboians—Chalkis, Eretria, Karystos, and Histiaia—seceded from the Athenian League and took the Theban side. Even though Thebes and Athens were still at peace and nominally allies, the defection of Euboia struck a grave blow at Athens,

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