**ANCIENT HISTORY PAST QUESTIONS BY TYPE**

**PERIOD STUDIES**

**20 MARK INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

**Greek period study – relations between greek states and between greek and non-greek states, 492-404 BC**

**Key Debate 1 – Why were the Greeks successful against the Persians (480-79 BC)?**

In immediate military terms, the value of Salamis was unambiguous. Had Xerxes won, then the Persians would have had the Peloponnese at the mercy of a naval assault; and, if it is still not quite a forgone conclusion that they would have won overall, by land as well as sea, their task would have been eased immensely. Victory at Salamis did not, on the other hand, inevitably mean victory for the resistant coalition Greeks in the Graeco-Persian Wars overall. From that perspective, it was not Salamis but Plataea that was the decisive battle. ‘It was Plataea, not at Salamis, that the new Satrapy was lost’, as George Cawkwell has crisply put it. Xerxes may have retired to Asia after Salamis, but Great Kings did not necessarily lead all major campaigns in person, and he left behind, under the command of the more than competent Mardonius, sufficient forces to complete the job by land as well as by sea. But Mardonius was decisively defeated on land in the summer of 479 at Plataea in southern Boeotia in central Greece, by the largest land army ever mustered by Greeks to that date (some forty thousand in all). Herodotus – even Herodotus…was forced to concede that Plataea was essentially a Spartan Victory.’

*Thermopylae: The Battle that Changed the World*, Paul Cartledge, p.166

**How convincing do you find Cartledge’s view that the Spartans deserve at least as much credit as the Athenians for the Greek victory over the Persians in 480-479 BC?**

**Key Debate 1 – Why were the Greeks successful against the Persians (480-79 BC)?**

It is easy to persuade ourselves that it was little short of a miracle that the allied Greeks emerged victorious. But we know the story only from the Greek side. The familiar picture that we in Europe have inherited, that of the King with half the East at heel repelled by a handful of resolute Greek patriots whom he expected to trample underfoot, is a heartening one for lovers of freedom. It is not entirely realistic. As regards sheer numbers, the fact that the population of the Persian Empire was many times that of Greece is balanced by the fact that there were far more Greeks in the world than Persians. What is more to the point is that a campaign at so great a distance from home in an ill-explored and difficult terrain was a very audacious enterpise. It involved risks that Xerxes did his best to insure against by such preparations as could be made in advance; and to that extent he deserved a moment of triumph when he sacked the city of those Athenians whom his father had long been at pains to punish. The Delphic priests expected him to win. But on the allied side there were leaders who calculated that a Persian conquest of Greece might be averted if the Athenians and the Spartan alliance united in resistance. The event proved them correct. It was bound to be a struggle in which chance could make or mar and generalship prove decisive. On the second count, if not also on the first, the allies were fortunate.

J.M. Cook The Persian Empire

**How convincing do you find J. M. Cook’s interpretation of Xerxes’ expedition against the Greeks in 480–79 BC?**

**Key Debate 2 – What caused the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC?**

The Megarians, being well aware of the Athenian sensitivities over the issue, may have been urged on by the Corinthians to cultivate the sacred land in order to provoke the Athenians into a hostile reaction, and thus give cause for complaint. For these reasons de Ste. Croix believes that the Athenians should be absolved from blame, but the Megarians (to a smaller extent) and the Spartans in particular should be blamed for exploiting the issue and making it a pretext for war.

T. Buckley, *Aspects of Greek History 750-323 BC, p.323*

**How convincing do you find the interpretation of de Ste. Croix (as reported in Buckely) that the Spartans and Megarians exploited the Megarian decree in order to go to war?**

**Key Debate 2 – What caused the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC?**

The success of Pericles’ policy in 432/1 relied in part on the Athenians’ recent inexperience in the field of hoplite warfare, on Athenian resentment over the terms of the peace treaty of 446/5, on a generational change that had removed many of Sparta’s old allies in Athens, and on a general Athenian enthusiasm and lust for power that had been unchecked in the last fifteen or so years. We must add to this the great wealth Athens had amassed over these years, a factor necessary for successful warfare, as Pericles himself emphasised in a speech just before the outbreak of war. The Athenians, Pericles must have seen by 432/1 were ripe for the renewal of open hostilities with Sparta and for the final rejection of an notion of joint rule of Greece. Pericles’ message of Athenian superiority and no concessions to Sparta thus found rich soil for growth, IN consequence, the Athenians voted to enter the greatest war in their history.

LJ Samons II, *Perilces and the Conquest of History*

**How convincing do you find LJ Samons’ interpretation of the Athenian attitude towards war with Sparta in 432/1?**

**Key Debate 2 – What caused the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC?**

The Spartans had declared in their final ultimatum that if the Athenians let the Greeks go free there could be peace; but the allies had no grounds for confidence in their liberators. They knew that Sparta had ignored them in the Thirty Year’s Peace, that she had failed to support the Samian revolt, and discouraged Mytilene from coming out into the open. Nor could democratic parties relish liberation by Spartans who maintained their leadership of the Peloponnesian League by encouraging oligarchies. Even those who might have welcomed Spartan garrisons will have realised Sparta’s military helplessness. *The Old Oligarch was not the only one who understood the importance of sea power*. Without a strong fleet Sparta would find most of the Athenian allies inaccessible.

R. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire*

**How convincing do you find R. Meiggs’ interpretation of Sparta’s position at the start of the Peloponnesian War?**

**Key Debate 3 – Why did Athens fail in the Peloponnesian War?**

Deprived of Alcibiades’ services as a result of Notion and of the victors of Arginusae by the subsequent trial, the Athenians, who between 410 and 406 had looked like winning the war after all, could now hardly fail to lose it. Just before the final defeat, which was at Aegospotami on the Hellespont in 405, we glimpse Alcibiades for the last time, warning the Athenian generals against recklessly beaching their ships where they would be exposed to attack by Lysander … His help was rebuffed; the battle was won and the Athenians now faced starvation.

S. Hornblower, *The Greek World 479-323 BC* (2011) p.189

**How convincing do you find Hornblower’s interpretation that it was the loss of competent leadership that lost Athens the Peloponnesian War?**

**Roman Period Study – The Julio-Claudians, 31 BC-AD 68**

**Key Debate 1 – To what extent did Augustus actually restore the Republic?**

[Augustus] resigned his consulship in the summer of that year (23 BC), a post to which he had been elected for nine years running. And he was not to hold it again, except on rare, honorific occasions. The senate, in turn, gave him the right to retain his imperium (his military authority). … More significantly still, the compliant senators increased the force of Augustus’ imperium abroad by making it superior to that of governors in any subject territory, even those outside his own extensive provincial commands … – an extraordinary authority conventionally known as maius imperium (“greater power”). … The Roman senate [also] accorded Augustus the right to wield the responsibilities of a tribune for life. …

What does all this mean? Common interpretation has it that the settlement of 23 BC represents a retreat on Augustus’ part, that resignation of the consulship diminished powers that he previously wielded … . All of that is speculation, unfounded and implausible. … Augustus may have technically relinquished the specific privileges that attached to the consulship. But this entailed no lapse in authority.

Erich S. Gruen, ‘Augustus and the Making of the Principate’

**How convincing do you find Gruen’s interpretation that Augustus suffered “no lapse in authority”?**

**Key Debate 1 – To what extent did Augustus actually restore the Republic?**

Whether people liked (Augustus) or loathed him, he was in many ways a puzzling contradictory revolutionary. He was one of the most radical innovators Rome ever saw. …

Yet Augustus appears to have abolished nothing. The governing class remained the same (this was no revolution in the struct sense of the word), the privileges of the sente were in many ways enhanced, not removed, and the old offices of state, consulships and praetorships and son on, continued to be coveted and filled. Much of the legislation that is usually ascribed to Augustus was formally introduced, or at least fronted, by those regular officials…Most of his formal powers were officially voted to him by the senate and cast almost entirely in traditional Republican format, his continued use of the title ‘son of a god’ being the only important exception. And he lived in no grand palace, but in the sort of house on the Palatine Hill where you would expect to find a senator, and where his wife Livia could occasionally be spotted working her wool. The word that Romans most often used to describe his position was *princeps*, meaning ‘first citizen’ rather than ‘emperor’ as we choose to call him, and one of his most famous watchwords was *civilitas* – ‘we’re all citizens together’.

M. Beard, *SPQR A History of Ancient Rome*

**How convincing do you find Beard’s interpretation that ‘Augustus appears to have abolished nothing’?**

**Key Debate 2 – The characters of Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius and Nero?**

Sometime before Sejanus’ fall, but when Tiberius already suspected him, Agrippina’s eldest son had been put to death. Not until 33 was is elder brother Drusus killed. Their mother committed suicide. The next years saw more trials and executions with Macro proving as ruthless in eliminating opposition as Sejanus had been. Attempts have been made to exonerate Tiberius, or at least to suggest that Tacitus exaggerates. Perhaps he does. And it is easy to forget when reading him that the circle affected by the executions and suicides was relatively limited. But two things are clear and indisputable: the demoralisation of the senatorial class, collectively and for the most part individually: and the fact that whenever Tiberius made his wishes clear, for leniency or the reverse, he was obeyed. In theory he could have stopped the denunciations and the useless deaths; in practice, of course, isolated, scared, increasingly cynical, he lacked the will to do so….His personality continues to puzzle historians, because Tacitus made it into an enigma.

C. Wells, *The Roman Empire*

**How convincing do you find Wells’ interpretation of Tiberius’ character and actions?**

**Key Debate 2 – The characters of Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius and Nero?**

Gaius’ assumption of divinity was an extreme reaction to his problems, but it was not, in itself, the act of a madman. His religious representation may be seen as a means of displaying authority. We must remember that Gaius numbered among his ancestors Venus, Mars, Romulus, Divus Julius and Divus Augustus. When interpreted in the context of contemporary religious practice and attitudes towards imperial position, Gaius’ policy may have been misconceived, but it was not revolutionary.

Richard Alston, *Aspects of Roman History, 31BC-AD 117*

**How convincing do you find Alston’s interpretation of Gaius’ divine pretensions?**

**Key Debate 2 – The characters of Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius and Nero?**

As to [Claudius’] conscious aims and achievements, the material…yields the portrait of an emperor who began his usurping reign with a heroic double effort, in conciliating the nobility, above all in invading Britain, to secure his position. Both proved inadequate against the resentment that his usurpation caused, and in 48 fissures developing amongst his own supporters weakened his political position still further. At no stage did Claudius dare to give up manipulation as his main political weapon or to assume the full weight of the Principate as he had helped to make it

B. Levick, *Claudius*

**How convincing do you find Levick’s interpretation of Claudius’ reign?**