

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

ANCIENT HISTORY

**OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE in
Ancient History**

H407

For first teaching in 2017

H407/12 Summer 2025 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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Paper 12 series overview

Performance in this option was generally sound, with a good number of candidates demonstrating secure knowledge and engagement with the material. However, there was a noticeable variation in quality across questions, and several recurring issues affected the clarity and accuracy of responses.

A common concern was the misattribution of ancient sources, particularly confusion between Pausanias and Plutarch, and between key decrees such as the Megarian and Chalkis. This was especially evident in Questions 3 and 6, where misunderstanding of the Megarian Decree and misidentification of authors weakened otherwise promising answers. Some candidates also included material outside the date range specified in the question, such as references to the Sicilian Expedition or Themistocles' prophecy, which were not relevant.

In Section A, Question 1 was the most popular and generally well handled. Strong responses addressed Persian policy thematically and used Herodotus and Thucydides effectively. Weaker answers often did not cover the full period or misunderstood the nature of Persian policy. Question 2 was less popular but produced some thoughtful responses, particularly where candidates tracked changes in Athenian and Spartan fortunes and evaluated leadership and strategy using Thucydides, Diodorus, and Plutarch.

Question 3 saw a range of performance. Strong answers focused on the interpretation and assessed the Megarian Decree in detail, while weaker responses either ignored it or confused it with other decrees.

In the Depth Study, Question 4 responses varied, with stronger candidates evaluating Plutarch and using wider knowledge to assess the passage's usefulness, while weaker answers lacked source engagement.

Question 5 was less popular and often weaker, with candidates struggling to link artistic themes to a unified building programme. Question 6 was more popular and generally better answered, with strong responses covering festivals, buildings, and Sophists, supported by good use of sources. However, confusion over sculpture details and source authors persisted.

Overall, while many candidates showed strong analytical skills and enthusiasm, there remains a need for greater chronological precision, accurate source attribution, and clearer understanding of key historical concepts.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
- focused sharply on the demands of the question, using well-chosen evidence and contextual knowledge to construct a clear argument - selected and applied sources that were directly relevant to the specific terms of the question - showed a confident grasp of the chronological framework, ensuring events and developments were accurately placed in time - demonstrated depth of understanding of the historical period, reflecting both breadth and precision in knowledge - evaluated arguments by testing the credibility of the specific claims being made, rather than offering generalised source critique.	- struggled with Spartan chronology, leading to confusion over key events, figures, and their correct placement in the timeline - focused on providing a general narrative of the period rather than addressing the specific demands of the question - misattributed events to incorrect individuals or groups, undermining the accuracy of the argument - offered broad, unfocused evaluations instead of assessing the specific claims or interpretations presented - prioritised description over analysis, recounting events without exploring their significance or implications.

Section A overview

Overall, candidates showed a good grasp of the key events across both essay periods, although there was a wider spread in performance than in previous years. Stronger responses demonstrated clear chronological awareness and used relevant evidence to support well-structured arguments. The most effective answers remained tightly focused on the terms of the question, with evaluation often precise and convincingly applied.

Question 1*

1* 'The Persians were consistent in their policy and actions towards the Greek states from 492–431 BC.'

To what extent do the sources support this statement?

You must use and analyse the ancient sources you have studied as well as your own knowledge to support your answer. **[30]**

This was the more popular of the two Section A essay questions, and responses varied widely in quality. Stronger responses demonstrated a clear understanding of the full date range (492–431 BC), with answers structured thematically around Persian policy, such as imperialism, revenge, diplomacy, and shifts toward peace. These responses often made effective use of ancient sources, particularly Herodotus and Thucydides, and showed awareness of the evolving nature of Persian-Greek relations, including the significance of the Peace of Callias.

Better answers also incorporated archaeological evidence, such as the Serpent Column and Persian inscriptions (e.g. Naqs-e Rostam), though some candidates showed uncertainty about which king commissioned which monument and what they actually stated. A few responses also referenced the Athenian offer of earth and water in 508 BC as useful background, even though it fell outside the specified date range.

Weaker responses tended to focus narrowly on the Persian Wars (492–479 BC), neglecting the later period up to 431. This limited their ability to address the question's emphasis on consistency. Some candidates confused key events or figures, such as the two Megabazoi, and misattributed actions to the wrong Persian kings. There was also confusion between peace treaties and alliances, with some claiming Athens and Persia became allies after the Peace of Callias.

Chronological imprecision was a recurring issue, with some candidates unclear about the sequence of invasions or the timeline of Persian involvement in Greek affairs. Misunderstandings about the nature of 'medizing' and the use of terms like 'alliance' further weakened some arguments.

Overall, the best responses were those that addressed the full period, used a wide range of sources critically, and evaluated the extent to which Persian actions were consistent, rather than simply descriptive.

Exemplar 1

		In the second half of the Persian Wars
		under the Xerxes from 480-478 ^{BC} was
		the battles of Thermopylae 480BC, Salamis
		479BC, Plataea 479BC and Mycale 479BC.
		In these battles under Xerxes and then the
		Mardonius. Example of Persian policy and
		actions towards the Greeks are shown
		particularly in Thermopylae 480BC in Herodotus's
		(Hdt) histories and Aeschylus' Persians about
		Salamis. In Thermopylae (480BC) the
		Persians were given help by a Spartan
		slave on how to defeat the Spartans on
		day 3 of the battle. According to Hdt
		the Persians but asked the Spartans to
		"give up their weapons in which the Spartans
		responded "come and take them". And when

The Persians ~~historically~~ ~~believed~~ filled with
 Hubris under their new leader believed they
 could "fly so many arrows it would cover
 the sun". The Spartans responded how they
 like to fight in the shade. The Persians
 attributed to Sparta is one of superiority
 and confidence. And even though they win
 this battle the Greek states don't back down
 and so other battles continue. Like Salamis
 in 479 BC. In Aeschylus Persians, the Queen
 Atossa talks on how could the Greeks possibly
 win if they don't have riches or a large army.
 The messenger talks on how the Greeks are
 monster and vicious. This shows how the
 Persians saw the Greeks from a Greek viewpoint.
 This play was shown just after the Persian
 wars after Persia had burned Athens acropolis
^{destroyed} in 480 BC. The battle of Salamis proves the
 Persians still believe they are superior to the
 Greek city states, even if they lost the battle
 due to the Athenian Naval commander The
 Themistocles strategy. However Both Aeschylus
 and Hdt are known to "exaggerate everything"
 (Green) but are still reliable due to having
 a strong truth and the exaggeration be based
 on what was told from people at the time.

Exemplar 1 shows some engagement with the question and includes relevant events, but it lacks precision and depth. There are factual inaccuracies and generalisations about Persian policy that need clarification, such as treating Persian actions as uniform across time and regions. The analysis tends to describe rather than evaluate, and it doesn't fully explore how Persian aims shifted in response to changing circumstances. Herodotus and Thucydides are not clearly referenced or critically used, which limits the strength of the argument. With clearer structure, more accurate detail, and deeper source engagement, the answer could be significantly improved.

Misconception: Confusing the key literary historians on Persia.



Examiners frequently note that candidates struggle to distinguish between ancient authors when discussing relations between Persia and the Greek states in the 5th century BC. This often leads to confusion over who describes what, and when. Understanding which historian covers which events and how they portray Persian involvement is essential for accurate and well-supported answers. The following guide outlines the key contributions of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, helping clarify their respective focuses and how Persia features in their works.

Herodotus focuses on the earlier part of the 5th century, especially the Persian Wars (492–479 BC). His *Histories* cover:

- The causes of conflict between Persia and the Greek world.
- The Ionian Revolt and Persian expeditions under Darius and Xerxes.
- Key battles such as Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis, and Plataea.
- Persian motivations, customs, and leadership, often with anecdotal detail.

Thucydides, by contrast, begins his History of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC but does offer a narrative and assessment of the period after the Persian Wars in a part of Book 1 called the *Pentekontaetia*. His *History of the Peloponnesian War* covers:

- Persia, mainly in the context of later diplomacy and funding during the Peloponnesian War.
- Internal Greek politics and warfare, with Persia playing a more background role until later in the conflict.
- The Egyptian expedition (c.460 BC), where Athens supported a revolt against Persian rule – an example of mid-century Athenian aggression towards Persia.
- The Peace of Callias (though not named explicitly), which some believe marked a temporary resolution between Athens and Persia in the mid-5th century.

Xenophon continues the narrative after Thucydides, covering events from 411 BC onwards in his *Hellenica*. His work covers:

- The role of Persian satraps like Tissaphernes and Pharnabazus in shaping Greek interstate politics.
- Persian financial support for Sparta, especially in naval campaigns against Athens.
- The Treaty of 411 BC and subsequent negotiations involving Persia and Greek states.
- The strategic importance of Persian-controlled Asia Minor and its impact on Greek diplomacy.
- The shifting alliances between Persia, Sparta, and Athens, including Persian attempts to play Greek powers against each other.
- The actions of Cyrus the Younger and his support for Spartan commander Lysander.

In short: Herodotus is the main source for Persian-Greek conflict up to 479 BC, while Thucydides is more relevant for Persian involvement in Greek affairs from the late 5th century onwards. Xenophon is useful for understanding how Persia reasserted influence in Greek politics through diplomacy and financial support, particularly in the late 5th century.

Question 2*

- 2* How far would you agree that the Peace of Nicias of 421 BC was always the most likely outcome of the first ten years of the Peloponnesian War?

You must use and analyse the ancient sources you have studied as well as your own knowledge to support your answer. **[30]**

Although less popular than Question 1, this essay was generally well answered by those with a secure grasp of the chronology and context of the Archidamian War. Stronger responses directly addressed the key term 'always', evaluating whether peace was a consistent likelihood throughout the first decade of conflict. These candidates often explored shifts in Athenian and Spartan strategy, particularly the impact of leaders such as Pericles, Cleon, and Brasidas, and used ancient sources like Thucydides, Plutarch, and Diodorus effectively.

Better answers demonstrated nuanced understanding of Pericles' initial strategy, the consequences of the plague, and the turning points at Pylos and Sphacteria. Many also discussed the role of Spartan internal politics, such as the influence of hawks and doves, and the implications of Brasidas' campaigns in Thrace. Some candidates used Aristophanes and the Thoudippos Decree to argue that Pericles' policy was unsustainable, making peace increasingly likely.

However, weaker responses often lacked precision, with some confusing the Peace of Nicias with the Thirty Years' Peace or not understanding its terms. Chronological errors were common, including misdating events or misunderstanding the scope of 'the first ten years.' A few responses drifted into irrelevant content, such as the Argive Alliance or the Sicilian Expedition, which fall outside the question's timeframe.

There was also confusion over key details, for example, the number of Spartans captured at Sphacteria, and some candidates misrepresented figures like Brasidas or Pericles. Evaluation in weaker answers tended to be generalised, lacking focus on the specific likelihood of peace at different stages of the war.

Overall, the strongest responses were those that tracked the evolving military and political landscape, used sources critically, and maintained a clear focus on the question's central claim.

Exemplar 2

		Indeed, Athens entered the war in 431 with a strong sense of purpose and strategy. Thucydides informs us that this strategy was largely shaped by the General Pericles who urged the Athenians not to engage the Spartans on land, to retreat inside the city walls whilst using their superior navy to raid the Peloponnesian coastlines - a strategy designed to weather Spartan annual invasions whilst gradually reducing their capacity for war. As such, the Athenian strategy of attrition in 431 is indicative of a state unlikely to sign a peace treaty within only 10 years, as they evidently had strategised for a long-term struggle. Moreover, whilst Thucydides tells us that Pericles presented this strategy as defensive, nowhere in the extant sources is Athens portrayed as at war unwillingly, with both Thucydides and Xenophon portraying Athens as eager for war, not peace. This is further evidenced by Thucydides' account of the Athenian ^{siege} interventions in Potidea, an act which the Corinthians viewed as a "direct threat" and the Peloponnesian League ^{saw as} a provocative intervention. Interventions such as these are are as told by Thucydides sparked Corinthian interest for
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2	continued	Athens meaning that by 431, Athens was eager for war, Corinth would not accept peace and therefore, though peace may have been desirable for Sparta, the peace of Nicias was not the most likely outcome in the 430s.
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This extract demonstrates precise historical knowledge and applies it directly to the question. It doesn't just recount events but evaluates how factors like the death of Pericles, the rise of Cleon and Brasidas, and the strain of war shaped the conditions for peace. The answer uses Thucydides effectively, not just for narrative support but to explore his views on unpredictability and political pressure. It also avoids asserting inevitability, instead showing how peace became more likely over time. This balance of detailed evidence, thoughtful analysis, and source engagement makes the answer both convincing and well-argued.

Question 3

3 Read the interpretation below.

So the Megarian decree had economic effects, and was surely intended to. Of course the Athenians took good care not to be wrongfooted morally: hence a religious aspect was needed for the punishment of an ostensibly religious offence. ... But the Megarian decree was seen, with justification, as Athenian aggression, and Corinth, remembering the 460s, must have thought Athens was up to her old intrigues. ... It seems then that for much of the 430s war looked imminent, and to that extent Thucydides, who under-reports the earlier stirrings and expansion, should be corrected. But his general picture of Athenian expansion, forcing the Spartans to war, stands.

5

S. Hornblower, *The Greek World 479–323 BC* (adapted)

How convincing do you find Hornblower's interpretation of the Megarian decree and the reasons for the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War?

You must use your knowledge of the historical period and the ancient sources you have studied to analyse and evaluate Hornblower's interpretation. [20]

This interpretation question was generally well handled, with many candidates demonstrating a clear understanding of the passage and engaging directly with Hornblower's argument. Stronger responses focused on the key points raised in the extract, particularly the Megarian Decree, its economic and moral implications, and the broader context of rising tensions in the 430s, and assessed how convincingly these were presented using detailed knowledge and relevant ancient sources.

The best answers structured their responses around specific claims in the passage, using Thucydides, Plutarch, and Aristophanes to support or challenge Hornblower's interpretation. These candidates often explored the idea of Athenian provocation, the strategic use of the decree, and the role of Corinth and Sparta in escalating hostilities. Many also recognised the reference to Thucydides 1.23 and discussed the 'earlier stirrings' of conflict in the 460s, including Megara's shifting alliances and Athens' growing assertiveness.

Weaker responses tended to either ignore the passage or engage with it only superficially. Some candidates provided general essays on the causes of the Peloponnesian War or the Megarian Decree without linking their points back to Hornblower's interpretation. Others confused the Megarian Decree with unrelated decrees or lacked a clear understanding of its terms and significance.

There was also some chronological confusion, particularly around the events of the 460s and 430s, and a few candidates misunderstood key phrases in the passage, such as 'justification' or 'under-reporting.' Evaluation in weaker responses was often vague or generic, lacking precise engagement with the specific arguments presented.

Overall, the most successful answers were those that remained focused on the question of how convincing Hornblower's interpretation was, using detailed knowledge and source analysis to reach well-supported conclusions.

Section B overview

Many candidates responding to Question 4 showed a good grasp of the material, particularly in identifying key features of ostracism from the passage. However, a number of responses lacked wider contextual knowledge or did not evaluate Plutarch's reliability, which limited their ability to assess the passage's usefulness fully. Some candidates relied too heavily on paraphrasing the passage without linking it to broader historical understanding.

Evaluation in questions 5 and 6 was generally more confident, with many candidates demonstrating detailed knowledge of buildings, festivals, and religious practices. In Question 5, stronger responses explored how themes across multiple sites supported the idea of a unified building programme, while weaker answers often listed features without linking them to the question. In Question 6, candidates were often more successful in integrating source material, although confusion over authors (particularly Pausanias and Plutarch) and sculpture details occasionally undermined arguments. Some responses also included material outside the period or lacked clarity in distinguishing between religious continuity and change.

Question 4

4 Read the passage below.

At first the people were delighted and treated the result as a great joke. But later they were angry at the thought that the institution of the ostracism should have been degraded by being applied to so utterly unworthy a creature. There was a general feeling that even punishment carries a certain dignity with it, or rather that the ostracism came as a punishment to men such as Thucydides or Aristides, whereas to Hyperbolus it was an honour which enabled him to boast that his iniquitous conduct had now earned him a place beside the greatest patriots. As Plato the comic poet expressed it,

5

The man deserved the fate, deny who can:
Yes, but the fate did not deserve the man.
Not for the like of him and his slave-brands
Did Athens put the sherd into our hands.

10

In the end the Athenians never again resorted to the ostracism. Hyperbolus was the last man to suffer from it, as Hipparchus of Cholargus, a relative of the tyrant Pisistratus, had been the first.

Plutarch, *Nicias*, 11

How useful is this passage for our understanding of the importance of ostracism and its use during this period?

[12]

Question 4 was generally well handled, with many candidates demonstrating a secure understanding of the passage and its relevance to the topic of ostracism. Strong responses selected a range of evidence from the passage and explained its usefulness clearly, often supported by wider contextual knowledge and reference to other sources. The very best answers went further by evaluating Plutarch's reliability and perspective, making this evaluation directly relevant to the question.

However, a number of weaker responses limited themselves to surface-level commentary, identifying only one or two points from the passage without linking them to broader historical understanding. These answers often lacked reference to other sources and did not assess the passage's utility in any depth. A recurring issue was the absence of evaluation of Plutarch, which is essential for demonstrating critical engagement with the source. Overall, while many candidates showed good comprehension of the passage, there remains a need for more consistent integration of wider knowledge and source evaluation to reach the highest levels.

Misconception Ostracism vs Exile



Examiners have raised concerns regarding candidates' confusion between the concepts of ostracism and exile in responses to Question 4. While both involved removal from Athens, they served very different purposes and followed distinct procedures. Ostracism was a democratic safeguard used to neutralise political threats without legal condemnation, whereas exile was a judicial punishment following a formal trial.

Summary:

Exile

- A legal punishment following a trial and conviction.
- Imposed for crimes such as treason, sacrilege, or murder.
- Often involved loss of rights, property, or even citizenship.
- Duration varied: could be temporary or permanent.

Ostracism:

- A democratic process used to protect the city from individuals seen as threats to the state or democracy.
- Citizens voted once a year by scratching names onto pottery shards (*ostraka*).
- If someone received 6,000 or more votes, they were exiled for 10 years.
- No loss of property or citizenship; they could return after the period.
- Not a punishment for a crime, but a political safeguard.

Known Ostracisms:

Hipparchus (c. 487 BC) – Relative of the former tyrant Peisistratus; removed as a precaution.

Megacles (c. 486 BC) – Member of the powerful Alcmaeonid family; politically controversial.

Callias (c. 485 BC) – Wealthy aristocrat; possibly targeted for influence.

Xanthippus (c. 484 BC) – Father of Pericles; involved in factional rivalry.

Aristides 'the Just' (c. 483 BC) – Ostracised for being perceived as too morally upright.

Themistocles (c. 471 BC) – Hero of Salamis; later seen as arrogant and overreaching.

Cimon (c. 461 BC) – Criticised for being too sympathetic to Sparta.

Thucydides, son of Melesias (c. 443 BC) – Political opponent of Pericles.

Hyperbolus (c. 417 BC) – Demagogue; ostracism backfired when rivals united against him. This was the last known ostracism.

Question 5*

- 5* 'The buildings and monuments constructed by the Athenians on the Acropolis and elsewhere were all part of one programme.'

How far do the sources support this view?

You must use and analyse the ancient sources you have studied as well as your own knowledge to support your answer. [36]

Question 5 was less popular than Question 6 and produced a mixed range of responses. Strong answers demonstrated a clear understanding of the key buildings and monuments on the Acropolis and in Attica, using them to explore the idea of a unified building programme. These responses often identified recurring themes, such as Athenian power, religious devotion, and civic identity, and linked them effectively to the question. Candidates who scored highly typically discussed a wide range of structures, including the Parthenon, Erechtheion, Temple of Athena Nike, and Temple to Artemis, and supported their arguments with detailed reference to sculpture and architectural features.

However, weaker responses tended to list buildings without clearly linking them to the idea of a single programme. Some focused too narrowly on religious themes and did not address the political or ideological motivations behind the construction. There was also frequent confusion between ancient authors, particularly the misidentification of Pausanias as Plutarch, which undermined source evaluation. In general, while many candidates showed good knowledge of individual buildings, stronger responses were distinguished by their ability to synthesise this knowledge into a coherent argument about the purpose and unity of Athenian building policy.

Question 6*

- 6* 'The majority of Athenians maintained a consistent attitude towards religion throughout this period.'

To what extent do you agree with this view?

You must use and analyse the ancient sources you have studied as well as your own knowledge to support your answer. [36]

Question 6 was more popular than Question 5 and generally produced stronger responses. Most candidates structured their answers around three key areas, festivals, buildings, and the influence of the Sophists. This allowed for a broad exploration of Athenian religious attitudes. Strong responses demonstrated a wide range of examples, particularly in relation to temples and festivals, and supported their arguments with well-integrated source material. The City Dionysia and Panathenaic Festival were frequently used to highlight the communal and civic nature of Athenian religious life, while authors such as Plutarch, Plato, Pausanias, and Thucydides were often evaluated effectively.

However, weaker responses tended to lack detailed knowledge or did not include relevant sources. Some candidates confused key festivals or misidentified buildings, which weakened their arguments. A few responses included material outside the period, such as Themistocles' prophecy, without making it relevant to the question.

There was also some confusion between ancient authors, particularly between Pausanias and Plutarch. In addition, the sculptural elements of major buildings like the Parthenon were sometimes inaccurately described or conflated.

Overall, while many candidates showed strong engagement with the topic, greater precision in factual detail and source attribution would further strengthen responses.

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