

Pericles



Figure 1: The ancient Greek statesman Pericles was largely responsible for the development of both the Athenian democracy and the Athenian empire.

(495?–429 B.C.). The “glory that was Greece” reached its height in the 5th century B.C., in Athens, under the leadership of the statesman Pericles. He opened Athenian democracy to the ordinary citizen. He built the magnificent temples and statues on the Acropolis. He also created the Athenian empire.

Pericles was born in Athens in about 495 B.C. to a family of wealth and position. His father, Xanthippus, was also a statesman, and his mother, Agariste, was a member of the politically powerful Alcmaeonid family. Pericles himself first gained fame in the spring of 472, when he provided and trained the chorus for Aeschylus’ play *The Persians*.

Pericles was first elected *strategos*, or general, in 458. Generals were elected yearly to devise and carry out the strategy necessary to manage the affairs of state at home and abroad. Pericles won reelection frequently for about 30 years. In a time of kings and tyrants as rulers, his policy at home was to place the state in the hands of the whole body of citizens under the rule of law. The Assembly made the laws, the Council of 500 executed them, and popular courts judged those who broke them. About 451 a law restricting Athenian citizenship to those of Athenian parentage on both sides was passed with Pericles’ support.

About this time the war with Persia finally ended. The Delian League, a confederation of Greek city-states, had been formed against Xerxes and the Persians. Each of the states was assessed according to its ability to pay. Some of the larger islands, such as Naxos, were able to contribute their own ships, but most could not. Instead they contributed money, and Athens built the ships in its shipyards and recruited crews. Pericles increased the size of the navy and instituted payment of wages to crewmen.

In 454 the treasury of the league was transferred from Delos to Athens. Pericles used the defense money to rebuild the temples of the gods that had been destroyed by the Persians in 480. Pericles argued that the allies were paying for their defense and, if that were assured, Athens did not have to account for how the money was spent. In 447 work started on the Parthenon, and the sculptor Phidias began work on the statue of Athena.

Pericles realized his ambition to make Athens, “the queen of Hellas,” not only the most beautiful but the most powerful of the Greek states. He lived also to see the states of the Peloponnesus, under Sparta’s leadership, rise against Athens’ overgrown power in the Peloponnesian War. The closing years of his life were times of storm and trouble. While Athens was besieged by the enemy outside the walls, a terrible plague raged within. For the first time Pericles fell from popular favor and was deposed from office. He was even fined 50 talents on a charge of embezzlement. Only a few weeks later the people repented and reinstated him with greater powers than before. But weakness from an attack of plague killed Pericles the following autumn.

The speeches of Pericles were not written down and preserved. However, Thucydides in his history of the Peloponnesian War provides some idea of Pericles’ power as an orator.

The funeral oration that he has Pericles deliver in honor of the dead during the first year of the Peloponnesian War is especially noble: “Of all cities Athens alone is even greater than her fame. She needs no poet to sing her praises; every land and every sea can furnish proofs of her enterprise and success. Her enemies when defeated are not disgraced; her subjects confess that she is worthy to rule them.” Of Athens’ dead he says: “To men who fall as they have fallen death is no evil.”

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