Pericles

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From World History in Context

Born: c. 495 BC in Athens, Greece
Died: 429? BC in Athens, Greece
Nationality: Greek
Occupation: Statesman

"Pericles, because of his position, his intelligence, and his known integrity, could respect the liberty of the people and at the same time hold them in check. It was he who led them, rather than they who led him." THUCYDIDES

Greek general, politician, and statesman, who dominated the political and intellectual life of democratic Athens when that city-state was at the height of its imperial and cultural power.

- 490 b.c. Athenian victory over Persians at Marathon
- 480 b.c. Athenian naval victory over Persians at Salamis
- 477 b.c. Delian defense league formed against Persia
- 460-70 b.c. Athens transformed the Delian League into an Athenian Empire
- 463 b.c. Pericles began political career by prosecuting the conservative, Cimon
- 461 b.c. Ephialtes and Pericles stripped the Areopagus court of its judicial review; Ephialtes murdered
- 453 b.c. Pericles elected general
- 449 b.c. Peace arranged between Athens and Persia
- 447 b.c. Pericles sponsored reconstruction of the Acropolis
- 443 b.c. Maneuvered the ostracism of Thucydides
- 440 b.c. Athens colonized Thurii in southern Italy
- 437 b.c. Athens colonized Amphipolis in the northern Aegean; Pericles commanded a naval expedition into the Black Sea
- 431 b.c. Peloponnesian War began
- 429 b.c. Pericles died of plague
- 404 b.c. Sparta won the Peloponnesian War

Born c. 495 b.c.; died a victim of the plague in 429 b.c.; son of Xanthippus and Agariste (both from prominent aristocratic families); divorced from first wife; although never legally married, entered into a long relationship with Aspasia; children: (first marriage) two sons; (with Aspasia) son Pericles.

Few have been born with rosier prospects than Pericles. Although little is known of his father's family, it was certainly noble, for Xanthippus not only married the aristocratic Agariste, he was also one of the most important public figures of his generation. Perhaps Xanthippus greatest claim to fame came in 479 b.c. when he led Athens to victory over the Persians at Mycale, a battle which virtually assured that Persia would never again invade European Greece. Pericles' mother Agariste was an Alcmeonid, an old and influential aristocratic family. The Alcmeonids were among the elite when Athens had
been a true aristocracy and had intermarried with the houses of autocratic tyrants. Nevertheless, they had also been responsible for the overthrow of Athenian tyranny when Agariste's uncle, Clisthenes, inaugurated his democratic reforms in 507 B.C.

As a child, Pericles enjoyed a progressive education. From an early age he was exposed to the intellectual innovations fostered by the so-called Sophists ("Wisemen"), who were revolutionizing education by concentrating on "scientific" training and placing less emphasis upon the physical exercise, piety, and notions of morality traditionally expected. The Sophists focused on logic as a vehicle for deductive analysis as they sought to comprehend the natural world. Among Pericles' teachers were the renowned Zeno of Elea and Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, who together introduced their charge to a rigorous study of natural philosophy, refutation, and rhetoric—the last being especially important for a rising politician. Under such influences Pericles came to disdain religious superstition and the belief that the gods played an active role in human affairs. Instead, he embraced logic and believed that humanity could master its own fate. As intellectually oriented as Pericles became, it is ironic that his head was oddly elongated and out of proportion. To compensate, Pericles habitually wore a Corinthian war helmet pushed back from his brow. This affectation became his trademark, especially after he became the foremost proponent of Athenian imperialism.

Although Pericles was heir to a fortune most in his city envied, it was neither great enough to afford the extravagant lifestyle expected by his wife and sons, nor large enough to permit Pericles to finance a political career out of his own pocket. As an adult, he kept a tight rein on his household finances, and his parsimony seems to have contributed to the eventual divorce from his unnamed wife and the subsequent alienation from his legitimate children.

**Cimon Is Prosecuted**

Pericles began his political career in 463 B.C. when he joined in the prosecution of the conservative Cimon, Athens's leading politician and the architect of the successful war against Persia. Cimon's vulnerability lay less in his military competence than in his support for close relations between Athens and its potential Greek rival, Sparta. With Athens's power on the rise as a consequence of its Persian war (a war from which the Spartans had withdrawn in 478 B.C. when it became clear that it would be fought in Asia, far from Sparta), friction with the traditionally powerful Sparta grew. Cimon, however, sought to defuse the mounting strain by inducing a spirit of cooperation between the two cities, reasoning that the Greek world was large enough for both—especially since Sparta's power was primarily land-based, while that of Athens was seaborne. Yet this policy overlooked the fact that a military elite enslaved the vast majority of the Spartan population. Many Athenians saw in Sparta the antithesis of democratic values and were extremely uncomfortable with embracing Sparta as a close ally. As Athens's power grew with the war against Persia prospering, many thought the time was ripe for the overthrow of Sparta and the exportation of democracy to cities where it had never flourished.

When a number of factors converged to sour Athenian/Spartan relations in 463 B.C., a liberal faction in Athens, led by one Ephialtes and ardently supported by the younger Pericles, obtained the ostracism ("temporary exile") of Cimon—a feat which disturbed many of Athens's wealthiest citizens. Their fears were well-founded, since it soon became clear that the liberals intended to "radicalize" Athenian society by making it practical for the poor to participate fully in the government. Although Athens had been a democracy since the reforms of Clisthenes, the traditional clout of the propertied classes had
remained into the 460s B.C., since few officials were paid for public service, elections were expensive, and not many people could afford the education necessary to prepare a would-be politician for the rhetorical battles fought in the public arena. In order to open public positions to the poor (and in the process, to assure their political support), the liberals sought to provide salaries for public service—a modest move by modern standards but an unheard-of reform at the time.

The opening salvo in the assault upon privilege came against the *Areopagus* ("a kind of Supreme Court or court of judicial review"), the origins of which predated the Clisthenic reforms. The *Areopagus* was composed of ex-magistrates who entered the court for life as soon as they stood down from public office. Although after Clisthenes these Areopagites became eligible for judicial service by being democratically elected to a magistracy, by the 460s B.C. it had been discovered that their life tenancy inclined them to represent the interests of their privileged class rather than those of their one-time constituents. In 461 B.C., Ephialtes and Pericles stripped the *Areopagus* of most of its review powers and divided them among other constitutional bodies open to all Athenian citizens by way of several lotteries. An expanded series of courts was established, the juries of which were selected by lot from a pool composed of citizens willing to serve. This important reform stirred up considerable controversy and violence, which culminated in the assassination of Ephialtes.

Thus, Pericles was propelled to the political forefront. If, however, the conservatives hoped that he would promote a more restrained domestic policy than that of Ephialtes, they were mistaken. Rather, they discovered that the "Olympian" (as Pericles came to be nicknamed because his stentorian rhetoric conjured up images of rumbling thunder) was both ideologically motivated and extremely capable. After Ephialtes' death, Pericles embarked on a policy which integrated foreign and domestic affairs, which was as imperialistic as it was democratic, and which made him the most prominent politician in Athens. Although his foreign and domestic policies complemented each other, it is easier to consider them separately, after first considering Athens's standing in the Aegean area at the time.

Following Sparta's withdrawal from the Persian war, the Athenians formed a new Greek alliance to sustain the conflict. As a result, in 477 B.C. a new league was formed around the sanctuary of Apollo on the island of Delos. There, an assembly composed of all members met, and a treasury was established to pay the expenses associated with the war. (The treasury was later removed to Athens in 453 B.C. and put under the direct supervision of the Athenian assembly.) The members who voluntarily joined this Delian League agreed to an *eternal* alliance under Athenian leadership, presumably since they could not foresee a future without a Persian military threat. So that the financial burdens of war could be fairly distributed, the Delian assembly agreed that an Athenian commission should audit each member city's finances in order to discover what each could afford to pay at a sustained rate. The League's larger cities initially contributed men, ships, and the money to sustain both while campaigning, while the smaller members paid cash to the League's treasury. The League also agreed that Athens should annually provide the commander who would lead the united army/fleet against Persia. Among the commander's responsibilities was to draw funds from the League treasury in order to construct ships and hire additional men to complement the contingents donated by the larger cities. The Athenians appointed this commander from among the ten *strategoi* ("generals") annually elected in that city. The *strategos* ("general") thus appointed (usually Cimon until his ostracism) inevitably decided to reward his constituents by returning to Athens in order to hire Athenian shipwrights to build the League's ships, and Athenian sailors to sail them. Thus, Athens profited from the League and came to depend on a growing war industry.
The military force had had such stunning success by the 460s b.c. that the preservation of the League seemed unnecessary to many. Before the League reached a consensus about its future, however, some of its larger members decided to secede unilaterally. In response, a majority of the League’s membership supported Athens by refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of these secessions, arguing that the enemy could return if the League disbanded. This argument had a certain validity, but the truth of the matter was that by the 460s b.c., the Athenian economy depended on the League. When these rebellions were broken, Athens converted their contributions to tribute paid in cash to the League’s treasury (thereafter to be spent in Athens, increasing the city’s dependency on the League). The result was a subtle, but real, transmutation of the Delian alliance into an Athenian Empire.

The "Long Walls" Are Constructed
As this metamorphosis occurred, Athens extended its influence within the Greek world and beautified its own city. Pericles never questioned the ethics of supporting Athenian democracy by enforced contributions, but rather became Athens’s most ardent imperialist ("advocating the expansion of his country’s borders"). What most seemed to open up the floodgates of brazen Athenian aggression was the construction of the famous "Long Walls" (urged by Pericles), linking the city to its fortified harbor of Piraeus, five miles away. One consequence of this project was jobs, but a more important one was that Athens became impregnable to assault by land, and thereafter never feared starvation while its fleets controlled the sea. The sense of security these walls provided stirred Athens to flaunt its power.

Although Pericles opposed the short-lived and unsuccessful attempt to extend the Athenian Empire to the Greek mainland in the 450s b.c., he wholeheartedly supported the expansion of Athens’s maritime power. As a strategos, Pericles humbled Sicyon (453 b.c.), restored the famous sanctuary of the Delphian Apollo to friendly hands (early 440s b.c.); crushed the rebellions against Athens on the islands of Euboea (445 b.c.) and Samos (439 b.c.); and led the Athenian fleet into the Black Sea (437 b.c.). Pericles also advocated the extension of Athenian economic influence through the establishment of colonies at Thurii in southern Italy (440 b.c.) and Amphipolis on the Thracian coast of the northern Aegean (437 b.c.). The latter, in particular, became a valuable asset as long as it remained in Athenian hands, since it lay close to the extensive forests which provided the wood, pitch, and other materials essential to an ancient naval power, and because it was not far from the productive silver mines of Mt. Pangaeus.

The Peloponnesian War Looms
Perhaps Pericles’ greatest strategic influence, however, came in the 430s b.c. as the Peloponnesian War against Sparta loomed. At that time he advised his city to take a hard line against any encroachment on its imperial interests, even though such extremism put Athens on a collision course with Sparta. As a result of Pericles’ recommendation, Athens strengthened its presence in the west through a defensive alliance with Corcyra, although that pact threatened the economic lifeline of Sparta’s ally, Corinth. Shortly thereafter, Pericles also convinced the Athenians to close the harbors of their Empire to Megara, another Spartan ally, after a series of disputes erupted with that city. When Sparta learned (432 b.c.) of the consequent damage wrought upon the economies of its allies, it demanded immediate redress and a curtailment of Athenian international activities. Pericles, arguing that Sparta’s demands amounted to extortion, convinced his fellow citizens to reject them and to pursue the city’s advantage regardless of whether or not Sparta approved.
Hostilities ensued (431 b.c.), and Athens relied again on Pericles to devise its war strategy. Unwilling to meet Sparta’s army head-on when it invaded Attica, Pericles ordered all Athenians within the city’s walls. This meant the abandonment of much food and the destruction of many farms, but the sea would provide the besieged with sustenance at public expense. Then, to convince the Spartans that he could hurt them more than they could Athens, Pericles ordered the Athenian fleet to despoil the Peloponnesian coast and to encourage Sparta’s helots (“state-owned slaves”) to revolt, a specter the Spartans always feared. Had Athens stuck to this strategy—and avoided any more foreign entanglements until after a secure peace with Sparta was established—it probably would have won the war. However, Pericles died of the plague (429 b.c.) that flourished amid unsanitary conditions made intolerable by thousands of Athenians seeking shelter within a crowded city. With Pericles dead, no one kept his strategy alive. As a result, after a conflict which lasted over a generation and which brought Athens incalculable distress, Sparta defeated its rival and appropriated the Athenian Empire for itself (404 b.c.).

Turning now to Pericles’ domestic policy: sometime before the Persian War officially ended (449 b.c.), Pericles foresaw an economic depression in peacetime Athens unless something was done to absorb the shock of unemployment in the city’s maritime war industry. Consequently, Pericles legislated new ways for Athenians to take advantage of the imperial tribute, while simultaneously promoting the ideals of radical democracy. In 453 b.c., he sponsored a law which paid Athenian citizens for their service as jurors in the courts proliferating at the time. This growth of the Athenian judiciary was the result of a conscious decision to force most imperial business to be adjudicated in Athens where Athenians could insure that the Empire was being run in their interests. In addition, Pericles successfully sponsored a bill which guaranteed that citizens could attend the popular state-supported theater if they otherwise could not afford the price of admission. Again, the Empire was to foot the bill.

One consequence of such privileges was that Athenian citizenship became an increasingly valuable commodity which many non-Athenians coveted—much to the dismay of those who feared that an extension of citizenship through any means would dilute the benefits doled to citizens. There ensued a Periclean law (451 b.c.) which limited Athenian citizenship to those whose fathers and maternal grandfathers were both full citizens. Interestingly, this law was very popular among citizens with daughters. Since Athenians were becoming rich by Greek standards, many sought Athenian bachelors as husbands for their daughters. The popularity of Athenian grooms increased the dowries they traditionally could demand with marriage. By restricting citizenship, Pericles magnified the importance of Athenian women, for the children of non-Athenians were ineligible for the growing list of city welfare benefits. Of course, Athenian fathers were happy at the lower dowries they could expect to pay for a citizen son-in-law after this law was enacted. And, as Pericles fully understood, happy voters vote for those who make them happy.

**His Vision of an Ideal City**

In thanksgiving for the victorious peace treaty arranged with Persia (449 b.c.), Pericles proclaimed a one-year moratorium on the collection of the imperial tribute. The next year, however, saw its restitution. Along with the renewal of the tribute came an implicit Athenian claim of sovereignty over the onetime autonomous members of the Delian League. This clearly demonstrated Athens’s financial dependency on its Empire, but it also provided Pericles with the financial wherewithal to engage in an experiment the likes of which the world had never seen. Henceforth Pericles spent much tribute to
promote the interests of the imperial democracy, but he also dedicated significant amounts to a nobler cause: he meant to fashion an ideal city to inspire its inhabitant to levels of intellectual and cultural achievement which he believed were attainable only in a *democratic* society, but which having been attained, would become a model for others to copy. In short, Pericles drafted a vision for a society he dreamed would become, in his own words, “the school which educated all Greece.”

The Acropolis became the symbolic crown of this utopia. Although its heights visually dominated the city, no building had stood on them since Xerxes had razed their original temples (480 b.c.) shortly before the Athenians expelled the Persians from the Greek mainland. For about a generation, the Athenians had employed their ruins as a visual incitement to war, but with peace, Pericles reckoned the time right to rededicate the site to the deities (especially Athena) most associated with the foundation, development, and prosperity of the Athenian state. This coupling of the gods and democracy was paramount in Pericles’ mind, and both had their place in the Acropolis’s reconstruction. The most majestic blend of piety and propaganda can still be seen in the Parthenon (built 447-432 b.c.)--a temple which simultaneously venerated Athena’s virginal purity and exalted the uprightness of Democracy as a way of life. Although the modern world often sees virtue in the separation of church and state, the ancient Greeks did not.

Other temples followed, including especially the Erechtheum and that of Athena Nike (“the victorious”), but it was not Pericles’ intent merely to beautify Athens physically. In addition, he promoted its intellectual and cultural development. It was no coincidence that the period of Pericles’ ascendancy coincided with the most creative phase in the history of the Athenian theater, where tragic and comedic masterpieces were routinely produced for the entertainment and edification of the city’s population. The careers of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes were all spawned when Pericles’ influence was at its zenith. In addition, Pericles’ interest in Sophism created such excitement about the latest scholarly controversies that the greatest thinkers of the age flocked to Athens. Consequently, historians like Herodotus and philosophers like Anaxagoras resided in Athens where they sparked locals like Thucydides and Socrates to pursue their calling.

Athens attracted many others as well, but perhaps the most remarkable of all was Aspasia, who came from Miletas about 445 b.c. in order to found a school of rhetoric. Her arrival in Athens created a stir because, traditionally, "respectable" women were expected to stay at home and acknowledge the intellectual superiority of their male counterparts. Aspasia, however, had few intellectual peers and no superiors, and soon won the admiration of the city's intelligentsia, even as her liberated ways scandalized those more conservatively inclined. She drew criticism from those envious of her talent or offended by her flaunting of tradition both on the stage--where comedic playwrights would occasionally lambast her "immorality," and in court--where she was once prosecuted for impiety (a charge stemming from her sophistic tendency to question everything, even the customary understanding of the gods).

Despite her detractors, her intellect, her wit, and her irrepressible desire to exploit her natural talents won her some impressive friends, among them Socrates (with whom she frequently conversed) and Pericles. Actually, Aspasia became much more than Pericles’ friend. Drawn together by mutual intellectual interests, the two lived as husband and wife from shortly after her arrival to Athens until Pericles died. Although not a legal marriage, thanks to Pericles’ own law debarring foreign wives, their union was emotionally far more egalitarian and loving than most in Athens. Together they produced a
son, the younger Pericles, who, after his father's death, was given a special grant of citizenship to honor his parents. Tragically, the younger Pericles died amidst the hysteria which increasingly struck Athens as the Peloponnesian War wound down to defeat. In an illegal trial which sought to attach blame for the loss of some Athenians at sea, a jury found the fleet's strategoi, including the younger Pericles, guilty of a dereliction of duty. They were quickly executed over the vociferous protests of Socrates, although none was guilty (406 b.c.).

With this inhumanity, the direct line of Pericles came to an end, but his fame lived on. No politician in democratic Athens had as long or as illustrious a career, and though he always had some opposition, after the ostracism of Thucydides, Pericles enjoyed an unparalleled ascendancy within his city. During this period, his political opposition dared not confront him directly, but contented itself with sniping at him through his friends, including Aspasia, whose unorthodox thinking frequently clashed with traditional mores. Although occasionally characterized as aloof and uncaring by those who would replace him in the people's hearts, Pericles' unceasing devotion to the political interests of the Athenian poor, his consistency of insight, the power of his oratory, the splendor of his social vision, his clearly discernible courage, and his fabled personal integrity--all combined to make him seem to the constituency he served like an Olympian among mere mortals.

Further Readings


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