

Pericles and the height of classicism

After Salamis a number of Greek city-states banded together against the continuing Persian menace in the Delian League, headed by Athens. They had either to supply their own troops or pay a contribution to the federal exchequer, based on the island of Delos. Most of the cities chose the simpler method of paying their levy and letting Athens arm and direct the fleet. In this way, they became dependent on Athens, which soon led to conflicts among the Greek city-states.

Once a peace treaty had put an end to the Persian Wars, in 449 BC, Pericles worked energetically to rebuild Athens and turn it into a leading commercial centre. To secure both its defence and its supplies, he had a double wall constructed linking the city with its port of Piraeus, which became the defensive base of Athenian imperialism. Economically, Piraeus came to be a centre of transit for all trade in the Mediterranean. As memories of the war faded, the naval levies accumulated by the Delian League were used more and more for the reconstruction of Athens.

Pericles commissioned the sculptor Phidias to transform the Acropolis into a site reserved for the city's protecting deities. A number of temples were built. The most celebrated was the Temple of the Parthenon, used as a treasury for the funds of the Delian League. It also housed a 12-metre gold and ivory statue of Pallas Athena, the goddess of Athens. Phidias made another statue of her, so large that the tip of her lance was used as a mark by sailors when they had passed Cape Sounion in the south of Attica. The Greek historian Plutarch described Pericles and the role that the rebuilding of Athens played in his policy as a whole.

When Pericles secured the assent of the People's Assembly to the buildings on the Acropolis, it was not primarily to respond to the religious needs of the Athenians. He belonged to the young postwar generation, whose thinking was more political and rationalistic. For him such public works would create jobs, make for progress in the construction industry and attract all sorts of foreign workers. This would benefit the middle class of craftsmen, merchants and shippers – thereby strengthening Pericles's supporters, the democrats, against the conservative oligarchs, whose partisans were recruited from among the peasants of Attica. Pericles thus obtained recognition for his imperialist policy, which made Athens predominant among her allies, attracted wealth and laid the foundations for what is regarded as the heyday of Greek classical culture.



3 PERICLES

Height: 59 cm. Roman copy in the British Museum, London

Born to a noble family, the great-nephew of Cleisthenes and creator of democracy, Pericles ruled Athens from 462 to 429 BC. Under him Athens became the richest state in Greece. It was said of this 'best of Athenians' that he practised democracy at home and imperialism abroad. A friend of the sculptor Phidias, the architect Callicrates and the philosopher Anaxagoras, he made Athens the finest and best-educated city in Greece.

4 Pericles and the Athenian Constitution

The Greek historian Thucydides (460–406 BC) recounted the story of the Peloponnesian War, during which Pericles pronounced the funeral oration for the Athenian soldiers who fell during the first winter of the war, in 430 BC.

Our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbours. It is more the case of our being a model to others, than of our imitating anyone else. Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability that the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty . . .

It is for you to try to be like them. Make up your minds that happiness depends on being free and freedom depends on being courageous. Let there be no relaxation in face of the perils of the war.

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Book II. Translated by Rex Warner, Penguin Books, 1954, pp. 117, 121.



1 ATTIC RED-FIGURE CUP DEPICTING A SCENE AT SCHOOL

Found at Cerveteri, Etruria; 480 BC. Diameter: 29 cm
Collection of Antiquities, Berlin

There were no state schools in Athens. Teachers of literature and music taught the cithara, initiated their pupils into the elementary laws of rhythm and had them play and sing the best-known works of the lyric poets. Education was not specialized, but opened the way to almost all lines of thought.



2 OSTRACISM

Agora Museum, Athens, 5th century BC

Fragments of pottery (ostraka) bearing the names of politicians who had been ostracized – exiled for ten years – after a popular vote. The name of Pericles has also been found, although he was never ostracized.

Greek democracy

The evolution from monarchical government to democratic government, via an aristocratic regime, began in the colonial period and reached its culminating point under Pericles, at the end of the 5th century BC.

The economic progress made in the colonial period conferred influence on broader groups in the population. Under the reign of the Tyrants in the 6th century, these groups played a greater part in public affairs, even if the ranks of senior officials were still reserved for the rich.

During the Persian Wars the whole population was united in doing its duty, irrespective of rank: even the slaves took part in the defence. This feeling of community and equality continued after the war and affected political life: all free men now had the right to take part in government.

Pericles held that poverty, in a democracy, should not prevent a citizen from playing his part in public affairs. To ensure that everyone could do so on an equal footing, Pericles introduced monetary compensation and the drawing of lots for public office. Office-holders were appointed for one year only so that many people could have their chance.

Greek democracy was the response to oriental despotism and an attempt to ensure that all citizens should be equal before the law. Nevertheless, it cannot be likened completely to modern democracies in the West. In Athens all the citizens of the city could present themselves in person and vote: that was direct democracy, as against representative democracy in our countries today. Furthermore, a large number of the inhabitants were debarred from citizenship: slaves, women and immigrant workers. It was they who did the work, while the citizens made the policy. In Periclean Athens there were some 150,000 free citizens (including families), 125,000 slaves and 40,000 immigrant workers.

The Greeks saw nothing abnormal or shocking in this discrimination. Societies in the classical world were slave societies based on the right of private property. Those who had only their muscles to offer had no time to participate actively in public affairs and were not counted as active citizens (in Greek, *politēs*) but as private persons (in Greek, *idiotēs*).

For Aristotle a human being was simply someone who played a part in the affairs of the community; and women, slaves and immigrant workers did not. The Greeks saw no injustice or discrimination in this state of affairs.

Democratic institutions

The People's Assembly (the *ecclesia*) was the soul and the voice of democracy. In Athens it normally met every nine days and it took all the decisions. Every male citizen over 18 could attend, speak and vote. Not all took part in every session: the peasants, in particular, who had work to do in Attica, were often absent. But it was not exceptional for there to be five or six thousand people present. So large an assembly required a certain discipline. So all the matters to be discussed were prepared beforehand by the Council, which acted as intermediary between the Assembly and the executive authorities.

The Council (the *boulē*) was made up of 500 men chosen annually by drawing lots, 50 from each of the ten tribes (*phylai*) of Athens which were administrative sub-divisions of the *polis*. The 50 representatives of each tribe exercised the executive functions of the Council for one-tenth of the year, during which time they bore the title of *prytaneis*. Together with their officials, they presided over the government of the city in the *agora*, the main square.

After a year in office the officials gave up their posts or were allotted others. The oldest and most experienced entered the Tribunal of the Areopagus, on the hill of that name. As democracy developed under Pericles, this court lost influence. Judicial power passed into the hands of a tribunal of jurors elected by the people, the *hēliaia*; in large trials, it could consist of up to 501 citizen-judges. The law was the supreme authority, the collective will of the *polis*, and was binding on the citizens. The tribunals supervised it. To protect democracy against tyranny, the Assembly could exile any politician who became too popular and therefore dangerous.

As it had in Athens, democracy gained ground in other city-states. Craftsmen and merchants liked this form of government, but it also had its enemies, especially among the landed proprietors in the agricultural districts of the *polis*. These oligarchs opposed all the expansionist activities of the Delian League, the intensive rebuilding of Athens and the imperialist policy. They looked rather towards conservative Sparta, which favoured the cities' oligarchical circles.

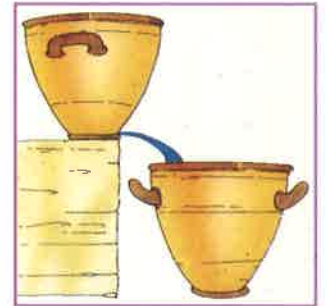
So long as the Persians posed a threat to both Athens and Sparta, the two city-states were at one; but, when the Persian danger diminished, disputes arose. Sparta's highly disciplined army was used by a few very influential families to maintain their grip on subject regions. Her citizens existed only to serve the state. Other city-states with the same form of oligarchy united to form the Peloponnesian League.



3 CLEPSYDRA FROM A COURT OF JUSTICE

Agora Museum, Athens

The clepsydra was a water-clock. The water ran out through a hole in the upper receptacle. It was used in assemblies to give every speaker a fair share of the time: six minutes or five litres.



4 ATHENS AT THE TIME OF PERICLES

