

MORE of the Story

April 15, 2023

Quote of the Week

“Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you. ” -- Pericles

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pericles-Athenian-statesman/The-drift-toward-war>

Pericles, (born c. 495 bce, Athens—died 429, Athens), Athenian statesman largely responsible for the full development, in the later 5th century bce, of both the Athenian [democracy](#) and the Athenian empire, making [Athens](#) the political and cultural focus of Greece. His achievements included the construction of the Acropolis, begun in 447.

Background and education

Knowledge of the life of Pericles derives largely from two sources. The historian [Thucydides](#) admired him profoundly and refused to criticize him. His account suffers from the fact that, 40 years younger, he had no firsthand knowledge of Pericles' early career; it suffers also from his approach, which concentrates exclusively on Pericles' [intellectual](#) capacity and his war leadership, omitting biographical details, which Thucydides thought irrelevant to his theme. The gaps are partly filled by the Greek writer [Plutarch](#), who, 500 years later, began writing the life of Pericles to illustrate a man of unchallengeable virtue and greatness at grips with the fickleness of the mob and finished rather puzzled by the picture he found in his sources of Pericles' responsibility for a needless war. These sources are not all ascertainable, but they certainly preserve an invaluable amount of fact and contemporary gossip, which is sometimes nearly as useful.

Pericles was born into the first generation able to use the new weapon of the popular vote against the old power of family politics. His father, Xanthippus, a typical member of this generation, almost certainly of an old family, began his political career by a dynastic marriage into the controversial family of the [Alcmaeonids](#). He soon left their political camp, probably on the question of relations with Persia, and took the then new path of legal [prosecution](#) as a political weapon.

Perhaps outbid in his search for popular support, Xanthippus was ostracized in 484 bce, though he returned in 480 to command the Athenian force at Mycale in 479, probably dying soon after.

From him Pericles may have inherited a leaning toward the people, along with landed property at Cholargus, just north of Athens, which put him high, though not quite at the highest level, on the Athenian pyramid of wealth.

His Alcmaeonid mother, Agariste, provided him with relationships of sharply diminishing political value and her family curse, a religious defilement that was occasionally used against him by his enemies. A few days before Pericles' birth, according to the Greek historian [Herodotus](#), Agariste dreamed she bore a lion. The symbolism, although [ambiguous](#), is most likely to be unfavourable. That Pericles' skull was of unusual shape seems well attested, but one can hardly speculate about the possible psychological consequences.

The only name associated with his early education is that of the musical theorist Damon, whose influence, it is said, was not just confined to music. The arrival of the Sophist philosophers in Athens occurred during his middle life, and he seems to have taken full advantage of the society of [Zeno](#) and particularly [Anaxagoras](#), from whom he is said to have learned impassivity in the face of trouble and insult and [skepticism](#) about [alleged](#) divine phenomena.

The first known date in his life is 472 bce, when he paid for the production of the playwright [Aeschylus](#)' Persian trilogy. Nothing further is known until 463, when he unsuccessfully prosecuted [Cimon](#), the leading general and statesman of the day, on a charge of having neglected a chance to conquer Macedonia; this implies that Pericles advocated an aggressive policy of expansion for Athens. Only rumour associates him directly with the political convulsion of the next two years, which drove Cimon into exile, swung Athens away from its alignment with [Sparta](#), and decisively strengthened the democratic elements in the Athenian constitution; but he probably did support the democratic leader [Ephialtes](#) in this period, and his introduction of pay for juries, unfortunately undatable, is a logical [consequence](#) of Ephialtes' reforms.

Rise to democratic leadership

That Pericles immediately succeeded the assassinated Ephialtes as head of the democratic party in 461 is an ancient oversimplification; there were other men of considerable weight in Athens in the next 15 years. The outbreak of war among the Greek states in 459 put a premium on [military](#) talent, and Pericles' only recorded campaign in the next few years was a naval expedition in the Corinthian Gulf in 454, in which Athens defeated Achaea but failed to win more important objectives. Politically he is credited with some kind of rapprochement with Cimon, who is said to have been recalled and allowed to resume the war with Persia, much preferred to fighting other Greeks, but the date of Cimon's recall is uncertain, and the rumours are hard to disentangle.

In 451 or 450 Pericles carried a law confining Athenian [citizenship](#) to those of Athenian parentage on both sides. No source provides any background to this proposal; it is not even clear whether it was retroactive. A correct [assessment](#) is vital for understanding Pericles, but explanations vary considerably; some argue that Pericles was merely forging a low-level political weapon for use against Cimon, who had a foreign mother. The upper classes certainly had no [prejudice](#) against foreign marriages; the lower classes may well have had more, and, on the

whole, it is possible to view Pericles here as championing exclusivist tendencies against immigrants who might break down the fabric of Athenian society.

One hundred years later, an orator argued for firm distinctions of status on the ground that the law provided even the poorest Athenian girl with a dowry in the form of her citizenship. The law also may have passed because of a general wish to restrict access to the benefits of office and public distributions, but there was never any [disposition](#) on the part of Athenians to restrict economic opportunities for foreigners—who served in the fleet, worked on public buildings, and had freedom of trade and investment, with the crucial, but normal, exception of land and houses. To speak of this legislation as a move toward creating a “master race” is thus partly misleading, but the demagogic nature of the law seems clear.

Cimon died after 451, during his last campaign against Persia. The policy of war with Persia was abandoned and a formal peace probably made. The [Persian War](#), begun as an ill-considered gesture in 499, could be considered ultimately successful. The city of Athens, however, was physically still much as it had been left by the Persian sack of 480, and its gods were inadequately housed.

Restoring Athens’s preeminence

Hostilities among the Greek states had also come to an end in the Five Years’ Truce of 451. Pericles now [embarked](#) on a policy designed to secure [Athens’s](#) cultural and political leadership in Greece. It had already dominated the alliance that had continued the Persian War after [Sparta’s](#) withdrawal in 478, a leadership strengthened by the transfer of the alliance’s considerable treasury from [Delos](#) to Athens in 454. If peace with Persia did not end the alliance, it may have ended the annual tribute paid to that treasury.

Whether to regain this tribute, or simply to assert Athenian leadership, Pericles summoned a conference of all Greek states to consider the questions of rebuilding the Greek temples destroyed by the [Persians](#), the payment of sacrifices due to the gods for salvation, and the freedom of the seas. Sparta would not cooperate, but Pericles continued on the narrower basis of the Athenian alliance. Tribute was to continue, and Athens would draw heavily on the reserves of the alliance for a magnificent building program centred on the [Acropolis](#). In 447 work started on the temple later known as the [Parthenon](#) and on the gold and ivory statue of [Athena](#) (by Phidias), which it was to house; the Acropolis project was to include, among other things, a temple to Victory and the Propylaea (started 437), the entrance gateway, far grander and more expensive than any previous Greek [secular](#) building.

There was domestic [criticism](#), however. Thucydides, son of Melesias (not the historian) and a relative of [Cimon](#), who had inherited some of his political support, denounced both the extravagance of the project and the immorality of using allied funds to finance it. Pericles argued that the allies were paying for their defense, and, if that was assured, Athens did not have to account for how the money was actually spent. The argument ended in [ostracism](#) in 443; [Thucydides](#) went into exile for 10 years, leaving Pericles unchallenged. It cannot be determined whether the glamour of the project had completely caught Athenian imagination or whether

Pericles was now simply thought to be [indispensable](#). [Plutarch](#) attributed to Pericles a desire to stimulate economic activity and employment in Athens, but these motives may be anachronistic and in actuality may not have influenced the voters very much.

Revolts within the empire

There was also some initial allied resentment at the continuation of tribute, and some scattered revolts. Pericles met the situation in part by extending a network of Athenian settlements throughout what may now be called the empire, thus strengthening Athenian control and providing new land for the growing Athenian population. In establishing one of these, Pericles engaged in his most admired campaign, the expulsion of barbarians from the [Thracian Chersonese](#) (Gallipoli). A more serious crisis came in 447 or 446, however, when the cities of [Boeotia](#), under Athenian control since 458, beat a small Athenian army and successfully revolted. [Euboea](#), crucial to Athenian control of the sea and food supplies, and [Megara](#) soon followed suit. The strategic importance of Megara was immediately demonstrated by the appearance, for the first time in 12 years, of a Spartan army north of the Isthmus in [Attica](#). Pericles thought and acted swiftly. The details were never fully known, but, possibly by bribery and certainly by negotiation, it was arranged that Athens would give up its mainland possessions and confine itself to a largely maritime empire. The Spartan army retired, Euboea was quickly reduced, and the arrangement was ratified by the [Thirty Years' Peace](#) (winter 446–445). For Athens, the essential loss was that of Megara, which meant that a Spartan army could appear in Attica at any time. That Pericles doubted the stability of the settlement and saw the need to develop an [alternative](#) basic strategy for Athens is shown by his immediate construction of a third [Long Wall](#) to improve the defenses of Athens and the port of Piraeus. Henceforth, in effect, Athens could be turned into an island at will.

Political and military achievements

There was a break in tensions for the moment. After Thucydides' ostracism, Pericles had little domestic opposition. His position rested on his continual reelection to the generalship and on his [prestige](#), based, according to the historian Thucydides, on his [manifest](#) intelligence and incorruptibility. From his youthful demagogy, he had moved to a more middle ground in politics, and there are traces in his later life of his being outflanked by more radical spokesmen. Athens was, Thucydides says, in name a [democracy](#) but, in fact, governed by its first man. Though Athenian [democracy](#) never gave more than severely limited powers to the executive, the assembly gave Pericles what he wanted. Thucydides, obsessed with the power of intellect, takes little note of the need of a statesman to work hard, and it is Plutarch who provided the glimpses of a man who took no interest in his own estates, who was never seen on any road but that to the public offices, and who was only recalled to have gone to one social occasion, which he left early.

This picture is softened somewhat by what is known of his personal life. The identity of his wife, however, though certainly of wealth and high birth, is unknown. He married her in his late 20s but, as they were incompatible, divorced her some 10 years later. Close to 50, he took [Aspasia](#) of [Miletus](#) into his house. By his own law, marriage was impossible, and, after the death of his two [legitimate](#) sons, their son Pericles had to be [legitimated](#). Although Aspasia is clouded by scandal

and [legend](#), it is easy to believe she possessed great charm and intelligence. There is no reason to doubt that she was free and of good birth in her own city with its great [intellectual](#) traditions. It is clear that her own behaviour and Pericles' attitude toward her were surprising phenomena in Athens, where upper class women were kept secluded. That Pericles was known to kiss her on leaving for and returning from work gave rise to speculation about her influence on him and, thus, on Athenian politics.

As the building program continued, Pericles demonstrated Athenian superiority in other ways. In 443 a Panhellenic colony was founded under Athenian [auspices](#) at [Thuri](#), in southern Italy, but did not form a continuing centre of Athenian influence in the west, as may have been hoped. At an unknown date, Pericles took a fleet into the [Black Sea](#) to demonstrate Athenian power and secure the grain route from the [Tauric Chersonese](#) (the [Crimean Peninsula](#) in modern Ukraine). As the buildings on the Acropolis rose, celebrations of the festival of the [Panathenaea](#) grew more and more elaborate, and much was done to [enhance](#) the splendour of the [Mysteries of Eleusis](#), symbolic, among other things, of the Athenian claim to have brought corn and civilization to mankind.

Pericles' last major campaign was the one interruption in these years. In 440, [Samos](#), one of Athens's principal allies with a substantial fleet of its own, revolted, and, despite a victory by Pericles against superior numbers, the revolt nearly succeeded. The campaign to recover Samos, although long and costly, was ultimately successful, and it became a model against which later Athenian generals measured their achievements.

The drift toward war

There had been a serious possibility that [Sparta](#) and its allies might intervene on this occasion, but they did not, and the Thirty Years' Peace was [upheld](#) until the end of the 430s. Tension grew as the decade progressed, particularly with regard to [Corinth](#), Sparta's ally, whose interests conflicted more obviously with those of [Athens](#). By 433 the situation was serious enough for Athens's finances to be put on a war basis, and, thereafter, the drift to war continued.

Pericles' policy was one of firmness, coupled with careful manipulation of the diplomatic position to keep Athens technically in the right. The firmness was a puzzle to contemporaries, particularly his determination to enforce decrees excluding Megarian trade from the Athenian empire. Was he, it was asked, influenced by some private grievance of [Aspasia](#)? Was he trying to divert attention from personal attacks on himself and friends by making war? Thucydides tells just enough to make his own interpretation [plausible](#), that [Megara](#) was a small matter in itself but crucial as a symbol of Athenian determination to maintain its position. Consideration of Megara's strategic importance, which Thucydides consistently undervalues, may suggest further the possibility that the Megarian decrees were not the immediate cause of the war but the first blow in a [war](#) Pericles thought inevitable and that began in spring 431.

Pericles' main strategic ideas are clear. He was an [admiral](#) rather than a general, and Athens's naval resources were immeasurably superior to its land power. He would evacuate the Athenian countryside, bring the population into the Long Walls, decline battle with the Spartan army, and

rely on the [fleet](#) to assure Athenian food supplies and secure the empire on whose resources the expensive naval policy depended. Expenditure on building had been counterbalanced by annual savings from the tribute, and enough capital had been reserved, he thought, for a long war, though expenditure turned out heavier than he could have calculated. This is essentially Thucydides' analysis, though he failed to explain what end to the war, other than a stalemate, Pericles wanted or expected. There are some indications that Periclean strategy included more aggressive elements, such as the recovery of Megara, which would have considerably improved Athens's position.

Weakness of Pericles' strategy

This strategy, however, had marked political weaknesses. The Athenian population had deep roots in the countryside, and great firmness was required to bring them to abandon their land to Spartan ravages without a fight. The middle-class army suffered in morale, and the living conditions of the lower classes, though they were allowed activity in the fleet, deteriorated in the overcrowded city. The overcrowding had an unforeseeable consequence in a plague, which in the second summer of the war took a quarter of the population. No obvious success counterbalanced the discomforts of war, and Pericles was deposed from office and fined. He was soon reelected, but he took no new [initiatives](#) before his death in autumn 429.

After the first campaigning season of the war, he had delivered the funeral speech over the fallen, which [Thucydides](#) reports at length. They had fallen, he said, in preserving a way of life that he described in detail. Athenian life often fell short of this Periclean ideal, but he conceived it with clarity and made it generally recognized. He conceived his Athens as "an education to Greece." If the last speech attributed to him by Thucydides is any guide, he cannot be accused of ignoring that the realities of power that made the Periclean age possible might also bring it down.