

# Biography of Pericles

- **Occupation:** Statesman and General
- **Born:** 495 BC in Athens, Greece
- **Died:** 429 BC in Athens, Greece
- **Best known for:** Leader of Athens during its golden age

## Where did Pericles grow up?

Pericles grew up in the Ancient Greek city-state of Athens. Pericles' name means "surrounded by glory" and he would live up to his name through his efforts to make Athens the greatest of the Greek city-states. His family was wealthy and his father, Xanthippus, was a popular general. Because of his family's wealth, Pericles had some of the best teachers in Athens. He loved to learn and he studied subjects such as music, politics, ethics, and philosophy.

Pericles grew up during the time of the Persian Wars. When Pericles was around three years old, Athens faced the first major assault from the Persians, but won a decisive victory at the Battle of Marathon. Ten years later Athens once again faced the Persians. This time they fled the city and the Persians destroyed much of Athens. However, they defeated the Persians at the Battle of Salamis and Pericles was able to return home.

## Supporting the Arts

When Pericles became a young man he used his wealth to support the arts. One of the first things he did was sponsor the playwright Aeschylus and his play *The Persians*. The play told the story of Athens defeating the Persians at the Battle of Salamis. The play was a success and helped Pericles to become a popular figure in Athens.

## Early Career

Early on in his political career Pericles took on a powerful council of leaders called the Areopagus. Together with his allies, Pericles helped to strip these men of their power. It was an important point in the history of democracy. Pericles became even more popular with the people of Athens and moved to the forefront of Athenian politics.

## Military Expeditions

Pericles now became a general, called the strategos, of the Athenian army. He led several successful military campaigns. He helped to take control of the city of Delphi from the Spartans. He also conquered the Thracian peninsula of Gallipoli and established an Athenian colony in the area.

## Politics and Law

Pericles also worked on reforming the Athenian democracy. He introduced new laws and ideas. One law was that people who served on a jury would be paid. This may seem like a simple thing, but it allowed for poor people to serve on a jury. Previously only the rich could afford to take off of work and serve on a jury.

## Building Programs

Pericles is perhaps most famous for his great building projects. He wanted to establish Athens as the leader of the Greek world and wanted to build an acropolis that represented the city's glory. He rebuilt many temples on the acropolis that were destroyed by the Persians. He also had the Long Walls built from Athens to the port city of Piraeus in order to protect the city in the event of a siege.

Pericles' most famous building project was the Parthenon on the acropolis. This magnificent structure was a temple to the goddess Athena. It was built between the years 447 BC and 438 BC. It took over 20 thousand tons of marble to construct.

## Golden Age of Athens

The leadership of Pericles ushered in a time which is called the Golden Age of Athens. Not only were many of the famous buildings constructed during this time, the arts and education flourished under Pericles. This included the teachings of great philosophers like Socrates and the theatre productions of playwrights like Sophocles.

## War with Sparta

As Athens continued to grow in wealth and power under the leadership of Pericles, other Greek city-states began to grow concerned. They thought Athens was growing too powerful. In 431 BC, the Peloponnesian War began between Sparta and Athens.

## Funeral Oration

Not long after the start of the Peloponnesian War, Pericles gave a famous speech called the **Funeral Oration**. It was in honor of the soldiers who had already died. In the speech Pericles described the Athenian ideals and democracy. The speech was written down and is one of the main ways that historians know about how the people of Athens thought.

## The Plague and Death

Pericles strategy against Sparta was to fight them at sea and not on land. Sparta had a stronger army, but Athens had the stronger navy. The people of Athens gathered in the city. They had the Long Walls to the port that enabled them to get supplies. This strategy may have worked, but a plague struck Athens. Thousands of people died. In 429 BC, Pericles also died from the plague. Athens would eventually lose the war and would never reach the same heights again.

## Interesting Facts about Pericles

- The Golden Age of Athens is often referred to as the "Age of Pericles".
- Pericles was elected to the position of strategos for 29 straight years.
- His nickname was "The Olympian".
- We have no idea who Pericles' wife was, but we do know he had two sons.
- Pericles was said to have had a very long and narrow head.
- He once said "Freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it."