Democracy and Greece’s Golden Age

CULTURAL INTERACTION
Democratic principles and classical culture flourished during Greece’s golden age.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW
At its height, Greece set lasting standards in art, politics, literature, and philosophy that are still influential today.

TERMS & NAMES
- direct democracy
- classical art
- tragedy
- comedy
- Peloponnesian War
- philosopher
- Socrates
- Plato
- Aristotle

SETTING THE STAGE
For close to 50 years (from 477 to 431 B.C.), Athens experienced a growth in intellectual and artistic learning. This period is often called the Golden Age of Athens. During this golden age, drama, sculpture, poetry, philosophy, architecture, and science all reached new heights. The artistic and literary legacies of the time continue to inspire and instruct people around the world.

Pericles’ Plan for Athens
A wise and able statesman named Pericles led Athens during much of its golden age. Honest and fair, Pericles held onto popular support for 32 years. He was a skillful politician, an inspiring speaker, and a respected general. He so dominated the life of Athens from 461 to 429 B.C. that this period often is called the Age of Pericles. He had three goals: (1) to strengthen Athenian democracy, (2) to hold and strengthen the empire, and (3) to glorify Athens.

Stronger Democracy
To strengthen democracy, Pericles increased the number of public officials who were paid salaries. Earlier in Athens, most positions in public office were unpaid. Thus, only wealthier Athenian citizens could afford to

Athenian and United States Democracy

**Athenian Democracy**
- Citizens: male; 18 years old; born of citizen parents
- Laws voted on and proposed directly by assembly of all citizens
- Leader chosen by lot
- Executive branch composed of a council of 500 men
- Juries varied in size
- No attorneys; no appeals; one-day trials

**Both**
- Political power exercised by citizens
- Three branches of government
- Legislative branch passes laws
- Executive branch carries out laws
- Judicial branch conducts trials with paid jurors

**U.S. Democracy**
- Citizens: born in United States or completed citizenship process
- Representatives elected to propose and vote on laws
- Elected president
- Executive branch made up of elected and appointed officials
- Juries composed of 12 jurors
- Defendants and plaintiffs have attorneys; long appeals process
hold public office. Now even the poorest citizen could serve if elected or chosen by lot. Consequently, Athens had more citizens engaged in self-government than any other city-state in Greece. This reform made Athens one of the most democratic governments in history.

The introduction of direct democracy, a form of government in which citizens rule directly and not through representatives, was an important legacy of Periclean Athens. Few other city-states practiced this style of government. In Athens, male citizens who served in the assembly established all the important government policies that affected the polis. In a speech honoring the Athenian war dead, Pericles expressed his great pride in Athenian democracy:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

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 in a particular class, but the actual ability which 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.

PERICLES, “The Funeral Oration,” from Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War

**Athenian Empire** After the defeat of the Persians, Athens helped organize the Delian League. In time, Athens took over leadership of the league and dominated all the city-states in it. Pericles used the money from the league’s treasury to make the Athenian navy the strongest in the Mediterranean. A strong navy was important because it helped Athens strengthen the safety of its empire. Prosperity depended on gaining access to the surrounding waterways. Athens needed overseas trade to obtain supplies of grain and other raw materials.

Athenian military might allowed Pericles to treat other members of the Delian League as part of the empire. Some cities in the Peloponnesus, however, resisted Athens and formed their own alliances. As you will read later in this section, Sparta in particular was at odds with Athens.

**Glorifying Athens** Pericles also used money from the Delian League to beautify Athens. Without the league’s approval, he persuaded the Athenian assembly to vote huge sums of the league’s money to buy gold, ivory, and marble. Still more money went to pay the artists, architects, and workers who used these materials.

**Glorious Art and Architecture**

Pericles’ goal was to have the greatest Greek artists and architects create magnificent sculptures and buildings to glorify Athens. At the center of his plan was one of architecture’s noblest works—the Parthenon.

**Architecture and Sculpture** The Parthenon, a masterpiece of architectural design and craftsmanship, was not unique in style. Rather, Greek architects constructed the 23,000-square-foot building in the traditional style that had been used to create Greek temples for 200 years. This temple,
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Built to honor Athena, the goddess of wisdom and the protector of Athens, contained examples of Greek art that set standards for future generations of artists around the world. Pericles entrusted much of the work on the Parthenon to the sculptor Phidias (FIDH•ee•uhs). Within the temple, Phidias crafted a giant statue of Athena that not only contained such precious materials as gold and ivory, but also stood over 30 feet tall.

Phidias and other sculptors during this golden age aimed to create figures that were graceful, strong, and perfectly formed. Their faces showed neither joy nor anger, only serenity. Greek sculptors also tried to capture the grace of the idealized human body in motion. They wanted to portray ideal beauty, not realism. Their values of harmony, order, balance, and proportion became the standard of what is called classical art.

Drama and History

The Greeks invented drama as an art form and built the first theaters in the West. Theatrical productions in Athens were both an expression of civic pride and a tribute to the gods. As part of their civic duty, wealthy citizens bore the cost of producing the plays. Actors used colorful costumes, masks, and sets to dramatize stories. The plays were about leadership, justice, and the duties owed to the gods. They often included a chorus that danced, sang, and recited poetry.

Tragedy and Comedy

The Greeks wrote two kinds of drama—tragedy and comedy. A tragedy was a serious drama about common themes such as love, hate, war, or betrayal. These dramas featured a main character, or tragic hero. The hero usually was an important person and often gifted with extraordinary abilities. A tragic flaw usually caused the hero's downfall. Often this flaw was hubris, or excessive pride.

In ancient times, Greece had three notable dramatists who wrote tragedies. Aeschylus (EHS•kuh•luhs) wrote more than 80 plays. His most famous work is the trilogy—a three-play series—Oresteia (oh•res•TEE•uh). It is based on the family of Agamemnon, the Mycenaean king who commanded the Greeks at Troy. The plays examine the idea of justice. Sophocles (SAHF•uh•kleez) wrote more than 100 plays, including the tragedies Oedipus the King and Antigone. Euripides (yoo•RIP•uh•DEEZ), author of the play Medea, often featured strong women in his works.

In contrast to Greek tragedies, a comedy contained scenes filled with slapstick situations and crude humor. Playwrights often made fun of politics and respected people and ideas of the time. Aristophanes (AR•ih•STA•FIH•uh•nee•ez) wrote the first great comedies for the stage, including The Birds and Lysistrata. Lysistrata portrayed the women of Athens forcing their husbands to end the Peloponnesian War. The fact that Athenians could listen to criticism of themselves showed the freedom and openness of public discussion that existed in democratic Athens.

History

As you learned earlier in this chapter, there are no written records from the Dorian period. The epic poems of Homer recount stories, but are not accurate recordings of what took place. Herodotus, a Greek who lived in Athens for a time, pioneered the accurate reporting of events. His book on the Persian Wars is considered the first work of history. However, the greatest historian of the classical age was the Athenian Thucydides (thoo•SID•ih•dee•ez). He believed that certain types of events and political situations recur over time. Studying those events and situations, he felt, would aid in understanding the present. The approaches Thucydides used in his work still guide historians today.
Athenians and Spartans Go to War

As Athens grew in wealth, prestige, and power, other city-states began to view it with hostility. Ill will was especially strong between Sparta and Athens. Many people thought that war between the two was inevitable. Instead of trying to avoid conflict, leaders in Athens and Sparta pressed for a war to begin, as both groups of leaders believed their own city had the advantage. Eventually, Sparta declared war on Athens in 431 B.C.

Peloponnesian War

When the Peloponnesian War between the two city-states began, Athens had the stronger navy. Sparta had the stronger army, and its location inland meant that it could not easily be attacked by sea. Pericles’ strategy was to avoid land battles with the Spartan army and wait for an opportunity to strike Sparta and its allies from the sea. 

Eventually, the Spartans marched into Athenian territory. They swept over the countryside, burning the Athenian food supply. Pericles responded by bringing residents from the surrounding region inside the city walls. The city was safe from hunger as long as ships could sail into port with supplies from Athenian colonies and foreign states.

In the second year of the war, however, disaster struck Athens. A frightful plague swept through the city, killing perhaps one-third of the population, including Pericles. Although weakened, Athens continued to fight for several years. Then, in 421 B.C., the two sides, worn down by the war, signed a truce.

Sparta Gains Victory

The peace did not last long. In 415 B.C., the Athenians sent a huge fleet carrying more than 20,000 soldiers to the island of Sicily. Their plan was to destroy the city-state of Syracuse, one of Sparta’s wealthiest allies. The expedition ended with a crushing defeat in 413 B.C. In his study of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides recalled: “[The Athenians] were destroyed with a total..."
destruction—their fleet, their army—there was nothing that was not destroyed, and few out of many returned home.” Somehow, a terribly weakened Athens fended off Spartan attacks for another nine years. Finally, in 404 B.C., the Athenians and their allies surrendered. Athens had lost its empire, power, and wealth.

**Philosophers Search for Truth**

After the war, many Athenians lost confidence in democratic government and began to question their values. In this time of uncertainty, several great thinkers appeared. They were determined to seek the truth, no matter where the search led them. The Greeks called such thinkers philosophers, meaning “lovers of wisdom.” These Greek thinkers based their philosophy on the following two assumptions:

- The universe (land, sky, and sea) is put together in an orderly way, and subject to absolute and unchanging laws.
- People can understand these laws through logic and reason.

One group of philosophers, the Sophists, questioned people’s unexamined beliefs and ideas about justice and other traditional values. One of the most famous Sophists was Protagoras, who questioned the existence of the traditional Greek gods. He also argued that there was no universal standard of truth, saying “Man [the individual] is the measure of all things.” These were radical and dangerous ideas to many Athenians.

**Socrates** One critic of the Sophists was Socrates (SAHK•ruh•TEEZ). Unlike the Sophists, he believed that absolute standards did exist for truth and justice. However, he encouraged Greeks to go farther and question themselves and their moral character. Historians believe that it was Socrates who once said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Those who understood Socrates admired him deeply. The majority of citizens, however, could not understand this strange old man and his ideas.

In 399 B.C., when Socrates was about 70 years old, he was brought to trial for “corrupting the youth of Athens” and “neglecting the city’s gods.” In his own defense, Socrates said that his teachings were good for Athens because they forced people to think about their values and actions. The jury disagreed and condemned him to death. He died by drinking hemlock, a slow-acting poison.

**Plato** A student of Socrates, Plato (PLAY•toh), was in his late 20s when his teacher died. Later, Plato wrote down the conversations of Socrates “as a means of philosophical investigation.” Sometime in the 370s B.C., Plato wrote his most famous work, The Republic. In it, he set forth his vision of a perfectly governed society. It was not a democracy. In his ideal society, all citizens would fall naturally into three groups: farmers and artisans, warriors, and the ruling class. The person with the greatest insight and intellect from the ruling class would be chosen philosopher-king. Plato’s writings dominated philosophic thought in Europe for nearly 1,500 years.
years. His only rivals in importance were his teacher, Socrates, and his own pupil, Aristotle (AR•ih•STAHT•uhl).

**Aristotle** The philosopher Aristotle questioned the nature of the world and of human belief, thought, and knowledge. Aristotle came close to summarizing all the knowledge up to his time. He invented a method for arguing according to rules of logic. He later applied his method to problems in the fields of psychology, physics, and biology. His work provides the basis of the scientific method used today.

One of Aristotle’s most famous pupils was Alexander, son of King Philip II of Macedonia. Around 343 B.C., Aristotle accepted the king’s invitation to tutor the 13-year-old prince. Alexander’s status as a student abruptly ended three years later, when his father called him back to Macedonia. You will learn more about Alexander in Section 4.