Biographies of Historical Figures

Pericles
Ancient Athenian Leader

Pericles was born about 490 B.C.E. in Athens. His father was actively involved in Athenian politics and served as a military commander during the Persian Wars. His mother was the niece of a well-known Athenian political reformer. Being from a wealthy family, Pericles was educated in many subjects, including music, logic, and philosophy. When he entered public life, he quickly rose to leadership because of his knowledge and skill.

As a leader, Pericles witnessed a golden age of peace and prosperity for Athens. To help maintain this peace, he organized neighboring Greek city-states to prepare for any future threat from the nearby Persian Empire. He also encouraged the buildup of the Athenian military. Pericles worked to beautify the city by promoting the creation of many public and religious buildings. The most famous of these buildings is the Parthenon, the temple to the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena. Industry and commerce also flourished under Pericles's leadership.

Pericles believed that Athens should lead the Greeks not just in culture and trade but also in government. Athens was the first Greek city-state to introduce the idea of democracy, or rule by the people, in which all citizens (native Athenian men over age 18) shared in the ruling of the city-state. Democracy was an unusual choice for governing. Most of the governments in other Greek city-states placed power in the hands of one person or a select few. Pericles, however, was a strong supporter of Athenian democracy. In a speech honoring soldiers who died in battle, Pericles praised this form of government.

> *[Our government] does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences [based on social class] . . . The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life . . . But all this ease [freedom] . . . does not make us lawless as citizens. [We are taught] to obey the magistrates and the laws . . . whether they are actually on the statute [law] book, or belong to [an unwritten moral code].*

Pericles also made reforms to advance democracy. He believed that all citizens, rich or poor, had an equal right to participate in government. Under his leadership, Athens paid the salaries of men who held public office. This reform allowed poor men, who otherwise would not be able to afford to leave their jobs and farms, to serve in public office.