

The name of Pericles (494-429 B.C.) has become synonymous with Athens at the height of her glory in the fifth century B.C. The long-enduring architectural wonders of the Acropolis--the Temple of Athena Parthenos, the Erechtheum, the Propylaea--still attest to the breadth of his vision of Athens as the mistress of all Greece. Yet, Pericles' undeniable love of his city did not always result in such positive achievements, and indeed eventually led to the disasters of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. Thus history's judgement of Pericles is equivocal: benefactor and destroyer, man of wisdom and man of folly.

Born into the politically influential Alcmaeonid family, Pericles seemed destined to play a leading role in Athenian affairs. His early years were spent in the turbulent shadow of the Persian Wars, a time when Greece came to realize that she could not continue to live in peaceful isolation from the rest of the ancient world. In this period of political upheaval, Pericles' family was drawn more and more into the internal crises of Athens, and, in 485 B.C., Pericles' father was condemned to ostracism. Although his father was recalled to Athens in 480 B.C., the young Pericles must have been taken aback by this experience.

When the Persians were finally driven out of Greece, Athens was in ruins. The slow process of reconstruction began, but Athens still feared the Persian threat, and much of her energy now went towards the creation of the Delian League, a defensive union of maritime city-states under Athenian leadership. It was this League which eventually, under the guidance of Pericles, would turn into a formidable Athenian Empire.

Meanwhile, after the Persian Wars, Pericles maintained a low profile in Athens, perhaps hesitant to enter politics because of his father's difficulties. He devoted his time mainly to the study of philosophy and drama under some of the finest minds of Greece. Finally, in 469 B.C., Pericles delivered a speech in the Athenian Assembly, the focal point of public affairs, and made it clear that he stood on the side of the radical democrats who were struggling to break the power of the dominant conservative faction. Five years later, Pericles was elected one of Athens' generals, the position which was to be his political base for many years to come. By 461 B.C., the conservative leader was in exile, and Pericles stood at the head of the democratic faction.

It was not long before Pericles' imperialistic tendencies came to the fore. His policy towards the Delian League was indicative: the so-called "allies" of Athens were quickly reduced to subject states, and any ally seeking release from the League met with violence at the hands of Athens. What had begun as a voluntary association was soon a tightly controlled Athenian Empire, a fact which led the historian Thucydides to remark that Athens, although she was a democracy at home, held her Empire like a tyrant.

The reason for Pericles' heavy hand with the League is not far to seek: in 460 B.C., Athens and Sparta began the First Peloponnesian War for the control of Greece. The policy adopted by Pericles was to isolate Sparta by alliances, but he met with little real success. A truce was signed in 451 B.C., leaving Sparta supreme in southern Greece and Athens in control of the Aegean and central Greece.

Pericles' attention now turned inwards, towards the domestic problems of Athens. With the truce had come massive unemployment, and so Pericles undertook a vast programme of public works: not only would Athenian men find work, but Athens would also be physically restored to look like the mistress of Greece that Pericles desired her to be. The Acropolis became the focal point of this project, and the Parthenon (the Temple of Athena Parthenos) became Athens' crowning jewel. Unfortunately, the entire undertaking was financed by the required tribute sent to Athens by her "allies"—a fact which did not endear Pericles to the rest of the Greek world.

By 431 B.C. it was evident to Pericles that the power struggle between Athens and Sparta had to be resolved. He was convinced that Sparta and her Peloponnesian allies stood in the way of the ambitions of Athens. Advising the Athenian Assembly against any concessions to the enemy, Pericles began to prepare Athens for all-out war, and the Second Peloponnesian War was underway.

Since Pericles' military strategy involved Athenian naval raids on the coasts of the Peloponnese and allowing Sparta to wear herself out with unopposed land raids in Attica, the people of the Attic countryside around Athens flowed into the city for refuge. Unsanitary conditions arose, and a violent plague broke out which decimated the Athenian population (430 B.C.). Athens was rapidly weakened, and, for the first time, Athenians began to question the wisdom of Pericles' policies. It was too late, however, since Pericles himself soon fell ill and died in 429 B.C. The war would drag on until 404 B.C., and result in the total defeat of Athens.

In hindsight, Pericles' desire to make his city-state the ruler of Greece ended in the destruction of all that Athens had achieved. Most historians agree that Pericles in fact provoked the conflict with Sparta, either to increase his own political power, or to get what he considered an inevitable war over with as soon as possible. His inflexibility, his unwillingness to compromise, may have had noble motivations, but, in the real world of politics and war, it was a fatal error. And so, ironically, the one man who raised Athens to her peak of glory was the same man who set her on the road to decline. He was indeed a lover of Athens, but, in the words of Shakespeare, he loved her not wisely, but too well.