

7.4 Pericles on Athenian Democracy (c. 430 BC)

Source: Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (translated by Richard Crawley, 1951), Modern Library.

Background: Pericles was born c. 495 B.C. in Athens, Greece. In 461, he became the ruler of Athens, a position he held until his death in 429. Under his leadership, Athens built the Acropolis and Parthenon.

Much of our knowledge about the Age of Pericles in Athens and Athenian democracy comes from a funeral oration delivered by Pericles after the first year of the Peloponnesian War (431 – 404 BC). The speech was included in an account of the war written by the Greek historian Thucydides. However Thucydides did not witness the speech and he did not write his book until at least 26 years after it was delivered. No other written record of the speech exists. While the speech has become a standard statement on democracy, Thucydides considered Pericles a demagogue and a threat to Athenian sovereignty. The book was written in an archaic [old] form of Greek and there is also disagreement amongst historians about how it should be translated.

Questions

1. Why does Pericles describe Athens as a “democracy”?
2. According to Pericles, how does the form of Athenian government affect its citizens?
3. Based on this speech and what you know about ancient Athens, is it legitimate to describe Pericles as the “Father of Democracy”? Explain

A. Our constitution 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; if to social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition.

B. The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes, or even to indulge in those injurious looks which cannot fail to be offensive, although they inflict no positive penalty. But all this ease in our private relations does not make us lawless as citizens.

C. Our public men have, besides politics, their private affairs to attend to, and our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters; for, unlike any other nation, regarding him who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless, we Athenians are able to judge at all events if we cannot originate, and instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all.



Bust of Pericles