

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Golden Age of Athens

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The Golden Age of Athens, also known as the Age of Pericles, began in 478 BCE when the Athenians defeated the invading Persians. A golden age is marked by political, economic, and cultural growth. In this text, Collomia Charles discusses the Athenian government during the Golden Age of Athens. As you read, take notes on how the Athenians structured their democratic society.

- [1] The year was 430 BCE, and Pericles stood ready to deliver the funeral oration honoring those who had died in the first year of the Peloponnesian War. It was an Athenian practice to honor war dead every year, and, as custom dictated, the Athenians chose a leading citizen to deliver the speech. According to the historian Thucydides, who may have been present at the event, Pericles had as much to say about the greatness of Athens as he did about the heroism of its soldiers:



"Parthenon from west" by Mountain is in the public domain.

We do not use a constitution that copies the laws of our neighbors, but we are a pattern for certain people rather than imitating others... We alone do not think that a man who avoids public affairs is minding his own business; instead, we call him useless... In short, I say that this entire city is the school of Hellas.¹

Rise of Hoi Polloi

To understand how Athens became the "school of Hellas" we must look back 50 years, to 480 BCE. It was in that year that the Greeks fought the invading Persians at Salamis and won a great naval victory. The Athenians had made the decision earlier to desert Athens and put their trust in the "wooden walls" of their ships. Their navy consisted of triremes, vessels that had three banks of oars and required a highly skilled crew. Unlike the cavalry or the infantry, where you had to be wealthy enough to pay for your own equipment, just about anyone could join the crew of a trireme. So, it can be said that for the first time in Greek history, hoi polloi ("the majority [of the people]") were important.

1. a term used to refer to Greece as a whole

After the Athenian victory, the Spartans retreated into self-imposed isolation in their city-state to the south. The Athenians, meanwhile, formed a loose coalition called the Delian League. The Athenians also collected funds from the city-states that joined the league. The organization's stated purpose was to finance a naval force capable of repelling Persian advances in the future. But plans changed, and the Athenians used the money to pay for the rebuilding of their Acropolis.² Among the structures involved in this project were the Parthenon, the Propylaea, and a huge gold-and-ivory statue of the goddess Athena Nike. Today, many of these structures still stand on the Acropolis — eternal symbols of the “glory that was Greece.”

'Radical Democracy'

Around 462 BCE, a radical member of the democratic party, an Athenian named Ephialtes, succeeded in splitting the council of former leaders and dividing their authority among the boule (Council), the ecclesia (Assembly of the People), and the courts. This was the beginning of what modern scholars call a “radical democracy,” because most offices and positions were filled by drawing lots, rather than by representative election. In theory, this meant that all Athenian citizens could have a direct voice in the day-to-day running of the government.

Who Was a Citizen?

- [5] Of the entire population in Athens, only men and women with Athenian parents were considered true Athenians. Yet, thousands of resident foreigners, called metics, also lived in the city. They worked, paid taxes, and participated in the cultural life of the city. They could not, however, take part in the government.

Most Athenians owned at least one or two slaves to work in the house and take care of children. Large potteries and other industries employed larger forces of slave labor. In addition, much of Athens' wealth came from the silver mines at Laurion, where the entire workforce consisted of slaves. One Athenian orator claimed that there were 150,000 slaves in Attica.

Women led extremely restricted lives and were excluded from government entirely. Unless a free woman was participating in a religious festival, she was rarely seen outside of her own house.

So, who were the citizens of Athens? Any free man whose parents were both Athenians, who was above the age of 18, and who had completed two years of military service.

The Boule

This council had been established by Cleisthenes in 507 BCE. It consisted of 500 men chosen by lot — a total of 50 from each of the 10 demes (districts). Anyone who wished to serve in the boule had to be 31 or older. Originally, a member had to own a certain amount of property, but, by the time Pericles took office in Athens, that requirement had been abolished³ — possibly by Pericles himself. Pericles may also have established a daily wage for those serving on the boule.

2. a protected high ground in Athens
3. to formally put an end to something

- [10] The term of office was a year, and an Athenian citizen could only be a member twice in his lifetime. The boule met every day, so it would have been a time-consuming responsibility. Members drafted proposals, decrees, and laws, which were then sent to the ecclesia for approval. Boule members also investigated and supervised the magistrates⁴ and other officers.

The Ecclesia

The boule brought proposals before the citizen assembly. The members met at the Pnyx, a hill in central Athens that could accommodate around 6,000 people, as certain decisions required a vote by at least that number. Membership was open to every citizen who had served in the military for at least two years. In the age of Pericles, there were probably between 40,000 and 60,000 citizens who were, by default, members of the ecclesia. Surviving accounts show that it was sometimes difficult to reach even the minimum attendance number. The ecclesia was directly responsible for many important decisions. Among these were the election of Athenians to the board of 10 generals, ratification⁵ of laws, and even the declaration of war.

Power to the People

Democratic politicians, including Ephialtes and Pericles, introduced reforms that were intended to encourage broad, popular participation in the daily affairs of the government. For example, paying members of the boule ensured that citizens who could not afford to lose a day's wages could now serve. Pericles did propose the law that restricted Athenian citizenship to men whose mother and father were both Athenian citizens. The intent most likely was to weaken the network of connections between aristocratic members of city-states throughout Greece. Pericles' goal was to make Athenian citizenship more important than old family ties.

Contemporary critics of Pericles argued that he gave the people too much power. These critics thought that most people did not have the education, the free time, or the insight to govern responsibly. Both the historian Thucydides and the comic poet Aristophanes complained that the ecclesia was fickle and foolish. According to them, when a thoughtful and brilliant strategist such as Pericles steered the will of the people, the city-state ran smoothly. After Pericles died, they saw that the ecclesia was at the mercy of any persuasive speaker.

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4. officials who administered the law
5. the process of making something official

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the central idea of the text?
 - A. The power that Pericles gave to his people allowed them too much political say and negatively impacted Athens as a whole.
 - B. The Golden Age of Athens refers to the golden sculptures that Athenians built following their victory against invaders.
 - C. During the Golden Age of Athens, democratic reforms were introduced in order to encourage citizens to participate in their government.
 - D. The lottery that selected representatives in Athens often selected people who were uneducated and didn't have governmental experience.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Among the structures involved in this project were the Parthenon, the Propylaea, and a huge gold-and-ivory statue of the goddess Athena Nike." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "This was the beginning of what modern scholars call a 'radical democracy,' because most offices and positions were filled by drawing lots, rather than by representative election." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "For example, paying members of the boule ensured that citizens who could not afford to lose a day's wages could now serve." (Paragraph 12)
 - D. "These critics thought that most people did not have the education, the free time, or the insight to govern responsibly." (Paragraph 13)

3. How does the quote from Pericles at the beginning of the text contribute to the author's depiction of Athens?
 - A. It portrays Athens as being unique, innovative, and influential.
 - B. It shows the high standard that citizens were held to in Athens.
 - C. It suggests that Athenians were forced to participate in their government.
 - D. It proves that Athens was the most powerful city throughout all of Greece.

4. How does the section "Who Was a Citizen?" contribute to the development of ideas in the text? (Paragraphs 5-8)
 - A. It stresses how difficult it was to become a citizen in Athens and earn the right to vote.
 - B. It shows how Athenian men and women were encouraged to participate in the government.
 - C. It suggests that being an Athenian was the same thing as being a full-fledged citizen.
 - D. It emphasizes how many people weren't considered citizens or allowed to participate in the government.

5. What connection does the author draw between Pericles and democracy in Athens?
