Milestone Documents in World History

Funeral Oration of Pericles: Document Analysis

OVERVIEW

The Funeral Oration delivered by Pericles of Athens is considered one of the most famous speeches of antiquity. The speech concluded a ritualized ceremony to honor the city’s soldiers who had fallen in the first year of the Peloponnesian War. Despite the fact that Athens had secured a strong defensive position that year (431 BCE), very little had been accomplished in reducing Sparta's ability to wage war. Moreover, hostilities between Athens and Sparta had not been the result of a unanimous policy. Given that the two cities had been allies in the Persian Wars (490-479 BCE), many people objected to a course that caused a disruption of those relations. Pro-Spartan elements existed, albeit in the minority, but their presence was enough to cause tensions.

Furthermore, not all Athenians agreed with the development of democracy, which allowed nonaristocratic elements to control policy. A work known as the Constitution of Athens, assigned to Xenophon (ca. 431-352 BCE), suggested a contempt for commoners in charge, indicating the fiction of the unity presented by Pericles. In addition, the defensive strategy withdrew the citizenship behind the city’s walls with the intention of relying upon maritime trade for foodstuffs to outlast Sparta’s armies in the field. Unfortunately for many displaced aristocratic farmers, this policy allowed the destruction of their family holdings and livelihood.

Thus Pericles’ speech did not merely praise the noble dead but also served to contrast the political and social systems of Athens and Sparta. Pericles seized the opportunity to promote the benefits of democracy and to extol its virtues in the face of the aristocratic forces that idolized the Spartan system. The oration idealized Athens and its status in order to justify the sacrifice not only of the soldiers who gave their lives but also of the citizens who faced continued hardships.

CONTEXT

The Great Peloponnesian War erupted in 431 BCE as a result of the growing rivalry between the Athenian Empire and the Peloponnesian League. Originally, Athens and Sparta had been allies in the Persian Wars that culminated in the Battle of Platea in 479 BCE. The Greek offensive turned into an effort to liberate the Greek cities of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) from Persian rule. Sparta’s abusive leadership under Pausanius, regent to the king, created friction with the freed city-states and eventually caused his recall. The Athenian high command received an invitation to assume leadership. At the island of Delos, the various city-states and Athens forged an alliance that granted the latter prominence because of its substantial fleet. Smaller cities provided financial contributions in lieu of actual forces. Later, when Naxos, one of the island members, attempted to leave the league, Athens destroyed the city and enforced the alliance. Eventually the members of the Delian League found themselves tied to Athens by threat of force.

Tensions with Sparta began because of the construction of a series of defensive walls around Athens and its port, Piraeus; the enclosure also included the land between the two. In 465 BCE Sparta faced a helot (slave) rebellion, and Athenian forces arrived to assist. Fear of democratic influence, however, caused the Spartans to request that the Athenians return home. The Athenian general Cimon had been a strong supporter of good relations between Athens and Sparta, and this rebuff undermined his credibility. Ephialtes, an Athenian aristocrat, used the reverse to have Cimon exiled, paving the way for a series of reforms that limited the older, aristocratic Council of the Areopagus and transferred many of its powers to the assembly of the people. The new political emphasis in Athens steered away from relations with Sparta and from efforts to strengthen imperial designs. The road to war became a convoluted course in 460 BCE, when Athens involved itself in a dispute between Megara and Corinth, both Spartan allies. The conflict of interests in the region initiated what is known as the First Peloponnesian War. By 445 BCE, however, the opponents had signed the Thirty Years’ Peace, and
Sparta forced **Athens** to cede territories gained in the fifteen-year war.

Subsequent incidents, such as a revolt in Miletus that threatened to bring Persian forces back into the Aegean, strained the treaty. The Peloponnesian League debated intervention against **Athens** to prevent a new Persian war. Archidamas II, king of Sparta, refused, however, and even in later events continued to seek the path of arbitration. Nevertheless, when **Athens** and Corinth conflicted over the latter's right to interfere in the affairs of its rebellious colony Corcyra (now Corfu), voices in the Peloponnesus began to clamor for war. Corinthian pressure on Sparta increased when its colony Potidaea, under Athenian control as part of the Delian League, received an ultimatum to destroy its walls and expel Corinthian magistrates. Sparta acquiesced in summoning the league after **Athens** issued the Megarian Decree, which created an embargo on goods from Megara. Despite Archidamas's resistance to conflict, Athenian emissaries brazenly declared that any aggression against them would be ineffective, provoking the Peloponnesians to vote for war.

In a defensive move to protect the approaches to their territory, the forces of Thebes, an ally of Sparta, advanced against the city of Plataea, an ally of **Athens**. The Peloponnesian forces expected **Athens** to attack and therefore prepared to blunt the offensive. Archidamas's strategy assumed that a decisive defeat of Athenian armies would force their surrender. If the Athenians hid behind their large wall system, the Spartans would ravage the countryside and destroy the farms and the ripening fields. If **Athens** persisted in a defensive war, continual loss of their crops and property would demoralize the population and, likewise, force a capitulation. The Spartan leadership, however, did not anticipate Pericles' determination to utilize a large treasury and mercantile connections to furnish the city with foodstuffs. In short, he planned to allow the Spartans to ravage the countryside, even if it took three or four years; **Athens** could afford the loss. Simultaneously he planned to use the large naval advantage of more than three hundred ships to ravage the Peloponnesian peninsula and demoralize the enemy. Pericles intended to make the point that **Athens** could not be humbled, and thus the Spartans would weary in their yearly campaign of fruitless endeavors and seek arbitration to end hostilities.

During the first year of the conflict, both sides carried out their strategies. After the Theban maneuver, Archidamas mobilized his forces and slowly advanced into Attica, the territory of **Athens**. He hoped that rumors of his large army would force talks so that large-scale fighting would prove unnecessary and relations could be healed. However, his slow siege of border forts caused his troops to grumble at the delay, so he proceeded with the destruction of the countryside around **Athens**. According to the fifth-century historian Thucydides, the population of Attica, forced to retreat into **Athens** to protect its cattle and moveable wealth, expressed discontent and frustration. Many found themselves obliged to live as squatters in the streets or within space between the walls that connected the city with its port.

As Sparta ravaged the countryside, the Athenian fleet also engaged in raiding operations along the Peloponnesian coast, advancing into Corinthian territory on the western coasts. Other forces seized islands and forts in Euboea, the island to the east, to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. After the Spartans ran out of supplies and retreated, Athenian troops retaliated against Megara in the fall of 431 BCE, devastating various villages. That winter, as troops returned from the campaign season, Pericles delivered his speech. Although his political connections and the naval successes helped him maintain a position of prominence and popularity among the majority of the citizens, voices of discontent criticized his strategy and policies, and even the system of government that allowed him to attain the authority which had brought **Athens** to its present situation.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Pericles of **Athens**, born in about 495 BCE, served as a prominent strategos, or general, within the assembly of the city. He served with nine other generals, but with his popularity and reputation he quickly gained a significant influence in the affairs of the government. In 462 BCE he emerged into public prominence as an associate of Ephialtes, who had pioneered democratic reforms that gave more authority to the people. After his mentor's assassination, Pericles became the mouthpiece for more democratic reforms and efforts to strengthen the city, both militarily and culturally. This period is referred to as the Age of Periclean **Athens** because of the artists, writers, and philosophers who flourished under his patronage, creating a cultural heritage for Western civilization. Pericles' efforts to broaden **Athens**'s authority and power in the Aegean allowed the city to dominate the Delian League and emerge as a major rival to Sparta.
With the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, Pericles devised the defensive strategy that pulled the population of the region within the walls of the city. While Athenian naval forces raided the Peloponnesus, Spartan forces continued to ransack the countryside. An outbreak of a plague within the city stirred up the anger of the people, who punished Pericles with a large fine. He nevertheless won reelection as general in 429 BCE, only to succumb to disease later that year.

Pericles' Funeral Oration, given during the first year of hostilities, is related within Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, which details a year-by-year history of the conflict between Athens and Sparta through 411 BCE. Very little information about the historian's life has survived from antiquity despite some biographical efforts, which tend to contradict each other or to proffer unsubstantiated reports. What can be gleaned with a certain amount of certainty are glimpses into Thucydides' life based on references to himself within the history. His father, Olorus, lived as a citizen of Athens, and Thucydides survived the devastating plague that struck the city in 429 BCE. In 424 BCE he served as a general in the defense of Amphipolis, a city on the northern coast of Greece, but his failure resulted in his exile for twenty years. Other trustworthy reports infer his age at around forty at the outbreak of the war in 432 BCE, placing his birth around 472 BCE. The date of his death is uncertain, but given statements about the eruption of Etna in 425 BCE and his lack of knowledge of a subsequent volcanic event in 396 BCE, historians assume that he died before that date. A belief that he suffered assassination persisted in antiquity, explaining why his work abruptly breaks off and ends, but the details are not consistent; thus confirmation eludes modern historians.

Famous for his work The History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides stands along with the fifth-century BCE historian Herodotus as one of the fathers of history. Unlike his predecessor, whose work rambled and included a variety of traditions and legends, Thucydides is distinguished as being more technical. With an insistence on recording only those events that came from eyewitnesses, Thucydides established himself as a reliable source in antiquity. Despite some biases, a tendency to omit details unrelated to politics and military, and a few errors, the text survived as a trustworthy account of the events of Greece in the fifth century BCE.

Among the criticisms about Thucydides is his treatment of speeches, which is germane to the contents of the Funeral Oration. Although he claimed to have begun compiling information from the beginning of the conflict, he acknowledged that he did not hear all of the speeches firsthand but received some from other sources. Indeed, he admitted that
it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one’s memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course, adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said. (i.xxii.1)

Thus the style does belong to the author, but the essence of the oration seems to have been captured. Thucydides was probably an eyewitness of Pericles’ delivery of the Funeral Oration, and given the speech’s prominence within Athens, the community at large would not likely have accepted a fabrication of its contents.

EXPLANATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DOCUMENT

The occasion for Pericles’ speech centered on a ceremony that honored the dead over a three-day period. On the first day, the bodies were laid out on platforms where families could place personal objects to be buried with the dead. On the third day, the remains were placed in cypress coffins, one for each tribe, and carried to the cemetery in nearby Ceramicus. One coffin was left empty to signify those missing in action. Anyone could follow the processional, and after the burial a speech was given by a person of prominence selected by the people. Afterward the families collectively mourned before leaving for home. Later the names of the honored dead were engraved in stone in lists organized by tribe.

PARAGRAPH 1

Recognizing that not everyone in his audience supported him, Pericles opens his speech with rhetorical humility, commenting that the actions of the fallen speak for themselves, even if the speaker inadequately honors them. He deflects potential criticism by saying that he cannot do justice to the soldiers because their deeds cannot be fully explained. Such an attempt would actually cheapen them, and some might perceive his efforts as exaggeration for the sake of a good speech. Nevertheless, since the speech is part of the ritual, he is compelled by law to speak.

PARAGRAPH 2

To justify the sacrifice of the fallen, Pericles had to focus on the cause for which they fought: Athens, which had been handed down to them by their ancestors. He does not attempt, however, simply to extol the city’s past greatness but also to emphasize to his audience the present magnificence of their city. He sought to win the crowd to him by indicating that Athens stood in glory because of those who stood before him. He creates a unifying image by forging a link between the heroes of antiquity and those contemporary “heroes.” He indicates that the greatness in which they participated resulted from the democracy that reigned within the political system. Behind Pericles’ words one can see an effort to defend his policies by creating the idea that heroic greatness is not something past but that it exists as an ongoing process maintained by the continued involvement of the people. Involvement could be brought about only by a system that did not allow just the aristocracy to rule, as in the past, but that opened opportunities for all to speak out and let their voices be heard in the decision-making process. Pericles wanted his audience to consider themselves great and at the same time to associate their success with democracy.

PARAGRAPH 3

In the face of those who might want to criticize the democratic government, Pericles emphasizes the uniqueness of a political system that promoted legal and social equality, in turn creating freedom. He stresses, however, that those freedoms did not encourage lawlessness, as some had suggested, but instead had created a sense of responsibility to respect others and to safeguard one’s own reputation. Behind his qualifications one senses an effort to refute the charges of aristocrats who resisted the idea that an uneducated and common worker could maintain any self-control without strict laws. Athenian law had originated with Draco (seventh century BCE), an aristocrat whose strict laws kept the lower classes in line. Even when Solon the Idealist (ca. 630 BCE-ca. 560 BCE) reformed the legal code, an attitude persisted that only those of class could properly control the unruly masses. Pericles attempted to undermine that same attitude with his words.
PARAGRAPH 4

Pericles briefly wraps up his point by defining those freedoms, for example, not as a mindless pursuit of pleasure but as a means that brought forth more opportunities for all. In times past only the rich enjoyed luxury goods, but the maritime trade had created circumstances to allow the influx of goods that enabled more people to enjoy the bounty of wealth.

PARAGRAPH 5

In the next paragraph Pericles moves from simply defending democracy to contrasting the Athenian system with the “antagonist.” This reference to Sparta, left unsaid, perhaps in an effort to address pro-Spartan elements in the city, becomes more explicit. Pericles’ audience would have been familiar with the Spartan custom of keeping outsiders at bay to prevent contamination of their social system. Pericles emphasizes their open society that allowed any to come and prosper (even if noncitizens could not earn political rights). Further, the Athenians would have recognized an implicit reference to Sparta’s rigid hierarchy, which produced specific roles for each citizen within the state. Those who did not enjoy citizenship, such as the helots, existed as exploited slaves. This system had created a society of soldiers, renowned for their martial prowess, but in spite of their famed military, Pericles declares, Spartans needed allies to accomplish the invasion of Athenian territory. In contrast, Athens stood alone, dependent on its own resources, which as of yet had not been fully mobilized. Thus, he stresses, they had met with success in battle, and those setbacks that they faced were of little consequence.

PARAGRAPH 6

Against charges that Athenians were weak and soft (once again in contrast to Spartan strength), their citizenship had demonstrated instead that their wealth and educational system had created a unique strength and hardness. The industrious nature of the Athenians had resulted from their democratic system, which allowed all to labor and to benefit. (Spartans had slaves.) Furthermore, Athenians needed to be active and strong as they all made decisions in the assembly, once again in contrast to Spartans, who merely acquiesced to the decisions of their elders in council. Pericles idealizes Athenian courage and generosity toward helping other city-states find democracy and success. Ironically, on occasion Athens had imposed democratic governments on other states, and their “assistance” to the Delian League resulted in imperialism.

PARAGRAPH 7

Given all of these strengths, Pericles declares that Athens shined like a beacon and a model to others. Once again, in contrast with others, they had no need for a Homer (ninth-eighth century BCE) to proclaim their great deeds in epic poetry. Instead, Athens demonstrated its greatness through its acts and the fact that it had grown into a mighty power—a power that compelled the honored dead to sacrifice their lives and called for the living to continue in personal sacrifice.

PARAGRAPH 8

Pericles finally brings the focus of his speech to the celebrated dead. He indicates that their true monument was not the one erected in stone but the continued greatness of Athens, which had spawned great men whose merit rested on the fact that they were ready to die for the city. They had not been driven by fear or personal ambition, but they risked all to wreak vengeance on those who threatened their freedoms, a cause for which they felt honored to die. Once again the unspoken slight at Sparta, which fought simply to fight, was clear.

PARAGRAPH 9

Thus in Pericles’ mind, if these men held a willingness to sacrifice, then the survivors should resolve also to defend Athens. They could not afford a lack of unity within the community. By contrasting words and actions, he hoped to shame his detractors by forcing them to participate, not just for patriotic reasons but also for Athens’s continued greatness. To pursue other agendas would diminish those who had perished in the cause. They had built the city with their courage, duty, and honor, offering themselves as a sacrifice to the greater good. They
would not be contained by a simple tomb but would create a reputation that would fill the earth.

PARAGRAPH 10

Finally, Pericles attempts to comfort the bereaved by reminding them that of the multiple dangers in life that can lead to death, dying for one's country is the best possible cause. He deems it better to have lost their loved ones for a great and noble cause than through a meaningless or random accident. Although he knew their loss would stay with them, he encourages them to start new families, who would grow to be noble Athenians. For those incapable of having more children, he assures them that they can rest in the eternal fame won by the sacrifice of their sons.

PARAGRAPH 11

To the sons and brothers, Pericles issues a subtle challenge not to become lost in the shadow of the greatness of their deceased relatives. By indicating that others would forever compare their actions with the deeds of those who sacrificed, he hoped to instill within them a determination to continue to serve and to fight. His comments to the widows reflected a typical Greek belief that the gods had created women to be good wives and mothers. Being, in their minds, weaker by nature, women fulfilled a role that kept them in secluded domestic situations. Thus while men had freedom to enjoy social and sexual pursuits, a good woman had to remain at home. Pericles expresses his hope that these widows would continue such lifestyles, so as not to be gossiped about in public.

PARAGRAPH 12

Pericles concludes the speech with a humble allusion that his words, though some might consider them inadequate, fulfilled the law. He challenges potential detractors, arguing that these men deserved the honors they had received. To encourage others not to lose heart in the struggle, he promises the ongoing reward that the children of those who lost their lives in the war would receive state support until grown. Beyond financial rewards, however, Athenians should look for the greater benefits of being honorable citizens who defend the glory of democratic Athens.

AUDIENCE

View of the Acropolis, rebuilt under the leadership of Pericles

(Alison Frantz Photographic Collection, American School of Classical Studies at Athens)
On the surface Pericles addressed his words to the families of those who had lost loved ones. However, given the direction of his speech, to defend democracy and to elevate the city itself, he also spoke to those in the audience who opposed him. The leadership of the pro-Spartan party in Athens had faced setbacks when their main voice, Cimon, was exiled after being rebuffed by the Spartans in the attempt to suppress their helot rebellion. They also complained about the loss of their property because of a policy that they felt had recklessly pushed Athens into a needless war with the Peloponnesians. The existence of aristocrats who rejected democracy also threatened Pericles' position. Criticism of democracy is expressed even among the philosophical writings that emerged after the war, such as those of Plato and Aristotle, both of whom were writing in the fourth century BCE. In fact, in the immediate aftermath, Sparta helped to install an aristocratic government that sought to purge democratic ideas. Known as the Thirty Tyrants, they quickly alienated the population and in turn were overthrown themselves.

IMPACT

Plutarch, in his biography Pericles, written in about 75 CE, indicates that when Pericles concluded the speech, the women sought to touch his hands and to give him crowns of leaves to honor him, in the same way that they would have rewarded a victorious Olympic athlete. For the most part, Pericles maintained his position, and the Athenians continued with the war. His opponents waited in the wings, however. On the day of the speech, some mocked his successes against Athenian allies (Sparta) instead of Persians, whom many considered the true enemy of Greece.

The Funeral Oration of Pericles took on a greater role in modern times. As an idealized paean to democracy, it was used by nineteenth-century Europeans as a fitting defense of growing liberal democracy. The discovery of Greek and Roman antiquities encouraged scholars to go in search of historical roots to explain why industrial Europe had emerged as a dominant global force. Finding a kindred spirit in Athenian democracy, British and American political philosophers elevated Pericles' speech to a defense of their own system. Just as Pericles glorified democracy, so also did his modern counterparts utilize the Funeral Oration to remind citizens that freedom and equality are still privileges worth any sacrifice, including death.

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Article Citation