

Introduction

A Biography of Pericles in the Context of the Ancient Sources

One night in Athens in the mid-490s B.C.¹ (the exact year is unknown), a rich and heavily pregnant woman named Agariste had a dream: she saw herself giving birth to a lion. A few days later her second son was born, and his parents named him Pericles. Ancient Greeks traditionally believed that dreams were sent from the gods, as they learned from the epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer; his famous stories explored the sufferings caused by the Trojan War and expressed foundational beliefs of Greek culture. From listening to myths about ancient heroes and from hunting lions, which still roamed Europe in antiquity, Greeks learned that these animals were both powerful defenders of their own group and fierce destroyers of their prey. Agariste understood her dream to be a divine message indicating that her child was to become a very special person, for good or for bad – or for both.

Agariste's premonition about her child's future prominence proved accurate. Pericles at the height of his career became the most famous leader of the most famous and radical democracy of the most famous place of the most famous era of ancient Greece (Figure 1). During Pericles' lifetime in the fifth century B.C. (he died in 429), Athens became Greece's most influential incubator of far-reaching cultural developments, from scientific and philosophical ideas to innovative forms of art, architecture, and theater. This aspect of Athenian history has gained an appreciative reception in later times. Far less positive, however, has been the assessment of the actions of the Athenians toward other Greeks in this same

¹ From here on, all dates in this book should be understood as B.C. unless otherwise indicated.



FIGURE 1. Stone bust of Pericles. JFB/The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY.

period as they transformed themselves from their previous second-rate international status into their region's wealthiest and strongest military power. By the 430s, they controlled numerous other Greek allies in what Pericles memorably called a tyranny, according to the contemporary historian and military commander Thucydides (*The Peloponnesian War* 2.63); other contemporaries echoed that judgment, adding that Pericles led Athens as a *de facto* tyrant. Many modern scholars agree, labeling the Athenian-dominated alliance an empire and Pericles an imperialist, implying all the deeply negative connotations of those terms in their modern context of colonialism and oppression.

Understanding how these events took place and deciding how to evaluate their significance for our judgment of classical Athens are challenging questions, and they are especially relevant for a biography of Pericles because by the middle of the fifth century he had become Athens' most influential political leader. He was directly involved in the political and military decisions of the democratic government of Athens that led to the creation of the so-called Athenian Empire, which, its critics charge, mistreated Greeks who did not fall into line with the uncompromising

leadership of the Athenians. A second challenging question is how to evaluate Pericles' responsibility for the infamous Peloponnesian War (431–404) between Athens and Sparta, each supported by its allies among other Greek states. (The name of the war is derived from the location of Sparta and most of its allies in the Peloponnese, the large peninsula that makes up southern mainland Greece.) In 431, the Athenians followed Pericles' adamant advice to make no concessions to the Spartans even if this hard-line position meant war. A generation-long conflict between the two competing states therefore broke out. Twenty-seven years later (and twenty-three years after Pericles' death), Athens' defeat in this long and bloody war proved catastrophic for his homeland.

These two aspects of Pericles' leadership – the nature of his influence during the time of Athens' greatest power and his successful advocacy of going to war with Sparta – make it imperative to ask whether, despite Pericles' lasting fame, his life in the end has to be judged a tragedy rather than a triumph. The answer to be offered here will emerge in the context of a concise biography intended for readers new to ancient Greek history. The ancient biographer and essayist Plutarch, whose writings provide the bulk of the surviving information about Pericles' life, stressed the different nature of biographical writing as compared to history: biography, he said, is the story of a life, focusing on evidence that reveals the subject's character, especially in making decisions under pressure and taking actions that affect other people. Of course, writing about the past (or the present, for that matter) involves selection of the evidence to consider, and, as Plutarch's words imply, writing biography adds to the innate uncertainty of this process by seeking to uncover the thoughts, motives, and feelings of human beings. In short, biography necessarily involves a large degree of speculation – we can never fully know what goes on in the heads and the hearts of other people (and perhaps not even in our own!). An abiding lack of certainty is simply inherent in trying to make sense of someone else's life, and it is to be expected that others will disagree, sometimes vehemently, with any biographer's interpretation of the person being profiled.

As a result, readers should expect to encounter repeated qualifications such as “probably,” or “most likely,” or “must have” in this book. At the same time, it seems to me that the author of a biography takes on the responsibility of presenting an interpretative evaluation of the subject and cannot always conclude by saying, “Well, we cannot decide.” Certainly the study of ancient history is especially humbling because that kind of inconclusive and unsatisfactory response is often the best any

scholar can offer in good conscience. And it may not be entirely wrong to regard biographers as closer to writers of fiction or fantasy than historians themselves aspire to be. My point is that readers should always be alert to the characteristics of the genre of writing that they choose to read, and that warning applies doubly to biography.

In his famous paired biographies comparing Greeks and Romans, the *Parallel Lives* (on which see later discussion), the ancient Greek author Plutarch states that he often does not spend time narrating the details of events of his subject's lifetime, even when they are major historical episodes. What matters to him in writing the story of a life, Plutarch explains, is trying to deduce meaning about his subjects' characters from their actions and words, even if those events and sayings might seem minor in the grand scheme of events. Plutarch's approach inspires the one that I will take, which aims above all at offering an evaluation of Pericles' character in action. This book therefore does not provide a balanced or comprehensive survey of the history of Athens during Pericles' time. Indeed, its narrative will not spend a great deal of time even on events important to Athenian history during Pericles' lifetime unless they seem relevant to understanding his decisions as a private individual and a political leader.

My selection of what to emphasize in telling the story of Pericles' life and evaluating his leadership instead will focus on the background to and the development of the three characteristics that for me are most important in evaluating Pericles' career: his unyielding opposition to Sparta, his reliance on reasoning and judgment based on knowledge as the basis for political persuasiveness, and his support for political and financial benefits for Athens' poorer citizens. Considering these issues will involve investigating his family history, his intellectual bent, his political skills, and his private life. This investigation calls for a thorough excavation of the historical background specific to these issues. For that reason, a significant portion of the narrative will describe relevant events dating from before Pericles' birth and during his youth, before he became politically active. These chapters will focus both on the highly contentious history of Pericles' ancestors and on the equally controversial actions of the Spartans during the conflict-filled decades of the late sixth and early fifth centuries. During these years, internal and external wars (and these latter conflicts waged against both neighboring Greeks as well as foreign invaders) determined not only the form of Athens' democratic government and political independence, but even its physical survival as a community.

This background material will reveal the degree to which Pericles' career became the story of a preeminent political leader whose ideas and policies were forever shaped by what he had as a child learned from his family about their deeply controversial history before his birth, about the treacherous about-face of Sparta in attempting to overthrow the Athenians' democracy founded by his uncle Cleisthenes after the Spartans had just expelled Athens' tyranny, and about the harsh realities of Athenian political life as revealed to the young Pericles by the exile imposed on his father. Those tough lessons were further driven home by Pericles' himself becoming a refugee while a teenager during the Persian Wars, a conflict waged by a Greek alliance to try to avoid conquest by the military forces of the gigantic empire ruled by the Persian Achaemenid dynasty. In the panic caused by this military crisis, Pericles, still too young to fight in Athens' army, was compelled to flee his homeland not once but twice during the chaos of mass evacuations of the city's population.

The detail of the opening chapters, which discuss Athenian history before Pericles' birth and during his early years, is necessary because it is my strongly held judgment that this deep background – especially how high the stakes were for Athens in these events and how vividly their reality was impressed on the young Pericles – is absolutely fundamental for understanding how Pericles came to form his unyielding attitude and policies about the necessity of Athens' possessing unassailable power, about the strict connection between Athens' power and its freedom, and, perhaps most poignantly of all, about the deep fear that Athenians should feel about the never-ending threats to their security posed by their enemies, above all the Spartans. Therefore, this biography includes an extended lead-in to Pericles' adult lifetime so that it can present evidence with which readers may reach their own judgments about the leader that Thucydides (2.65) judged to have been so overwhelmingly influential in his state's democracy that he rose to the status of its "first man" during what has sometimes been called Athens' Golden Age.

In short, the linchpin of my evaluation – and the motivation for narrating in some detail the crises in the half-century of Athenian history before Pericles rose to become a leader – is that Pericles' experiences and memories from his very early years taught him lessons that he never forgot, provoking him to formulate the policies that he ever after maintained in response to the brutal realities of political and military power as they played out in the Greek world in general and in the policies of Sparta in particular. As cognitive scientists would say, the influences on Pericles from his early life – what he heard from his parents about their

family histories and then his own lived experiences – led him to develop a “memory of the future.” That is, like all of us, what he heard about and experienced as repetitive phenomena during his youth – in his case, the terrible dangers threatening Athens and the necessity of asserting power to defend its freedom, the treacherous unreliability of the Spartans, and the unpredictable fate of prominent political and military leaders in democratic Athens – strongly predisposed him to expect that circumstances in his future life would correspond to those memories and that ongoing fear for the safety of his community was the only prudent attitude for an Athenian to adopt. That Pericles never wavered in his stance on these issues is a major factor that must be weighed in evaluating his leadership. Modern observers may well want to ponder whether he should have changed his mind later in life, but the fact is that he never did.

Following the background on Pericles’ family and early life, the story of his life as told in this book will turn to the question of how he earned his lasting fame as a leader in competition with many other ambitious male citizens in the rough-and-tumble politics of Athens’ democratic system of government. In this context, one challenging question concerns how he achieved the respect for his character and the skill in public speaking that empowered him to persuade the mass of citizens in Athens’ democracy (Greek for “strength of the people”) to adopt policies that he recommended. As we will see, in everything Pericles did as a leader who always had to operate under close public scrutiny and the very real possibility of punishment for promoting unpopular or unsuccessful policies, he privileged reasoned judgment based on knowledge as the key to predicting what was likely to happen and therefore as the best guide for deciding what policies and laws to propose. In other words, Pericles developed a relentless devotion to reason and knowledge as the best way to combat the disturbing and often sorrowful unpredictability of human life.

His reasoning was deeply influenced by his education and personal friendships with the most controversial thinkers of fifth-century Greece. It is remarkable that Pericles was able to rely on an intellectually grounded approach to make himself into one of the most persuasive and most celebrated political leaders in history. An aloof scholarly tone in political speeches is rarely effective in today’s world, and recent psychological studies demonstrate that even scientifically grounded knowledge exercises a minimal persuasive power on people when it conflicts with their personal values and interests. It is therefore especially impressive that Pericles leveraged his notoriously intense interest in intellectual and scholarly questions into a tool for persuasive public speaking in a democracy where

oratory carried great influence in political decision making. Somehow, his unvarying stress on employing knowledge-based reasoning and judgment motivated the majority of his fellow citizens – almost all of whom did not share his exceptional educational background or his interest in academic-sounding disputes – to reach difficult, dangerous, and even self-sacrificing decisions for their community.

The vast majority of citizens in Pericles' time not only lacked much, if any, high-level education, they also made do with a very modest or even poor standard of living, at least in comparison to the wealth and status of the elite members of Athenian society. The riches and fame of his family placed Pericles in the upper-class section of society. Some members of this social elite vehemently opposed democracy because it required them to share political power with the mass of citizens less affluent than they and to contribute financial resources to provide benefits for the masses. In sharp contrast to this attitude, Pericles supported measures to strengthen the political and financial interests of the majority of citizens as opposed to those of his own social class. In evaluating Pericles, it will be important to consider the likely reasons for his successful promotion of this contested policy, which at its most spectacular yielded the construction of the costly buildings, including the Parthenon temple (Figure 15), that made Golden Age Athens so famous in ancient and modern times.

Pericles' political opponents and rivals blamed him for the decisions that the male citizens of Athens had ratified in the democratic assembly (*ecclesia*) to maintain strict control of their allies in the Athenian Empire and to spend money on fabulously expensive public buildings. The denunciations of Pericles by his contemporaries could be savage. The authors of comedies mocked him for his highbrow proclivities and claimed he behaved immorally in his sexual life. Especially bitter criticisms attacked his never-wavering insistence that Athens reject the demands from Sparta that peaked in the late 430s and culminated in the Spartans' launching the Peloponnesian War; some even charged that he brought on the war to cover up scandals in his private life.

This bloody struggle of Greeks against Greeks was filled with countless disasters, including the deadly epidemic disease that killed Pericles in 429. The war finally ended in 404 with the unconditional surrender of Athens to its hated Spartan enemies, the devastation of its flourishing economy, the abolition of its democracy, and the installation of a murderous regime of Athenian collaborators, whose crimes against their fellow citizens plunged their community into a civil war that came to an end in 403 only after bloody battles of citizens in the streets. The

bitterness from this internal conflict motivated the trial and execution in 399 of Socrates, an Athenian war hero and the most famous philosopher of the fifth century. In short, the Peloponnesian War was a catastrophe for Athens. Should we blame Pericles for this terrible outcome? Had his reasoning truly presented his fellow citizens with the best available choice by persuading them to wage war rather than to capitulate to the Spartans' demands? After his death, were the citizens shortsighted in abandoning his strategic policy of not attempting expansion during wartime, as Thucydides accuses them of having done? Did they in this way cause their own eventual doom, a fate that could have been prevented if they had kept to Pericles' recommended policy? Taken together, these questions about Pericles' policy concerning Sparta, as much as his insistence that Athens maintain its power over others in its own self-interest during the period of Athenian Empire, seem to me to pose the most difficult issues to analyze in the debate concerning Pericles' leadership and legacy, a debate that began in his own time and continues to this day.

Linked to issues from Pericles' public life as a leader are remarkable aspects of his private life. His home life was often turbulent. He infuriated his children by limiting their expenditures, refusing to indulge them when they appealed to him for money for splurges. He had such a bitter relationship with one of his two sons that it culminated in the accusation that he had committed adultery with a daughter-in-law. After Pericles and his wife divorced, he fell deeply in love with Aspasia, a foreign-born woman much talked about and admired for her intellectual acuity but also slandered as a brothel operator. Pericles openly expressed his affection for Aspasia and fathered a child with her named after him – but he could never marry her, the love of his life, and he could not make his son a citizen, because of a law that he himself had some years before convinced the Athenians to pass. As we will see, some Athenians claimed that Pericles' notorious relationship with Aspasia led him to force Athens into the Peloponnesian War.

Pericles exercised strict control over his personal emotions so that he could always behave with a calm dignity in the company of others. He scrupulously avoided potentially awkward social situations, especially the frequent drinking parties that were the social glue of the upper class, where overindulgence in wine could lead to embarrassing incidents and damaging gossip. The only time he was said to have wept in front of others who were not close to him – and in ancient Greek culture real men, like the warriors of Homer's *Iliad*, shed copious tears without shame in public – was when he defended Aspasia in court. But showing emotion

in Athenian trials was expected; not a single anecdote exists portraying Pericles as showing emotions in public that were inappropriate to the occasion. What, then, do the stories about Pericles' private life say about his emotional life and his success – or failure – in integrating his personal choices as a man and a father with his public position as Athens' most personally disciplined leader? Did the troubles – and joys – of his personal life affect his policy recommendations? These questions, too, will figure in the evaluation of Pericles to be outlined in this biography.

Biographical information about Pericles is provided only by other people: he apparently never wrote anything for publication or preservation. There are no private letters of his, no personal journals, no public statements, and no political or reflective essays. We rely exclusively on other texts from antiquity for information on both his private life and his public career. The ancient sources that have survived (a tremendous amount has been lost in the intervening centuries) are limited – but also very interesting. I energetically encourage readers to take the characteristics (especially the shortcomings) of this biography as inducements to read for themselves the ancient texts on which its story depends so that they can critique its approach and judgments. That is the outcome that I most wish for, especially because reading ancient sources about Greek history has enriched my life so powerfully for so long.

My approach to these sources will be to take their evidence seriously unless there are clear reasons to reject their testimony; hence, they provide the context for my understanding of Pericles' biography. Keeping in mind my intended audience and the brevity of this book, I will not present much source criticism, the extremely important process through which experts tease out what is likely to be accurate and what seems mistaken or even deceptive in the accounts that we have. This choice against offering detailed source criticism will not please many scholars. What I report from the sources in this account of Pericles' life represents my judgment on what is reasonably plausible to believe from their evidence. I can add that I do not believe that it is methodologically sound to discount or disregard ancient sources just because their information seems implausible in terms of modern assumptions and assertions about how people “must” have behaved in the past. The sources on Pericles certainly do not present a uniform picture, and they are frequently difficult to understand because, to mention just one reason among many, they were written for people who often had very different views and experiences from many of us today. Nevertheless, these ancient sources are our primary evidence, and I will treat them as just that: primary. In short, my

approach will be to try to tell the story of Pericles' life as it emerges from the evidence of the surviving ancient sources, without explicitly engaging discussions of modern scholars, even those specifically cited in my text. This characteristic of the book, which I recognize will be unsatisfying to some, means that readers who want to benefit from the enormous amount of stimulating and valuable scholarly work on Pericles and fifth-century Athenian history need to turn elsewhere, for example, to the list of Suggested Readings provided at this book's end. It seems appropriate to point out that a significant number of the books and articles listed there dispute or reject both my approach and my conclusions.

The surviving sources for Pericles' biography are fascinating in their varying approaches to his life, their colorful details, and, in many cases, their strongly argued judgments about him. Most of these ancient works are available in readable English translations, also listed in the Suggested Readings. They brim with stories of courage and cowardice, violence and kindness, wonders and mystery – all the stuff of lives lived fully and passionately. I will sometimes mention a specific ancient source in relation to a large theme or a direct quotation. To stress the importance and interest of the most informative ancient sources as the basis for everything that follows, I will now briefly introduce them.

Plutarch's *Life of Pericles* (hereafter cited as *Pericles*) in his *Parallel Lives* is the only surviving ancient source presenting information about Pericles' life from birth to death. An upper-class and extremely well-educated Greek living from about AD 50 to AD 120 in the time of the Roman Empire, Plutarch wrote five centuries later than Pericles' lifetime. By Plutarch's time, his beloved homeland of Greece had long been subject to the Romans. Plutarch became famous in later times mainly as the author of the *Parallel Lives*, which became popular for their exciting anecdotes and demanding moral lessons; they were favorites, for example, of Shakespeare and of the founders of the American republic. Plutarch also wrote the *Moralia*, an extensive set of essays exploring a large diversity of philosophical, religious, and personal topics. All Plutarch's works display his tremendous knowledge of earlier literature and histories. He frequently quotes from or refers to the many earlier authors whose texts he had carefully read and remembered. In fact, he preserves a very large number of so-called fragments (that is, quotations, paraphrases, and references) from "lost authors" relevant to this period of Athenian history whose works have not survived to the present.

In composing his biographies, Plutarch chooses his subjects, all of whom are men, to match Greeks with Romans. His pairing of these