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978-1-107-11014-4 - Pericles and the Conquest of History: A Political Biography

Loren J. Samons II

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## PERICLES AND THE CONQUEST OF HISTORY

### *A Political Biography*

As the most famous and important political leader in Athenian history, Pericles has featured prominently in descriptions and analyses of Athenian democracy from antiquity to the present day. Although contemporary historians have tended to treat him as representative of values like liberty and equality, Loren J. Samons II demonstrates that the quest to make Athens the preeminent power in Greece served as the central theme of Pericles' career. More nationalist than humanist and less rationalist than populist, Pericles' vision for Athens rested on the establishment of an Athenian reputation for military success and on the citizens' willingness to sacrifice in the service of this goal. Despite his own aristocratic (if checkered) ancestry, Pericles offered the common and collective Athenian people the kind of fame previously available only to heroes and noblemen, a goal made all the more attractive because of the Athenians' defensiveness about Athens' lackluster early history.

LOREN J. SAMONS II is Professor of Classical Studies at Boston University. He was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and studied classics and history at Baylor University before earning his PhD in ancient history at Brown University. Samons has published widely on Greek politics and history and on the relationship between ancient and modern democracy. His books include *What's Wrong with Democracy? From Athenian Practice to American Worship* (2004), *Empire of the Owl: Athenian Imperial Finance* (2000), and (with C. W. Fornara) *Athens from Cleisthenes to Pericles* (1991). He is the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and has published articles in such journals as *Historia*, *Hesperia*, *Classical Quarterly*, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, and the *Classical Journal*.

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Pericles of Athens. Photo: Getty Images.

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*Boston University*



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*To the river*

and

*to my teachers*

*Tommye Lou Davis*

*Robert Reid†*

*Randy Todd*

*Wallace Daniel*

*David Herlihy†*

*Michael Putnam*

*Kurt Raaflaub*

and

*Charles Fornara*

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*Exiled Thucydides knew  
All that a speech can say  
About Democracy  
And what dictators do,  
The elderly rubbish they talk  
To an apathetic grave;  
Analysed all in his book,  
The enlightenment driven away,  
The habit-forming pain,  
Mismanagement and grief:  
We must suffer them all again.*

– W. H. Auden, from “September 1, 1939”

*Many things escape us.*

– Aristophanes, *Peace* 618

*The true history of these events is unknown.*

– Plutarch, *Pericles* 32.6

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## *Preface*

A vortex. For me, Pericles has been a vortex. Perhaps any student of fifth-century Athenian history, literature, philosophy, art, or architecture must eventually think – at least for a few minutes – about Pericles. A scholar interested in classical Athenian politics, foreign relations, historiography, and warfare simply cannot escape him.

I never wanted to write a biography, and I certainly did not want to write a biography of Pericles. Nevertheless, questions about why Athens went to war with Sparta in 431, what the Athenians thought about themselves (and other Greeks), how Thucydides constructed his history, and what the Athenian people sought in a leader forced me to accept my fate. The figure of Pericles ultimately sucks all these questions into his powerful, churning maw. The historian Thucydides deserves a great deal of blame for this, as do the comic poets and philosophers who loved to skewer the Athenian statesman and whose works played a major role in the construction of Plutarch's biography. Then there are the fantastic buildings constructed with (at least) Pericles' encouragement, the modern fascination with democratic Athens under its greatest leader, and, especially, the empire over other Greeks that Pericles and his fellow Athenians built and exploited while expanding their own political freedoms and privileges. Perhaps, in the end, Pericles should be forgiven for demanding our attention.

The principal question this work seeks to answer is what circumstances and ideas led Pericles to take the actions he (and Athens) took in the fifth century BC. The guiding hypothesis is that Thucydides has attempted to present us with a picture of Pericles that is not misleading. Like Thucydides,

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I am interested in Pericles' ideas and in his role as a leader. However, unlike Thucydides, I attempt to elucidate or reconstruct the factors that made Pericles into the man Thucydides and Plutarch found so fascinating.

It has become fashionable to avoid using admittedly anachronistic terms like "state," "conservative," and "progressive" in descriptions of classical Athenian politics and foreign policy. I hope I may be forgiven for employing them for the purpose of convenience. I use the term "state" to refer to sovereign political entities. By "conservative" I mean simply those Athenians who preferred good relations with Sparta to enmity with that city-state and who wished to maintain the political status quo rather than extending more power to the poorer elements in society, an action favored by those I call "progressive" or "more democratic." Of course, nothing like political parties existed in ancient Athens, but some individuals did tend to support or pursue policies that fell into one of these two schools of thought. On the other hand, sometimes other considerations (like family relationships or status) seem to have trumped political concerns.

I employ no fixed system, but I usually spell Greek names in the ways that seem most readily recognizable to the nonspecialist reader without doing violence to the original Greek (hence "Pericles" instead of "Perikles," but "Kimon," which does not run the risk of mispronunciation faced by "Cimon"). In cases where the mispronunciation or Latinization has become endemic (e.g., Thucydides, Alcibiades), I usually bow to tradition and apologize to my Greek friends: Συγγνώμη.

I want to thank several people for their help or inspiration. Robert Reid brought the ancient world to life for me and many other Baylor students in his Waco, Texas, classroom. Wallace Daniel showed me (or, rather, became) the Platonic form of a college professor, providing an ideal standard to which I could only aspire. Tommye Lou Davis taught me Latin and the beauty of grammar. Randy Todd introduced me to the Greek of Homer and Herodotus with great patience and generosity. Michael Putnam showed me why Vergil is wonderful, and David Herlihy explained new ways to study and understand late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Charles Fornara introduced me to the professional study of Pericles and fifth-century Athens about thirty years ago. He forced me to become a classicist when I wanted only to be a historian. My great debts to him will be obvious to anyone who knows his work.

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The anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press offered invaluable corrections and suggestions for this work. However, above all I am grateful to my former teacher and longtime friend, Kurt Raaflaub, who read an earlier version of the entire manuscript and offered me numerous ideas, suggestions, and pointed criticisms. His reading caused me to correct many errors and to rethink several important issues. Because he is perhaps the most generous scholar I have ever known, Kurt will forgive me for the places where I have chosen to be stubborn. For me, Pericles remains a disquieting figure, whose intelligence, idealism, sagacity, ambition, and political honesty present aspects both attractive and foreboding.

The classical studies faculty at Dickinson College generously invited me to give the Christopher Roberts Lectures in the fall of 2013. Some of the ideas appearing here were developed or put into their final form during that delightful visit with my good friends in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. I want especially to thank Marc Mastrangelo and Chris Francese for their hospitality. I must also thank Brendan McConville for joining me in a presentation there and Ted Lendon for serving as the (appallingly frank) commentator. Dickinson College seems to me an ideal place to study the ancient world.

Other scholars who have helped along the way with this project (at times unwittingly) include Jim Sickinger, Tom Figueira, Peter Rhodes, Mortimer Chambers, Lucia Athanassaki, Jim Kennelly, and Don Kagan.

Friends at Boston University have made the writing of this book much easier than it would otherwise have been. I must single out Steve Esposito, Wolfgang Haase, Brian Jorgensen, Peter Michelli, Stephanie Nelson, Kelly Polychroniou, Wayne Snyder, James Uden, and Ann Vasaly.

My wife Jamie, my family, my students, and my friends have endured my harangues about fifth-century Athens, Pericles, and many other things for far too long. I offer this book to all of them as an act of expiation and exorcism.

Jay Samons  
*Athens, Agia Paraskevi*  
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## *Important Dates*

546/5	Peisistratus establishes tyranny firmly in Athens
528/7	Death of Peisistratus; Hippias becomes tyrant
525/4	Cleisthenes is archon eponymous
524/3	Miltiades is archon eponymous
514	Murder of Hipparchus, brother of tyrant Hippias
511/10	Tyranny of Hippias in Athens overthrown by Spartans
ca. 510?	Kimón's birth
ca. 507	Cleisthenes' reforms ( <i>demokratia</i> )
ca. 500–495?	Pericles' birth
493	Miltiades returns to Athens; tried for tyranny
490	Battle of Marathon
489	Miltiades' second trial; Xanthippus prosecutes
485/4	Ostracism of Pericles' father, Xanthippus
483/2	Themistocles' proposal to use silver revenues for fleet
481	Recall of Xanthippus and other ostracized Athenians
480	Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis
479	Persians defeated at Plataea and Mycale
478/7	Foundation of Delian League
473/2	Pericles serves as <i>choregos</i>
ca. 471	Themistocles ostracized
ca. 466	Kimón's victory at the Eurymedon
465–463	Thasos' revolt and suppression
463	Pericles' prosecution of Kimón

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462/1	Kimón leads expedition to assist Sparta Ephialtes' reforms in Athens Kimón ostracized
ca. 460–446/5	First Peloponnesian War
ca. 459–454	Athenian expedition to Egypt
ca. 454/3	Athens transfers treasury of Delian League to Athens
ca. 452?	Kimón returns from ostracism
ca. 451	Five Years Truce with Sparta negotiated by Kimón
451/0	Pericles' Citizenship Law
ca. 450	Athenian expedition to Cyprus; Kimón's death
ca. 449	Kallias sent to negotiate with Persia
446/5	Pericles leads expedition to Euboea after revolt
446/5	Thirty Years Peace between Athens and Sparta
ca. 444/3	Thucydides son of Melesias ostracized
440–439	Athens' war with Samos
437/6	Foundation of Amphipolis
432/1	Beginning of Peloponnesian War
429	Death of Pericles
421	Nikias negotiates peace between Sparta and Athens
418	Battle of Mantinea
415–413	Athens' invasion of Sicily
404	End of Peloponnesian War; Athenian empire dismantled