

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ATHENS FROM THE SIXTH TO THE FOURTH CENTURIES B.C.

During the sixth century B.C., Attica and its principal city, Athens, became one of the wealthiest city-states of mainland Greece and a leader in artistic achievement. Early in the century, the lawgiver Solon laid the foundation for this development with reforms that canceled crippling personal debts, dismantled an oppressive law code, and based political participation on ownership of property rather than birthright. His measures stimulated the local economy, and foreign craftsmen were invited to live and work in Athens. One way we can trace the success of these initiatives is by studying Attic black-figure pottery, which developed so rapidly in quantity and quality that by the middle of the century it was being exported throughout the Mediterranean world.

During most of the second half of the sixth century, Athens was under the rule of the tyrant Peisistratos and his sons. Although Peisistratos took power by force around 561 B.C., his rule was moderate and relatively popular, and it provided peace and prosperity for a generation. Peisistratos did much to unify the scattered population of Attica into a common allegiance to Athens and to the notion of the city-state; consequently, the influence of the land-owning aristocracy was weakened. New roads connected outlying regions to the city, which was embellished with fine public monuments. At least one large temple was constructed on the akropolis, or high citadel, of Athens, the principal sanctuary of the city's patron goddess Athena Polias, and many marble statues were dedicated around it. Impressive sanctuaries were also built in the city for gods whose cults were centered in the countryside. Religious festivals became increasingly magnificent. The Greater Dionysia, a state festival in honor of Dionysos, included a competition of tragic choruses from which the great fifth-century tragedies developed. Contests held as part of the Great Panathenaia, which honored Athena, came to include recital of works by Homer and other poets. By 510 B.C., when Peisistratid rule was overthrown, Athens had become a prosperous cosmopolitan city that attracted poets, musicians, and artists from all over

the Greek-speaking world. In 508/7 B.C., Kleisthenes introduced a new constitution that gave power to more Athenian citizens by breaking the family ties of the landed aristocracy. This constitution became the basis of Athenian democracy. Henceforth, all Athenians belonged to one of ten newly created tribes.

During the fifth century B.C., Athens became the political, economic, and cultural leader of Greece. The city's rise to prominence was due in part to the role it played during and after the Persian Wars, which, early in the century, threatened to absorb the Greeks into the hugely rich and powerful Persian Empire. The Athenians played a decisive role in the defeat of the invading enemy both at the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. and at the sea battle at Salamis in 480 B.C. Following the defeat of the Persian land army at Plataea in 479 B.C., the Athenians organized a confederacy of Greek cities, known as the Delian League, on the Aegean islands and neighboring coasts in order to keep the Persian navy away from Greek waters. The allies provided either ships and men or a fixed sum of money, which was kept in a treasury on the sacred island of Delos. Since Athens controlled these funds and the fleet, the city-state became a major military force and voluntary members of the alliance gradually became Athenian subjects. By 454/53 B.C., when the treasury was moved from Delos to the akropolis of Athens, the city had become a wealthy imperial power.

By the mid-fifth century B.C., Athens had also become a democracy in which approximately 30,000 citizens (almost all of whom were adult males born out of the legal marriage between an Athenian citizen and an Athenian woman) were assured political equality and equality before the law. The dominance of the aristocratic families had been curtailed by the reforms of Kleisthenes and by constitutional changes instituted in the late 460s and early 450s by the statesman Perikles, the most pragmatic and successful Athenian leader of the period. Magistrates, jurors, and members of the Council, an organization that administered finance and formulated new legislation, were chosen purely by lot, and all of these officers were paid for their services from public funds. Every citizen had the right to speak and vote in the public assemblies that determined domestic and foreign policy.

During the fifth century B.C., Athens also enjoyed a period of unparalleled artistic and cultural activity. New dramas by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were presented at festivals in honor of Dionysos, the god of wine and the theater. After 450 B.C., a great building program on the Athenian akropolis, led by Perikles, replaced the damage inflicted by the Persians in 480 B.C. and expressed the optimism and self-confidence that arose from the new Athenian wealth and the extension of its democracy and its maritime empire. The Parthenon, a great temple dedicated to the city's patron goddess Athena, whose cult had always been celebrated on the high plateau of the akropolis, was constructed entirely of Pentelic marble and decorated with an ambitious sculptural program. It housed a colossal gold and ivory statue of the goddess by the sculptor Pheidias. The Propylaia, the monumental gateway to the akropolis, an exquisite small temple to Athena Nike (Athena the Victor), and the Erechtheion, a multipurpose building that housed a number of ancient shrines, were all completed by the end of the century.

The growing power of Athens alarmed the other city-states of Greece, many of which were allied in a defensive league with Sparta. In 431 B.C., open warfare broke out between Athens and the Peloponnesian League, and in the following years Athens suffered tremendous losses through the outbreak of a plague that killed an estimated 25 percent of its population, including the irreplaceable Perikles. The great historian Thucydides (Thucydides) in his book on the war recorded both the progress of the plague, which lasted over four years, and the course of the Peloponnesian War, which continued intermittently for nearly thirty years until the final defeat of Athens in 404 B.C.

Vanquished and with its maritime empire effectively demolished, Athens lost its place as the most powerful Greek city. The victorious Spartans installed a group of men, known as the Thirty Tyrants, to rule the city. By the beginning of the fourth century B.C., however, the Athenians were able to restore a full democracy. While attempts by some to recreate the Athenian empire were unpopular and largely unsuccessful, Athens' importance as a cultural center did not diminish. However, when Sokrates, one of

the most influential teachers of his day, was tried for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens, his execution in 399 B.C. exposed the arbitrary, fragile, and ephemeral nature of a higher educational system that lacked formal structure. Consequently, his students (and, in turn, their students) established permanent teaching and research institutions in and around the city. Among the most important was Plato's school at the Academy, a large public park just outside the city walls. Plato formalized his teacher Sokrates' methods of inquiry into a philosophical investigative approach known as dialectic. Aristotle, who studied under Plato, formulated a different and more encyclopedic approach to learning: he attempted to make a systematic, scientific survey of the entire field of knowledge. These schools were part of an explosion of creative energy in many areas—philosophy, political theory, science, and the arts. Other luminaries of the day included some of the most famous individuals of classical antiquity, such as Demosthenes, the great Athenian statesman and orator; Euphranor of Corinth, a distinguished painter and sculptor; and the Athenian Praxiteles, one of the most admired of all Classical sculptors.
