

## Periclean Polarity

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According to Jonathan Hall, Greek ethnic identity was built on antagonism and polarity as an 'adversative model of ethnogenesis.'<sup>1</sup> In a worldview that focused on polarity, Pericles and the Athenians saw a series of diametric oppositions: Athenian versus Spartan, Ionian versus Dorian, sailor versus *hoplite*, and democracy versus aristocracy. The career of Pericles can be used as a prism to explore these antitheses; more specifically, the powerful shifts in Athens between the rise of a pro-democratic, egalitarian ethos and the decline of a pro-Spartan, aristocratic ethos. As such, I postulate that Periclean policy was a specific application of this antithetical Greek worldview, and that Pericles formed Athens in direct contrast to Sparta.

In order to chart the origins of conflict between Athens and Sparta and explore these aforementioned antitheses, one must follow Pericles' career diachronically, beginning with the Persian Wars. Following the decisive Greek victory at the Battle of Plataea in 479 B.C.E., an Aegean world quickly emerged that was divided by three superpowers: Persia, Sparta and Athens. The beginning of a fissure between the interventionist and democratic Athenians and the isolationist and oligarchic Spartans became apparent; these ideological, character and linguistic differences played an important role as part of a larger ethnic discourse that polarized these two sides. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2, 29, 162.

## *Philomathes*

immediate aftermath of this battle, the Athenians and their allies found themselves abandoned by the Spartans:

*Leotychides, King of the Lacedaemonians, the commander of the Hellenes at Mycale, departed home with the allies from Peloponnese. But the Athenians and the allies from Ionia and Hellespont, who had now revolted from the king, remained and laid siege to Sestos, which was still held by the Medes.*<sup>2</sup>

Following the disgrace of Pausanias in 478 BCE, the Ionians implored the Athenians to take command of the allied forces, free from Spartan influence:

*But the violence of Pausanias had already begun to be disagreeable to the Hellenes, particularly to the Ionians and the newly liberated populations. These resorted to the Athenians and requested them as their kinsmen to become their leaders, and to stop any attempt at violence on the part of Pausanias.*<sup>3</sup>

By means of their dialect and ancestry, the majority of Ionians certainly felt more closely connected to the Athenians than the Doric Spartans.<sup>4</sup> In the generation that followed, the Athenians transformed the alliance of Greek city-states into an Aegean empire named the Delian League, which controlled the eastern part of the mainland, Aegean Sea and seaboard of Asia Minor, and often allied with city-states hostile to Sparta.<sup>5</sup> The trajectory of the next half-century – a period Thucydides calls the *Pentecontaetia* – was split into two major axes that was characterized by the great conflict between the Ionians and the

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<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by C.F. Smith, Loeb Classical Library Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919). 1.89.

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.95.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy McInerney, *Ancient Greece: A New History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 2-4.

## *Philomathes*

Dorians and their over-determined differences. These were the preconditions that formed Pericles' early career: he witnessed the fragile unity of the Greeks in the Persian Wars disintegrating under the pressure of Athenian power and the development of the Delian League.

While the Athenians forged an increasingly coercive system of imperial hegemony abroad, at home they witnessed a strengthening of their democracy and a cementing of the egalitarian potential of the Cleisthenic constitution under Ephialtes and Pericles. Some of their notable policies include the reform of the *Areopagus*<sup>6</sup> in c. 462 B.C.E.,<sup>7</sup> the inclusion of the *zeugetai*<sup>8</sup> eligible for the archonship in c. 458 B.C.E., and the introduction of *misthos*<sup>9</sup> and *theorika*<sup>10</sup> in c. 450 – 430 B.C.E..<sup>11</sup> These corresponding internal and external shifts in policy were the stipulations responsible for the anchoring of the democracy and the fracturing of the old, aristocratic ethos. Notably, as

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<sup>6</sup> The *Areopagus* was the earliest aristocratic council in ancient Athens whose power and jurisdiction shifted following Pericles' reforms. Originally the central governing body in Athens, the council transformed into a prominent legal institution that focused on serious cases of crime in Athens.

<sup>7</sup> The circumstances around the Ephialtic reforms and what they amounted to still remain unclear today. Similarly, the roles of Pericles and Ephialtes are unclear. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is a shift away from the old, aristocratic institution of the *Areopagus*. After the disappearance of Ephialtes, Pericles becomes associated with this more extreme and radical positioning. For more, see McInerney, *Ancient Greece*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> The *zeugetai* were a category of people that produced 200 or more *medimnoi* annually and were the second lowest social class above the *thetes*.

<sup>9</sup> The *misthos* was the payment or reward given to Athenians for holding public office (e.g., jurors).

<sup>10</sup> The *Theorika* was a fund that allowed the poor to receive free admission to theatrical festivals.

<sup>11</sup> Exact dates of introduction are still debated by scholars today. For more, see Raphael Sealey, *A History of the Greek City States* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1976), 123-40.

## *Philomathes*

*choregos*<sup>12</sup> for Aesychlus' *Persians* in 472 B.C.E., Pericles had initially demonstrated a rather orthodox and aristocratic approach to politics, though perhaps this was relatively unsurprising, given his maternal ties to the *Alcmaeonid* clan. Nevertheless, in response to the developing power of the Athenian state and democracy, Pericles – the embodiment of Athenian egalitarianism – turned towards a more populist and radical stance by stirring up discontent against the aristocratic, pro-Spartan Cimon:

*In the beginning, as has been said, pitted as he was against the reputation of Cimon, he tried to ingratiate himself with the people.*<sup>13</sup>

After electing to support the Spartans during the helot uprisings in 462 B.C.E., Cimon and his army was quickly dismissed by those very same Spartans (who feared that the Athenians would infect them with their democratic ideology), and then subsequently ostracized from Athens the following year.<sup>14</sup> As the Athenian democracy was becoming more entrenched and secure – which was expressed in the fluctuating fortunes of Pericles and Cimon – Pericles emerged as the leading figure shaping Athenian policy and soon turned his attention fully towards Sparta.

The end of the Persian Wars following the purported Peace of Callias in c. 449 B.C.E. (whether formal or not) represented a generational shift and the emergence of an

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<sup>12</sup> A *Choregos* was a wealthy Athenian citizen who paid for the chorus of a dramatic production.

<sup>13</sup> Plutarch, *Lives: Pericles and Fabius Maximus*, Translated by Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919), 9.2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Jeremy McInerney, *The Age of Pericles*, performed by Jeremy McInerney (Virginia: Teaching Company, 2004). CD.

## *Philomathes*

Athenian sphere of influence.<sup>25</sup> The suppression of the Euboean revolts in the 440s B.C.E. signified a hardening of Periclean policy towards Athens' allies who were now considered subjects. This move is made evident in the Regulation of Chalkis (c. 440s BCE):

*I shall not revolt from the People of Athens by any means or device whatsoever, neither in word nor in deed, nor shall I obey anyone who does revolt; and if anyone revolts I shall denounce him to the Athenians, and I shall pay to the Athenians whatever tribute I persuade them to agree, and I shall be the best and fairest ally I am able to be and shall help and defend the Athenian People, in the event of anyone wronging the Athenian People, and I shall obey the Athenian People.*<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, according to Victor Hanson, Periclean Athens "widened, amplified and intensified" the waging of war and was a "constant source of death and destruction" amongst the Greeks, suggesting Athenian democracy was inherently bellicose under Pericles.<sup>28</sup> Cleisthenes' *klerosis ek prokriton* (the pre-selection of candidates by *deme* for selection to the archonship), introduced in 487 B.C.E., deliberately aided military preparations and readiness and laid the groundwork for Pericles, who employed warfare endemically as a tool of democratic action and as an extension of policy and hegemony.

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<sup>25</sup> For a discussion on the Peace of Callias, see McInerney, *Ancient Greece*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> IG I<sup>3</sup> 40 in "Two Inscribed Documents of the Athenian Empire. The Chalkis Decree and the Tribute Reassessment Decree". Trans. S. D. Lambert and R. Osborne (AIO Papers no. 8, 2017, Attic Inscriptions Online; Website: <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGI3/40>). Accessed date, 11/15/2017.

<sup>28</sup> V.D. Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise to Western Power* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 4, 24.

## *Philomathes*

As a result, Athenian democracy was suited perfectly to serve as a "machine of war," and ready to prosecute wars more aggressively and emphatically than ever before:<sup>30</sup>

*For Athens alone of her contemporaries is found when tested to be greater than her reputation, and alone gives no occasion to her assailants to blush at the antagonist by whom they have been worsted, or to her subjects to question her title by merit to rule. [...] we have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere, whether for evil or for good, have left imperishable monuments behind us.*<sup>31</sup>

By the 430s B.C.E., Pericles' long-established political influence enabled him to push the Athenians into all-out war with Sparta.<sup>32</sup> According to Thucydides, Pericles opposed all concessions to Sparta "on principle,"<sup>33</sup> with his policies resting on a "commitment to Athenian superiority rather than calculation of a diplomatic or political advantage."<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Thucydides points to Pericles as the culprit for the failure of Sparta's diplomatic efforts to secure peace preceding the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C.E.: "the Athenians, persuaded of the wisdom of his advice, voted as he desired."<sup>35</sup> Under Pericles, more public money was spent financing the Peloponnesian War than on all other public activities combined: the *ekklesia* openly endorsed spending between five-hundred

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Hunt, "Athenian Militarism and the Recourse to War," in *War, Democracy and Culture in Classical Athens*, edited by David Pritchard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 241.

<sup>31</sup> Thucydides, *History of Peloponnesian War*, 2.41.3–2.41.4.

<sup>32</sup> Loren J. Salmons II., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 290–1.

<sup>33</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.140.

<sup>34</sup> Salmons, *Age of Pericles*, 290.

<sup>35</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.145. On Thucydides, it is worth acknowledging that he was not an ardent supporter of Athenian democracy and democratic values, unlike Pericles.

## *Philomathes*

and two-thousand talents each year during the war, suggesting the democracy was actively engaged in the waging of war on a regular and continuous basis.<sup>36</sup> Because of this constant warfare, the Athenians tolerated an extremely high percentage of casualties, with approximately 4-5% of the adult male population being eradicated each campaigning season (given a total Athenian population of between 350,000 to 400,000 during the fifth-century B.C.E.).<sup>38</sup> By comparison, in 1968 – the highest recorded year of American casualties in the Vietnam War – the United States lost 16,899 military personnel out of a total US adult population of 15,400,000, which represents approximately 0.11% of the total population.<sup>40</sup> As such, by radicalizing the democracy and empowering the *demos*, Pericles used *demokratia* as a weapon to build Athenian power and to ensure her dominant position in Greece, which meant spending more money and sacrificing more lives than any other Greek city-state before.<sup>41</sup>

After the first year of the Peloponnesian War, Pericles delivered the annual funeral oration: a time-honored, commemorative speech that marked the communal burial of all the Athenians who had died in foreign wars on behalf of the state.<sup>42</sup> The funeral oration represents the most succinct and striking statement of democratic ideology in antiquity, and its praise of democratic values and liberty has since informed

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<sup>36</sup> McInerney, *Age of Pericles*.

<sup>38</sup> IG I<sup>3</sup> 1147. Lambert and Osborne, *Two Inscribed Documents*. For these population estimates, I have deferred to McInerney, *Age of Pericles*. It is important to note that estimates of the Athenian population in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. are widely questioned and debated by the modern scholarship.

<sup>40</sup> McInerney, *Ancient Greece*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Salmons, *Age of Pericles*, 292.

<sup>42</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.35–2.46.

## *Philomathes*

countless orations (including Abraham Lincoln's address at Gettysburg).<sup>44</sup> In his eulogy, Pericles depicts an idealized version of democracy where individuals advance through merit and public service is valued:

*Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy.*<sup>45</sup>

The eulogy accurately reflects Pericles' precise view of Athenian identity and ideology in direct antithesis to the Spartans, and as the embodiment of this polarity, Pericles – in somewhat atypical fashion – articulates an extended and explicit critique of Sparta in antithesis to Athens. McInerney argues that Pericles conveys a series of clear oppositions: in contrast to the Spartan habit of driving out foreigners (*xenelasia*), Athens remained somewhat open and accessible; whilst the Spartans trained hard from childhood, the Athenians pursued a more relaxed, moderate way of life.<sup>46</sup> Pericles links his description of the balanced, ideal democrat to a notion of political participation that values debate and discussion not as "empty rhetoric" but as "the lifeblood of the democracy."<sup>47</sup> Additionally, Pericles describes how Athens is a "model for all Greece,"<sup>48</sup> and that each Athenian represents the ideal "self-sufficient individual" best suited to face any contingency.<sup>49</sup> In this respect, the Athenians distanced themselves from both the soft Persians and the Spartans, who

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<sup>44</sup> Hunt, *Athenian Militarism*, 225–242.

<sup>45</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.37.

<sup>46</sup> McInerney, *Age of Pericles*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.36–2.41.

<sup>49</sup> McInerney, *Age of Pericles*.



## *Philomathes*

emphasized physical strength "at the cost of any intellectual or artistic pursuits."<sup>50</sup>

Notably, Pericles did not allow his vision for Athens to rest wholly on its democratic system of government. For Pericles, according to Salmons, Athens' superiority to other city-states stemmed from its "citizens' character more than any political or cultural hegemony:" a character that had 'facilitated the acquisition of that power' (i.e. the empire).<sup>51</sup> These ideas directly contradicted the old, aristocratic and Homeric ideal of *arête* (manly excellence or virtue), which focused on the assertion of individual superiority; Salmons provides the pertinent example of Achilles withdrawing from the Trojan War after Agamemnon famously insulted his *tímê* (personal honor).<sup>52</sup> By placing his own status above his duty to the group, Achilles demonstrated a conception of *kleos*, not based on morality or responsibility to the group, but rather on an individual's performance of great deeds (military prowess in his case).<sup>53</sup> Like Achilles, it was the Spartans who placed the greatest emphasis on military prowess amongst all the Greeks, according to Thucydides<sup>54</sup> and Isocrates.<sup>55</sup> By comparison, Pericles redirected an individual's duty to his own *kleos* with his civic duty to provide for the state. Seen in this light, it seems Pericles was not denying the old Homeric code but reengineering it, so that, ironically, the exact same Achillean equation that

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Salmons, *Age of Pericles*, 285.

<sup>52</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, 1.1-1.125, Translated by A. T. Murray, Loeb Classical Library Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924).

<sup>53</sup> Salmons, *Age of Pericles*, 292.

<sup>54</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.11.

<sup>55</sup> Isocrates, 11.18-19. Trans L. V. Hook, Loeb Classical Library Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945).

## *Philomathes*

began in an élite, aristocratic setting was now reapplied in a democratic setting.

Furthermore, the reformulation and reapplication of these Homeric ideals by Pericles was also expressed militarily during the so-called "*hoplite* revolution." Pericles' new military vision was focalized on the expansion of Athens' naval empire, and as a result, the *hoplites*, who were the core of the Athenian infantry and comprised of landowners from the middle to upper classes, were required to become sailors in the navy. The *hoplites* within their *phalanx* – a massed rank of *hoplites* armed identically and lined up in perfect formation – symbolized the very beginnings of Athenian democracy and underpinned the egalitarian drive that established the conditions of democracy based on the concept of the concept of *homonoia*, or "like-minded men."<sup>56</sup> These military changes instituted by Pericles expanded the very idea of democracy and became the perfect expression of the *demos*, which now included the lower social classes (akin to his reforms). As such, conservatives like Plato<sup>57</sup> and Stesimbrotus of Thasos, lamented the fact that sailors could not demonstrate their individual *kleos* like the *hoplites*:

*Themistocles robbed the Athenians of spear and shield and gave them oars and cushions instead.*<sup>58</sup>

Notably, the egalitarianism of the upper-class phalanx and the working-class heroism of the trireme mirrored the dichotomy between the Athenian and Spartan militaries preceding the Peloponnesian War:

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<sup>56</sup> McInerney, *Age of Pericles*.

<sup>57</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, Translated by W. R. M. Lamb, Loeb Classical Library Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).

<sup>58</sup> Plutarch, *Themistocles*, Translated by Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919).

## *Philomathes*

*At the head of the one stood Athens, at the head of the other Lacedaemon, one the first naval, the other the first military power in Hellas.*<sup>59</sup>

In exploring the differences in ethos between the Athenians and Spartans, Thucydides highlights some of the hypocrisies and ironies of Pericles' career. He says that Pericles was a born aristocrat who thrived in a democratic system, that he was a man who – in what was nominally a democracy based on collegiality and the sharing of public office – ruled like an elected tyrant, and finally, that he was an aggressive, bellicose politician whose ultimate strategy was to refuse to engage in battle.<sup>60</sup> Although I have theorized that Pericles formed Athens in juxtaposition to Sparta, Thucydides might argue that the foremost antithesis exists between Pericles and the Athenians themselves. In this polarized world and mentality, Thucydides uses Pericles as his model to explore this chiasmic relationship and furthermore, to develop the opposition between the Athenians and Spartans to another degree. Thucydides' theory of leadership sees the character and disposition of a leader directly opposing that of the *demos*, exemplified by Pericles:

*The reason whereof was this: that being a man of great power both for his dignity and wisdom, and for bribes manifestly the most incorrupt, he freely controlled the multitude and was not so much led by them as he led them. Because, having gotten his power by no evil arts, he would not humor them in his speeches but out of his authority durst anger them with contradiction.*<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.18.

<sup>60</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.65.10.

<sup>61</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.65.8.

## *Philomathes*

In his reverent admiration of Pericles, this main point of contrast was the great difference among Pericles, the Athenians, and Pericles' successors: "but they that came after, being more equal amongst themselves and affecting everyone to be the chief, applied themselves to the people and let go the care of the commonwealth."<sup>62</sup> Indeed for Thucydides there is simply nothing worse than an elected leader who represents the inner failings of the *demos* – a theory that perhaps still resonates today.

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<sup>62</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.65.10.

# Philomathes

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## *Philomathes*

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