

## Pericles' Funeral Oration

In 431, shortly after the Peloponnesian War had broken out, Pericles delivered his famous Funeral Oration to commemorate those troops who had already fallen in battle. Recorded, and probably rewritten by the historian Thucydides, it is one of the primary sources on which our understanding of ancient Athens is based and provides a unique insight into just how Athenian democracy understood itself.

In the speech Pericles relates the special qualities of the Athenians, redefining many traditional Greek virtues in a radical new light. The idea that the Athenians are able to put aside their petty wants and strive for the greater good of the city is a central theme of the speech. Bound together by bonds of mutual trust and a shared desire for freedom, the people of Athens submit to the laws and obey the public officials not because they have to, as in other cities, but because they want to. Athenians had thus achieved something quite unique - being both ruled and rulers at one and the same time. This had forged a unique type of citizen. Clever, tolerant, and open minded, Athenians were able to adapt to any situation and rise to any challenge. They had become the new ideal of the Greek world. Pericles' view was obviously a very idealized one, and it ignored the realities of party factionalism, selfishness, and arrogance that were to soon manifest after his death.

Thucydides fervently supported Pericles but was less enthusiastic about the institution of democracy. Under the hands of Pericles, Thucydides thought democracy could be controlled, but without him, it could be dangerous. Despite Thucydides' attitude towards democracy, the speech he puts in Pericles' mouth supports the democratic form of government. The word '**democracy**' has its origins in the **Greek** language. It combines two shorter words: '**demos**' meaning whole citizen living within a particular city-state and '**kratos**' meaning power or rule.

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Thucydides, who wrote his Periclean speech for his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, readily admits his speeches are only loosely based on memory so shouldn't be taken as a verbatim report.

In the speech, Pericles says:

- Democracy allows men to advance because of merit instead of wealth or inherited class.
- In a democracy, citizens behave lawfully while doing what they like without fear of prying eyes.
- In a democracy, there is equal justice for all in private disputes.

Thucydides writes:

"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. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if no social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition. The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes, or even to indulge in those injurious looks which cannot fail to be offensive, although they inflict no positive penalty. But all this ease in our private relations does not make us lawless as citizens. Against this fear is our chief safeguard, teaching us to obey the magistrates and the laws, particularly such as regard the protection of the injured, whether they are actually on the statute book, or belong to that code which, although unwritten, yet cannot be broken without acknowledged disgrace."