

## **Prehistoric Athens (4,000 – 1,600 BC)**

### **Athens Before History (5000-1500)**

**Source:** <http://www.anagnosis.gr>

Athens enjoys a singularly fortunate site. The acropolis with its small nearby hills and convenient access to spring water, is a natural fortress and place of retreat in times of danger. The plain around it, the Lekanopedia, broken only by the range of Anchesmos, of which Mount Lycabettus, to the east of the Acropolis, is the highest point, is often described as arid. Yet it is carpeted with fertile sediment washed down from the surrounding hills, Aigaleos, Parnes, Pendeli and Hymettus, which shelter it on all sides from the worst weather, and which provide a ring of natural fortifications, except on the south-west, where the plain borders on the sheltered waters of the Saronic Gulf.

For all these reasons, it is not surprising that the area of the acropolis and its immediate neighbourhood have been inhabited since the early part of the fifth millennium B. C., making Athens possibly the oldest continuously inhabited city in Europe. The remains of Neolithic houses and graves have been found on and around the Acropolis. Archaeological evidence supports the view that this area was continuously inhabited from that time through to the Bronze Age, which began circa 3,000 B.C., at which time there were also settlements in eastern Attica, at Marathon, Spata, Vraona, Thorikos and elsewhere, suggesting a high degree of security and prosperity for the entire region.

At the beginning of the second millennium B.C. Greek-speaking people, sometimes called Achaeans, first entered Greece from the north. The Athenians always distinguished themselves from non-Greek-speaking people, whom they usually referred to as Pelasgians. It is not known whether they massacred them, drove them out, or subjugated them. Traces of their non-Hellenic tongue are still to be found in many of the topographical names of Attica. Even the name 'Athens' itself does not appear to be Greek. Topographical names with the forms '-ssos' and '-ttos', such as Kifissos, Ilissos, Ardettos, Lykabettos and Hymettos, are also believed to belong to the pre-Greek language once spoken in Attica. This extensive adoption of existing topographical names by the Greek-speaking incomers, together with later claims by the Athenians to represent the indigenous inhabitants of the area, suggests that in Attica the invaders did not drive out or massacre their predecessors, but cohabited with them.

## **Mycenaean Athens**

### **The Athens of Legend (c.1500-1200)**

Near the end of the Bronze Age, the Achaeans began to demonstrate increasing cultural sophistication under the influence of the civilisation of Minoan Crete, named after the legendary King Minos. At the same time, they retained their own distinctive ways. The result of this synthesis is known as the Mycenaean civilisation, since the most important city exhibiting this cultural fusion was Mycenae. A syllabic script, Linear B, was used to put the Greek language into writing, and this, together with the work of the archaeologists, gives us some insights into their society.

The chief Mycenaean settlements were usually built around a royal palace, maintained by an elaborate bureaucracy working under a king. Around the foot of the eminence on which the palace was built lived the freemen and slaves who worked the land.

It is likely that during this period the kings of Athens had such a palace on the Acropolis. Unfortunately, later building has destroyed most of the evidence dating from this period. It is most likely that this building consisted of a great hall, or megaron, and a forecourt, like the palaces at Mycenae, Tiryns and Pylos. A rich chamber tomb has been found on the northern slopes of the Acropolis containing fine Mycenaean pottery, gold and bronze ornaments and a carved ivory box, making it evident that the burial was that of a woman, probably of royal birth. It is referred to as 'the Princess' Tomb. Another family chamber tomb found under the temple of Ares was in use between 1450 and 1200 B.C. Excavations in the area of the later Athenian agora have revealed a cemetery from this period. Mycenaean tholos tombs are found scattered about the countryside of Attica: in Thorikos, Spata, Marathon and Menidi. [Read about the Mycenaean tomb in Menidi in [Attica](#).]

Nothing is known of the Mycenaean kings of Athens except a few names and legends, and what may be inferred from excavations. The traditional date assigned to the founder of the royal line, Kekrops was 1581 B.C. He was said to have selected the goddess Athena as patron of the city and named it after her. It is equally possible that the goddess is named after, and personifies, the city. Other royal names include Kodros, Erichthonios, Erechtheos, Pandion, Aegeus and Theseus. [Read about the legends of the earliest Athenian kings and their families in [Athens: The City](#).]

The port of Mycenaean Athens was in the Bay of Phaleron. Archaeologists have

recently uncovered what appear to be traces of this port, which preceded Piraeus.

The memory of the last great event of the Mycenaean age, the Trojan War, was long preserved in the oral traditions of bards. One such survived long enough to be written down in the epic poem the *Iliad*, in its late form attributed to the blind poet Homer. According to the *Iliad*, the Athenians were represented at the war of Troy under their king, Menestheus, but they had only a minor role to play in the great affairs of the day. This fits in with the impressions of relative importance of the Mycenaean states gathered by the archaeologists.

## **Dark Age Athens**

### **The Centuries of Obscurity (1200-750)**

**At the beginning of the twelfth century the Mycenaean palace-cities were first more strongly fortified, with water supplies secured within the walls, and then later abandoned. This is generally attributed to the invasion of Greece from the north by another Greek-speaking people distinguished by their dialect and customs as Dorians. These invaders swept down through central Greece into the Peloponnese, and burned Mycenae Tiryns and Pylos.**

**The Athenians always maintained proudly that they were autochthonous, or 'sprung from the earth'; that is, that they were not incomers but 'the people of the land', already settled on their land before the Dorian invasion. The evidence of excavations on and near the Acropolis suggests that this claim to continuity is correct. The tombs in the cemetery in the Keramikos have yielded an uninterrupted sequence of pottery spanning some five hundred critical years. One particular group, dating over some fifty years, shows a range of Mycenaean pottery lying together with the characteristic long bronze shoulder pins and safety pins which were introduced into Greece by the Dorians. Moreover, the important pottery remains show a gradual transformation from one style to another, without any sharp breaks.**

**In the 1930s the Swedish-American archaeologist Oscar Broneer discovered evidence that the walls and defences of Athens, like those of other Mycenaean cities, had been strengthened around 1300B.C. A section of this wall is visible today near the entrance to the Acropolis. There is evidence that at the same time, housing beyond the north-east wall was abandoned.**

**There are few traces of buildings dating from the centuries which followed, and the tomb gifts are poor, showing a deterioration in the economic condition of the Athenians, and possibly a reduction in population. But it is clear that the Dorian invasions passed Athens by without the destruction of the city or its inhabitants. On the far side of Mount Hymettos, on the sheltered Midland Plain and the north-east coast of Attica, Mycenaean burial pottery continued to be manufactured and deposited in graves for some time, suggesting the survival there of a style, and perhaps a culture, which had been destroyed elsewhere in Greece. The result everywhere, however, was a 'dark age' in which writing disappeared entirely and both the population and the standard of living fell. As a result of the destruction beyond the borders of Attica, Athens, although a minor Mycenaean town, may have become by default the most important city in Greece, and something of a refuge for the Mycenaeans. An ancient tradition states that refugees from Pylos fled to Athens**

after the destruction of that city. The father of King Kodros, Neleus, was supposed to have come from Pylos, and the name 'Neleus' appears in the genealogy of King Nestor of Pylos. Neleus was supposed to have saved the Athenians from the Dorian invaders at the cost of his life, by agreeing to be sacrificed in accordance with the promise of an oracle. From him some famous Athenians, such as Solon, Peisistratos and Plato, later claimed descent. The precise significance of this legend is by no means clear, but it may be based upon a genuine historical memory of a king who lost his life successfully repelling the invaders from the borders of Attica.

In the sixth generation after the Trojan war, some of these refugees from Mycenaean Greece allegedly went to Asia Minor, where they settled. Certainly, at a level dated about 1000 BC in Old Smyrna, to the north west of the modern city, locally produced pottery has been found decorated in a style which seems to be very closely imitative of Athenian protogeometric style. It is certain also that there was a general migration from the mainland across the Aegean to Asia Minor (modern Turkey) at about that time. Most cities along the Asian coast were subsequently Greek speaking. Their dialects showed that those in the central region were Ionians, akin to the Athenians; and the Athenians were later to claim, correctly or not, that Athens was the metropolis of all the Ionians of the Aegean islands and the Asian shore.

The evidence provided by pottery assumes great importance during the Greek 'Dark Age', for when all else rots or rusts, pottery survives. Also, the Athenians began to develop the art of ceramics as a major form of artistic expression, so that it can tell us much. Finally, their practice was to bury pots with the dead, and the burial ground at the Keramikos was used continuously for several centuries, providing archaeologists with evidence over a long period of time. Moreover, since each society developed its own style, similarity of pottery in different places reveals the existence of commercial contacts or cultural influence.

The development of the distinctive style of protogeometric pottery in Athens in the eleventh century is held to show that some degree of peace and prosperity gradually returned to Attica; while the appearance of the geometric in the ninth suggests increased prosperity. Stylistic influences from the east in the later eighth century provide evidence of renewed commercial contact with the Aegean world. Some historians infer from the superior character of Athenian pottery during much of this period that Athens was then the most highly-developed state in Greece.

Although most of what we know about this period has to be inferred from later traditions, it is clear that during this 'Dark Age' that some of the most distinctive characteristics of the city states of the later Archaic and Classical periods evolved.

At some point, the kings of Athens lost their power to the landowning aristocracy, which met in council on the Areopagos Hill. The aristocrats were divided into four tribes and rival clans, the members of each of which claimed a common descent. The members of a clan, together with their retainers and supporters, were enrolled in 'brotherhoods'. Enrolment into a brotherhood signified that a person was officially a citizen of Athens.

The chief duties of government came to be shared among three archons, or officials, chosen from among the aristocracy: the king archon, who performed the religious duties of the former king; the polemarch, who led the citizens in battle; and the eponymous archon, who presided over the civil administration and gave his name to the year. Later these were assisted by a board of six 'lesser' archons, known as thesmothetai, who were responsible for the interpretation of customary law. With the transfer of power, the institutions of government were symbolically located in the lower town; while the Acropolis became a 'sacred rock' reserved for religious sanctuaries and monuments, as well as remaining a place of refuge in times of danger.

The eupatridai, or 'well-born', owners of large estates on the fertile plains, enjoyed control of the Areopagos Council and these offices of state. The *ekklesia*, an assembly of freemen, probably had no rights other than that of giving, or withholding assent to decisions made by the aristocrats. Even though there were conflicts between great families and prominent personalities, these 'Few' were united by their common interests against the 'Many'.

During the early 'Dark Age' Attica was a land of independent towns and villages which sometimes went to war with each other, so that we hear, for example, of a war between Athens and Eleusis; but the various communities became united in a single polity. This extended the authority of the city over a wide area including the plain of Thria, and the Midland Plain. Unification was probably achieved over a long period as the result of a gradual process, one not quite completed in the late sixth century, when the island of Salamis was taken from Megara. However, in accordance with the widespread ancient practice of attributing important political developments to a single occasion, and the work of a single prestigious ancestor, the union was attributed by the Athenians to the semi-mythical King Theseus, who had lived in the distant Mycenaean Age. However achieved, this union created a single state larger than any other in Greece except that of Sparta.

The decline in the power of the Egyptians and Phoenicians during the eighth century led to a power vacuum in the eastern Mediterranean. Many Greek city states were able to take advantage of this by sending out settlers to found new colonies. Corinth and Megara and the cities of Euboea were very active, but Athens

was not. Despite its unusual size, Athens was surprisingly underdeveloped commercially before the sixth century. The most active cities were comparatively close to Athens, which may have been overshadowed by more powerful neighbours. The Aeginetans adopted the use of coinage at least fifty years before the Athenians, and seem to have then played a more active role in Aegean politics. They, in particular, may have stifled Athenian commerce and hampered its progress, for Herodotus hinted of 'an ancient hatred' between the two states.

## **Archaic Athens I**

### **The Age of the Tyrants (750-528)**

In the late seventh century the darkness begins to dissipate, although our knowledge of the earliest period is limited to isolated incidents and developments.

When we first learn of events in Athens it is clear that the city was already rent by internal divisions of two types, rivalries between prominent aristocrats and between the social classes: 'the Few and the Many'. The divisions within the aristocracy were based upon loyalties to important families which wielded influence in particular parts of Attica, which were no doubt evident in the form of confrontations between their rival heads and their supporters as they jockeyed for influence and power in city politics. It may have been an outcome of such a conflict that from the chief officers of the state, the archons, were limited to holding office for ten years.

When one clan became too powerful, its head might try to seize power by force, and become a tyrant. In such an attempt in 632 B.C., Kylon, an Olympic victor and son-in-law of the tyrant of Megara, seized the Acropolis with the help of his father-in-law and friends. Athenians flocked in from the countryside and besieged them. In the end, Kylon escaped, but his supporters were slaughtered in the sanctuary. Following this sacrilegious murder, those considered most immediately responsible, Megakles and the family of the Alkmaeonids, were banished. This incident led to a war between Athens and Megara.

The first known Athenian law code was issued by Drakon circa 621, possibly as a consequence of these events. It was later described as extremely harsh, and as 'written in blood'; giving us the word 'draconian'. It authorised generous application of the death penalty.

By the beginning of the sixth century, the social strains in Athens were becoming severe. Wealth had come to be concentrated in the hands of a clique of important landowners. In 620 B.C. two Athenian colonies were founded at the approaches to the Black Sea, suggesting that the Athenians had an interest in the important grain trade from that region. The widespread scattering of Athenian olive jars of this date found across the Mediterranean indicates that olives and olive oil were the main product of Athenian agriculture at this time, and that the city may have needed to import grain to feed its citizens. Olive production, which requires substantial investment which will not yield fruit for many years, can only be satisfactorily accomplished on a large scale by wealthy landowners, not by subsistence farmers who have to live off their land from year to year.

Many Athenian freemen had got themselves into debt with these great landowners by offering their persons as security. When they were unable to pay off their debts, some had been enslaved, while others had chosen exile. At the same time, changes in the techniques of warfare had led to the development of hoplite armies. Warriors equipped with a round shield and long spear would advance upon the enemy in ranks. The men who could afford to equip themselves with the necessary arms and armour for this style of fighting, and who could not afford the horse and groom necessary to fight in the cavalry, were mostly small farmers. Each man's shield covered his own left hand and partially guarded his neighbour. This method of fighting required that the men developed a sense of loyalty to their comrades so as not to break the 'shield wall'. It was therefore to be expected that the hoplites would develop a sense of a corporate identity and pride as those upon whom the safety of the city now depended, and would begin to look out for their common interests. The small farmers became increasingly unwilling to put up with economic insecurity; and in any case, whenever a man lost his land, and was no longer able to provide himself with a shield and spear, the city lost a valuable warrior.

Fearing civil strife, the extraordinary step was taken of appointing the well-travelled and widely-respected Solon as mediator and extraordinary legislator in 594, with a commission to solve the problem within one year. An aristocrat, who believed firmly in the privileges of the few: he claimed that he made just those reforms as were strictly necessary to avoid open civil strife -but no more.

The first step he took was to dissolve all existing debts. Solon seems to have believed that wealth, rather than ancestry, should determine who should actively participate in the government of the state, and that that government should be in accordance with just laws. He divided the Athenians into classes, based upon wealth (and ability to perform military service). The poorest class, the *Thetes*, who were the majority of the population, received some political rights for the first time, being able to vote in the assembly of citizens (*ekklesia*), but political office remained restricted to the upper class. The area of the *agora*, a space dedicated to the conduct of public affairs in the lower town, was probably cleared and set aside for this purpose at this date.

Solon also issued a detailed law code. It was written on four-sided wooden tablets set in frames; each tablet rotating on an *axon*, or axle. The laws were referred to in the following manner: 'the fifth law from the fourth axon.' Witnesses report that these tablets were to be seen on the Acropolis for many centuries. Perhaps wisely, Solon went into self-imposed exile for ten years afterwards.

Although Solon's reforms may have prevented immediate breakdown, they did nothing to solve the issue of rivalries between powerful families. In 580-79 B. C. a certain Damaisias tried to retain his power as archon beyond the allotted period of

one year. He lasted for two years and two months before being expelled by the aristocrats. On other occasions, no archons were elected, perhaps because ousted rivals would not concede defeat.

In c.561 B.C. Peisistratos, a leading citizen from Brauron on the north-eastern coast of Attica, seized control of the acropolis with an armed bodyguard, but was soon ejected. He later returned in an alliance with Megakles, leader of a family which enjoyed influence in the area of Phaleron. They dressed up a tall woman from Paeania, on the other side of Mount Hymmettos, as the goddess Athena, and with her in tow, re-entered and took over the city. [Read more about this remarkable story in [Attica](#).] They soon quarrelled, and Peisistratos was forced into exile once more. After acquiring a state in Thrace, he returned with an army, defeated his enemies at Pallene, swiftly entered the city during the afternoon siesta, and captured it for a third time.

Peisistratos ruled Athens from that point until his death in 528. Although he had seized, and held, power by force, he took good care to disguise the basis of his regime by outward conformity to law and custom. The laws of Solon continued to be observed, and the archons held office as usual, but it is likely that the tyrant took care to ensure that those people, elected to office could be relied upon to do his bidding. Thus when accused of murder, he duly attended the court, but significantly, his accuser dare not put in an appearance. He also took up residence on the Acropolis, which at that time had come to be reserved for religious sanctuaries. Despite the fact that his regime was founded upon force, over time he earned the reputation of being a consistent and just ruler who worked successfully to build up the wealth and power of the city.

In order to glorify the city, and thereby his own rule, and to bind the inhabitants of Attica together, he carefully fostered religion in all its forms.

He deliberately built up the state cult of Athena. In 566 B.C., he reformed the Panathenaic festival held annually in her honour, making it famous throughout Greece. The festival was held every year as before; but every four years there was to be a 'Greater Panathenaia', with dancing contests for boys and youths, a torch race, a chariot race and athletic contests, in which the prizes were amphoras filled with olive oil. The highlight of the festivities was a magnificent procession from the Dipylon Gate to the Acropolis, in which many of the citizens took part, having as its focal point a new richly embroidered robe carried on a boat on wheels, to offer to the ancient xoanon or olive-wood statue of Athena Polias. The celebration ended with sacrifices, feasting and dancing. Peisistratos probably also built a new temple dedicated to Athena on the acropolis.

Similarly, he instituted the festival of the Greater Dionysia. The followers of Dionysos in the foothills of Mount Pendeli, in the area today known as Dionysos, celebrated the god by singing his praises in goatskins. In 534 Thespis, an Athenian, initiated the practice by which an actor conducted a dialogue with this chorus. Peisistratos permitted this new dramatic form of the festival to be performed from a cart in various places, usually at the village threshing floors, which provided level space. Thus was the Western drama born. Soon, plays were being performed in Athens itself at the City Dionysia in an open space below the northern walls of the Acropolis, the audience sitting on the slopes above what was later to become the Theatre of Dionysos. [Read about the Dionysian origins of the Western theatre in [Attica](#).]

He extensively rebuilt the ancient Mycenaean sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis, erecting the first *teleuterion* or hall of mysteries. The public rites celebrated in connection with initiation into the mystery cult were probably first integrated into the Athenian calendar of observances at this time. [Read about the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries in [Attica](#).]

Peisistratos planned, but failed to carry to completion, the building of an ambitiously large temple of Zeus, known as the Olympeion. Aristotle thought that the enterprise was deliberately planned to absorb all the energies of the Athenians, so that they would be less likely to rise up and expel him. The foundation of several other shrines nearby are also attributed to his patronage, including the temples of Artemis in the fields, Apollo Delphinios, and the shrine of the Nymphs.

Peisistratos built temples across Attica on the site of ancient shrines, at Rhamnous, Sounion, and his native Brauron. He carried out a ceremonial purification of the island of Delos, the island lying in the centre of the Cyclades, sacred to Apollo and revered by all the Ionian Greeks. All bodies buried within sight of the god's temple were disinterred and reburied elsewhere. In doing this he was probably deliberately laying the basis for an Athenian claim to primacy over all Ionian Greeks and over Apollo's island shrine.

Peisistratos was a patron of the arts in other ways as well, but usually with a clear political motive. He supervised the standardisation of the oral tradition attributed to Homer, transmitted by the recitations of the rhapsodes, or bards, by having an 'authorised' text written down. It seems likely that it was in his time that many of the legends of the hero Theseus were developed as state propaganda in deliberate imitation the much more ancient legends of Herakles, in order to provide a sense of patriotic pride for the citizens, and for the glorification of the city. An indication of his success was that poets such as Anakreon and Simonides were attracted to Athens. Athenian black figure pottery, depicting scenes from legend and ordinary

life, ousted the work of Corinthian rivals, and came to be exported across the Mediterranean world.

Peisistratos was no less attentive to the infrastructure of the city. He built roads, while aqueducts brought water from Hymettos to the fountain house of Enneakrounos in the agora. He erected law courts and other public buildings in the agora, quarrying high-quality marble on Mount Pendeli. He levied a property tax to subsidise poor farmers, and sent circuit judges into the far reaches of Attica to settle disputes, consolidating the incorporation of the people of those areas into the full life of the Athenian state. He imported miners from northern Greece to work the silver mines of Laourion, in the southeast of Attica, and struck coins showing the head of Athena and her sacred owl.

He established ties of friendship with many states on the mainland, and with the tyrants of Naxos and Samos. He acquired the Thracian Chersonese, beginning the colonisation of the Hellespont, and laying the first foundations of the later Athenian empire, and further safeguarding the all-important grain route from the Black Sea.

## Archaic Athens II

### The Birth of Democracy (528-494)

It could fairly be said that Peisistratos laid the foundations of future Athenian greatness. He was undoubtedly a man of great ability, and perhaps for that reason, his tyranny was generally accepted. But after he died, the rule of his sons, Hippias and Hipparchos, was resented. After a lovers' quarrel with Hipparchos, two Athenians, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, decided to overthrow the ruling dynasty during the procession at the Panathenaic festival in 514 B.C. Hipparchos was stabbed, but the bodyguard of Hippias managed to arrest the pair. Threatened, Hippias overreacted, killing many citizens he thought dangerous to him. The disinherited aristocrats met to eject him, but were defeated at Leipsydriion near Mount Parnes, where many young nobles were killed. In 511-10, Hippias fortified the hill of Munychia, overlooking Phaleron, where the warships were beached. The powerful Alkmeonid family then engineered his overthrow by calling upon the aid of King Kleomenes of Sparta. Wealthy patrons of Delphi, the Alkmeonids bribed the oracle to urge the Spartans to free Athens. Two attempts were necessary, but a Spartan army drove away the Thessalian cavalry which Hippias had summoned to his aid, and besieged him on the Acropolis. When some of his children, hiding in the lower city, were caught by the besiegers, he surrendered and left under safe conduct.

The Spartan king then tried to interfere in the internal affairs of Athens in support of his ally Isagoras, in his rivalry with Kleisthenes, head of the powerful Alkmeonid clan, and expelled the latter, but when the Spartans withdrew, Kleisthenes placed himself at the head of the people against the return to power of the discredited aristocracy. He ostensibly 'took the people into partnership' and profoundly reformed the government of Athens in 507 B.C. These changes clearly had two purposes: to destroy once and for all the persistent and divisive loyalties to rival local leaders, and to create a situation of isonomia, or equality before the law, with an equal chance for everyone to participate in the government of the city. In this way he sought to defuse the divisions between rival families and between social classes which had so rent the life of the city before Peisistratos had imposed his tyranny, and at the same time remove the local bases of their power.

Every Athenian citizen was enrolled in one of the new 'tribes', depending upon where they lived. The land of Attica was divided into three large areas representing the power bases of the main rival clans: the south-western shore, the city and its surrounding plain, and the land beyond the surrounding mountains. Each of the tribes was allotted people who lived in one area of each of these regions, and these

areas were deliberately not adjacent to each other.

The ten tribes each sent fifty members, chosen by lot, to a new council, called the *Boule*, or Council of the Five Hundred. The year was divided into ten parts, and one tenth of the council, the *Prytany*, would meet during each period. The *Prytany* would prepare the agenda for the *ekklesia*, a function they probably took over from the Areopagus, which retained only limited judicial functions. A *Bouleuterion* was built for the meetings of the council on the west of the agora. As a further measure against the division of the people into factions by the ambitions of powerful rival individuals, Kleisthenes also introduced the legal process of ostracism. The Assembly would vote each year on whether to hold an ostracism. If the vote was positive, a day would be appointed upon which the people would vote whom to exile. They would write the name of their choice on an *ostrakon*, or potsherd. If 6,000 citizens participated, the person whose name appeared on most ostraka had to leave the city within ten days, and could not return for ten years.

Although Kleisthenes' motives may have been limited to gaining short-term advantage against rivals, his reforms provided the foundations for the world's first known democracy. It is one thing to empower the people, and another for them to possess the self confidence to employ that power. It was to be twenty years before these new rights were exercised, but by that time events had conspired to endow the people of Athens with precisely that spirit of self-confidence which would enable them to take their destiny into their own hands. [Read about the nature of Athenian democracy in [Athens: The City](#).]

## **Archaic Athens III**

### **The Persian Threat (494-478)**

At the end of the sixth century the very existence of Athens was threatened by a danger looming in the east. The expansion of the Persian Empire, the superpower of its time, had reached the Aegean shore and absorbed the Greek cities of Ionia. It was not to be expected that the fiercely independent spirit of the Greek city states could be crushed easily, even by such overwhelming force; and in 499 B.C. the Ionian city of Miletos led a concerted revolt against Persian rule. Answering their call for aid, the Athenians sent twenty ships to assist them. Although the rebels burned Sardis, the seat of the Persian satrap, the revolt was soon extinguished at the battle of Lade. In brutal reprisal, Miletos was destroyed, and its entire population massacred or enslaved. The strong identification of the Athenians with the Ionian cause was evident shortly afterwards, when Phrynichos put on his play *The Capture of Miletos* in Athens. Many in the audience burst into tears. Phrynichos was fined one thousand drachmas and his play banned.

In 492 B.C. the Persian king, Darius, sent an expedition to conquer Thrace and Macedonia which was only withdrawn after much of his fleet was destroyed by a storm while rounding the peninsula of Athos.

The Aegean Sea, however, was no barrier to the spread of Persian power, for the islands of the archipelago, for the most part lying within sight of each other, invited further expansion. In June 490 Darius sent another force, which sailed from island to island across the Aegean receiving submission and tribute, and reducing any cities which resisted. This expedition was probably designed only to subdue the islands and then to reconnoitre the European shore; but the Athenians, conscious of the assistance they had rendered to rebel Miletos, expected Persian retribution. When, in September, having subdued Euboea, the Persians landed their forces in the Bay of Marathon, the Athenians feared the worst.

It is not known at that time whether the lower city was surrounded by a wall, but no unambiguous trace of one has yet been detected by the archaeologists. The defencelessness of the city has been used to explain why, with only some six hundred Plataean allies, the Athenian citizen army, under the command of the polemarch Kallimachos and the ten generals, numbering perhaps ten thousand men in all, marched out to Marathon.

The Athenians stationed themselves on the lower slopes of the hills above the bay to observe the invaders, having already sent a runner to Sparta to seek assistance. He seems to have had some sort of religious experience while crossing the mountains of Arcadia, which he interpreted as an encounter with the god Pan. When he arrived, the Spartans warmly expressed willingness to come to the aid of the Athenians in principle, but also explained that they were forced to delay actually setting out to help them on account of a religious holiday they were observing. It seems

likely that the Spartans were not unwilling to see the destruction of a potential rival.

The Athenian forces contented themselves with observing the Persians watering their horses at a lake on the north of the plain for several days. Then when he saw an opportunity to strike, one of the generals, Miltiades, who had acquired experience of the fighting practices of the Persians in the Straits area, led a surprise attack against the invaders and defeated them. Then the victorious warriors rushed back to defend their city from further attack in case the fleet should land a force at Phaleron, but the reconnoitring ships did not put anyone ashore.

Our knowledge of this battle comes almost entirely from a single source: Herodotus. His *Histories* was written more than one generation after the events he narrates, and were designed to be read aloud before an Athenian audience, so he was unlikely to present a clinically detached viewpoint. In addition, there are some important respects in which his account is deficient. For example, he writes that King Darius had special ships built to transport cavalry horses, yet in his account of the battle itself, the cavalry plays no part, and he never accounts for their absence. Again, he describes the Persians as defeated at Marathon and fleeing in panic to their ships, yet he inconsistently portrays the Athenians as afraid that, when the fleet rounded Cape Sounion, the Persians might land a force at Phaleron and take the city. He never explains why the Persians, if they intended to take Athens, landed at Marathon, on the wrong side of the peninsula, and stayed there for such a long period. With the overwhelming force he attributes to them, a landing at Phaleron would have been the obvious preliminary to an attack on the city.

There is reason to believe that the expedition may have been over already, as far as the Persians were concerned. They probably landed at Marathon to water and graze their horses at the lake which then occupied the north of the plain, in preparation for the return journey back to Asia Minor. There is some late evidence that most of their forces had already embarked on the ships when Miltiades launched his attack, so that only a fraction of the Persian forces were actually defeated; hence the nervousness of the Athenians that their city was still in danger from the Persian forces after the battle.

Yet despite all these qualifications, Marathon remains one of the most important battles in world history. The Athenians lost only one hundred and ninety-two men, and their 'victory', however insignificant it may have seemed to the Great King in distant Susa, filled the Athenians with a heady sense of their own potential, the results of which were to play a crucial role in the history of the long upward march of the human spirit. A new self-confidence filled the people of Athens, and this spirit, however insecure its basis, was to have momentous consequences for the history of civilisation.

The results were not slow in coming. An awakening of confidence of the citizens in their ability to govern themselves is evident in the new readiness of the people actually to exercise their powers of ostracism against prominent citizens. The first ostracism was voted in 488-7 B.C. It

was probably in the next year that the method of choosing the archons by lot was introduced. This was a profound move towards genuine democracy. It destroyed the advantage which the wealthy and well-known necessarily enjoy in elections, and removed a source of corruption. It also indicated that these, and all, offices of state were no longer to be as important as they had been, that ambitious citizens would no longer campaign for their election, and that the *boule* and *ekklesia* had taken upon themselves a greater role in the government of the country. The various specific duties of government were generally taken up by boards of officials chosen by lot, who could serve only once. Only the ten generals were elected, and could serve an indefinite number of times.

It was intended to erect a magnificent new temple to Athena, now known as the 'older Parthenon', on the acropolis. Older buildings were demolished and the rubble used to extend the surface area of the citadel. New temples were constructed at Rhamnous and Sounion. The cult of the rural god Pan was introduced into Athens. The sanctuary of Pan in the cave on the northern side of the acropolis was dedicated following the victory of Marathon. An annual torch race and sacrifices were established in honour of the god. Another sanctuary to Pan lay by the Ilissos, near the present church of Ay. Photini, where a carving of the god could still be seen on the rock until recently. In the countryside of Attica he frequently came to share the caves originally sacred to the nymphs.

The first prominent citizen who was to win his position by his ability, and whose origins lay outside the ranks of the old aristocracy, was Themistokles. He saw clearly that the expansion of Persian power had not really been checked, and that the Athenians must prepare for the real threat which would inevitably come.

A stroke of pure luck provided the means to make preparations to beat off an invasion. A particularly rich vein of silver was discovered in the mines of Laurion. Themistocles knew his fellow citizens well enough to realise that there was no way that he could persuade them to spend this money on building a navy to protect their shores from a distant enemy whose resources and strength they did not yet appreciate. So he took advantage of a long and inconclusive war with the Athenians' nearby rivals, the Aeginetans, to persuade the citizens to use their new wealth to make Athens a great naval power. A new war fleet of two hundred ships was built; and instead of beaching the ships at Phaleron, as had been the practice, the three natural harbours at Piraeus were developed and fortified. [Read more about the mines of Lavrion, ancient *and* modern, in [Attica](#).]

When it became clear that King Xerxes was planning a campaign to subdue the whole of Thrace, Macedonia and the Greek peninsula, a meeting those states determined to resist met at the Isthmus. The Hellenic League was formed, and the Spartans were accepted as head of this alliance. All wars between its members, including that of Athens with Aegina, were promptly ended.

The attack, when it came in 480 B.C. was by both land and sea. In an attempt to prevent the Persian army entering the peninsula, a detachment was sent to block the Vale of Tempe. But when the leaders of this force found out that there were other ways into Greece, they returned to the Isthmus. A second blocking attempt was made at the pass of Thermopylae. Most of those soldiers left when the Persians appeared; and the Spartan rear guard was surrounded and annihilated. As so often happens in wartime, this defeat was transformed by propaganda into a 'moral victory', but one that in no way held up the advance of the Persians. Despite the loss of many of his ships in a storm off Euboeia, and an indecisive engagement with Greek ships at Artemiston, the Thebans and some other states decided to side with the invaders, while the Peloponnesians built a wall across the Isthmus of Corinth, leaving Athens defenceless against overwhelming force.

The Delphic oracle had instructed the Athenians to rely on their 'wooden walls'. Themistocles convinced the people that this was a cryptic reference to their ships, and the new navy was employed to evacuate the citizens to the nearby islands of Salamis and Aegina, and the peninsula of Troizen, while the fleet of the Hellenic League, having protected the operation, put into Salamis. Nine days after the engagement at Artemiston, the Persian fleet anchored in the Bay of Phaleron.

When Persian land forces arrived at Athens there were just a few people left behind, described as the Treasurers of the Temple of Athena and a mass of poor people, all barricaded on the acropolis. Because it was thought impregnable, the defenders had left the steep north side of the hill unguarded, and Persian soldiers managed to scale the cliff and the walls. The despairing defenders flung themselves from the battlements or fled into the temples, where they were slaughtered. The lower city and the temples on the acropolis were alike plundered and burned.

Themistocles had to employ all his cunning and duplicity to prevent the Greek fleet from either withdrawing to defend the Peloponnese, protected by its hastily built wall, and abandoning the rest of Greece, or simply breaking up, with the various contingents going their several ways. In secret communications with Xerxes he lured the Persian fleet into the narrow Bay of Salamis after convincing him that the Greek ships would otherwise escape his clutches, and provoked a battle in which the Persian fleet was decisively defeated. In this victory the new Athenian fleet played a key role, although it was agreed at the time that the first prize for valour in the battle really went to the Aeginetans. '

Disgusted, Xerxes went home, leaving his general Mardonius with part of his forces to winter in Greece and complete the subjugation of the region in the next spring. Mardonius, however, was defeated by the combined land forces of the Hellenic League at the battle of Plataea, and on the very same day, the Greek fleet, which had gone onto the offensive, defeated a Persian fleet at Cape Mycale, in Asia Minor. The Greeks of Ionia promptly rose in revolt once more, and drove out the Persians, whose power in the Aegean was set to fade from this time onwards.

## **Classical Athens I**

### **The Golden Age (478-431)**

The years immediately following the Persian defeat must have been hard ones for the Athenians. They had lost their homes, property and temples, which were probably nearly all destroyed. Two consecutive harvests had been lost. Yet if the battle of Marathon had given the Athenians new self-confidence, the victories of Salamis, Plataea and Mycale inspired them to new heights of creativity.

Themistocles arranged the immediate building of a wall around the lower city with thirteen gates, known as the Themistocleian Wall, traces of which remain today. The Spartans put considerable pressure on the Athenians to desist. They clearly felt that their traditional position of primacy in Greece was threatened by the new assertiveness of the Athenians. Themistocles used his diplomatic skills to delay any action on their part until it was too late for them to do anything about it.

The Hellenic fleet under Pausanias, the Spartan victor of Plataea, captured Cyprus and Byzantium, securing control of the Aegean in north and south. The occupation of Byzantium was more important to the Athenians, for it could be used to control the all-important Black Sea grain trade route. Pausanias installed himself as ruler but they complained about his tyranny and accused him of conspiring with the Persians. He was recalled and punished, but cleared of the last charge. It is clear that the Athenians did not want a Spartan in control of this strategic city. When, in 477, the Spartans sent a replacement contingent to join the Hellenic fleet, it is clear that the Athenians and Ionians had come to an agreement to reject their aid, and they were asked to go home. In this way the Spartans found themselves deliberately excluded) by Athenian machinations from Aegean politics.

This left the field clear for the Athenians, led by Aristides, who promptly founded a new alliance, known as the Delian League, to provide mutual protection for themselves and the Greeks of the coastlands of Asia Minor and the Archipelago. Perhaps one hundred and fifty states joined almost immediately. Each state contributed to a fleet for their common defence against the Persians; the larger states contributing ships and men, and the smaller states the money to pay for their upkeep. The treasury of the League was located on the central Ionian sanctuary of Delos, but its treasurers were Athenians. This was to be an alliance in which the Athenians were much more than equal members with the others.

Cimon encouraged the larger states of the Delian League to substitute money payments for the ships and crews due as their contribution to the common effort. As a result, the fleet of the League became, in reality, an Athenian fleet, maintained by a form of taxation on the other states. With the decisive defeat of the Persians in 468 at Eurymedon, the ostensible purpose of the League was accomplished. Previously, it had been popular as the member states had

received protection against a return of the Persians for their money. But afterwards, its real purpose was seen to be the subjugation of the islands and the coast of Ionia to Athenian rule. The experience of the people of Naxos c.470 and Thasos in 465 showed that any state attempting to leave the League, would be punished, and restrained, if necessary, by force. Athenian primacy had become by default Athenian hegemony, and the Delian League an Athenian Empire.

The large and active Athenian fleet provided work for many citizens of the lower classes who could not afford to provide themselves with the arms and armour of a hoplite warrior. They found employment as oarsmen on the ships. This kept large numbers of them away from the city for long periods, and may be why the old nobility were able temporarily to recover some of their influence. Under the leadership of the wealthy and well-connected Cimon, son of Miltiades, who soon came to dominate Athenian public life, the Persians were driven from the shores of the Aegean, and the Athenians acquired the coast of Thrace and Skyros.

On Skyros were 'discovered' the bones of Theseus. These were solemnly transported to Athens and interned in a new temple dedicated to the hero. An indication of the range of activities abroad in which the Athenians were engaged during this period is given by a war memorial, which records that in 458 B.C., one hundred and seventy-seven Athenians from just one of the ten 'tribes' were killed. They died in Cyprus, Egypt, Phoenicia, Halicis, Aegina, Megara, etc.

Cimon levelled the devastated temples on the Acropolis, previously left in ruins as a memorial of Persian barbarism, and used the stonework to build ramparts on the summit of the rock to enlarge its surface area. In this rubble were later found many fine statues and architectural pieces. He also erected the Painted Stoa, on which scenes from the great victories of the Persian Wars were painted by Polygnotus. He was praised by contemporaries for planting many trees to beautify the city, especially in the public gardens known as the Academy. He also rebuilt other sanctuaries in Attica, such as that of Eleusis, which had been destroyed by the Persians.

In the 460s Cimon led an expedition to rescue the Spartans from a revolt by their slaves, who had taken advantage of a disastrous earthquake which had killed many citizens. In his absence, a certain Ephialtes led a peaceful revolution in Athens, bringing about constitutional changes which moved power even more decisively and firmly into the hands of the ordinary people. The powers of the aristocratic Areopagus were virtually abolished. Most government functions came to be administered by boards often men chosen by lot.

The *Heliaia*, previously a court of appeal, became one of the chief means of holding officials responsible for their actions. Six thousand citizens were enrolled each year to act as jurymen, and were paid, enabling the less well-off to enjoy the free time to perform the duties of a citizen. When Cimon returned, having been insulted by the Spartans he had set out to aid, he was ostracised. Paradoxically, recent constitutional reforms in the direction of direct democracy made it impossible for the aristocracy to wield much influence, yet that very levelling enabled a

dynamic and well-respected citizen to enjoy real power -as long as he did what the mass of the people wanted him to do. In this manner, influence in the state passed to Pericles.

Bringing an end to all pretence, in 451 the Treasury of the Delian League was moved to Athens, and the wealth of the League was diverted for the rebuilding, fortification and glorification of the city.

Already, in 458, a huge bronze statue of Athena was erected on the acropolis by Pheidias as a monument to Athenian valour in the war. Athena was represented as holding a spear and helmet, and came to be known as Promachos or "Champion." Thirty feet high, the crest of the goddess' helmet and the point of her spear glinting in the sun were visible from ships rounding Cape Sounion.

Border forts were built at Panakton and Phyle, etc. in order to make the ring of mountains encircling the city part of its defences. During this period the port of Piraeus grew in importance. Ship sheds and dry docks were constructed for the warships. Much of the city was rebuilt in accordance with a plan devised by Hippodamus. Many foreign residents settled there, bringing with them the worship of foreign gods, and giving the port a cosmopolitan and politically radical character. Then defensive walls were built, enclosing the fortifications of Athens and Piraeus, and connecting the city with the Bay of Phaleron, allowing the Athenians unfettered access to the sea and use of their fleet during a siege. On Pericles' suggestion, a second reinforcing wall was built parallel to the northern wall a few years later. The line of these two walls roughly follows the course of the present Pireos Street, while that of the Phaleron Wall is less well established.

The temples on the acropolis were magnificently rebuilt, as a demonstration of Athenian self-confidence. A new Parthenon was designed by Iktinos and Kallikrates, while Pheidias was in charge of building operations. The marble was brought from the nearby quarries on Mount Pendeli. Inside was placed a gold and ivory statue of Athena, more than ten metres high. These precious substances were locked into a wooden framework so that they could be removed in case of necessity. A ceremonial way was designed by Mnesikles as an imposing entrance to the Acropolis. Temples were also magnificently rebuilt across Attica, such as the temple of Poseidon at Sounion. [Read about the wonders of the Parthenon in [Athens: The City.](#)]

When Pericles dominated the city by the force of his personality, the arts flourished, and men of letters everywhere looked to Athens for stimulation and patronage. Pericles himself called the city 'an education for Greece.' Herodotus was encouraged to give readings of his travels in the Persian Empire. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides brought Greek drama to new heights. The plays were put on by wealthy men, who were awarded monuments for their work, of which the monument to Lysikrates in Plaka is the sole survivor.

Private homes during this period formed a contrast with the fine public buildings. Narrow, streets surfaced with gravel wound in irregular fashion around the foot of the acropolis, as on

many island towns today, and the houses erected on them had to accommodate their peculiarities. They were usually built of sun-dried mud brick on stone bases. Small homes were often a single room with a courtyard in front, and other rooms on either side of it. Furniture was sparse. Many houses had stone-lined cess pits. 'Home' meant less to the Athenians than it does to us. The men met each other and conducted their business in the agora, and took their exercise and recreation in the gymnasia.

## Classical Athens II

### The Great Peloponnesian War (431-404)

It was inevitable that resentment among the so-called 'allies' of the Athenians at their subjugation and exploitation would fester. The 'allies' were subject to the laws decided upon in the Athenian *ekklesia*: Athenian magistrates were imposed on them; legal cases involving the death penalty had to be referred to Athens. Athenian coinage and weights and measures were enforced upon them. The Allies had discovered the lessons, so obvious in our own day, that an 'alliance' with a greater power may turn into the subversion of one's own government and effective subjugation, and that democracies may give some liberty to their own citizens, while simultaneously denying it to those of other states effectively under their power. Resentment was also felt keenly in rival Sparta, which had for centuries been regarded as the leading power in Greece. It was equally natural that all those independent states, such as Megara and Corinth, which felt themselves threatened by the growing power and 'political meddlesomeness' of the Athenians should line up with 'the Spartans and their allies', known to history as the Peloponnesian League. Thucydides says that: 'the growth of Athenian power alarmed the Spartans and compelled them to war.' After a false start, war broke out between those states loyal to Athens and those which wished to bring about the downfall of Athenian power.

This was a terrible war, involving at one time or another most of the Greek states. Since the Athenians were identified with democracy, and rule by 'the Many', the dominant aristocracies of the conservative states feared the attraction of Athens for their own people, and in many states, civil wars broke out, with the aristocrats favouring Sparta, and the common people Athens.

This was not merely a war between states, it was a struggle between two different ideals and ways of life. The Spartans stood for the old-fashioned militaristic values of the Dorians, while the Athenians represented radical new ways of thinking, which required rational justification for institutions and actions rather than blind appeal to custom. This made many fearful, even among the aristocrats in Athens itself.

Pericles' policy was to fight offensively at sea, where the large Athenian navy could be used to best advantage, and to fight defensively on land, withdrawing behind the Long Walls and avoiding direct confrontation with the superior Spartan hoplites, who were by far the most powerful and prestigious fighting force in Greece.

During the war, each year, at the beginning of the campaigning season the Spartans invaded Attica, and the country people were obliged to abandon their homes and

fields, and retire behind the Long Walls. Many encamped in an area below the eastern walls of the acropolis known as the 'Black Stones', where the Delphic oracle had expressly forbidden settlement, in the area of the modern Anafiotika. An unforeseen consequence was that, crowded together under siege conditions during the hot summer months, epidemics broke out. Pericles himself died in this manner in 429.

Athens was an open society, and the long, inconclusive but damaging war provoked some real questioning. Socrates began his own struggle for understanding and truth in his dialogues with leading young aristocrats. Amazingly, after six years of warfare Aristophanes was able to put on his play *The Acharnians*, a plea for peace, ascribing the beginning of the war to 'a bunch of good-for-nothing individuals.' It won first prize. How many modern states, including those which most loudly claim to be democratic, would tolerate the public performance of an anti-war play during a long and exhausting war, let alone reward its author!

When Mytilene seceded from the Delian League, the Assembly voted to massacre all the inhabitants, sending out a ship with those orders. On the next day, the people relented and contented themselves with ordering the destruction of the city's defences and the loss of their fleet and land. They sent out another ship with new orders to overtake the first. At the time this was seen by some Athenian aristocrats as an indication of the inherent instability of democracy.

After a decade of bitter fighting a truce was agreed by the exhausted parties in 421, after the Athenians had managed to capture some Spartans hoplites on an island in the mouth of the bay of Pylos. Contrary to the reputation which they carefully fostered, the Spartans hoplites surrendered.

Influence in Athens began to pass from generals to orators, such as Kleon, who could sway the Ekklesia. Remarkably, when the fighting ended, building immediately began again in Athens. In 420 the Asklepeion at the southern foot of the Acropolis was founded, when the god was brought up to the city from Zea, perhaps ultimately from Epidaurus. Work began on the temple of Athena Nike and the Erechtheion.

The Peace was not destined to last. The most prominent man of his day in Athens, the handsome and charismatic young nobleman Alcibiades, persuaded the Athenians to launch an ambitious naval expedition to go to Sicily to threaten the grain supply of the Spartans and their allies by taking Syracuse, the Spartans' most powerful allies on that island. This was the largest naval expedition the Athenians ever mounted, and it set out with high expectations.

One night just before the fleet was due to set sail, some of the erect phalloi of the

Hermes, stylised representations of the god Hermes which were set up on property boundaries in the streets, were broken off. This shocked many conservative citizens, and after the departure of the expedition, investigations were held. Household slaves were interrogated, and Alcibiades and his friends were accused of mocking the Eleusinian mysteries in wild drinking parties. The state trireme was sent to arrest Alcibiades and bring him back to Athens to face trial in the absence of his supporters in the fleet. Not unaware of his enemies' intentions, he escaped and offered his services to the enemy.

Without the dynamic leadership of Alcibiades, the Sicilian Expedition proved a disaster. Now poorly led, after a failed siege of Syracuse, the Athenians were themselves threatened by Sicilian forces reinforced by Spartans. The besiegers found themselves besieged. After several failed attempts to extricate themselves, the Athenians were pursued and cut down. The survivors were imprisoned in the quarries of Syracuse, and either died there or were sold as slaves. Late in 413 the news of the disaster, and the total loss of ships and men, reached Athens. [Read about the disastrous Sicilian Expedition in [Athens: The Suburbs.](#)]

The war had already been resumed. But this time, on the advice of Alcibiades, the Spartans converted Dekelea, twenty kilometres from the acropolis, into a permanent base, so that the end of the campaign season would bring no relief to the besieged country folk packed behind the Long Walls. Some twenty thousand slaves from Laurion deserted to the Spartans at Dekelea, and the lucrative silver mines had to be closed down. Yet despite the odds, the indefatigable Athenians built themselves a new navy using a special reserve fund they had set aside for such an emergency twenty years before.

Under the strain of renewed war and siege, bitter social divisions began to appear once more among the Athenians. In 411 a group of four hundred oligarchs took over the city for several months, breaking into the *bouleuterion* and paying of the councillors. This coup was overthrown by the sailors who returned from Samos and had a law passed which condemned to death anyone trying to subvert democracy. Yet despite their internal problems, a victory at sea persuaded the Athenians to turn down a Spartan offer to end the war in 410.

The Spartans called upon Persian aid, and after a long struggle of attrition, Athenian naval power was finally extinguished in the battle of Aegospotami in 405, when their ships were surprised onshore and one hundred and sixty destroyed. It was said that on the night when the news of this defeat was brought to Piraeus by the galley *Paralos*, the people of Athens first knew that something was terribly wrong when they heard a cry of wailing approaching the city from the port. Not only was Athens' last fleet lost, the route from the Black Sea, by which the grain

which fed Athens was imported was severed. Athens was blockaded for several months by land and sea by Lysandros.

In 404 B.C., facing famine, the city finally surrendered. A Spartan garrison was installed, and the Athenians were forced to demolish their own Long Walls to the sound of pipe music.

## **Classical Athens III**

### **The Intellectual Centre (404 - 339)**

The long period of warfare and plague had set up tensions within the city which could only be resolved by blood, and the Athenians now turned upon each other. Lysandros allowed the 'Thirty tyrants', an anti-democratic group of aristocrats, to assume power, upon which they instituted a reign of terror. Thrasyboulos retreated to the fortress of Phyle, gathered support, and returned to restore the democracy in 403. But the horrors which Athenians had undergone raised profound questions of responsibility and punishment in the minds of many. Socrates, who was associated with many of the aristocrats who had imposed the tyranny, was selected as a scapegoat, and forced to drink hemlock in 399.

Despite their failure in the great war, the Athenian spirit was irrepressible, and in 394 Conon defeated a Spartan fleet off Knidos in Asia Minor. The Long Walls and the fortifications of Athens and Piraeus were soon rebuilt, and an Athenian League was founded in alliance with Thebes. The Thebans destroyed Spartan supremacy once and for all under Epaminondas at the battle of Leuktra. From that point onwards, the Athenians began to fear the Thebans as their main rivals.

Despite this military revival, there seems to have been a sense at the time that something wonderful had passed away for ever. The domination of Athens by its past had already begun. People began to look backwards. Even the language of the past came to be considered more dignified than that of the present.

Athenian democracy came to be increasingly dominated by orators, who were trained to speak in public. They were the lawyer-politicians of their day. From 355, Euboulos directed Athenian policy towards peace, a less ambitious foreign policy, social harmony and sound management of the economy.

During these years several new institutions came into existence which made Athens the centre of the scholastic world, institutions founded by intellectual giants without peer. Plato, a pupil of Socrates, created a philosophical school outside the city walls at the shrine to Akademos, from which it took its name as "the Academy." This drew other philosophers to Athens, and in 335, Plato's student, Aristotle, from Stagira, in Macedonia, in turn founded the Lycaeum, outside the walls on the other side of the city, near the present Parliament Building. At the end of the fourth century Zeno of Kition, in Cyprus, founded the Stoic School, and Epicurus of Abdera, in Thrace, created the school which bore his name. Yet their work, however profound, was essentially reflective. It lacked something of the freshness, and the sense of flowing seamlessly out of the experience of life, of the thought of

the fifth century.

In the middle of the fourth century, the political and military centre of gravity in Greece moved northwards, to Macedonia, where a strong-minded king, Philip II was able to build up a powerful permanent army and extend his power over the Greek peninsula. The orator Demosthenes saw clearly what was happening and warned the citizens of Athens of their danger. A league was created to unite the southern Greeks against Philip, but he decisively crushed all opposition at Chaeronea in 338. The Athenians might have expected the worst, but by this time the name of their city was already surrounded by such a halo of renown that the Macedonian king, conscious of his cultural heritage, spared the city. His son, Alexander, personally visited bearing the ashes of the Athenian dead. Yet when Philip died and Thebes rebelled, the only reason that the Athenians were not directly involved was that its army was too slow to take the field.

Alexander, no less proud of this inheritance, nursed the ambition to take revenge for the destruction of Athens by Xerxes by taking the offensive in the clash of civilisations. A brilliant general, he was so speedily and so overwhelmingly successful in his invasion of Asia that in a few years he was able to take over the Empire, from Egypt to what is now Afghanistan, and then to extend its eastern borders to India. He sent back to Athens as trophies of his victory three hundred Persian shields, which were thereafter hung in the Parthenon.

Macedonian hegemony turned out to be of no immediate disadvantage to the Athenians. During the period of the great expedition, the orator Lycurgos, a financial genius, was able to resume the ambitious building plans abandoned by Pericles because of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. He replaced the treasures of the Acropolis spent during the Great War. He repaired the walls, the ship-sheds, and many of the public buildings. He renovated the Pnyx, built a stoa between the temple and theatre of Dionysos, laid out the theatre of Dionysos in its present form, and also constructed the first Panathenaic Stadium.

## Hellenistic Athens

### Athens Under the Macedonians (339-168)

Despite the benefits of the peace imposed by the Macedonians, the call of freedom proved irresistible, and on Alexander's early death in June 323 B.C. the southern Greeks, including the Athenians, rebelled against Macedonian rule. Feeling against the Northerners was so strong in Athens that Aristotle considered it prudent to retire to Chalkis. Under the leadership of Leosthenes, the rebels forced Antipater to retire Lamia, where he was besieged. During the course of siege operations Leosthenes was killed, and reinforcements from Macedonia forced the lifting of the siege. The Macedonian fleet defeated the Athenians at Abydos and Amorgos; while the southern Greeks decisively defeated in battle on land by Antipater and Krateros at Kranon in Thessaly in August 322. The future of Athens and all of southern Greece was to remain at the mercy of the vagaries of Macedonian politics.

Demades and Phokion, who had opposed the rebellion, were chosen to lead peace negotiations. The Macedonian generals insisted on a limitation of Athenian democracy, that the poorer half of the citizens be disenfranchised, and that those who had proposed the war be executed. Demosthenes fled the city and committed suicide when facing capture. A garrison of Macedonians was installed in Piraeus. When, in 319, the pro-Macedonian Demades and his son went to Antipater to request their removal, they were summarily tried and executed.

The death of Alexander did not merely spark a revolt in Greece, it ushered in a period of almost universal strife as his generals fought over the spoils of his empire. In Europe, when Antipater died, and passed on his territories to Polyperchon, bypassing his son, Kassander, civil war became inevitable. Kassander demanded of all the disputed cities that they transfer their allegiance to him, and Nicanor was sent to Athens to secure their loyalty with the 'bribe' of a lavish programme of public entertainment. Polyperchon launched his appeal to the Athenians by calling for the restoration of full democracy, urging the citizens to take back their ancient rights.

In August 317, Kassander occupied Aegina and Salamis, and Polyperchon was defeated at Megalopolis. The Athenians decided to make their peace with Kassander. The philosopher Demetrios of Phaleron, a student of the Lyceum, was chosen as one of the delegates sent to conduct the delicate negotiations with the new hegemon. Like his teacher, Aristotle, Demetrios was a polymath. He had written works on political theory and philology, on Athenian history and politics, and had collected the fables of Aesop for publication. He impressed Kassander so much that he was appointed governor of Athens.

Demetrios moved some power back to the ancient Council of the Areopagus,

strengthened the powers of the “Guardians of the Laws”, and created a special force to police women. He seems to have been an austere man, who was much concerned at the social rivalries and dissatisfaction generated by ostentatious displays of wealth. He passed a series of sumptuary laws, for example, limiting parties to thirty guests, and allowing only plain small columns to be used as funerary monuments, in place of the ever more extravagant works of art which were crowding the roadsides out of the city. The liturgies rich men were expected to perform at festivals were abolished, and replaced by state sponsorship. Like most of his measures, this was to the benefit of the wealthy, since the liturgies had been a form of progressive taxation.

Demetrios held a census of the population, which revealed that at that time there were 21,000 citizens, 10,000 foreign residents and 400,000 slaves. No one can explain the huge number of slaves, even taking into account the numbers employed at Laurion, and most authorities believe his assessment to have been simply inaccurate.

When Ptolemy, ruler of Egypt, captured Megara and threatened Athens, his rival Antigonous sent his son Demetrios, later known as 'the Besieger', to Athens with a fleet. It was admitted into Piraeus by error, under the impression that it had been sent by Ptolemy. This second 'Demetrios' occupied the city, and exiled Demetrios of Phaleron.

Although officially he restored Athenian democracy and autonomy, he became, in effect, its tyrant. He moved into the sacred buildings connected with the Parthenon. He insisted on being initiated into all the degrees of the Eleusinian Mysteries on a single occasion, and the rules were stretched to accommodate his whims.

Between 307 and 261 the government was changed several times, as the successors of Alexander sought to control the city.

In 301 after the battle of Ipsos, at which Antigonous was killed, the wars between the successors of Alexander the Great came to an end, but this did not ensure peace for the Athenians. An attempt was made by a certain Lachares to drive out Demetrios. He took control of the city, but his opponents were able to hold on to Piraeus. From there Demetrios blockaded the city. Lachares took the gold plates from the statue of Athena Parthenos and melted them down to pay his soldiers. But in the end the city was starved into surrender, and he fled.

In 287 B.C. there was another rebellion against Demetrios, with the support of Ptolemy. This was successful, and the Athenians regained genuine independence for a short time. An attempt by Ptolemy to liberate Greece from Macedon led, in 262, to the reimposition of Macedonian rule over the city by Antigonous Gonatas. A third 'Demetrios', this one a grandson of Demetrios of Phaleron, was appointed governor. When he died, in 229 another revolt took place, headed by Diogenes, the commander of Piraeus.

During the extended wars between Macedonia and the Achaean League, the Athenians wisely sought to stay out of the endemic conflict, favouring an alliance with the conveniently distant but powerful Ptolemies. The gymnasium of Ptolemy was probably erected during this period in honour of Ptolemy.

At the end of the third century there was a widespread revolt against Macedonian hegemony in Greece, and the Athenians were inclined to side with the rebels. In 200 B.C., two youths from Acarnania who happened to be in Eleusis casually slipped into the performance of the Mysteries. The penalty for unauthorised entry was death, and the youths were duly executed. There was an Acarnanian raid on Athens in reprisal, and so the Athenians, in concert with Rhodes, Pergamon and Rome, declared war on both them and their ally and hegemon, Philip V of Macedon.

Philip marched on Athens, occupying the suburbs, where his forces did considerable damage. Macedonian soldiers stormed the Dipylon Gate but found themselves trapped in an especially designed courtyard facing an inner gate, and under heavy fire from the defences on either side. It was only with difficulty that Philip extracted his forces, after which he gave up the siege. Perhaps out of vindictiveness, his troops systematically destroyed religious shrines across Attica, from Rhamnous to Brauron. Ultimately, it was the rising power of Rome which was to secure the exclusion of Macedonian power from southern Greece, and in the end subdue it.

There followed another golden age in Athens. By now, thanks to the conquests of Alexander, Greek culture dominated the known world. In Asia and in Egypt Greek rulers presided over Greek courts, built Greek cities. The upper classes over whom they ruled everywhere rushed to adopt Greek culture and Greek fashions. 'Greek culture' largely meant 'Athenian culture', and as a result, the fame of Athens as a centre of learning became unrivalled. Hellenised rulers sent their sons to Athens to be educated, so that students from all over the ancient world flocked to study in its great institutions of learning. Athens became the chief university city of the ancient world.

These Hellenised rulers often later remembered their student days in Athens fondly, and vied with each other as benefactors of the city. Eumenes II, king of Pergamon (197-159) built a stoa on the southern slope of the Acropolis beside the Theatre of Dionysos. The original Stoa of Attalos in the agora was erected by his brother, King Attalos II (159-138) as a token of respect for the city in which he had received his education. Attalus' brother-in-law and fellow student, King Ariathes V of Cappadocia (162-130) built the Middle Stoa. These were shopping centres with colonnades for walking, doing business and sitting in the shade.

In 175-163 BC, the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV employed a Roman architect, Cossutius, to resume Peisistratos' project of building a massive temple to Olympian Zeus.

The roof was still unfinished when he died in 163 BC, and the project was abandoned once again. The huge columns still visible today date from this period.

Although in the process of time intellectual leadership in mathematics and science would pass to Alexandria, in Egypt, Athens would remain the centre of the philosophical world. The arts also flourished. During this period, Menander, a native of Kifissia, wrote his comedies, less dependent upon local events and personalities than the comedies of Aristophanes, and so more universally appreciable.

**When, in 171 open war broke out between Rome and Macedonia again, the power of Macedonia was finally broken at the battle of Pydna. Greece fell decisively under the shadow of Roman hegemony.**

## **Roman Athens I**

### **Athens Under the Republic (183 BC-AD 31)**

The extension of loose Roman hegemony over Greece produced immediate benefits for the Athenians. The Roman Senate, appreciative of the Athenians' long opposition to the Macedonians, granted to the city the islands of Delos, Skyros, Lemnos and Imbros. Piraeus was made a free port in a deliberate attempt to undermine the prosperity of the port of Rhodes. Athenians went out to settle on Delos. They expelled the existing inhabitants and developed the island as a prosperous trading centre.

However, when the Athenians tried to annex the port of Oropos, which the Boeotians also claimed, the city was fined five hundred talents. The Romans intended to discourage initiatives of that sort. Yet even this worked, in the long run, to the advantage of the Athenians. In 155 B.C. a deputation, consisting of the heads of the three leading philosophical schools, the Academy, the Lyceum and the Stoa, was sent to Rome to plead their case. Their knowledge and eloquence proved a revelation to upper class Romans, who reduced the fine to one hundred talents. Although proud of their martial superiority, the Romans were made acutely aware of their intellectual and cultural inferiority, and saw a way to put that right. Wealthy and well-born men began to send their sons to Athens to complete their education, while the adoption of Stoicism among educated Romans became fashionable. Thus was laid the foundation of that cultural victory of the Greeks over the Romans which was to bear so much fruit much later.

In 146 B.C. the Roman general Mummius defeated the army of the Achaean League and sacked Corinth. Direct Roman rule was extended over much of Greece, although Athens still remained nominally independent. Under Roman influence, however, Athenian democracy was seriously compromised by constitutional changes. The practices of choosing officials by lot, and of publicly examining their accounts on leaving office, were abolished.

At this time the Athenians seemed to have acquired a special talent for political incompetence. They contrived to position themselves consistently on the losing side in the succession of revolts and civil wars which led to the end of the Roman republic and the establishment of imperial rule.

In 88 B.C., led by Athenion, an Aristotelian philosopher, the Athenians chose to throw in their lot with King Mithridates VI of Pontus in his revolt against Rome, after he promised to restore the democracy. In the name of this 'democracy' Athenion seized the opportunity to impose a most unphilosophical reign of terror

upon the city, persecuting all those who had been friendly to the Romans, and arbitrarily confiscating the wealth of some of the richer citizens. When his rule became insupportable he was overthrown by another philosopher-tyrant, the epicurean Aristion.

The consequences of their ill-considered support of the revolt became all too apparent in 86 B.C., when the city was besieged by Sulla. The Long Walls, the fortifications of Piraeus, the arsenal and most of the town were all destroyed in the siege. Unwilling to suffer the same defeat as Philip V, this man of many contradictions, who claimed to admire Greek culture and collected Greek books, cut down the trees in the Academy and the Lyceum in order to build his siege engines. Mounds of stone and earth were heaped up outside the Dipylon Gate from which his forces could fire down on the fortifications and destroy them. These siege operations destroyed many of the monuments in the Keramikos, which afterwards fell into disuse as a burial ground. The Pompeion, and the Themistokleian Walls in the neighbourhood of the Dipylon Gate were also destroyed, and there was considerable damage to the buildings in the agora. When Sulla's army broke into the lower city, Aristion and his followers retreated to the Acropolis, burning the Odeion of Pericles as they did so, in order to prevent the timbers in its roof from being appropriated for the building of siege engines. When lack of water forced a surrender, a bloody massacre took place. The city was plundered of precious metals and statues, and also of such priceless relics as Aristotle's personal library. The Long Walls and the fortifications of Piraeus were never to rise again.

Something of the immense loss of works of art at this time was made evident in 1959 when workmen came upon a unique collection of statues which had been stored in a stoa in Piraeus, presumably for shipment to Rome by Sulla, and then forgotten. If they really were forgotten, they must have constituted only a small part of the treasures looted at that time.

Considerably impoverished, the Athenians were forced to sell the island of Salamis to raise cash. Yet foreigners, particularly Romans, continued to flock to the city, both as tourists and as students. A Roman financier, Titus Pomponius quickly established himself as a noted benefactor, for which he was awarded the name 'Atticus'. He several times saved the city from debt and food shortages, the latter out of his own pocket. Foreign dignitaries continued to befriend the city. Ariobazarnes II, king of Cappadocia, rebuilt the Pompeion. Appius Claudius Pulcher, governor of Cilicia, built a magnificent ceremonial entrance to the sanctuary of Eleusis. In 51 Cicero had the house of Epicurus restored. Also in the middle of the first century B.C. Pompey took it upon himself to rebuild much of the city of Piraeus.

**It is thus perhaps hardly surprising that when war broke out in 49 between Pompey and Julius Caesar, the ill-fated Athenians chose to support Pompey. Fortunately, the victorious Julius Caesar forgave them. He even endowed a new forum, now known as the Roman agora, on the site of the original marketplace in 44, a project unfinished at the time of his assassination.**

**After Caesar's death, his murderers, Brutus and Cassius, fled to Athens to seek support. After their defeat, Caesar's avenger, Octavian, visited the city, and attended lectures and athletics competitions.**