

The Golden Age of Athens

Athens's Golden Age lasted for most of the 400s BCE. It was during this period that many of Greece's most famous and influential writers and thinkers lived. The fields of history, philosophy, and medicine were developed as areas of study.

Pericles

Athens's emergence as the cultural and political center of Greece was largely the result of the work of its leading statesman, Pericles (495 BCE–429 BCE). Born into a noble family, Pericles earned a name as a great orator. By the mid-400s BCE, he had consolidated his power as the leader of Athens, and he embarked on his policies to improve the city. His plans included rebuilding temples destroyed during the Persian Wars. This effort led to the development of the Acropolis and the building of the Parthenon.

Under Pericles's leadership, Athens became a center of culture, a place where education, the fine arts, the performing arts, philosophy, and architecture flourished.

As leader of Athens, he also led the Delian League, using it as the base for building an Athenian empire. Ultimately, though, his foreign policy put Athens on a path toward confrontation with Sparta in the Peloponnesian War.

The Delian League

Established in 478 BCE, the Delian League was an alliance of Greek city-states formed for the purpose of freeing eastern Greek cities from Persian rule and defending against future Persian attacks. Delian League is a modern name for the alliance, taken from the island of Delos where alliance meetings were held. At the time, the group of city-states was more commonly referred to as "Athens and its allies," indicating Athens's leadership role in the alliance.

According to the rules of the alliance, each member city-state had an equal vote in league meetings. Members were also expected to pay tribute, money which was to be used to support the league's military operations.

In fact, Athens dominated the three hundred city-states in the league, making the league, in effect, an Athenian empire. As leader of the league, Athens at times used its military to keep other member states in line and to collect tribute, some of which was used to pay for Pericles's building projects. The league was disbanded after the Peloponnesian War.

The Parthenon

The Parthenon is one of the defining achievements of Athens's Golden Age. Its sculptural work is particularly significant. The Parthenon included richer sculptural decoration than all earlier Greek temples. The sculptures suggest that the Athenians considered the gods as their helpers and supporters. Representations of Athenian men, women, and children were an unusual, new addition to the typical temple sculptures that honored the gods. The Parthenon sculptures also show Athenians interacting with gods, which is often interpreted as showing that Athens believed it had a special relationship with the gods.

Theater

Theater was a particularly important part of Greek culture. In Athens, theater performances that occurred during a festival called the Dionysia were judged by citizens. Poor citizens received money to be able to attend the performances, and performances were funded by taxes on the wealthy. Citizen judges awarded prizes. They took into account the opinions of the larger audience. (They could be impeached if the public didn't like their decisions.) The award-winning plays tended to be intellectually and ideologically challenging, and have artistic merit. They often expressed the points of view of groups who did not have power, such as women and foreigners. Several surviving plays contain anti-war messages, including Aeschylus's *The Persians* and Aristophanes's *The Archanians*. These plays may have been controversial to some degree, because Athens had gained power and glory through war, especially through defeat of the Persians. They help show the degree to which Athens allowed and valued debate, criticism, and examination of behavior and ideas. The theater seems to have been considered an important tool in educating and shaping citizens, who were expected to think, reflect, and debate about what was best for their society as a whole. It's worth noting that some criticism of theater existed. Plato worried that Athens was controlled by citizens whose main interest was going to the theater. He thought citizens could be ignorant and fickle, and that the theater encouraged them to exert influence in society, even though they did not have the education or discipline needed to make good decisions for society.

Aeschylus

Called "the father of tragedy," the playwright Aeschylus (c. 525 BCE–c. 456 BCE) is considered the first of Athens's great dramatists. Aeschylus witnessed the birth of democracy in Athens and fought in the Persian Wars. He is believed to have been wounded at Marathon and to have lost his brother in the battle. He also served in the battle at Salamis. His experiences in the Persian Wars influenced his play *The Persians*, one of his earliest surviving works and a winner of the Dionysia competition.

Over the course of his lifetime, Aeschylus wrote about ninety plays, of which eighty have survived. Only seven have survived in a complete form. The language in his works is rich, characterized by figurative language and extended images and metaphors. His work revolutionized Greek drama. Before Aeschylus, Greek plays had a chorus and one actor who played multiple roles. Aeschylus expanded the number of actors to two, which increased opportunities for more variety, dialogue, and tension in the story. Performances of his plays were equally revolutionary with their use of scenery, machine-produced scenic effects, costumes, and choreography.

Sophocles

Sophocles (c. 496 BCE–c. 406 BCE) was a frequent competitor of Aeschylus's in the Dionysia and, with Aeschylus and Euripides, one of Athens's three great tragic playwrights. Like Aeschylus, Sophocles served Athens in capacities other than as a playwright. He was elected to the *strategoí*, and he served as a treasurer for the Delian League. He also led public choral performances, such as one that celebrated the victory at Salamis and one that honored the memory of Euripides after the latter's death.

A frequent subject of Sophocles's plays was Oedipus the King; a frequent theme was a tragic fate that resulted from power and flaws. His works were just as revolutionary as Aeschylus's. Sophocles is credited with adding a third actor into Greek drama and increasing the size of the Greek chorus. He is especially known for his ability to create sympathetic tragic women, such as Antigone and Electra.

Euripides

The third and youngest of Athens's great tragic playwrights, Euripides (c. 485 BCE–c. 406 BCE) was not the public servant that his fellow playwrights were. He appears to have served in only one public service role: on a diplomatic mission to Sicily. It is believed that Euripides wrote ninety-two plays, but only nineteen have survived—and the authorship of some of those nineteen are in question.

While Aeschylus and Sophocles tended to create larger-than-life characters, Euripides was more likely to include characters who were down-to-earth. His works often expressed a doubt or questioning of ancient Greek religion and mythology. For example, his characters' failures were often the result of their own actions or flaws, and not the result of predetermined fate.

One of Euripides's most powerful plays is *Medea*, about a woman who seeks revenge on her ex-husband by killing her children and his new wife. Medea remains not only a powerful tragic figure, but also a symbol of the mistreatment of women.

Aristophanes

Known for writing comedies, Aristophanes (c. 445–380 BCE) is believed to have written about forty plays. Of these, only eleven have survived. The plots of Aristophanes's plays were not always well constructed. He is best known for the strength of his dialogue, which is filled with word play, witticisms, and allusions to the events of the time—often jabs at Athenian leaders or his fellow playwrights.

Among the most famous of Aristophanes's plays is *Lysistrata*, written before Athens sought peace with Sparta to end the Peloponnesian War. In the play, the women of Athens take control of the Acropolis and the city's treasury and rebel against their husbands until peace is reached with Sparta.

The Study of History

Athens in its Golden Age also produced two of the Western world's first historians, Herodotus (c. 484 BCE–420s BCE) and Thucydides (c.460 BCE–c.400s BCE).

Herodotus

Known today as “the father of history,” Herodotus is credited with inventing the study of what we today call history. Born in Asia Minor, most likely in Halicarnassus, Herodotus lived the first part of his life under Persian rule. He spent many years of his life traveling the Mediterranean world. Historians believe he spent time in Athens later, most likely during the early years of the Peloponnesian War. He is known for his *History*, a narrative of the Persian Wars. The book is divided into four parts, each recounting a series of conquests by Persia. Each part is written as a story, including dialogue from participants in the war. These are not direct quotations as one might find in a modern historical work, but rather the license of a storyteller. It is perhaps more accurate to describe Herodotus's *History* as a work of creative nonfiction, rather than as a scholarly work of history.

Thucydides

The historian Thucydides also made a name for himself writing about war, but he wrote about the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. Not much is known about Thucydides, except for what he included about himself in his own writings. He lived in Athens and caught the plague during the epidemic that swept the city in 430–429 BCE. He survived and was elected to be one

of the *strategoí*, or leading generals, in the city in 424 BCE. After a military defeat at the hands of a Spartan general, Thucydides was exiled from Athens. It was during this time that he wrote his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. His exile ended when Athens fell in 404 BCE, and it is likely he died shortly thereafter, based on the sudden stop in his *History*. (It ends mid-sentence.)

Hippocrates and the Study of Medicine

While Herodotus and Thucydides were forming the foundation of the field of history, Hippocrates (c. 460 BCE–c. 375 BCE) was doing the same for medicine. Considered the father of medicine, Hippocrates was a well-respected physician and teacher in ancient Greece. Having been mythologized throughout history, there is very little known for sure about him. He is believed to have traveled widely through Greece and Asia Minor and to have taught at the medical school in Cos, Greece. Many of the writings that bear his name were actually written by others. He is credited with keeping records of weather and disease, maintaining case histories and records of treatment, and writing treatises about the workings of the human body, of diseases, and of the treatment of various wounds. The Hippocratic Oath, taken by modern physicians, was added to Hippocrates's corpus, or body of work, long after his death, possibly in the 100s CE.