

ATHENIAN EMPIRE—ERA SUMMARY

ANCIENT GREECE—478 TO 404 B.C.

FORMATION OF DELIAN LEAGUE TO FALL OF ATHENS

In the years following the [Persian War](#), Athens was rebuilt and the Greek navy expanded its domination of the Aegean Sea. Further naval victories over Persia resulted in the freeing of several Ionian Greek colonies from the Persian yoke and the increased prestige of Greece as a sea power. Athenian control of the Greek navy was made possible by the creation of the Delian league, a group of Greek colonies located in the Aegean Sea united for defense. Although this league was nominally a confederation, it was dominated by Athens, and eventually became the foundation of the Athenian Empire. Athens became very wealthy due both to its domination of trade in the region and also to the inflow of tribute that had to be paid to Athens in return for protection from Persia.

The most important statesmen in Athens in the years immediately after the Persian War, were [Cimon](#), son of Miltiades, and [Aristides](#). Both were involved in the organization of the Delian league and the rebuilding of Athens, including the construction of a fortified wall around the city to protect it from future invasions. Sparta opposed the building of walled cities, lest they fall into enemy hands, but the Athenians insisted and eventually a great wall was built from Athens to the sea, wide enough to drive two Chariots abreast. During the same period, great temples and state houses were built, funded mostly from the Delian league tributes, on a scale never before seen on the continent of Europe.

In 461 BC one of the greatest statesmen in Greek history came into power in Athens. [Pericles](#), more than any other person, determined the character of classical Athens. He was a patron of the arts and architecture, and he extended the democratic franchise to virtually all Athenian citizens. Greek theatre thrived under his leadership, and all four of the great Greek playwrights, [Aeschylus](#), [Sophocles](#), [Euripides](#), and [Aristophanes](#), lived during his thirty year reign. He made Athens the cultural center of the Mediterranean and paid pensions to philosophers, artists, sculptures, and poets, to encourage their contributions. The Parthenon and many other great public buildings were built under his leadership, and the famous Greek Historians, [Herodotus](#), and [Thucydides](#) were both contemporaries.



PHIDIAS AND THE STATUE OF ATHENA AT THE PARTHENON.

Sparta, although shunning luxury and empire, looked upon Athens with distrust and jealousy. As Athens became more arrogant and contemptuous of the rights of its colonies, the dispute between the cities grew, and eventually Sparta and its allies declared war on Athens, and thus began the [Peloponnesian War](#). It was a futile and drawn out affair, lasting almost 30 years, with many horrendous atrocities, and its only long term effect was to critically weaken and depopulate all of mainland Greece. Athens for the most part, avoided meeting Sparta in battle on land and instead trusted to its fortified walls and control of the seas to provide for its people during the long years of siege. The first ten years of warfare resulted in almost no change in the state of affairs and eventually a ceasefire was arranged.

The Peace of Nicias lasted several years, until Athens, under the influence of [Alcibiades](#), undertook an ill-fated expedition to conquer the island of Sicily. This disastrous campaign was the turning point of the war. It destroyed Athens naval supremacy and greatly weakened it in its continuing struggle against Sparta. For ten more years the conflict raged on, until Sparta defeated the last remnant of the Athenian navy at the battle of ***Agos Potami***, and starved the walled city into submission.

Even during the Peloponnesian war, Athens produces some of its greatest geniuses. [Socrates](#), Aristophanes, Euripides and Thucydides all lived during this period, and their writings are among the most cherished in Western Civilization. Undeniably, however, the Peloponnesian war was a disaster from which Greece and Athens never fully recovered. Athens eventually regained its reputation as a center of culture and education, but was never again dominant over the other unruly city states.