

Funeral oration of pericles term paper sample

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At both the beginning and end of his Funeral Oration, Pericles states very clearly that the heroic and valiant deeds of the soldiers being buried at public expense are far more important than any words of praise from orators and politicians or any physical monuments and inscriptions. His purpose in this speech is not to glorify the dead any further since their deaths in battle have already accomplished this and no further commentary from him would be able to add or detract from them. Rather he is attempting to explain to the widows, children and parents of the dead that their sacrifice was not in vain, and that the city of Athens should be beloved by all for its many excellent political, economic and moral qualities. Its democracy, individual freedom and rule of law are the envy of the world and far superior to the authoritarian institutions of the Spartans, so much so that all other cities and countries should imitate its example. Athens is also a great economic power with more trade and overseas colonies than any other city and able to import goods from all over the known world. Because of this, it is powerful enough to stand on its own while the Spartans always need allies to fight their battle for them. Repeatedly in the speech, Pericles assures his audience that Athens is therefore worth fighting and dying for, and that its freedom and prosperity have only been attained through the sacrifices and heroic deeds of them men being buried. As long as it continues to produce men of such character and virtues, both its democracy and empire will endure and be passed on to succeeding generations.

After his introductory remarks deprecating and minimizing his own rhetorical abilities, Pericles goes on in great detail to explain to the relatives of the dead why Athens is the type of society worth dying for, first and foremost for

its great political institutions. He wants the audience to remember their ancestors who “ always handed it down in liberty through their valor to successive generations up to now” (Thucydides ii 36). They should also remember their fathers, who founded the empire and expanded it through their valiant feats of arms, and who maintained the democracy of Athens as an example to the rest of the world. Even the poorest men in their state could serve in public office, if they had the ability and virtue, and leadership was not reserved for the wealthy and well-born. All citizens had rights and were considered equal before the law, and “ we are not offended by our neighbor for following his own pleasure” (Thucydides ii 36). Unlike the more dictatorial and authoritarian societies, all in Athens were free to do so, provided that they obeyed the laws that were made, not by kings, tyrants and oligarchs, but by all for the common good of all. Athens also offered its people many public entertainments, contests and sacrifices, which encouraged them to excel on a wide variety of virtues (Thucydides ii 38). Instead of leaving all power in the hands of a few and expecting the masses to obey “ we alone think that a man he does not take part in public affairs is good for nothing” (Thucydides ii 40). Even though Athens was the richest city in Greece, it did not expect its citizens simply to mind their own business and be concerned only with private affairs, but rather encouraged every man to participate in passing laws and deciding public policy.

Athens was economically superior to its Spartan enemies because it engaged in trade and commercial activities with the known world, but its people had not been softened by luxury and wealth as its enemies always claimed.

Athenian merchants imported a huge variety of goods from all countries “ so

that we enjoy the products of other nations with no less familiarity than we do our own" (Thucydides ii 38). Unlike the Spartans, they were not suspicious of and hostile toward strangers and foreigners in their midst or closed to new ideas. They did not expend all their wealth and resources in secret preparations for war or train their men for combat from childhood. Just the opposite, the Athenian citizens had a more comfortable, prosperous and "relaxed life", but just the same could "still take on dangers as great as they do" (Thucydides ii 39). Sparta was therefore much poorer in people, money and resources than Athens, and always required many allies to accomplish any military feat than the Athenians could do on their own. This was yet more proof of the superiority of the democratic system, which made its people wealthy and secure and "lovers of wisdom without any softening of character" (Thucydides ii 40). Athenians were not greedy, money mad or eager to place others in their debt, but the most generous people in the world, and were the most likely to win friends by doing them favors rather than demanding them (Thucydides ii 40).

Pericles sums up his remarks on the superiority of Athens and its people by stating that it should be a model for the rest of the world in government, law, economics and moral character. Unlike other great powers, "only in our empire can subject states never complain that their rulers are unworthy" (Thucydides ii 41). He repeats that this was the city for which these brave men gave their lives, and that it is obviously superior to the Spartans in every way. These dead men were all great heroes that exemplified all that was good about Athens and were worthy of its worldwide fame and reputation. If their earthly lives may have been less than ideal in some

cases, they now “ deserve to have their faults overshadowed by their courageous deaths in war for the sake of their country” (Thucydides ii 42). They did not die for money, fame or power but for democracy and therefore Pericles encourages all those who survived them to also “ become lovers of Athens” in the same way (Thucydides ii 43). They do not need any words of praise or great stone monuments and inscriptions, because the ideals and the cause they died for are far greater than any of that and they have “ already been honored by their actions” (Thucydides ii 46). Their widows and orphans will be cared for by the state, and that is as it should be, but as long as Athens continues to produce worthy and courageous sons like these, both its democracy and empire will be secure forever. So Pericles fulfilled the task he set for himself at the outset, by explaining to these bereaved relatives why these men had to give up their lives in a just cause, and that Athens was a city with a democratic political and economic system that was the envy of the world and one which any man should be gladly willing to give up his life to preserve.

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