

# Pericles' funeral oration



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In his oration, Pericles sheds new light on traditional Greek virtues by examining not only the accomplishments of the Athenian empire, but the particular qualities and institutions that have facilitated Athenian greatness. Pericles defies the traditional role of a funeral orator as historian of Athenian accomplishments in order to thoroughly redefine what makes Athens great. Pericles begins his oration by setting out the difficulty of his task: to please those in the audience who were close to the dead with tales of glory and honor without dismissing the citizens of Athens, who Pericles claims only want to hear praise of the dead so long as they can feel satisfied that they are equally great, (II. 35). In light of the conflicting appetites of his audience, Pericles declares that he will forsake the funeral orator's custom of recounting the great accomplishments of Athenian history because they are "too familiar to my hearers for me to dwell upon," (II. 36). Instead, Pericles is interested in exploring the particular spirit of Athens, and those institutions that facilitated its prosperity and greatness. In the remainder of his oration, Pericles is engaged in a characterization of the essence of Athens. He claims that the uniqueness of the Athenian constitution stems from its bold innovation. Athenians live under a rule of law that holds the many over the few, and which regards citizens as equal before the law, (II. 37). Thus he claims that it is the nature of Athenian politics (i. e. the theory and practice of how to live) that has allowed it to achieve greatness. The institution of equality inherent in their democracy is, according to Pericles, what facilitates the brotherhood and friendliness that Athenians feel towards one another: "we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes," (II. 37). But this friendliness amongst citizens has not diminished the strength or esteem of Athens because all Athenians contribute to the efforts

to uphold international fortitude. Pericles praises citizens for their devotion to Athens, which they love even more than money or wealth: “wealth we employ more for use than show,” (II. 40). He challenges his listeners to envision a citizen more innovative, independent, and strong than the Athenian, (II. 41). Having examined the particular qualities of Athenians, it appears that their ability to both rule and be ruled is what he finds most essential. For evidence of the accomplishments that Pericles attributes to the unique virtues of Athenian society, he turns to what he views as the unparalleled power of the empire. It is at this point in his oration that Pericles returns to purpose of the occasion. He implores his audience to view the death of Athenians as gallant sacrifices to a world historical regime. These men died “resisting, rather than submitting, they fled only from dishonor... [and] left behind them not their fear, but their glory,” (II. 42). In this way, Pericles argues that there is something particularly honorable about a man who dies in the line of a great duty, to uphold and protect a great empire, (II. 43). Furthermore, these sacrifices are not in vain because “heroes have the whole earth as their tomb;” they live on in Athenian spirit and become a part of the very fabric of Athenian society, (II. 43). Finally, Pericles uses his praise to implore his listeners not to shrink from making the same sacrifice. He urges each man to consider his interests as citizen (of Athens) and individual (“father” as truly merged in the great Athens, (II. 44). It is impossible to ignore the context in which Pericles apparently gives this speech. The reader cannot help but recall Thucydides' earlier admission, that he has a habit of making the speakers in his book “say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said,” (I. 22). This consideration

explains the overtones of nationalist pride and manifest destiny present within Pericles' funeral oration. Pericles wants his listeners to feel implicated in a common project of historical proportions, which unites the plights and glories of Athens with those of the Athenians themselves. It is for this reason that he puts forth the image of the people of Athens as united by trust and a desire for freedom; they submit to laws and sacrifice not simply out of duty, but because they see that it is in their best interests. Thucydides' Pericles heeds the "demands of the time" by using this same logic to implore members of the audience to be brave in the face of sacrifice on behalf of Athens because their own future is tied up with Athens' destiny: "judging happiness to be the fruit of freedom and freedom of valor, never decline the dangers of war," (II. 43). This is perhaps an indication that Thucydides recognizes the precarious nature of power and influence, such that Athens will always As unique citizens of a great empire, Pericles urges his audience to rise to any challenge to uphold and protect Athens.