

# Funeral oration and old oligarch

[History](#)



Funeral Oration and the Old Oligarch Contrast the two different views of Athenian democracy presented here. Why do you think they come to such different conclusions? Do you think there is truth in both accounts, or is one more accurate and reliable than the other? Why?

The two documents in question are well regarded for their political and historical comment. Both talk about Athenian democracy and its pros and cons. While Pericles' Funeral Oration is an eulogy to martyrdom and democracy, the Old Oligarch (Pseudo-Xenophon) takes a rather pessimistic view of democracy.

In the Funeral Oration, Pericles pays rich tribute to warriors, who commit the supreme sacrifice for maintaining the sovereignty of the Athenian state. In the wake of the Peloponnesian War, scores of Athenian soldiers were pressed into duty who they readily endured the hardships of warfare. Though acknowledging their bravery and sense of duty, Pericles notes that one individual's words cannot sufficiently capture the magnitude of their feat. Pericles goes on to mention how the very foundation of the Athenian kingdom was based on valour and patriotism. He cites the example of martyrs from previous generations to identify this tradition.

Pericles assures the audience that the great courage exhibited and the great human loss thus incurred was not in vain. The city of Athens is a crown jewel of civilization and culture. According to Pericles, the endeavour to protect the sanctity of this great city from marauding invaders was a noble project, for, in consequence, it protects the institutions of democracy within the city. His eulogy then is not just for the recently martyred, but also for their exemplary forbears and the proud democratic traditions that the city stands for. He concludes his speech by exhorting the audience to live up to the standards

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of the martyrs as well as uphold the spirit of democracy that Athens has become synonymous with.

The Old Oligarch takes a totally different view of Athens, especially its Constitution. He reckons that democracy can easily lead to mob-rule. The author believes that the aristocracy is endowed by nature with qualities necessary for leadership. Taking away the reigns from them could so easily lead to disintegration of law and order. Their privilege in acquiring sound education is a valuable asset for statecraft. Likewise, the material abundance into which the aristocracy are born lends them skills for managing the economy of the city. Pseudo-Xenophon worries that if the poor are given a voice in public affairs the natural order of the Athenian city-state could be disrupted.

I find Pericles' oration much more convincing than that of the Old Oligarch. Pericles' lecture is full of right sentiments and balanced judgments. This is reflected in the thoroughness of prose and richness of the content. The oration highlights the value of martyrs through their efforts to protect Athenian democracy. Pseudo-Xenophon's attack on the Athenian Constitution is less convincing for its want of sound rationale. The looseness of the prose indicates a degree of muddled thinking on the part of the author. Moreover, the ambiguity of the author's identity undermines the credibility of the document. In sum, I tend to agree with Pericles' work much more than the contrarian perspective of the Pseudo-Xenophon.