

# Pericles Argumentative Essay

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Here is an argumentative essay which I wrote for my Senior Ancient History Class. This essay contains 6 paragraphs, analysing the supposed greatness of Pericles, the motives which interlaced the Parthenon and the Delian League, aswell as the idea of Periclean Appeasement in the act of the Megarian Decree. Both primary and secondary sources have been used to support facts, interpretations and perspectives. Full reference list included. Enjoy and feel free to give feedback :D

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## Pericles Mythistoricus

Pericles, son of Xanthippus and arguably the best Athenian statesman that ever lived, has been credited with the 'Golden Age of Athens' (Sandels, 2012). Athenian historian Thucydides expressed the dominant view of Pericles when he stated that, 'Indeed, during the whole period of peace-time when Pericles was at the head of affairs the state was wisely led and firmly guarded, and it was under him that Athens was at her greatest' (in Williams, 2002, p. 352). However, Pericles' unprecedented rhetorical skill provided a vessel for which he was able to impose imperialistic ideals into the Athenian government. Contrary to the idealistic writings of Thucydides, the building programme symbolised the height of Athenian imperialism, which was exemplified through the Megarian Decree and the consequent Peloponnesian War.

The unparalleled rhetorical skill possessed by Pericles allowed him not only to enforce his role as an autocratic ruler of Athenian politics, but also to introduce his imperialist policies with ease. Pericles, the most accomplished statesman of Ancient Greece was born of distinguished parentage in 495 BC (Encyclopedia of World Biography, 2012). As a result of being educated from a young age by the eminent philosopher Anaxagoras, his intellectual development served as preparation for his role in politics and the state. In pursuit of a public political career, Pericles entered the Athenian assembly as a highly patriotic radical who aspired for a more advanced democracy. Labelled the 'Olympian' due to his serene, aloof behaviour, Pericles somewhat deepened and extended the democratic reforms that Cleisthenes had set in motion 50 years earlier (Roberts, 2003). However, the high level of magniloquence present in the oratory of Pericles provided a way by which he could invoke imperialist policies into the Athenian government. The orthodox interpretation of Pericles' oratorical talent is provided by author and realist Anthony Iannini (2011) who suggested that, 'Pericles governed with his oratory, his ability to speak to the Athenian citizens and persuade them to his own opinion.' It is hard to find justifiable dissent in this argument, which is argued by a triumvirate of both ancient and contemporary philosophers and historians alike, including Plato (in Bartlett, 2004), Socrates (in Bartlett, 2004), Protagoras (in Munn, 2003), Phil Paine (1998) and Dr. Steven Muhlberger (1998). Although this argument is generally accepted by scholars, the negative effects of Pericles' rhetorical skill are rarely acknowledged. Cleon, one of Pericles' greatest political opponents, expressed a marginalised interpretation of the cynical exploitation of rhetoric when he argued, 'you [the assembly] estimate the possibilities by hearing a good speech on the subject; you are completely at the mercy of the pleasure of listening, and are more like spectators gathered around sophists than those deliberating affairs of the state!' (cited in Worthington, 2010). Although critics have labelled Cleon's statement simply as a diatribe against a consummate political enemy, it heralds a high degree of accuracy as it presents an unbiased portrayal of rhetoric which not only typified the assembly, but is supported by a variety of historical evidence.

Conversely, the dominant view of Pericles' immense skill as an orator is given by Greek historian Thucydides, who provided a glowing appreciation of Pericles in the following example of epic speechifying, 'Whenever he perceived that [the people] were arrogantly bold against what the times warranted, he confounded them into fearfulness by his speaking, and again, when they were irrationally afraid, he restored them to confidence' (cited in Mara, 2008). Thucydides, by means of his pro-Athenian interpretation, reinforced the notion that 'Imperialism brings about freedom', as devised by Pericles himself. However, it would be inaccurate to interpret Periclean imperialism as an ideology which benefited Athenian society. Rather, it enabled Pericles to maintain control over the polis by keeping citizens in a state of fear. A

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silenced view is given by an anonymous Athenian sausage seller, who, when discussing the possibility of revolt against Pericles, concluded, "And who will be my ally? For the wealthy fear him, and the poor folk are terrified" (cited in Munn, 2003). Evidently, the underlying motives of Pericles behind his Imperialist regime was to maintain his political status through holding the public in a state of fear and subjugation. Furthermore, the impeccable oratory of Pericles paved the way for the advancement of his imperialistic ideals. The definitive opinion is expressed by professor of Greek History Paul Cartledge (1984), who provided an accurate summary of Pericles's imperialism when he argued that, "his imperialism was partly due to his skilful oratory" that his policies consistently appealed to the majority of Athenians as being in their best interests. They did so mainly because Pericles was an unashamed imperialist, and imperialism appeared to benefit the Athenian masses. After interpreting a variety of perspectives and recounts, it is evident that the advancement Pericles's imperialism was a direct result of his immense skill as a rhetorician.

Furthermore, Pericles took advantage of the funds from the Delian League in order to pursue the building programme, which was driven by his desire for wealth and self-benefit. Immediately after the end of the Persian War in 449 BC, Pericles stood as the dominant political figure in Athens (Hurwit, 2004). As the Athenian acropolis remained in ruins following the war, Pericles began a lavish building programme which from 446 BC onwards which was to provide the acropolis with buildings and shrines (McGregor, 1987, p. 94). The programme was to be funded by the Delian League; a free confederation in which the Ionian cities joined together for mutual protection. Athens, being the "hegemon" of the League, received tribute from its allies in order to provide naval protection (Gill, 2012). For ten years the Delian League fought to rid Thrace and the Aegean of Persian control. However, once war ceased, the League still remained, which resulted in Athens being paid tribute which was to be stored on the island of the *Delos* in case of war (Lendering, 2012). As war had subsided in the region, the Athenians utilised these funds to promote their building plan. The Parthenon, a monument supposedly constructed to honour the goddess Athena for the Athenian victory over the Persians was completed in 432 BC (Martin, 1996). However, the Parthenon in fact symbolised the height of Athenian imperialism, and was built by Pericles in order to satisfy his desire for fame and wealth. These sentiments are echoed by Professor of Ancient Greek History at Nipissing University Dr. Steve Muhlberger (1998), who argued that, "Pericles proposed the use of the league treasury to build the Parthenon, a temple that was meant to be [a tribute] to Athena" this was generally accepted by the citizens. Pericles was what we call a populist politician, and regularly appealed to chauvinistic sentiments. Professor John Boardman (1992), world-renowned conservative historian and archaeologist, tentatively agrees with this idea when he noted, "To say the Athenians built the Parthenon to worship themselves would be an exaggeration, but not a great one. Pericles, as the Funeral Speech makes clear, would probably have accepted that the polis was the true object of devotion." Although Boardman provides conservative interpretation of Pericles's motives behind building the Parthenon, he implied that Athenian imperialism was of significance. As Pericles's regime was dependent on both popularity and support from the Athenian people, it would be incorrect to dismiss popularity as being a potential underlying motive behind the Parthenon. This unorthodox perspective is emphatically supported by Foster (2010), Herington (1955) and Lewis (1992), but is also mentioned by Kallet (1993) and Lagerlöf (2000).

The orthodox interpretation of Pericles's motives is given by historian, scholar and philologist John Bury (in Stecchini, 2012) who suggested that, "It devolved upon the city, as a religious duty, to make good the injuries which the barbarians had inflicted upon the habitation of her gods, and fully pay her debt of gratitude to heaven for the defeat." Concomitant with the interpretation put forth by Thucydides surrounding the Parthenon, this perspective concedes its construction to be a necessary religious act. A florid interpretation of the events, now considered unlikely to be true, is mentioned by the biographer Plutarch (in Hurwit, 2004, p.103), who pondered, "But what brought the greatest pleasure and embellishment to Athens, and the greatest astonishment to the rest of men, and what is now Greece's only evidence that her vaunted power and ancient wealth is no fiction? The buildings dedicated to Athena on the Acropolis." Plutarch's assessment, which interprets Pericles's motives to be purely economic, is anachronistic. As unemployment was a problem in Plutarch's time but not in that of Pericles, it is likely Plutarch extrapolated this

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perspective from the historical period in which he lived. Nevertheless, Plutarch still viewed Pericles as a devious leader whose stealing from the Delian League typified the motives of his imperialist regime. Oft cited cartographer, author and professor of ancient history Livio Stecchini (1979) warns of the reliability errors in the works of both Plutarch and Bury when he categorically stated, "Instead of providing evidence, the authors [both ancient and modern] echoed each other's words, taking as proof what they were trying to defend and ignoring the contrary evidence." Such criticisms of Thucydides are justified, as his large pro-Athenian bias was likely to falsify some proportion of his texts, therefore, resulting in his recounts possibly being perpetuated myths. A silenced view of Pericles's motives in building the Parthenon is provided by Odys (in Teaching Matters, 2012), an Athenian soldier, who argued, "Pericles never does anything for the people's good. Pericles only wants power and fame." This rare insight, when corroborated with eminent historians such as Muhlberger (1998) and Boardman (1992), leaves no doubt as to Pericles's underlying motives in building the Parthenon. Through hi-jacking the Delian League and promoting an adventurous building scheme within the acropolis, Pericles was able to reinforce his imperialist dogma and ultimately achieve his desire for wealth and self-glorification.

The most exemplified act of Athenian imperialism, the Megarian Decree, was a vain attempt by Pericles to expand the Athenian empire, however, this resulted in the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. The Peloponnesian War was a territorial, economic and political conflict between the Spartan-led Peloponnesian League and the Athenian-led Delian League which spanned from 431 BC until 404 BC (Koeller, 2003). The main cause of the Peloponnesian War remains a highly contentious issue among scholars and historians, whose opinions typically fall under two interpretations; the traditional perspective and the modern perspective (Kagan, 1989). The former supports the interpretation pioneered by Thucydides, who argued war was an act of rebellion to the growing power of Athens. However, the latter provides a more valid assessment of the causes of the war, emphasizing the importance of the Megarian Decree as hypothesised by Plutarch. The Megarian Decree was a law passed by the Athenian government in 432 BC which prohibited all citizens of Megara from the ports of the Athenian Alliance and the Agora (marketplace) of Athens (Lendering, Megarian Decree, 2006). Pericles designed the Decree to avenge the murder of Anthemocritus, a herald who was treacherously murdered by the Megarians while on a mission from the assembly. The economical restrictions which the decree imposed on the Megarians caused a terminal decline in not only their economy, but those of their allies in the Peloponnesian League (Roisman, 2011). Sparta, the leading polis in the Peloponnesian League, ordered Athens to repeal the Decree under the pressure of their collapsing economy. Fearing that submission to Spartan authority was the first step towards slavery, Pericles quickly declined to revoke the decree. Henceforth, the Peloponnesian War was inevitable (Rhodes, 2011). The war as a direct consequence of the decree is emphatically supported by Plutarch (in Bowden, 2005, p.145), who argued, "If war would not have come upon the Athenians for the other reasons, if they could have been persuaded to revoke the Megarian Decree! And since it was Pericles who was particularly opposed to this, he alone had responsibility for the war." Plutarch's assessment of the Megarian Decree discerns the importance of Pericles's imperialist regime in the precipitation of the Peloponnesian War. Andocides (in Harl, 1998), a contemporary politician to Pericles, offered rare insight into the causes of the war when he maintained that, "We went to war again on account of Megara, and allowed Attica to be laid waste!" Thus, the evidence indicates that the Megarian Decree was the most crucial immediate cause of the war.

Despite this perspective of the Decree being argued by various contemporary citizens and historians such as Pausanias (in Harl, 1998), Dicaeopolis (in Titchener & Moorton, 1999) and Diodorus (in Harl, 1998), the traditional interpretation of the Megarian Decree is given by Thucydides (in Crowley, 2008, p.68), who offered a possible solution to the cause of the war when he suggested, "The real cause I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war inevitable." It is no surprise that Thucydides diverts responsibility of the war from Pericles and provides a quixotic portrayal of Athenian supremacy. Despite being the dominant contemporary historian to Pericles, his interpretations are not supported by ancient nor primary sources. Scholar and poet Francis Cornford (2004) warned of the bias and inaccuracies suffused throughout the works

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of Thucydides when he categorically stated, "The only causes of human events, considered by ancient historians are psychological." Thucydides had not only no religion and no philosophy, but no scientific conceptions. He limits himself to recording observed actions and alleged motives. However erroneous the traditional interpretation of the Megarian Decree may be, it is ardently maintained by scholars of Ancient Greek history Donald Kagan (1989), who expressed it as a "mean between the two extremes of doing nothing whatever and launching an attack on Megara." Although Kagan remains one of the great modern authorities on the Peloponnesian War, his interpretation of the Megarian Decree is not compatible with primary evidence. The main evidence for the significance of the decree remains Aristophanes, an ancient playwright and satirist of the time. Aristophanes validates the modern interpretation of the Decree, as he reported that, "he [Pericles] threw out that little spark, the Megarian decree, set the city aflame, and blew up the conflagration with a hurricane of war. and peace disappeared." While portraying Pericles to be solely to blame for the war, this accurate interpretation reinforces the modern perspective of the Decree, leaving no doubt as to the causes of the Peloponnesian War. Thus, it can be seen that the Megarian Decree directly precipitated the Peloponnesian war and the consequent collapse of the Athenian empire, while failing to accomplish the imperialist ideals of Pericles's government.

Through the systematic analysis of both primary and secondary sources, it is evident that Pericles's regime was based solely on imperialistic ideals. In spite of the idealistic portrayal given by Thucydides, his powerful oratorical skill, the building programme and the Megarian Decree led to the advancement of his desire for Athenian supremacy. As erudite historian, scholar and professor Ernst Badian (in Holliday, 2000, p. 13) categorically stated, "he [Thucydides] must not be followed in slavish adoration and treated like a provider of revealed truth. He was an Athenian of his time, trying to convey the strong feelings that he naturally held about Periclean leadership and its disintegration owing to the war."

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