

# ATHENIAN EMPIRE



## The Athenian Empire 454-404 BCE

**Background** Greece was a collection of city-states sprinkled across the tip of the Balkan Peninsula, on islands of the Aegean Sea, along the western edge of the Anatolian Peninsula (Ionia), and on the rim of the Black Sea. In the sixth century BCE, the Ionian city-states belonged to Persia, which conquered them along with the rest of the Anatolian Peninsula. In 494 BCE, however, these city-states revolted, spurred on by Athens. Darius, the Persian emperor quickly squashed the uprising, and two years later, sent an army to get even with Athens. In spite of having a force several times larger as the Athenian army, the Persians suffered defeat on the plains of Marathon in 490 BCE. Darius died before he could have another go at the Athenians. But in 480 BCE his son Xerxes launched a second attack. The Athenian navy, however, outfoxed and outmaneuvered the Persian fleet at

the Battle of Salamis. Xerxes watched the defeat of his navy from his throne high up on the coastal plain overlooking the battle site. He quickly marched home in humiliation. The following year, the Greeks defeated the remnants of the Persian army at Platea.

**Founding** Although the Persians had been defeated, they remained a threat to the Greeks. In 478, 104 Greek city-states created an alliance, the Delian League, under Athenian leadership, agreeing to contribute ships or cash to Athens in exchange for building and maintaining a navy. Although the League was run by a council of representatives from member states, the Athenians, as the leading city-state, determined how much each state would be taxed—how many ships it would contribute or how much money it would pay. Members could not leave the League without unanimous consent of the members, which meant that

Athens could prevent any city-state from dropping out. Xerxes died in 456 BCE and with him the threat from Persia. Nevertheless, Pericles (495-429), the powerful, charismatic leader of Athens, refused to allow any state to leave the League. In fact, he forced more city-states to join. States that did not cooperate were subject to occupation by Athenian troops. In 454 BCE, the League's treasury was moved to Athens. The Delian League had become the Athenian empire. At its imperial height in the 440s BCE, Athens controlled 172 tribute-paying city-states.

**Administration** Athens, the champion of individualism and the independent city-state, had become the oppressor. While probably no Athenian would have admitted to owning subject states, Athens certainly treated the states as though they were private property. Uncooperative states had their land taken and handed out to Athenian colonists.

Governments in uncooperative states were overthrown and replaced. Taxes were collected regularly and often raised. With no external enemy threatening the empire, the funds piled up in the Athenian treasury. Therefore, it was not long before these taxes from member states, whose citizens were mostly farmers, traders, and herders, were being used support projects in Athens. This money financed the art, architecture, and literature of what historians call the Golden Age of Athens. In 447 BCE, funds from the League's treasury paid for the construction of the Parthenon. Completed in 432, it was built on the Acropolis, where the Persians had destroyed temples in 480 BCE. Phidias (490-430), one of Greece's greatest sculptors, created the Parthenon's monumental statue of Athena. It was about thirty-nine feet high and made of gold and ivory. The figure of Athena held a spear in her left hand and a six-foot high statue of Nike, the goddess of Victory, in her right hand. The arts, including drama, also flourished under the Athenian empire. Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Euripides, and Sophocles, four of Greece's most important playwrights, wrote during this period. So did the historians Herodotus (c. 490-c.425 BCE) and

Thucydides (c. 460/455-c. 300 BCE).

Needless to say, subject city-states were not happy about underwriting the glory of Athens. They did, however, benefit to some extent from the arrangement, enjoying a period of relative peace and prosperity.

### Religion

All of the city-states of the Athenian empire shared generally the same culture, so religion was never an issue. By 500 BCE, however, the old polytheistic religion of Zeus, Hera, and Athena, had ceased to be used for much more than public ceremony. Into this spiritual void came mystery religions such as the Egyptian cult of the goddess Isis. These cults had elaborate rites and restricted memberships. At the same time, thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle used reason to develop systems of rational thought, philosophies that spread widely in later centuries.

### Trade

The Athenian navy cleared the Aegean of pirates. This was a benefit to all of the merchants of the empire because it allowed for an increase in trade. The downside was that Athens closely controlled trade so as to benefit itself.

**Decline/Fall** In the wars against Persia, Athens and Sparta had been allies. Now they turned against one another. The increase in Athenian wealth and power, both political and commercial, alarmed the Spartans and their allies. In 460 BCE, the First Peloponnesian War broke out. In 445 BCE a 30-year peace treaty was signed, but the peace didn't last. In 431, the fighting resumed. In 404, The Spartans won and imposed humiliating terms on Athens. All but a few of its ships had to be surrendered. Athenian democracy was replaced by a Council of Thirty, an oligarchy, loyal to Sparta. In addition, Athenian property was plundered and many citizens were exiled. The Athenian Empire had come to an end.



Bronze statuette of a soldier. Spartan work, around 500 BCE

## EXPERT GROUP NOTE TRACKER: **ATHENIAN** EMPIRE

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Significant information about this empire related to this characteristic:</b>
Background/ location	
Founding	
Organization	
Religion	
Trade	
Decline/Fall	
Summary description / categorization of this empire	

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