

The contest of Athena and Poseidon, West Pediment of the Parthenon

According to the ancient Athenian founding myth, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, competed against Poseidon, the God of the Seas for patronage of the yet-unnamed city. They agreed that whoever gave the Athenians the better gift would become their patron and appointed Cecrops, the king of Athens as the judge. According to the account given by Pseudo-Apollodorus, Poseidon struck the ground with his trident and a salt water spring welled up. In an alternative version of the myth, Poseidon instead gave the Athenians the first horse. In both versions, Athena offered the Athenians the first domesticated olive tree. Cecrops accepted this gift and declared Athena the patron goddess of Athens. (Later the Southern Italian city of Paestum was founded under the name of Poseidonia at about 600 BC.)



(image from spallek.com)

A sacred olive tree said to be the one created by the goddess was still kept on the Acropolis at the time of Pausanias (2nd century AD). It was located by the temple of Pandrosus, next to the Parthenon. According to Herodotus, the tree had been burnt down during the Persian Wars, but a shoot sprung from the stump. The Greeks saw this as a symbol that Athena still had her mark there on the city.

In 621 B.C., Draco was the first legislator in Ancient Greece to impose a written law code that would become famous as an example of

severity, but was a great step compared to the primitive justice system which had existed before.

Draco was replaced by Solon, one of the seven sages of Greece, renowned for his honesty and patriotism. He made new concessions

to the working classes, considered the germ of the first democracy on earth. Solon was elected Archon in 594 and made great reforms, including forgiving the peasants their debts, limiting the right to life and death of the father of the family and dividing the population into four groups according to their income and their military service. He also formed the boule, a council of 400 or 500 people and the Ekklesia (assembly) and the Heliaia (court).

After the wise Solon, there were new social revolts that fractioned the city until Peisistratus took control of Athens by force, so he was considered a tyrant. He was succeeded

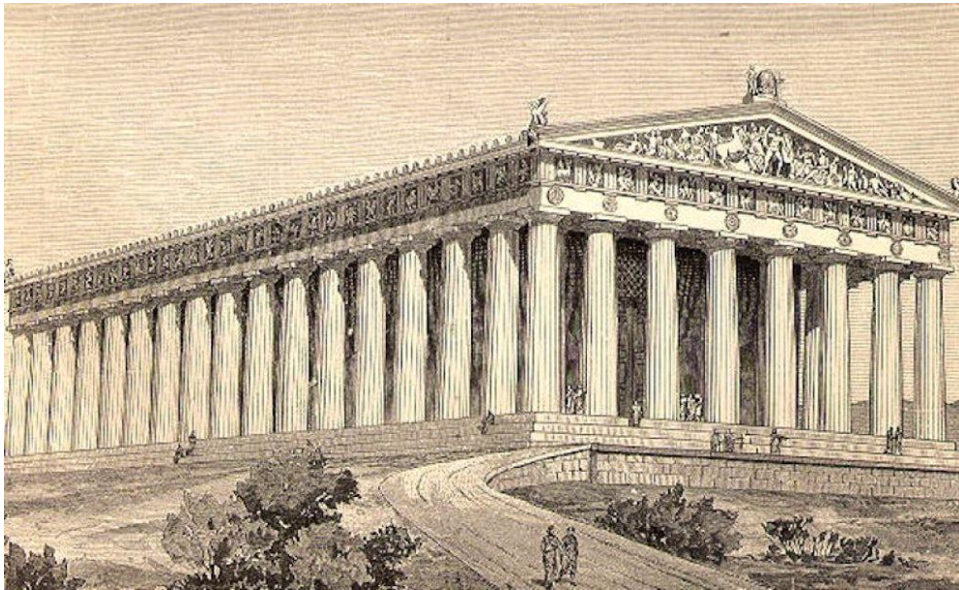
by his sons that compared to their father were a lot more brutal, which created more division among the Athenians. Eventually, Cleisthenes, leader of the democratic movement in 508 B.C. granted citizenship to all free men and reformed the constitution of ancient Athens.

510 B.C. is considered the year of the birth of Athenian democracy.

The golden age of Athens

The fifth century B.C. is also known as the Golden Age of Athens or The Age of Pericles. Pericles was a prominent and renowned political leader that did important reforms to democracy, by establishing the theorikon, a fund for subsidizing attendance at public festivals. He encouraged artists and writers to praise Athens and commissioned beautiful monuments and buildings with the Allies money. He was also very interested in science and encouraged its development. Imposing temples and landmarks were erected during

his time in power including the Temple of Athena Nike, the Erechtheion, and the Parthenon (symbol of Athens), on the Acropolis.



(image from itinari.com)

During the Golden Age of Athens, 250,000 people lived in the city.

The Greco-Persian Wars

In 499 BC, Athens was involved in a series of battles against Persia called the Greco-Persian Wars. The Athenian army defeated the Persian king Darius I in 490 B.C. in the Battle of Marathon under the command of Miltiades.

The soldier Philippides became famous during this battle for his race to tell Athens of the victory. This led to the creation of the marathon race.

During the second battle, the son of king Darius I, Xerxes I, attacked Athens and destroyed the Acropolis, but were defeated once more at the Battle of Salamis in 480.



(image from maritimeprofessional.com)

At that time, Athens was a maritime power and it used this power to form an alliance that neutralized the Spartan hegemony. During this prosperous period, the political leaders were always from the wealthy families.

Athens and Persia went to war once more in 468 B.C. in the Battle of Eurymedon, and Persia was defeated again.

After its victory, Athens became even more powerful and imposed its dominion over the other Greek cities (polis in Greek).