

Athens

A "Golden Age" for Athens?

The 5th century BCE was a period of great development in Ancient Greece, and specifically in Athens. The development of so many cultural achievements within Athens and the Athenian Empire has led scholars to deem this period a "Golden Age." It is true that this period had many achievements, but in the light of the Athenians' treatment of women, metics (non-Athenians living in Athens), and slaves it is given to question whether or not the period can truly be called "Golden."

The 5th century and the Athenian Empire gave birth to an amazing amount of accomplishments. One such accomplishment was the minting of standard Athenian coins that were used throughout the Athenian holdings as valid for trade. The use of standard Athenian-minted coins helped the Athenians establish and maintain control over their empire by helping to control trade and the economy of the area to the Athenians' benefit.

Since Athens regularly received tribute from the states it controlled, Pericles, the leader of Athens, began a building project in Athens that was legendary. Athens had been sacked by the Persians during the Persian Wars and Pericles set out to rebuild the city. The city's walls had already been rebuilt right after the end of the second Persian War so Pericles rebuilt temples, public grounds, and other impressive structures. One of the most famous structures to result from Pericles' building project was the Parthenon. The Parthenon and other such structures re-established Athens's glory and while some Athenians criticized the projects as too lavish, most Athenians enjoyed the benefits of the program. A major benefit to the Athenian people was that there was an abundance of work in the polis.

The 5th century BCE was also an important time for Athenian thought. "Sophists," paid teachers, taught rhetoric amongst other subjects to wealthy Athenian citizens. The Sophists were criticized by Athenians who thought that Sophists were destroying Greek tradition by emphasizing rationalism over a belief in superstition, however it was this rationalism that became so important to Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, both who belonged to the 5th century BCE. The Sophists' high regard for rhetoric was later of great use to citizens addressing the Assembly in the developing Athenian democracy.

Athenian democracy is perhaps considered the crowning achievement of the 5th century BCE. Democracy grew out of the status that poorer Athenians were gaining as rowers for the ships of the large Athenian fleet. Since these poorer Athenians now played a large part in the Athenian military, they gained more say in the Athenian government. This

led to a democratic government where "every male citizen over 18 years was eligible to attend and vote in the Assembly, which made all the important decisions of Athens in the 5th century BC\_" (Demand 223). This democratic government is considered by some scholars to show the full enlightenment of the Athenians in the 5th century BCE.

This glorious enlightenment seems somehow less enlightening, however, when one views this period from other than a male Athenian's eyes. Athenian enlightenment and democracy was by and for male citizens. The underprivileged of Athens included women, metics and slaves. The position of Athenian wives in Athenian society is clearly stated by Xenophon in his *Oeconomicus*. Ischomachus, a young husband, is conversing with Socrates about the duties of husband and wife. Ischomachus relates how he explained to his wife that the duties needed to support a household consisted of "indoor" and "outdoor" activities. He then explains to his wife, "And since labor and diligence are required both indoors and outdoors\_it seems to me that the god prepared the woman's nature especially for indoor jobs and cares and the man's nature for outdoor jobs and concerns." (Spyridakis 206). This is the general attitude that Athenians held toward their wives. The Athenian wife was expected to marry and bring a dowry into her husband's house. Although this dowry was attached to the woman, she was in no way allowed to control the lands and moneys she might bring to her husband.. Similarly, women were not allowed to vote or take any part in the Assembly, being seen as unfit for this privilege. The primary function of a citizen's wife was to take care of domestic affairs and provide the citizen with an heir. Athenian wives were rarely seen outside of their houses, for respectable wives had at least one slave who would purchase needed items at market. Poorer Athenian women were seen at market because they lacked slaves to run their errands. Women were considered intellectual non-entities and were treated as such in the Athenian Empire.

Metics also had a low status in Athenian society. Metics were not allowed voting privileges in the Athenian democracy, but were compelled to serve a specified time in the Athenian military and were taxed by the Athenians. Metics usually were lower-class tradesmen or craftsmen. Although some metics families eventually gained wealth, the vast majority of the metics remained second-class inhabitants of Athens, even though they performed some of the polis' most activities, such as military service and trade.

Slavery was also matter-of-fact in 5th century Athenian life. Slaves were the property of specific owners and subject to the wishes of their owners. Like women and metics, slaves had no citizenship rights. It was possible for a slave to save enough money to buy his freedom, but a freed slave had only as much status as a metic. Aristotle defended slavery as necessary and a law of nature, saying in his *Politics*, "That some should rule and others should be ruled is not only necessary but expedient; indeed, from the very moment of birth some are set apart to obey and others

to command." (Spyridakis 62) and also stating that, "He is by nature a slave who is capable of belonging to another (and therefore does belong to another) and who has access to reason in that he senses it and understands it but does not possess it." (Spyridakis 63). Many Athenians viewed slavery as necessary to society in order to give a citizen more time to participate in government affairs and other matters that were viewed as more important than a slave's work. Although some lower-class Athenians may have been forced to share labor with slaves, most Athenians did not participate in slave's work. Male slaves did harder labor such as construction and agriculture. Female slaves ran their mistress' errands and generally took care of domestic affairs under the watchful eye of their mistress. Slaves also acted as State scribes. In short, slaves did much of the work that allowed Athens to prosper in a period of "enlightenment."

In light of the unrecognized people who helped to build the foundations for the Athenian Empire, this "Golden Age" seem far less golden. However, many major accomplishments grew out of this period as well. Before one can or cannot place a "Golden Age" label on 5th century Athens, one must consider other times when the ends of man's accomplishments may not have justified the means. Athens could be compared to post- Revolutionary America, where a "democratic" government was only available to white male citizens. Yet Americans tend to view this time with much patriotism and pride. Likewise the Industrial Revolution is said to be a great accomplishment of mankind, but little recognition is given to the horrible factory conditions that employees, many women and children, endured. I would say that the 5th century BCE was as much a "Golden Age" for man as either of the above mentioned time periods. I think that most of our accomplishments as humans rest on the shoulders of invisible and overlooked peoples.

#### Works Cited

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Word Count: 1306