

The Peloponnesian Wars, 431–404 B.C.

In the 5th century B.C., during the Golden Age of Athens, the city-state came to dominate the Aegean world. Through the military and trade alliance of the Delian League, Athens was able to force other city-states to remain loyal to her. In addition, the Athenians required member city-states of the Delian League to pay Athens tribute money—payments of loyalty which amounted to perhaps \$200 million in modern currency.

Alarmed at the forcefulness of Athenian control over many of the Greek city-states, some turned to Sparta, Athens's chief rival, for protection and direction. The Spartans and their allies banded together in a second powerful confederation called the Peloponnesian League.

The leagues came to dominate the Greek peninsula from 454 to 431 B.C. These two armed and powerful city-states eventually went to war against one another in a series of conflicts known as the Peloponnesian Wars, beginning in 431.

The Athenian monopoly of trade in the Aegean region had caused much strain between Athens and her neighbors. War broke out when a member of the Peloponnesian League, the city of Corinth, became embroiled in a conflict with Athens over trading colonies. At the request of the Corinthians, Sparta and the Peloponnesian League declared war on Athens in 431 B.C.

Pericles, the ruler of Athens, based his strategy on Athenian seapower. He abandoned the farmlands surrounding the city and moved the farmers and their families into Athens. Everyone was fed by imports of grain that came into the Athenian port at Piraeus just five miles away.

Since Sparta did not have an adequate navy, it looked as though Athens might be able to hold out forever. However, in 430 B.C., a plague broke out in Athens. Many people died, suffering dreadful symptoms such as vomiting, painful sores, and harsh diarrhea. Pericles himself died in 429.

Many in the city were afraid they were being punished by their gods through the plague. This affected their confidence in meeting the challenge of the Spartan military on land. The death rate from disease was so high (approximately one-

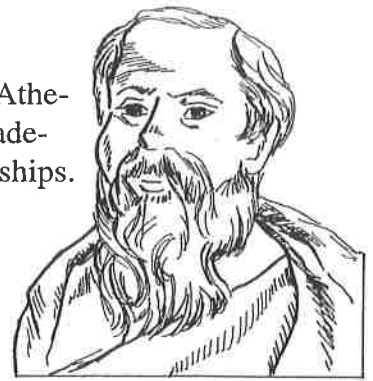
third of the people in Athens died) that the Athenians were unable to adequately man their warships.

War continued for another 10 years until the Athenians and the Spartans agreed to a 50-year truce, or peace, in 421 B.C. However, by 415, Athens was up to its old ways again—bullying its neighbors—and the Peloponnesian Wars resumed.

In 413 B.C., the Spartan army began permanent occupation of the Athenian countryside. The great silver mines of Athens came under Spartan control and 20,000 Athenian slave-miners declared their loyalty to Sparta. Slowly the Athenians were being defeated.

In 404 B.C., with no powerful leader having replaced Pericles, the Athenians surrendered and were forced by the Spartans and the Peloponnesian League to tear down their defensive walls and reduce their navy to 12 ships.

While the Golden Age of Athens came to an end, the city did remain an important cultural center and home to the most famous philosophers in all of ancient Greece, including Socrates (469–399 B.C.) and Plato (427–347 B.C.). The ideas of Socrates and the writings of his pupil, Plato soon became the cornerstones of ancient Greek philosophy.



The Athenian philosopher, Socrates, lived during the Peloponnesian Wars

Review and Write

1. What circumstances led to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian Wars in 431 B.C.?
2. Why did Athenian seapower fail to protect the city of Athens during the wars?