**The Impact of Pericles**

*The so-called golden age of Athenian culture flourished under the leadership of Pericles (495-429 B.C.), a brilliant general, orator, patron of the arts and politician—”the first citizen” of democratic Athens, according to the historian Thucydides. Pericles transformed his city’s alliances into an empire and graced its Acropolis with the famous Parthenon. His policies and strategies also set the stage for the devastating Peloponnesian War, which would embroil all Greece in the decades following his death.*

The golden age of Athenian culture is usually dated from 449 to 431 B.C., the years of relative peace between the Persian and Peloponnesian wars. After the second Persian invasion of Greece in 479, Athens and its allies throughout the Aegean formed the Delian League, a military alliance focused on the Persian threat. Following a failed Athenian attack on the Persians in Egypt in 454, Athens’ leaders pushed to transfer the League’s treasury from Delos to Athens. Three years later, a coinage decree imposed Athenian weights and measures throughout the league. By the time Pericles was elected strategos, the league began giving **tribute** to Athens and was well on its way to becoming an Athenian empire.

During the 440s and 430s Pericles tapped the league’s treasury to fund vast cultural projects in Athens, most notably a series of structures on the city’s hilltop Acropolis: the temple of Athena Nike, the Erechtheum and the towering Parthenon. Built to the highest standards of **aesthetics**, engineering and mathematics, these white marble structures were decorated with intricate statues and friezes carved by the era’s greatest sculptors.

Pericles’ social innovations were equally important to the era. He worked to democratize the fine arts by **subsidizing** theater admission for poorer citizens and enabled civic participation by offering pay for jury duty and other **civil service**. Pericles maintained close friendships with the leading intellects of his time. The playwright Sophocles and the sculptor Phidias were among his friends. Pericles’ consort Aspasia, one of the best-known women of ancient Greece, taught rhetoric to the young philosopher Socrates. Pericles himself was a master **orator**. His speeches and elegies (as recorded and possibly interpreted by Thucydides) celebrate the greatness of a democratic Athens at its peak.

As Athens grew in power under Pericles, Sparta felt more and more threatened and began to demand tribute from the Athenians. Pericles refused, and in 431 B.C. conflict between Athens and Sparta’s ally Corinth pushed the Spartans to invade Attica near Athens. Pericles adopted a strategy that played to the Athenians’ advantage as a naval force by evacuating the Attic countryside to deny the superior Spartan armies anyone to fight. With all his people collected within the walls of Athens, Pericles was free to make **opportunistic** seaborne attacks on Sparta’s allies. This financially costly strategy worked well during the war’s early years, but a **plague** hit the concentrated Athenian population, taking many lives and stirring discontent. A few months later, Pericles himself succumbed to the disease. His death was, according to Thucydides, disastrous for Athens. His strategies were quickly abandoned and the leaders who followed lacked Pericles’ **foresight** and forbearance, instead following the shortsighted **whims** of the people. The glory of ancient Greece was far from over—Plato was born a year after Pericles’ death—but the golden age slid away.

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1. **Describe four achievements of Pericles.**
2. **Use context clues to define four of the bolded terms.**