

- LECTURE -

Roads to Freedom Series:

Athenian Civilisation: The Glory That Endures

By Boris Johnson, Mayor of London

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I had a mis-spent youth. During the period when most normal adolescents are learning key life skills playing Grand Theft Auto or discovering 10 interesting facts about Pamela Anderson I am afraid that I would take the tube by myself - aged about 13 - and visit the British Museum.

I would walk through the cat-headed Egyptians and the cloven-hoofed Babylonians and the typewriter-bearded Assyrians, and all the other savage and ludicrous near eastern divinities - until I penetrated the sanctum sanctorum: the innermost and holiest shrine of London's greatest cultural temple, the Duveen galleries.

And there, like so many before and since, I would give thanks again to the slightly dim-witted seventh Earl of Elgin. Yes, I would mentally congratulate that reviled but blameless Scottish diplomat who in 1803 spent a stonking £75,000 of his own money to rescue those treasures from the Ottoman lime kiln, and who thereby allowed me and every other Londoner to form a glimmer of understanding of that revolution which took place in 5th century Athens.

You go in that room, and you feel you are in a new and better world.

You have left behind the totalitarian tyrannies, with their rigid and robotic processions of prisoners, their undifferentiated armies, their scenes of humiliation and massacre and headless corpses chucked (plus ca change, alas) in the Tigris. You notice a change in the mood.

It's not just the quality of the sculpture - though that has taken a hyperleap forward, with a new accuracy and fluency in the modelling. It's the attitude towards the subject.

You look at the riders of the Panathenaic frieze, and you see that this one has boots on, this one has chosen sandals for the big day, this one is tapping his head, this one is having difficulties with an obstreperous cow; and you realise that in the swivel of the hips and the unique articulation of the neck that the sculptors were trying to say something new: that these people were idealised, certainly, but they were meant to be the real people of Athens, the ordinary people, and in their scale and their attention to detail they were just as important as anyone else on that frieze - no smaller and no less carefully rendered than the Olympian gods themselves.

After thousands of years of civilisation and after centuries of abject quivering before fishgods and cowgods and skygods you are seeing the arrival of the individual - centre stage at last in the story of humanity.

I was vaguely capable of understanding this as a teenager, and to the Greeks themselves, and especially the Athenians, it was very clear that something wonderful was going on. The world is full of amazing things, says Sophocles - who had fought with Pericles in the same military campaigns - and nothing is more amazing than mankind.

Not Zeus with his thunderbolts, not Poseidon with his earthquakes, not even Apollo with his plagues: man is the strangest and scariest thing on the planet. Man is the measure of all things, said Protagoras of Abdera, who was also the teacher of Pericles; and the Greeks were the first really to try to take the measure of all things.

When you look at that supernova of classical Athenian intellectual activity - the blasphemous inquiries of the philosophers, the scatological satire of the comedians, the pervy psychological probing of the tragedians, the cynicism of the historians, the musings of Aristotle on the sex life of the cuttlefish, you have to ask yourself: why then?

Why did it all come together in 5th century Athens? Yes, it helped that they were relatively prosperous. They had found a huge silver mine at Laurium in Attica and in 483 they took the crucial strategic decision to invest in transport infrastructure, and with the biggest fleet in the Aegean and the entire Mediterranean they were able to control maritime traffic and to impose a tax on virtually every boat afloat.

But it wasn't just a question of economics. Look again at those friezes and metopes.

What do you notice - or, rather, what absence do you notice? Who is not there among the Athenians? Like the near eastern friezes there are some animals with human heads - the centaurs, though they are being defeated and not worshipped. There are scenes of battle, though there is no horror. There are no headless bodies (well, there are loads of headless people, including one poor lapith whose head is in Athens and whose body is in London; but no intentionally decapitated people).

Who is missing? That's right: there is no king, no pharaoh, no Basileus having his boots licked by fawning chamberlains. There is an absolutely explicit ideology at work - a celebration of people power. This Parthenon is not only a treasure house and a nationalist expression of Athenian money and might - with a ton of gold swaddled around the statue of Athena. It is a gigantic painted jewel box that exalts the triumph of the Athenians over the barbarians, a reminder that they have twice in living memory prevailed over the swarming hordes of the Persian king, and the reason they won was not that they feared the king or death at the hands of his slave-masters - like their opponents.

They won because they were fighting for an idea, for *eleutheria*, for freedom, for rights that were conferred 60 years ago when Cleisthenes the great-uncle of Pericles had instituted a system of government that had never been tried before and by which we claim still to be governed today, and which we call democracy.

Of course Athenian democracy was very far from perfect, and when we say Pericles was a democrat we need to qualify that, as Thucydides does, by pointing out that he exercised supreme power in Athens for a very long time, and he didn't devote himself just to Keynesian programmes of public works.

He was a general, a warrior, and the reason he wore a helmet on his head was not just that he was bald or that he had a dolicocephalic skull but because he led his troops in war, and when Pericles and his hoplites went to suppress a rebellion, as happened with the people of Samos, they could behave with oriental savagery - allegedly crucifying the ringleaders in the marketplace or branding their skins with symbols of subjection.

It was Pericles who converted the Delian league to the Athenian empire, who took the treasure from Delos to Athens, and in the run-up to the ultimately disastrous Peloponnesian war he behaved like a superhawk. He refused to compromise; he dismissed any suggestion of some UN-style peace initiative; he told the Athenians they could win; he promised they would win if they did as he said; and he got them to subordinate their interests to those of the state - so that they evacuated their farms and allowed them to be ravaged by the Spartans, while the population of Attica - maybe 400,000 people - was penned up behind the long walls, with the result that huge numbers succumbed to the terrible plague that killed both Pericles' sons and the man himself.

Periclean Athens was avowedly the heart of an empire that exacted tribute and ruled by force. And it was worse than that, as we all know.

It was a slave state, with perhaps as many 50,000 of them: people who lived in varying degrees of subordination, men and women who could be beaten by their owners with impunity, or used as sexual partners with little concept of consent; and as for the lives of so-called free women, we all know that in Athens they had virtually no formal political power or rights. And just because the system was called a democracy, that did not stop the Athenians taking dreadful decisions - like the sending of ships to massacre the entire population of Melos in 416, by any standards a war crime.

And yet for all its faults it was a democracy - the first time in history that they took power, and that is hard power: *kratos*, force, not just *arche* or leadership, and gave the right to exercise that *kratos* to the *demos*, the first time ever that thousands and thousands of ordinary people - as many as 10,000 perhaps - were brought together to vote, as they were on the Pnyx; the first society to have a parliament - 500 people who prepared the business and drafted the laws; the first time ever that people were paid by the state to perform public service - 3 obols a day to sit on a jury; the first society to ensure mass enjoyment of the arts by giving people 2 obols to subsidise attendance at the theatre; the first society when you could not only elect people - and don't forget Pericles was elected, year after year, for 15 years - but where you could get a bit of broken pot, scratch a name on it and you could send any politician you didn't like, no matter how powerful, into exile.

That is people power; and ostracism could happen to anyone. It happened to Themistocles, even though he had defeated the Persians at Salamis. It happened to Pericles' father. You just needed a quorum of 6000 people to vote on their pet hates, and kapow, you were spending the next 10 years twiddling your thumbs in Bulgaria. You can imagine the sense of personal power and confidence that gave to the people who scratched on the potsherds; and who saw instant and deeply gratifying results from their participation in the democratic process.

You can see why some people would like to bring back ostracism today; and it was this sense of political confidence - that willingness to challenge and to innovate - that went hand in hand with intellectual confidence and freedom of the Periclean inflorescence.

We rightly dwell today on the imperfections of Athenian democracy; and yet we should surely accept that no modern democracy is perfect. We only gave women the vote in 1928 - after Belgium and after Turkey, and we still have not just unelected hereditary but unelected religious representatives in our legislature. As for the Americans, they didn't give full civil rights to all races until my own lifetime, and the views of the Athenians on the Melians were mild by comparison with the views of, say Presidents Andrew Jackson or Theodore Roosevelt on the subject of native American Indians.

All democracies are like Periclean Athens in that we fall short of the ideal. The important point about 5th century Greece was that it was the first time and place that this ideal was so clearly and beautifully expressed. Read that great speech Pericles made in the winter of 431/430 BC, after the first year of that war he thought Athens would win.

Before him under a sacred tent he has the bones of those who have died, and he has to explain to the grieving people - the mothers, the fathers, the widows and orphans - what it is all about, what they are fighting for, and in words that leap off the page, and that sound so modern and yet so much better than any modern political speech he tries to sum up the difference between Athens and the rest of the world.

"We enjoy a form of government that does not emulate the institutions of our neighbours; indeed we ourselves are more often the model for others than their imitators. Democracy is the name we give to it since we manage our affairs in the interests of the many, not the few, but though everyone is equal before the law in the matter of private disputes, in terms of public

distinction preferment for office is determined on merit, not by rank but by personal worth; moreover, poverty is no bar to anyone who has it in them to benefit the city in some way, however lowly their status. A spirit of freedom governs our conduct, not only in public affairs but also in managing the small tensions of everyday life, where we show no animosity at our neighbours' choice of pleasures, nor cast aspersions that may hurt even if they do not harm. Although we associate as individuals in this tolerant spirit, in public affairs a sense of respect makes us the most severely law-abiding of people, obedient to whoever is in authority and to the laws, especially to those established to help the victims of injustice and those laws which, though unwritten, carry the sanction of public disgrace."

You read those words today - and I am sure they are very close to what he actually said, and not some Thucydidean fiction - and you can understand the excitement and pride and self-belief of the Athenians; and the reason those words strike such a chord is that this is still what we believe in and aspire to in London today, a city where we are prospering mightily because we are unlike so many other places in the world in actually adhering to Periclean principles.

He speaks of the rule of law, and above all the impartiality of the law; and I might remind you that crime in London has come down by 18 per cent over the last six years, and that we patrol this city with such a sense of equality that the police recently detained the Duke of York for loitering in the shrubbery at Buckingham Palace and we jail our MPs for so much as trying to pass their speeding points on to their wives, and jail the wives.

This is quite serious. It is the visible adherence to the rule of law that attracts confidence and investment to London.

"Furthermore", says Pericles to the Athenians two and a half thousand years ago, "we have provided many diversions from work to refresh the spirit; there are regular public games and festivals of sacrifice throughout the year, while in private we have lovely things at home to delight us every day and drive away our cares." There is no need to enlarge on all the lovely things that modern Londoners have at home or do in private to drive away care - I am sure you all know what they are.

But in the public arena we have more live music venues than any other city, twice as many theatres as Paris, twice as many bookshops as New York and there could be no greater festival

of sacrifice than the 2012 Olympics where we sacrificed £9.3 bn on the greatest public games the world has ever seen (and whose benefits are yielding an hundredfold in east London).

It is worth noting, by the way, that we follow the Periclean example in this respect. He was fast. It took them only nine years, from 447 to 438, to plan, finance and build the Parthenon, with all its sublime sculpture and statuary - the same time it took London to clear and decontaminate the site and then build the Olympic venues, on time and on budget.

And then Pericles comes to some of the most critical points of comparison between his world and ours. They are both gigantic centres of free trade and free enterprise, with all the benefits that brings. Pericles says: "Because of the importance of our city the products of the whole world flow in here, and it is our good fortune to enjoy with the same familiar pleasure both our home-produced goods and those of other people."

You only have to glance at the exotic stuff in our supermarkets to see what he is talking about there. Above all, there speaks a man who understood the importance of transport infrastructure - the need to be able to move goods and people in and out of the great emporion, the entrepot, as fast and efficiently as possible.

In the early 5th century the Athenians made the strategically vital decision to abandon the shallow and congested Phaleron harbour and build a new 3-harbour multi-dock 24 hour superport at Piraeus - which Pericles and others connected with long walls to Athens; and that was how Athens became the greatest economic power in Greece, and that is how she achieved commercial dominance of the Aegean - not just enough ships but a big enough port to cope; and I am sure that I don't need to spell out the lesson for our modern debate on London's airports.

Add all this up: the rule of law, good transport, fantastic entertainment, a culture based on merit and opportunity, and you can see why people flocked to ancient Athens as they come to modern London - like Periclean Athens the number one tourist city in the world. They wanted to live there, to work there - and it was in the matter of immigration that there was a fundamental difference between Athens and her Spartan enemies.

Now we should be very clear that neither Pericles nor his electorate were remotely soft on immigration, in the sense that they made a sharp distinction between native Athenians and everyone else. They held that the very first Athenian, a chap called Erichthonius, had not even arrived there; he had sprouted from the soil, after Athena just managed to avoid being raped by Hephaestus, wiped off the mess on her dress with some wool and dropped it to the ground.

Pericles built on this chauvinist sentiment, and in 451 passed a decree that you could only be a full Athenian citizen if both your mother and father were born in Athens - with the result that thousands of people suddenly found themselves facing huge fines as they were reclassified as resident aliens. And if you were one of these resident aliens, or metics, as they were called, you faced many disadvantages.

You could not vote or own land. You faced the risk of arbitrary arrest, and you didn't have the same legal protections as a citizen, and you faced a pretty swingeing non-dom tax of 12 talents a year if you were a man and 6 if you were a woman - far more than anything an Athenian would pay.

And yet they came in huge numbers, at all levels of society. There were probably as many metics in Athens as there were citizens - 50 per cent foreigners, in other words, and they were critical to the life of the city. There were millionaire arms dealers like Cephalus, the genial old buffer we meet at the beginning of Plato's Republic.

There was Pericles' own mistress, the gorgeous and brilliant Aspasia. He loved her. He kissed her when he got home from work every day and he wept when she was prosecuted for allegedly running a high-class knocking shop; and yet she was officially a metic, a foreigner, because she came from Miletus in what is now Turkey. There were the foreign intellectuals - rhetoricians like Gorgias of Leontini in Sicily, mathematicians like Theodorus of Cyrene in what is now Africa, doctors like Hippocrates of Cos.

And then there were the workers, the builders, the plumbers, the plasterers, the potters, the tanners who gave the Athenians the leisure they needed for politics and for speculations. Look at the Erechtheum - one of the greatest and most important buildings in the history of architecture, whose porch of the Caryatids - the pillar women with baskets on their heads - is

echoed everywhere including the Euston road, and which has the first example of the egg and dart motif that you find all over buildings in London.

Who built the Erechtheum? We have some of the records, and of the 86 workmen whose status is identifiable, 24 are citizens, 42 are metics, and 20 are slaves. It was mainly done by the 5th century equivalent of the Poles and the South Africans, in other words.

We look back from the vantage point of 21st century London - where 40 per cent of the city was born abroad - and we see in our spiritual prototype the same anxieties about immigration, the same patriotism and nationalism, but also the same willingness to welcome energy and talent if it could be turned to the advantage of the city as a whole.

Now Pericles comes in his speech to that crucial difference in attitude between the Athenians and their rivals: "We keep our city open to the world, and do not ever expel people to prevent them from learning or observing the sort of thing whose disclosure might benefit an enemy."

Here he draws the great contrast with the Spartans, whose wretched xenophobia meant that every year they expelled every foreigner in a ritual known as the *exelasia*. Yeah, you may say: and who won the Peloponnesian war?

It is true that long after Pericles had died, and after his successors had made a series of catastrophic mistakes, the war came to an end with a Spartan victory; but it was a short-term victory. If you seriously wonder which was the more far-sighted policy, openness or xenophobia, then ask yourself when you last read any Spartan poetry or Spartan philosophy, or who were the great Spartan tragedians or Spartan painters; or go to Sparta and stand amid the ruins - if you can even find those few pathetic courses of stone - and compare them to the miracles still to be seen in Athens today: exactly, by the way, as Thucydides prophesied.

It was that openness to the world that created the cultural openness - the extraordinary willingness of Athenians to consider new ways of thinking and speaking. It was an irreverent society, where the leaders could be mercilessly lampooned - as was Pericles for his onion-shaped head and his devotion to Aspasia.

It was an intellectually curious society, where people fearlessly postulated that the sun was actually a stone or that the earth was round or that the gods Demeter and Dionysus were just glorified references to the individual human beings who had invented making bread and growing vines. And as Pericles shows in that amazing passage I have just quoted, about the Athenian “spirit of freedom...where we show no animosity at our neighbour’s choices of pleasures”, it was a world where people could enjoy themselves nearly naked at alcohol-fuelled parties in a way that is abundantly depicted on X-rated red-figure vases.

The Athenian approach to pleasure - exuberant though still bound by strict rules and conventions - is the direct precursor of the innocent hedonism of the modern Londoner at the end of the working day. It is that sense that you can express yourself and have fun - and not be judged, not be gossiped about - that draws people to a successful metropolis; and it is one of the reasons why London today is as Athens was - the academic and university capital of the world.

And then there is one final element that these cities share; the nuclear rod of fuel that makes the whole pile vibrate and go critical. Pericles comes to the subject towards the end of the speech, when he has observed that the whole earth is the tomb of famous men. Of all life’s desires, he says, now in his mid 60s, “the love of honour, alone, never grows old.”

The Greeks competed for honour, for prestige, and so have Londoners down the ages. Shakespeare didn’t become Shakespeare by sitting alone in a garret in Stratford with his quill in his ear. He came to London and competed to put bums on seats with Dekker and Marlow and Fletcher and about 12 others and pow - the cyclotron quivered and he became the greatest writer ever. And in the seventeenth century scientific revolution you had the same throbbing coffee house competition between Boyle and Hooke and Newton and Flamsteed, each spurring the other to a breakthrough, and again between the London rock and roll bands of the 1960s. You have enough venues and enough bands and zoink - you have the Rolling Stones or the Kinks.

Athens provided that arena for literary, artistic, musical and intellectual competition of all kinds - with twice as many festivals as any other city; and when Sophocles and Euripides put on their plays at the Dionysia, they weren’t just hoping to entertain; they were hoping to win the top prize.

In the end it was that spirit of competition and philotimia - that love of honour - that did for Athens. As most modern historians agree, the war with Sparta was essentially about who was top dog, who had the prestige of being called the leader of Hellas, and the competitive urge that made Athens great was also therefore her downfall.

She ended that long war diminished and weakened - much as London was at the end of the long cycles of violence that began in 1914 and ended in 1945. And yet 70 years after the end of those wars, this is the amazing thing: that London is still the Athens of the world, and once again the education of the planet, and that is because we have managed to avoid warfare and uphold those essential Periclean ideals of democracy and freedom; and the reason that funeral speech is so arresting and so thought-provoking is that when we look around the world today we see that these ideals are so very far from trite and very far from being universally accepted.

Even in Hungary, a country that has only lately joined the EU, we hear of the advantages of so-called "illiberal democracy"; we see the autocracy of the Kremlin; we see the vertiginous rise of our friends in China - defying Fukuyama by embracing the market while maintaining the sole supremacy of the communist party; politely and gently damping down the voting power of the people of Hong Kong, and whatever you say about the merits of that approach, as a keeper of stability, it is certainly not the heir of Periclean democracy.

We see the increasing centralising power of a European Union, that is paradoxically eroding the sovereign rights of the people within it. Across the middle east we see the growing strength of people who hate democracy, and who would not only execute gays and oppress women and banish female nudity but who would smash and destroy virtually every sculptural treasure in the Duveen gallery as a matter of so-called religious principle.

There are people around the world who in one way or another reject Periclean ideals, and so it is more vital than ever that we uphold them here in London. Let us keep the flame alive, protect the owl of Pallas Athena that still haunts the squares of Bloomsbury; fight off those who would fulfil Hitler's agenda and rip the Parthenon marbles from their place in the heart of our culture. Let us teach our children the Latin and Greek classics and the derivation of the egg and dart motif and let us continue for as long as Londoners have legs, as long as Londoners have nerves, to show the rest of Europe that here in this city we keep alive the ancient skill of those soldiers we see on the Athenian friezes who were trained to be anabates and apobates,

able to board and alight from a moving chariot; and let us defy the health and safety fanatics of Brussels by mounting and dismounting the open platform on those beautiful new Routemasters with the freedom and grace of the hop-on hop-off hoplites of Periclean Athens.

And that is just a tiny part of what I mean by that spirit of freedom that Pericles exalted, a spirit of democracy, and tolerance, and cultural effervescence, and mass political participation. That is what we believe in. That's what makes London great. In the Thucydidean phrase, let's keep it as a possession forever.