

# Archaeological find opens the pages of Ancient Greek history

Sandy English  
28 February 2000

Archaeologists have announced that a discovery in 1998 of a mass grave of 200-250 cremated bodies at a construction site in Athens may contain the remnants of soldiers who fought for democratic Athens against oligarchic Sparta in the opening years of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), the prolonged struggle between the two great powers of ancient Greece that ended in defeat for Athens.

Pottery finds date the grave to 421-431 BC. Although the remains were cremated, many bone fragments remain intact, including jaw, pelvis, and vertebra. The bones were discovered in what were the public burial grounds of ancient Athens, not too far from Plato's Academy.

The remains have been flown to Adelphi University in Garden City, New York for detailed analysis that may reveal the diet, overall health and lifestyles of some of the individuals. Dr. Anagnostis Agelarakis, the anthropologist in charge of the study of the bones at Adelphi, has already suggested that stress patterns may indicate that some of these soldiers were members of the cavalry.

The find is stunning because these may be the very Athenian soldiers over whom the politician Pericles delivered his famous funeral oration, rendered by the historian Thucydides in his contemporaneous *History of the Peloponnesian War*, one of the first documents of scientific history.

Thucydides almost certainly heard Pericles speak in 431. Although it is unlikely that he recorded the speech verbatim, it is widely believed that he gave an accurate accounting of the sense of the speech.

Pericles' funeral oration is not only one of most eloquent public speeches in world literature; it is also one of history's earliest sustained defenses of the ideals of democracy and social equality. The gist of Pericles'

speech was that the Athenian dead were not just any soldiers fighting for any sort of social regime; they had fought for a more just and equal social system against a state, Sparta, that sought to impose the rule of the few over the many in the Greece of the fifth century BC.

The sense emerges in his speech that these soldiers knew for what they were fighting and were themselves participants in the one of the world's first democratic regimes, as Pericles put it, "an education for Greece."

While the Athens of the fifth century BC, like other Greek states was a polity based on slave labor, in which foreigners and women had almost no rights, the notions of one man—one vote, freedom of speech and the right to personal privacy represented a tremendous social advance, one almost completely confined to the small Greek city-states of the era. These ideas had reverberations throughout European and later world history for centuries to come.

Archaeology now has the opportunity of telling us how these soldiers, or men very much like them, lived their material lives, what they may have looked like, and how the state buried them, all-important issues for a deepening understanding of ancient Athens. However, we are fortunate in being able to glimpse, through Thucydides, something of their political and spiritual lives. It is important to recall that these soldiers died for a progressive social system.

Recent press announcements, however, have quoted little from Pericles' speech that might tell us something about the social system that the Athenian soldiers fought for. In the *New York Times* report, and in popular scientific journals, selections from the speech have focused on the glory these soldiers achieved by their courage and self-sacrifice. The egalitarian ideal that inspired the Athenian lower and middle classes to defend their city, the notion that they were fighting for

a fundamentally just society, has been passed over. What it was that impelled these men to make such sacrifices, and the social content of the glory they won, might be better revealed in the another passage from Pericles' funeral oration:

“Our constitution is called a democracy because power is not in the hands of a minority, but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability, which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get in a state with our next-door neighbor if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks, which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people's feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives, but in public affairs we keep the law. This is because it commands our deep respect.” [trans. Warner. Penguin: 149]

An excellent report on the discovery may be found in the current issue of *Archaeology* magazine at <http://www.archaeology.org>.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**