

Which famous persons did Myrtis come face to face with in 440-430 B.C. Athens?

(by Despo Papagrigoraki)

On the second half of the fifth century B.C., known to posterity as “the Golden Age of Pericles”, when Myrtis was growing in Athens, the city enjoyed a splendid heyday in the arts and letters, as well as a consolidated democracy with inspired political leaders. The city that was to be known to history as Classical Athens experienced an age of unprecedented grandeur and was characterized by a passion in reasoning and reconsidering institutions and values, principles and beliefs, the natural world and the behavior of man as an individual and as a member of an organized society. Socrates’ rationalism put all notions under unrelenting critical analysis, thus adding to the mood for revision and mistrust to many traditional beliefs and concepts about the divinity.

In this climate, men of outstanding abilities distinguished themselves and played a bigger or smaller part in the great achievements of the Hellenic spirit and its contribution to the history of our civilization.

We have chosen some of the personalities who were active in 440-430 B.C. Athens and present them here, focusing, when possible, more to the everyday person than to the historical personality.

PERICLES

Born in the municipality of Holargos in 495 he was the leader of the Athenian Democracy for more than thirty years (461-429). With his policy he consolidated and developed the newly-established democracy elevating Athens to its highest material and intellectual state, a political and cultural centre in the Hellenic world. At the end of the first year of the war he delivered the celebrated funeral oration "Epitafios", which was a strong appeal to the pride and patriotism of the citizens. Perhaps Myrtis heard him hidden in the folds of her father's cloak. She was already 10 years old!

ASPASIA

Around 455, at the age of 20, Aspasia came to Athens from Milos as a hetaera. She was distinguished for her wit, her eloquence, her beauty and her culture. She influenced Pericles a lot, so that he divorced his first wife in order to live with her. It was said that he didn't hesitate to kiss her good-bye in public. Her home was a meeting place for the greatest men of her time, the intellectual and artistic aristocracy of Athens of the "Golden Age". Maybe, Myrtis was a young slave in this house!

SOCRATES

Born around 470 in the municipality of Alopeki (today Daphne) he became famous for his view of philosophy as a pursuit proper and necessary to all intelligent men, and he is a great example of a man who lived by his principles even though they ultimately cost him his life. He became convinced that his calling was to search for wisdom about the right conduct by which he might guide the intellectual and moral improvement of the Athenians. He was widely known for his intellectual powers and spent his time discussing virtue, justice, and piety wherever his fellow citizens congregated. Myrtis might have heard such discussions, of which, most probably, she didn't understand a word!

HERODOTOS

The oldest of Greek historians (called the “Father of History” by Cicero) he was born in Halicarnassos in Asia Minor around 480. His history is the starting point of Western historical writing. The value of his work lies not in its accuracy but in its scope and the rich diversity of information, as well as the charm of its anecdotal style. He visited Athens many times, and it seems that he read extracts from his history to the public (probably in the newly built Odeon of Pericles) and the Athenians were so pleased that awarded him a prize of 10 talents from the public purse. Perhaps Myrtis heard him read his tales!

THUCYDIDES

Born around 460 in the municipality of Alimos Thucydides is one of the greatest ancient historians. His one work, the incomplete History of the Peloponnesian War marked the beginning of a new style in history by reason of its generic character. He interprets the succession of events in view of the general nature and behavior of man rather than as a result of a fate outside man’s influence. His writing is marked by accuracy and a studied impartiality. His account of the plague –which killed Myrtis– displays his clinical and descriptive attitude: by describing the signs and symptoms of the disease in detail he hopes people will have the experience to treat it if it ever recurs.

PHEIDIAS

One of the greatest sculptors of ancient Greece, Pheidias was born in Athens and the peak of his creative life was between 470 and 430. He had a very special artistic and intellectual personality and traditionally he has been credited with having been in charge of the Parthenon sculptures and other great works on the Acropolis, sponsored by Pericles. His greatest achievements were the Athena Parthenos at Athens and the Zeus in the temple of Olympia, both colossal figures of chryselephantine workmanship. In 438, when the Athena was completed he was forced to leave Athens because of charges of atheism and blasphemy

among other accusations, since he dared portray the features of Pericles and his own on the depiction of the Amazon Battle that decorated the shield of the statue.

ZENO OF ELEA

Greek philosopher who was born in Elea of Southern Italy around 490. At the age of 40 he came to Athens where he was admired for his intellect and his versatility in philosophical debates. According to Aristotle, Zeno is the “Father of Dialectic”, for he sought to demonstrate through logical reasoning the error of common sense notions of time and space.

ANAXAGORAS

Greek philosopher born in Clazomenae around 500. He is credited with having transferred the seat of philosophy to Athens, where he stayed and taught for thirty years. He is thought to have been the teacher of Socrates. Anaxagoras universe, before separation, was an infinite, undifferentiated mass, while the formation of the world was due to a rotary motion produced in this mass by an all-pervading mind (nous). Although Anaxagoras was the first to give “mind” a place in the universe, he was criticized and charged with atheism.

EURIPIDES

He was born in Salamis around 480 and was the last of the three great tragic poets of ancient

Greece. Provocative, concerned with problems and conflicts sometimes disturbing to his audiences, Euripides displayed a rationalistic and iconoclastic attitude toward the gods and an interest in less heroic, even homely characters. He brings the mythical stories down to the immediate contemporary and human level. He can be considered the first known “bibliophile of ancient Greece – he possessed the only copy of Heraclitus’ writing “Peri Physios”, which he is known to have lent to Socrates, too!

HIPPOCRATES

Greek physician born in Cos around 460, recognized as “the father of medicine”. The Hippocratic school that formed around him was of enormous importance in separating medicine from superstition and philosophic speculation, placing it on a strictly scientific plane based on objective observation and critical deductive reasoning. He ended up in Athens after many tours and helped in confronting the horrible plague. Maybe he attended Myrtis but didn’t manage to save her!

SOPHOCLES

Born in the municipality of Colonos around 497 he was one of the three great poets of ancient Athens. A man of wealth, charm and genius, Sophocles was given posts of responsibility in peace and in war by the Athenians. He is supposed to have said that Aeschylus composed correctly without knowing it, Euripides portrayed men as they were, and he himself painted men as they ought to be. He got two sons and two grandsons with the name Sophocles (from wife Nicostrati and mistress Theorida), one of which grandsons became also a tragic poet and produced “Oedipus at Colonos” after his grandfather’s death in 406. Maybe Myrtis had played with the two young Sophocleses in the back streets of Athens!

ARISTOPHANES

Born in the municipality of "Kydathinaioi" today "Plaka" around 450, he was the greatest of the ancient writers of comedy. His plays mix political, social and literary satire, attack directly his contemporaries (e.g. Euripides or Socrates), uses severe invective and burlesque extravagances. His Greek is exceptionally beautiful and many of his choruses are among the finest lyric pieces in Greek literature.

CRATINOS

Born in Athens around 485 he is the comic poet who is considered to have formed the old type of attic comedy, enjoying in comedy the status that Aeschylus enjoys in tragedy. He won the prize at the Athenian drama contest when Aristophanes competed with *The clouds* and was regarded with Aristophanes and Eupolis as one of the greatest comic poets. He attacked Pericles violently in his plays, only fragments of which survive.

ICTINOS

We have not much information about Ictinos' life, it is not even certain whether he was Athenian or not. However, we know that he lived in the second half of the 5th century and was one of the greatest architects of Greece. His celebrated work is the Parthenon upon the Acropolis, which he built with architect Callicrates as associate. Myrtis might have seen them when she was strolling in the area. Ictinos also built the temple of Apollo Epicurios at Vassae, near Phigalia, and the Telesterion at Eleusis.

CALLICRATES

5th century Athenian architect who, according to Plutarch, in association with Ictinos built the Parthenon. His most important work, however, was the Temple of Athena Nike, which he designed at the western edge of the Acropolis. Construction works ran parallel to those in Propylaea (437-432) when they stopped because of the Peloponnesian War. Maybe Myrtis had seen him supervising construction works.

POLYGNOTOS

Perhaps the greatest painter of antiquity, he was born in Thasos in the first half of the 5th century, but lived most of his life in Athens and became an Athenian citizen. He is credited with having developed a series of physical attitudes to express emotion, that may be reflected in vase painting of the late 5th century. None of his works have survived.

ANTIPHON

Athenian orator born in 480 in the municipality of Ramnous, the oldest of all Attic orators and the first "speech writer" and instructor of rhetoric. He rarely spoke in public but wrote defenses for others to speak. He did much to advance Attic prose writing. His position in politics was with the conservative aristocrats and he was instrumental in setting up the Four Hundred in 411. When they fell, Antiphon was among the first to be executed.

DAMON

Athenian musician and politician of the 5th century, who was trusted by Pericles and became his teacher and political consultant. Plato named him "the most graceful of men" and Antiphon was a friend of him but also of Socrates, who considered him his teacher. He was attacked by comedy writers and later was ostracized.

ALCIVIADES

Athenian statesman and general, born in 452, symbol of moral and political amorality. He was a ward of Pericles and was for many years a devoted attendant of Socrates. He was admired and loved but also hated by his contemporaries. Some viewed him as a highly competent leader while others considered him to be largely responsible for the decline of Athens. Maybe Myrtis had fallen in love with him as many Athenian corae.

MNESICLES

Great architect of the 5th century Athens who was responsible for the construction of the Propylaea, so that their orientation would be the same with that of the Parthenon. He managed to match the Doric style of the building with the Ionic and made a construction worthy of the Parthenon.

EUPOLIS

Comic poet born in Athens in 449, the most important representative of the old attic comedy. His plays were satirical and malicious but greatly admired by the Athenians. He seems to have collaborated with Aristophanes whom he also attacked. At his 17 years of age he took part in drama competition, which Myrtis might have attended with her parents!

POLYCLEITOS

Born in Argos in the 5th century he is counted together with Athenian Pheidias and Sikyonian Lysippos in the three greatest sculptors of ancient Greece. He wrote studies about the ideal proportions of the human body, which means that he is the first theoretician of Art we know. His most famous statue embodied his ideal of physical perfection, the Doryforos (Spear-Bearer) and became the standard of proportions for sculptors, the "canon of Polycleitos". In the beginning of the Peloponnesian War he stayed in Athens, where he became acquainted with Socrates.

MYRON

One of the most famous sculptors of the 5th century from the municipality of Eleutheres, in the boundaries between Attica and Boiotia, who, nevertheless, had his workroom in Athens. Sculpting in bronze, he was noted for his animals and for his athletes in action. His works are known through descriptions by ancient writers (thirty-six inscriptions of the Greek Anthology speak enthusiastically about the celebrated "Myron's cow" on the Acropolis). Also his Discovolos is known to us by Roman copies.

Famous persons

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