For over 20 years, at Athens' height, the city was dominated by the aloof, 'Olympian' figure of Pericles. A magnificent orator with a reputation for scrupulous honesty, Pericles deepened and extended the reforms that Cleisthenes had set in motion some 50 years before.

A keen patron of learning and the arts, he masterminded the construction of the Parthenon. However, in glorifying Athens, he set it upon a collision course with Sparta that would ultimately lead to its ruin.

**c. 493 BC - Pericles’ Early Life**

Pericles was born around 493 BC into a rich aristocratic family. On his mother's side he was related to the great reformer Cleisthenes. His father was a famous general.

Little is known of his early life and this may be partly to do with the great events going on all around him. These were tumultuous times for Athens. When Pericles was only three years old the Persians made their first bid to conquer the Greeks, being soundly defeated at Marathon. By the time he was 13 they had returned again, and undoubtedly the teenage Pericles would have been among the many women and children evacuated from Athens during the battle at Salamis.

**472 BC - Pericles Enters Public Life**

In 472 BC, eight years after the defeat of the Persians at Salamis, the young Pericles, now in his late 20s, sponsored a major dramatic production for the festival of Dionysus. As well as providing entertainment for the whole city, this annual event was also an opportunity for sponsors to bring their name to wider public attention.

Pericles was lucky enough to be assigned to sponsor Aeschylus, the first of the great tragic playwrights. Aeschylus' play, 'The Persians' was considered a masterpiece and won first prize, bringing its sponsor, Pericles, to widespread public prominence.

Around this time he also married, though, as with so much about male-dominated ancient
Greece, we don't even know the name of his wife. She bore him two sons.

Pericles' first real involvement in politics began a decade later, in 461. He became involved with a politician called Ephialtes. Together they organized a vote in the popular assembly that deprived the Areopagus, the old noble council, of its remaining powers. It was an action that would have huge consequences, and many historians believe it to mark the defining moment of Athenian democracy.

460 BC - Pericles’ Rise to Power

In the stormy aftermath of the old noble council losing its powers, Pericles' ally, Ephialtes, was assassinated. It was a dangerous time for the budding leader as Cimon, the pro-Spartan politician who had probably organized the ostracism of Themistocles ten years before in 470, tried to re-assert himself as Athens' foremost politician.

But Cimon underestimated the power of the common people and was ostracized. As a result Pericles now joined the front rank of Athenian politicians. Over the next ten years he led several important military expeditions, helped reinforce Athens' control over the naval alliance called the Delian League, approved a final peace with Persia, and introduced payment for jury service. This last act marked a major step forward for the poor, since they too could now afford to take time off their normal work to become involved in politics.

Athenian democracy was entering its most radical phase.

451 BC - Pericles’ Citizenship Law & Aspasia

In 451 Pericles introduced a new citizenship law which prevented the son of an Athenian father and a non-Athenian mother becoming a full citizen. The law's main effect was to curb the power of the aristocrats since if their heirs could not be legally recognized they could no longer forge alliances with aristocrats from other cities. Ironically, it would have major consequences for Pericles own private life.

A few years later Pericles divorced his wife and started to live with a beautiful foreign courtesan called Aspasia, described by Socrates as one of the most intelligent and witty women of her time. The relationship scandalized polite society, especially because they remained unmarried and Pericles treated her as an equal, an almost unthinkable action for most Greek men.

But though Pericles became the butt of vicious jokes about his private life, in public office he was known for his incorruptibility and refusal to accept gifts from other aristocrats, as was the normal custom. Instead he kept to himself, limiting his public appearances before the assembly, but slowly coming to dominate it with his aristocratic style and superb oratory skills.

447 BC - The Acropolis Rebuilt

In 447 Pericles began the project he is most famous for: the building program on the Acropolis. Through its great naval alliance the city controlled an empire - Pericles now insisted his countrymen support him in constructing a building whose magnificence, architectural genius, and sheer brilliance would reflect the prestige of imperial Athens:
'All kinds of enterprises should be created which will provide an inspiration for every art, find employment for every hand... we must devote ourselves to acquiring things that will be the source of everlasting fame.'

The most ambitious building program in Greek history, the building of the Parthenon was Pericles' greatest triumph and he oversaw the project personally. Costing 5000 talents in the first year alone - a figure equivalent to some $3 billion in today's money - the building was completed in less than 15 years, despite attempts to derail the projects by Pericles' political opponents. Made from 20 thousand tons of marble quarried from nearby Mount Pentelicus, the huge cost of the building was partly financed from the treasury of the Delian League, which caused great resentment among many of Athens' allies, who were to be the source of many future troubles.

443 BC - Pericles Defeats His Rivals

In the early years of Pericles' power he was constantly challenged for the leadership of Athens. One opponent, Thucydides (not the historian of the same name), a relative of the ostracized Cimon, tried a novel way to subvert Pericles' influence. Rather like a modern political party, he arranged for all his supporters to sit in one block in the assembly in order to strengthen his cause. Sadly for Thucydides, the plan backfired by exposing just how little support he really had. A champion wrestler who had won the Olympics, he later said of Pericles:

'If I wrestle him to the ground he will deny this and deny it so vigorously that he will convince even those who witnessed the fight.'

Thucydides was Pericles' main rival for a number of years but eventually followed Cimon into exile in 443, having also lost an ostracism vote.

With the politician Thucydides gone, Pericles remained secure as Athens' leading statesman for the rest of his life. As the historian Thucydides observed of Athens during Pericles' long rule over it:

'In name democracy, but in fact the rule of one man.'

438 BC - Pericles Triumphant

Nicknamed 'The Olympian' because of his aloof manner, Pericles brought a new authority and stability to Athenian politics. It was a unique moment in Western history and at the center of it all was Pericles.

Tutored by the philosopher Anaxagoras, whose studies in natural science are said to have made the great statesman renounce all superstition, Pericles became a patron and fervent supporter of the arts and new advances in learning. The city hummed with great thinkers like Socrates and his opponents the Sophists; was captivated by the playwrights like Euripides and Sophocles; and marveled at the designs of Phidias and the new Parthenon. Athens had become the school of Greece.
Pericles' was by now far too popular for his rivals to topple him as the city's leader. So instead, they attacked his close associates in the courts. Anaxagoras and Phidias were eventually exiled from Athens. Aspasia survived, but only after Pericles himself publicly pleaded her innocence in a legal case.

Elsewhere in Greece, the new magnificence of Athens was greeted with less enthusiasm. Mighty Sparta, the traditional overlord of Greece, looked on with grave suspicion at the upstart naval power. Rumors began of war.

431 BC - Athens Goes to War

In the year 431 BC Pericles stood before the popular assembly and urged them to make a momentous decision:

'If we go to war, as I think we must, be determined that we are not going to climb down. For it is from the greatest dangers that the greatest glories are to be won.'

The assembly responded by declaring war on Sparta.

Pericles insisted that Athens would win the war by superior planning. To be successful the Athenians must abandon the surrounding land and retreat behind their impenetrable city walls. Supplied by a fleet of ships that could bring provisions from as far afield as Egypt and the Black Sea, they should avoid all land battles with Sparta. Instead their navy would launch surprise attacks from the coast.

The war began slowly and appeared to follow the pattern Pericles had predicted. It was during a commemoration speech for those who had already died that he made one of the most famous speeches of Ancient Greek history, called the Funeral Oration.

Tragically, for all his meticulous planning, not even Pericles could have foreseen the cataclysm that was about to strike the city he so loved.

430 BC - The Plague Strikes Athens

Pericles' plan to defeat Sparta seemed to have taken account of everything. With a fleet of 300 triremes; 13,000 hoplite infantrymen; 1,200 cavalry and 16,000 reserves; the Athenians believed themselves to be invincible. Such was their confidence that Pericles' main problem was preventing the assembly from rushing overconfidently into land battles, when his carefully constructed strategy relied on Athens weakening the enemy from the sea.

Then in 430, barely a year after the war began, Athens was struck by a disaster even Pericles could not have foreseen. The grain boats that fed the city brought with them an additional and deadly cargo - plague.

The plague spread through the overcrowded city of Athens like wildfire. Sufferers racked with fever and overcome with unquenchable thirst dived into the city's water cisterns, and there would die. Law and order broke down as the corpses of the dead piled up in the streets. An estimated 100,000 or more people were contained within Athens' great walls. By the time the
first outbreak of the plague had run its course at least 20,000 of them were dead, including Pericles' two legitimate sons.

429 BC - The Long Death of Athens

One of the victims of the plague that swept Athens in 430 BC was Pericles himself. According to the historian Thucydides:

'...The plague seized Pericles, not with sharp and violent fits, but with a dull lingering distemper, wasting the strength of his body and undermining his noble soul.'

The city was devastated; morale was at its lowest ebb. In despair the popular assembly sent a peace delegation to Sparta, and turned on the man they blamed for starting the war: Pericles.

Tried in the courts he had helped to reform, Pericles was stripped of his office and heavily fined. Yet even now the people were reluctant to be rid of the man who had guided them for so long. Soon after they reinstated him.

But Pericles was a broken man. The plague had claimed his two legitimate sons and in an attempt to have his son by Aspasia declared as his heir he sought to repeal his own citizenship law. The man who had renounced all superstition also turned to charms to ward off the plague. In the fall of 429, at the age of about 65, Pericles, the mastermind of Athenian glory, died.
Described as one of the most beautiful and educated women of her era, Aspasia became the consort of Pericles, leader of democratic Athens. Their relationship caused scandal in the male-dominated world of Classical Athens, not only because the couple remained unmarried, but because of her determination to be treated as an equal. Mixing with some the greatest minds of her generation, and at the very center of Athenian political life, Aspasia's story is unique among the women of her time.

**c. 460 BC - Aspasia of Miletus**

In cities such as Athens women had few rights and little opportunity to take part in sports, theatre, or public life. Because of this we know only the most general details of their lives, interests, and pursuits.

But life would be different for Aspasia. Born in Miletus, an Ionian Greek settlement on the coast of Western Turkey, she would not be bound by the same rules that restricted Athenian citizen women, and would eventually attain the sort of fame and prominence usually associated only with men.

Aspasia's father, Axiochus, had insisted his daughter be raised and schooled by her mother and household slaves; an education which seems to have been unusually thorough, especially for a girl. It was probably during her childhood that she discovered the great power women often possessed in myths and heard stories of the those few other real women who had left a lasting impression on her age; women like Artemesia, Queen of Halicarnassus.

Exposed to a melting pot of ideas, cultures, and influences, Aspasia's decision to leave her home city and journey east to Athens would have been quite remarkable for a man, for a young, unmarried woman it was almost unheard of.

**c. 445 BC - Aspasia - A Hetaira?**

Aspasia arrived in Athens probably around the middle 440s BC, and soon after achieved instant fame through her association with Pericles, the city's democratic leader. Divorcing his wife, who
he left with two sons, he took up residence with Aspasia setting tongues wagging all over the city.

As the companion of Athens' leading politician, Aspasia quickly became the target of much malicious gossip, and she was soon accused of being a hetaira: a high-class courtesan, rather like a Japanese Geisha girl. These women would entertain wealthy men during their symposia, or dinner parties, but were not considered suitable as wives or companions. Whether Aspasia had actually been a hetaira is unclear.

Still more upsetting for Athenian traditionalists was the great respect their city's leader showed to his lover. Women were meant to be unseen and unheard, yet Pericles consulted Aspasia as an equal, made no effort to prevent her mixing with important men, and openly showed her great affection.

Malicious gossip that Aspasia was a cheap prostitute, that she procured young girls for Pericles, secretly wrote his speeches, and persuaded him to enter wars to protect her home city, would follow Aspasia for the rest of her life.

440 BC - A Marriage Forbidden

Pericles never married Aspasia, probably for the simple reason he could not. In an effort to prevent aristocratic families making alliances with other cities he had introduced a new citizenship law in 451 BC. As a result the sons of non-Athenian women could not become full citizens. Pericles would therefore be risking his whole political career if he married Aspasia in defiance of the very law he had introduced.

With two sons already Pericles' family line seemed secure, so Aspasia lived as his pallakis, his companion. In 440 BC she bore him a son, named after his father. Also living with them was Pericles' ward, Alcibiades. In years to come both children would rise to greatness and come to play pivotal roles in the Peloponnesian War, though both would leave mixed legacies.

Independently minded, witty, and with a gifted intellect even the philosopher Socrates acknowledged as being among the best of the city, Aspasia enjoyed a life of constant stimulation and excitement. No doubt with her help and encouragement, Pericles made Athens the greatest city of its day, the very epicenter of learning, art, politics and achievement. Just to walk around it was described as an education in itself.

431 BC - Athens’ First Couple

When war began between Athens and Sparta, Aspasia, as was usual, received more than her fair share of blame. Her critics argued that by helping her home city of Miletus over a decade before, Pericles had provoked Sparta, who had supported Miletus' enemies.

Other gossip maintained the war had started because allies of Sparta had kidnapped the best girls from Aspasia's brothel, a tall story later made into a comic play by Aristophanes. Another comic playwright actually tried to have Aspasia prosecuted for impiety and only Pericles' personal intervention spared her from possible exile.
But there were compensations.

Having lived with Pericles for nearly two decades, borne him a son, and helped raise his ward, Aspasia now enjoyed almost all of the privileges of an Athenian noblewoman, with none of the normal restrictions.

In 431 BC, Pericles delivered his famous 'Funeral Oration', glorifying the war dead, a speech written by Aspasia as Plato later joked. The couple were at the height of their power, but within a year tragedy would shatter their lives irreparably.

**429 BC - Triumph to Tragedy**

War brought unmitigated disaster for Athens and Aspasia. Soon after its outbreak, plague swept the overcrowded city, killing as much as a quarter of all its citizens. In their fury and panic the citizens turned on Pericles, stripping him of his office, only to reinstate him soon after.

Pericles' fell ill and struggled for long months against the plague. A broken man, his carefully thought out war strategy in ruins, he now wore magical charms in an effort to ward off the pestilence that had claimed so many lives. With both his legitimate sons dead he also tried to do the unthinkable and have his son by Aspasia declared as heir. He lingered at death's door for long months until finally, in 429, he died.

Left alone in a foreign city devastated by disease and war, the outlook for Aspasia and her young son seemed bleak. But deprived of their great leader, and with both his legitimate heirs dead, the Athenians responded with a kindness that they had never shown their great leader's mistress while he still lived. The popular assembly voted to allow Pericles' son full citizenship.

**406 BC - Aspasia after Pericles**

In time, Aspasia found herself a new partner. His name was Lysicles, a self-made man from a very different social background to Pericles, but who seems to have shared the great leader's radical democratic credentials. Aspasia it seems, remained a politically progressive woman to the last.

Twenty-three years after his father's death, the younger Pericles, was elected general in 406 BC. Sadly it was his grave misfortune to be one of the leaders of a major naval fiasco in which the Athenians defeated the Spartans only to be caught in bad weather. Forced to flee home, two thousand sailors who had fallen overboard during the battle were lost. The popular assembly responded by putting the commanders on trial, and despite the protests of the philosopher Socrates, executing every one of them.

History doesn't record if his mother was still alive at the time; but she would have been in her sixties if she had survived the many hardships of the long Peloponnesian War. Her son's early death would have been a tragic end to an otherwise inspirational and unconventional life.