Classical Greece: the ‘Golden Age’

The years 500 to 323 BC (2,500 to 2,323 years ago) marked the Classical Period, and nowhere is it better seen than in Athens. Under the great Athenian leader, Pericles, beautiful temples were built on top of the Acropolis (see page 32) and art, science, philosophy and politics flourished. Athens grew rich and emerged as the most important of all the Greek cities, controlling the whole of the Aegean and much of the mainland. Her port, at Piraeus, became the largest in the Greek world, and her navy the strongest. During the 400s BC as many as 200,000 people are thought to have lived in Athens and the surrounding countryside. The city attracted people from all over the Greek world. Craftworkers, merchants, business people, artists and poets came to Athens to live and work. It was a ‘Golden Age’, when Pericles said that Athens was the ‘greatest name in history...a power to be remembered forever’. He spoke the truth, because much of what the Athenians enjoyed 2,500 years ago forms the cornerstone of our own society. For example, many aspects of theatre, architecture, sculpture, philosophy and democracy were developed by the Greeks during their Golden Age, and have been handed down to us today.

Fact File

The rise of Macedonia

The ‘Golden Age’ at Athens could not last for ever. A bitter war broke out between Athens and Sparta (known as the Peloponnesian War) and lasted for 27 years. In 404 BC Athens surrendered to Sparta and the great days of Athens came to an end. Democracy was abolished and was replaced by an unpopular ‘oligarchy’, which meant rule by a few wealthy people. With the decline of Athens and later of Sparta, wars broke out between other cities, each trying to fill the power gap. But while these cities quarrelled they were distracted from what was happening in Macedonia—a region in the north-east of the mainland where local chieftains had become powerful kings. Under the Macedonian king, Philip II, and then his son Alexander, weakened Greek cities were defeated by Macedonian armies. In 338 BC Philip took control of the whole of the Greek mainland.