

**Alcibiades the Chameleon**

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Alcibiades was one of the most famous (or infamous) individuals in Greece and even beyond during the Peloponnesian War. The accounts of his life and adventures can be found in Plutarch's *Greek Lives* as well as Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, and I used both texts to draw a picture of the man.

I really enjoyed Plutarch's account of Alcibiades because it had so many anecdotes that satisfied my interest in the personal Alcibiades, not merely the historical one. For instance, he gives mention of Alcibiades' lisp and even offers a sample of what he would have sounded like<sup>1</sup>, and talks extensively about Alcibiades' character. He was a stubborn man who had to have his own way<sup>2</sup> and was a hedonist to the extreme, living luxuriously, drunkenly and insolently, seeking above all fame.<sup>3</sup> He was selfishly ambitious, spreading lies and half-truths so that the people of Athens would distrust Nicias and place more value in himself<sup>4</sup>, fanning Athens' lust for power and wealth so that they attacked Sicily, naming him as one of the generals.<sup>5</sup>

Plutarch drew from Thucydides and other sources to shape his account of Alcibiades, but Thucydides is one of only few sources that come down to us. Plutarch lived and wrote many years after the events he described and gleaned his information by talking with people who claimed to have knowledge of such things, like descendents of the man, and probably recorded for us many of the rumors that circulated about Alcibiades at the time. Which begs the question; How can we trust that what Plutarch

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch "Greek Lives", 2

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, 3, 16

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, 6; Thucydides 6.15.1

<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, 14; Thucydides 6.48.1

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, 17, 18

records for us is true? When it comes to many of the anecdotes, there is no way of knowing whether they are true or not, since Plutarch's other sources did not survive time.

However, Thucydides did and we can compare Plutarch with Thucydides to see if we get a match. We generally do, when we desire to learn about the historical Alcibiades, thus strengthening Plutarch's research, for Thucydides is a much more trustworthy source since he was a contemporary of Alcibiades, had seen him speak, and may have even known him personally. We know from both sources, therefore, that Alcibiades was indeed a source of great joy and fear for the Athenians. We know that he was accused of disfiguring the Hermae and profaning the mysteries<sup>6</sup>—eventually to be condemned to death—and that he fled to Sparta where he impregnated the wife of king Agis.<sup>7</sup> Once a celebrated general of Athens, a man the Athenians could not do without, he soon became an exile and while in Sparta did Athens great harm, one of the greatest being his advice that Sparta fortify Decelea.<sup>8</sup> We also know that, due to Agis' anger at having his wife impregnated by Alcibiades and the jealousy of the oligarchs at Sparta, he was condemned to death there as well, but the sly and fleet-footed Alcibiades fled to Persia, befriending the Persian satrap Tisaphernes.<sup>9</sup> While there he counseled Tisaphernes to be stingy in his aid to Sparta so as to wear both Athens and Sparta down whilst they fought each other, making them easier prey for Persia herself.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the harm Alcibiades had done to them, the Athenians soon regretted the way they treated him and begged him to come back. But rather than make it seem as if he were accepting Athens' pity, Alcibiades wanted to return in blazing glory and so spent

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<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, 19; Thucydides 6.28.2, 6.29.1, 6.53.1, 6.61.1

<sup>7</sup> Plutarch, 23; Thucydides 8.12.1

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*; Thucydides 7.18.1

<sup>9</sup> Plutarch, 24; Thucydides 8.45.1

<sup>10</sup> Plutarch, 25; Thucydides 8.47.1

many years at the head of an Athenian army making victory after victory in Athens' name before finally returning with so much pomp.<sup>11</sup> But even after all of this, the fickle Athenians abandoned him and elected new generals while he was in the field, and so he retreated to his private stronghold. After Athens fell to Sparta, they later bitterly regretted the way they again deserted Alcibiades and entertained the thought that if only they had let Alcibiades have his own way without interference from Athens, she might have withstood the whole of the Peloponnese.<sup>12</sup> Alcibiades died by assassination in Persia, after the Spartans decided that he was too powerful a name to leave alive.<sup>13</sup>

Despite being merely a citizen of Athens—not a king of Sparta or a man of royal lineage at all, but simply handsome, eloquent and sly—Alcibiades managed to be arguably the most important player in the whole of the Peloponnesian War. Because of his physical beauty he had great influence in Athens, for so many famous men (like Socrates<sup>14</sup>) loved him. Because of his slick tongue he could sway nearly whomever he wished, as long as they weren't blinded by jealousy, and could adapt to any environment he found himself in. I believe he is the key figure to Athens' destruction. If they had not recalled Alcibiades from the Sicilian expedition<sup>15</sup> the Athenians might well have conquered Sicily. Had he not assimilated so well to the Spartan way of life he would never have had as much influence with the Spartan kings (and a certain queen) as he did, and Sparta might have never defended Decelea. And had he not been so appealing to Tisaphernes, the Persian might not have aided Sparta at all, and left the Greeks to stew alone in their own war. The man was a chameleon and adept at doing what he needed to

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<sup>11</sup> Plutarch, 32; Thucydides 8.48.1-7, 8.49.1

<sup>12</sup> Plutarch, 38

<sup>13</sup> Plutarch, 39

<sup>14</sup> Plutarch, 4

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch, 21; Thucydides 6.53.1, 6.61.4-6

do to get what he wanted. He exploited both sides in this pursuit, affecting countless thousands of lives, whether innocent Melians (it was Alcibiades who best argued for the total annihilation of the men at Melos)<sup>16</sup> or soldiers and mercenaries.

I am amazed that one man could do so much and have such a great influence in three distinct societies; Athenian, Spartan and Persian. From reading about Alcibiades, I see a world where democracy is broken, for people are petty and fickle. The mob of Athens made some incredibly short-sighted decisions concerning Alcibiades and others. They were far too easily influenced by popular opinion, by people who were favored at the moment, like Alcibiades, and were quick to condemn even those whom they revered only days earlier. The story of Alcibiades—nay, the story of the whole of the Peloponnesian War—shines a frightening light upon pure democracy which is one of the characteristics of this classical age. The Spartans—a militaristic oligarchy that would be shunned and abhorred by a society like our own—are painted the heroes (by Plutarch in particular, but also Thucydides), at least for a while, and Athens, the so-called free peoples, as imperialistic tyrants who terrorize those around them and terrorize their own people, inflicting democracy and subsequently *stasis* wherever they went, such as at Corcyra.

The story of Alcibiades shows us a world of people desiring wealth, power and land and people reveling in luxury and entertainment. The Athenians were fond of their plays and indulged themselves in all sorts of profane sexual practices, as Plutarch makes vividly plain.<sup>17</sup> They felt themselves to be unstoppable and thus allowed themselves to become obsessed with such things, much as the Persians had before, for they too were

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<sup>16</sup> Plutarch, 16

<sup>17</sup> Plutarch, 4, 8; Robert Morkot, “The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Greece” pages 43-44

known for their outrageous pomp<sup>18</sup>. The other extreme, exemplified by Sparta, is one of self-denial and a rigidity that supposedly makes them superior fighters (although it didn't seem to help them at Sphacteria) and yet they enslaved an entire people and treated their women as mere utensils for pumping out babies.<sup>19</sup>

We are told that absolute power corrupts absolutely, and while I disagree with the absolute nature of such a statement, during the classical age it seems to work well. Persia—the mightiest force in the area—attacked the Greeks during the Persian Wars and was defeated by them, primarily by Athens. Thus the poor, oppressed underdogs won the day and defeated the imperial oppressor. But, over time, Athens herself grew in fame and influence, making membership in the Delian League mandatory, moving the treasury at Delos to Athens and becoming an imperial force herself. She became the new tyrant, and the poor underdogs of the Peloponnesian League, led by a benevolent leader (Sparta) waged a holy war against the tyrant Athens, finally defeating her and tearing down her long walls. And what then? Sparta became imperial and dominated the Aegean, until Thebes overthrew her, becoming imperial and dominating the Aegean, and so forth.

The classical age is marked by warfare as nation after nation grappled to dominate the world. The classical Greeks, at least those of rank, wealth and position enough to be recorded in history, were lovers of themselves, and this love led to war, plague, death and *stasis*. But I suppose I shouldn't judge them too harshly. After all, what will our children say about people of the twentieth century, a century that brought the world Nazism and Communism? The story of Alcibiades, and that of his generation, is a superb magnifying glass on humanity itself, not just the Greeks.

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<sup>18</sup> Plutarch, 32

<sup>19</sup> Robert Browning, "The Greek World" page 95