

The last decades of the 5th century BC were desperate ones for the Greek city-state of Athens. She was embroiled in a life-and-death struggle with her arch-enemy Sparta, her discontented allies were deserting her in droves, and thousands of her men had died over the years of constant fighting. But perhaps the worst blow she had suffered was the loss of her most eminent and capable statesman. Pericles had died in 429 BC, just two years into the Peloponnesian War, that conflict between Sparta and Athens that lasted twenty-seven years and brought the world of Classical Greece to an end. Pericles had led Athens into war with Sparta, and in the judgement of many he was the only one capable of leading her safely out. With his death, the Athenians were lost and often directionless, giving their trust in turn to violent imperialists like Cleon and to indecisive pacifists like Nicias. No one seemed capable of filling the shoes of the great Pericles.

No one, that is, except perhaps the ward of Pericles himself, the young Alcibiades. Alcibiades was only about twenty years old when his guardian Pericles died. He had been brought up in the home of the great statesman, a blood relative of his. This close relationship was no doubt of assistance to Alcibiades when it came time for him to enter the political arena, since people would have associated him with the recently deceased and much mourned Pericles.

But it could not have been long before even the most uninformed and stay-at-home Athenian citizens learned that Alcibiades was very different from the elder statesman. Pericles had been a grave and aloof individual, nicknamed "the Olympian" for his air of distant reserve. His ward Alcibiades had the aristocratic and self-confident air — but he was anything but grave or aloof. Extremely handsome and an extravagant dresser, he was attractive to both men and women, and he exploited to the full the opportunities that that attractiveness brought him. Even his defects were turned to advantages. Alcibiades had some trouble saying the letter *r*, "but his lisp," says Plutarch, "is said to have suited his voice well, and to have made his talk persuasive and full of charm." He threw money around like water, especially on race-horses; in the Olympic Games of 416 he entered seven teams in the chariot-race and took first, second and fourth prizes.

The gossips of ancient Athens were always busy when it came to Alcibiades. No other politician offered so much grist to the rumour-mill. His sexual affairs were legendary; even the shield he carried in battle bore

the figure of Eros, the god of desire. His behaviour was finally so outrageous that his wife, Hipparete, left him in order to institute divorce proceedings. Even more outrageous, though, was his bid to get her back. When Hipparete appeared before the magistrate to begin the proceedings, Alcibiades appeared, seized her and carried her home through the marketplace. His caveman approach apparently worked; Hipparete continued to live with him until her death. (His wife wasn't the only person Alcibiades treated like this; he once locked up a famous artist in his house until the artist decorated it with paintings for him. Alcibiades then paid the man lavishly for his work.)

Alcibiades seemed to promote gossip about himself deliberately. Plutarch tells us the story of his dog, a handsome animal which Alcibiades disfigured by cutting off its tail. When his friends reproached him for doing so, and told him that everyone was angry with him, Alcibiades only laughed and replied: "That's just what I wanted. I'm perfectly happy for all of Athens to chatter about this; it'll stop them from saying anything worse about me." Of course, it usually wasn't too long before there was something worse to say.

But Alcibiades's party-animal attitude, his roguishness and his devotion to self above all (he once bit an opponent in a wrestling match when it looked like he was going to be beaten) were only one side of his character. An important side, and perhaps in the end a fatal one; but it wasn't the whole truth about him. For one thing, Alcibiades was unfailingly brave in battle; for another, he exhibited an outstanding charisma, both on the battlefield and in the banquet-hall. Everything he did, he did with the kind of panache that irritated some people (mostly members of the older generation), but that brought him many loyal adherents. His better qualities even earned him the love of the philosopher Socrates, a man who once saved Alcibiades's life in battle and perhaps the only man who was ever capable of putting Alcibiades in his place (even temporarily).

Loyalty, however, was not one of Alcibiades's own outstanding characteristics. By his early thirties, he was the leading representative of the younger, more radical crowd at Athens, and one of the most prominent politicians and military leaders in the state. But in the year 415, it all came crashing down, and the love affair that much of Athens had with Alcibiades came to an end.

It was in that year, while the war with Sparta was in a temporary lull, that Athens, at the urging of Alcibiades and others like him, decided to embark on the conquest of the island of Sicily. This was a vast undertaking, far beyond the comprehension of most Athenians. It has been condemned by

the succeeding generations of history as an immoral and insane decision. Perhaps it is true that the expedition against Sicily was doomed to failure, a failure which cost the Athenians thousands of lives, and contributed to their ultimate defeat at the hands of the Spartans a decade later. And perhaps Alcibiades should bear the brunt of the blame for persuading the Athenians to take this step in the first place. But it can't be denied that the Athenians were largely responsible for their own defeat; and that responsibility springs from their real attitude towards Alcibiades. They were fascinated by him, but they were also repelled; they gave him the highest military office in the land, but they didn't trust him; they sent him out to do their dirty work for them, but they hamstrung his effectiveness at the same time.

One way in which the Athenians hampered the expedition from the start was in awarding the command of it not only to Alcibiades, but to two other generals as well, one of whom, the cautious Nicias, was Alcibiades's chief political enemy and had no stomach for the conquest anyway. But far worse for the fate of the expedition was an incident which demonstrates the essential distrust many Athenians felt for their brilliant, if erratic, young general. Shortly before the expedition sailed, some religious sacrileges had taken place in Athens: statues of the god Hermes were discovered to have been mutilated in the night, probably by drunken revellers, and the sacred (and secret) rites of the goddess Demeter were profaned in a mock celebration in a private home. Alcibiades was suspected, and accused, of involvement (and it certainly does seem to have been the kind of thing that was right up his alley). Alcibiades pleaded with the Athenians to allow him to stand trial for these crimes before the fleet sailed. But at the urging of his political enemies he was ordered to sail without clearing his name; the Athenians were concerned about the excessive loyalty that the troops had to their leader, and were afraid that the expedition would fail before it began if Alcibiades were found guilty.

So Alcibiades was sent to Sicily. But he barely reached the west when the order came for him to return to Athens to stand his trial. He set sail for Athens as ordered, but Alcibiades had no intention of returning for a trial he believed to be the work of his enemies. He jumped ship in Italy and eluded his Athenian captors. This action of course ensured a guilty verdict *in absentia*: he was condemned to death, his estate was confiscated, and his name was to be publicly cursed by all priests and priestesses. When informed in exile of the death sentence that his countrymen had passed on him, Alcibiades replied: "I'll show them that I am still alive." In the next issue, we'll see what he meant by that ominous remark.