

When we last saw Alcibiades, he had been disgraced and condemned to death. But he was never one to take adversity lying down, and he soon showed what he meant by his threat to show Athenians that he was still alive.

From Italy, where he had jumped ship to escape his Athenian captors, he made his way to Sparta, and proceeded to ingratiate himself with the old enemies of Athens. His extravagant ways and luxuriant style of dressing and wearing his hair would not impress the Spartans as they had the Athenians. In his previous life he had had the decks of his ships custom-designed to allow him to sleep more comfortably, slinging his bedding on cords rather than on hard planks. But in Sparta our chameleon learned to live the rough life: going without haircuts, taking cold baths (when he took them at all), and eating the plain (if not downright revolting) Spartan fare with gusto. Once he had gained the confidence of the Spartans, he set about persuading them to take action against Athens in every way: to send decisive help to the Sicilians, to invade Athenian territory, and to promote the rebellion of Athenian allies in the Aegean. The Spartans took his advice, and the war between Athens and Sparta escalated again, reaching its final tragic stage.

A good example of the typically selfish thought processes of Alcibiades, and the way in which he could twist any circumstance to his advantage, is the speech he is supposed to have delivered to the Spartans, excusing his behaviour in turning traitor: "None of you should think the worse of me if, in spite of my previous reputation for loving my country, I now join in vigorously with her bitterest enemies in attacking her...The country I am attacking does not seem to me to be mine any longer; it is rather that I am trying to recover a country that has ceased to be mine. And the man who really loves his country is not the one who refuses to attack it when he has been unjustly driven from it, but the man whose desire for it is so strong he will shrink from nothing in his efforts to get back there again." Alcibiades's "love" for his country was clearly really a love for himself.

With the renewed Spartan attacks and the disastrous Athenian defeat in Sicily in 413, it began to look as though Alcibiades's vengeance on his homeland was complete. So perhaps the most remarkable thing in all this is that the Athenians eventually forgave him. By 412, Alcibiades had been forced to flee from Sparta as well; up to his old tricks, he'd been having

an affair with the wife of the Spartan king. He unofficially joined the Athenian naval forces in the Aegean, with whom he had always been popular; and in the wake of the Sicilian failure (a failure Alcibiades himself might have been able to prevent), the defection of allies, and civil unrest, the Athenians at home began to forget that they had ever had cause to wish him dead. Finally, in 407, Alcibiades was welcomed back to his city as a returning hero, the only man who could rescue Athens from the terrible fate of defeat by the Spartans.

But the reconciliation of the lovers was short-lived. Within a few months Alcibiades was out again. A subordinate of his had disobeyed orders and lost a battle; Alcibiades was blamed. The Athenians refused to renew his command, and Alcibiades left, this time for good. He retired to his estates on the Hellespont, coming forward again only one last time, in 405, to plead with the Athenian commanders at the Hellespont to take his advice in an upcoming engagement with the Spartans. The generals refused to listen to him, and as a result, they lost the battle, and, at last, the war. Athens was defeated.

Alcibiades did not long survive the defeat of his homeland. In the wake of the Spartan victory, he had removed himself from the Aegean, and was living in Persian territory. Rumour had it that he met his death under circumstances entirely characteristic for him: he had seduced a girl from a notable family, and had her living with him. Her brothers then murdered him, in a most cowardly fashion, by setting fire to his house at night, and shooting him down with arrows and javelins when he ran out. So the story goes; but there's more to it than that. It seems likely that Alcibiades's murderers were not solely motivated by some notion of outraged sibling honour. The most likely version of the story is that they were actually fulfilling a Spartan demand. The Spartans could never be sure of their dominance over the defeated Athenian enemy so long as this wild card was still in play. As Plutarch says, "the cause of Athens could never be utterly lost so long as Alcibiades was alive." And so, at the age of forty-five, more than a decade after his countrymen had first condemned him to death, Alcibiades finally met his fate.

In light of the fact that Alcibiades was often blamed for the ruination of Athens, it's interesting to examine what Thucydides, a contemporary of Alcibiades, had to say about him. Thucydides agreed that Alcibiades's character had a lot to do with the downfall of Athens — but not for the reasons you might think: "Most people became frightened at a quality in him which was beyond the normal and showed itself both in the lawlessness of his private life and habits and in the spirit in which he acted on all occasions. They thought he was aiming at a tyranny, and so they turned

against him. Although in a public capacity his conduct of the war was excellent, his way of life made him objectionable to everyone as a person; thus they entrusted their affairs to other hands, and before long ruined the city." To Thucydides, it was not so much Alcibiades who was directly responsible for the Athenian defeat; it was the Athenians themselves, for failing to trust this alarming prodigy that they had produced.

Ambivalence of feeling was always there in the Athenian relationship with Alcibiades. Not long before that last naval battle in 405, when the Spartans finally whipped the exhausted Athenians, a theatrical performance in Athens had encapsulated the quintessential Athenian feeling about Alcibiades. In Aristophanes's *The Frogs*, produced in 406, one character asks of another, "What should be done about Alcibiades? Athens is in a very tricky situation, you know." "What do the Athenians themselves think about it?" responds the other character. "Ah," replies the first, "you might well ask. They love him. But then again, they hate him. And then again, they want him back."