

Personalities and the Peloponnesian War:
Alcibiades, the Golden Boy of Athens

Sheila L. Ager

When most of the Greek world was plunged into war in the year 431 BCE, a war sparked by Spartan fear of Athenian imperialism, both Sparta and Athens were under the guidance of mature statesmen, cautious in their strategic principles. In Sparta, King Archidamos – who had failed to persuade his fellow Spartans to forego the war on Athens – mounted regular (and

[Bust of Alcibiades, Capitoline Museum](#)



mostly unimaginative) campaigns to devastate the territory of Attica (the rural surroundings of Athens). In Athens, the dominant politician of the day was Pericles, famous for his insistence that the Athenians conduct themselves as though they were on an island: to bring the countryside population within the city walls and give up their rural territory for lost, to forego any expansionist campaigning, and to concentrate on the security of the city itself and its powerful fleet. It is hard to say how a war fought in this fashion would ever have been settled: Pericles' strategy effectively neutralized that of Archidamos, but at the same time, the Athenian strategy by itself would never have been decisive.

As it happened, however, the Peloponnesian War was not fought only through these rather simple strategic approaches. Both Pericles and Archidamos died shortly after the outbreak of the war, and other voices were now heard in both Athenian and Spartan decision-making. For the next several years, each side suffered losses and gains as they experimented with new strategies and new theatres of war. By 421 BCE, the two coalitions led by Athens and Sparta had fought themselves to something of a stand-still, and had agreed on peace, a peace that came

to be known as the Peace of Nikias, after the Athenian general and politician who played a large part in its creation. But history has demonstrated what many contemporaries already knew: that the Peace of Nikias was a false peace, a temporary hiatus in fighting, a treaty that resolved none of the issues that had given rise to the war in the first place.

It was during the period of this false peace that a new statesman rose to the fore in Athens. He had been raised as the ward of Pericles himself, a fact that gave him an undeniable advantage in the political arena. His name was Alcibiades, and he was an unforgettable figure on the Athenian scene. Handsome, witty, athletic, extravagant, courageous in battle, he won the admiration of all his peers, though it is probable that from his own point of view, he was peerless. That his noble qualities were not only skin-deep may be supposed from the fact of his friendship with the philosopher Socrates; each had saved the other's life in battle. Nevertheless, the records of their friendship suggest that Socrates spent much of his time trying to rescue Alcibiades from himself, from his own baser instincts and ambitions.



Jean-Baptiste Regnault, Socrates dragging Alcibiades away from sensual pleasure, 1791

For a man like Alcibiades, peace – especially an uneasy one – had little to offer. Reputations were to be made on campaign and on the battlefield, and reputation was everything to a man like Alcibiades. Thucydides, the great historian of the Peloponnesian War, says that Alcibiades was moreover offended by the Peace of “Nikias” on the grounds that those negotiating it had not thought fit to involve him in the discussions. He therefore set himself to sabotage the peace. When a group of Spartan ambassadors arrived in Athens to discuss some unsettling developments, Alcibiades met with them privately and assured them that he could get them what they wanted if only they would publicly deny that they had full powers to deal with the situation. When the Spartans stood before the Athenian assembly and made this denial, Alcibiades did an about-face and publicly accused them of lying. That the Spartan ambassadors were lying was of course true. That Alcibiades profited personally from this little bit of manipulation was also true. His credit with the Athenian people went up, and Athenian trust in the Spartans – never very high – went down. Alcibiades was able to forge a coalition between Athens and some of the Peloponnesian states which had reasons of their own to fear Sparta, and the fighting that ensued effectively killed the Peace of Nikias.

Nikias and Alcibiades came from opposite ends of the political spectrum. Nikias was an older, well-established general and politician, cautious and highly religious (to the point of superstition). Alcibiades was one of the younger generation, men who questioned – even mocked – the beliefs of their elders and who saw nothing wrong in pursuing their own ambitions at the cost of all else. There was a brief moment of cooperation between Nikias and Alcibiades in 417 – each of them was facing the possibility of ostracism, and decided to combine the votes of their followers and throw that combined weight against a third individual, the nonentity Hyperbolos (the Athenians, annoyed at this cynical manipulation of the tool of ostracism, gave

up using it) – but for the most part they were oil and water. The generational, cultural, and political divide between the two men eventually contributed to one of Athens' greatest military disasters: the Sicilian campaign.

In the winter of 416/5 BCE, when one of the Greek states of Sicily sent an embassy to Athens requesting Athenian assistance, Alcibiades seized the chance. His glamour and persuasiveness were at their height (he would have been about thirty-five at the time), and he convinced the Athenians to do much more than give aid to their small Sicilian ally. Why restrict themselves to such a limited goal when the entire island of Sicily could be theirs for the taking? The Athenians – carried away by Alcibiades' glowing portrait of plunder and wealth and the expansion of their empire – ignored the long-ago advice of Pericles and jumped on the imperialist bandwagon. But Alcibiades' path to glory was not made smooth: older and more cautious citizens insisted that someone of their stripe be part of the expedition, and their choice fell on Nicias. When the massive force set out, then, in the spring of 415, it was led by three generals: Lamachos, a competent man who did not engage in politics (and who was soon killed in Sicily); Nicias, who had opposed the expedition with every fibre of his political and military being; and Alcibiades, the charismatic and dynamic leader of the new breed of Athenian imperialists.

Things were rocky from the start. Even before the expedition sailed, a series of religious sacrileges had taken place in Athens – mutilation of statues of the god Hermes, mock celebrations of sacred mystery rites – and Alcibiades was thought to be neck-deep in them. He protested his innocence, and begged the Athenians to put him on trial before the expedition sailed, but his political enemies (fearful that allied troops personally loyal to Alcibiades would cause trouble if they were still in the city when the trial took place) succeeded in having the trial

delayed. Alcibiades was forced to sail without clearing his name, but the fleet had barely arrived at its destination when orders came recalling him to Athens to stand trial. He set out in his own ship as if to sail back to Athens, but in southern Italy he jumped ship and disappeared. Back in Athens, Alcibiades was tried in absentia and condemned to death. And in the meantime, the Sicilian campaign was left to the primary command of Nicias: aging, unimaginative, unenthusiastic, and increasingly ill. Within two years, the army and the navy of the Athenians in Sicily were defeated and destroyed, the single greatest military disaster the Athenians suffered in the course of the Peloponnesian War.

Where did Alcibiades go when he disappeared? To the most logical place possible: Sparta. There he succeeded in assuaging any lingering Spartan suspicions about him by living like one of them: abandoning the wildly extravagant lifestyle he had enjoyed in Athens (perforce, since he had no access to his wealth and property) and adopting the fabled austerity of the Spartans, dressing in a single cloak, bathing only in the cold waters of the River Eurotas, and subsisting on the famous Spartan “black broth”, a mix of pork blood and vinegar. And if any still suspected him of loyalty to Athens, Alcibiades acted quickly to dispel that suspicion by advising the Spartans on how they could really hurt his own homeland. He persuaded them to send out a Spartan general to aid the Sicilians against the invading Athenian force, and he also convinced them to set up a permanent Spartan garrison at Dekeleia in the territory of Attica. For the first time in a decade, the Athenians were faced with a Spartan invasion force in their own territory, and one that was now there all year round. Athens and Sparta were now back at war with a vengeance.

The curiosity of Alcibiades’ story is that it does not simply end there, with Alcibiades sitting on the banks of the Eurotas, chugging black broth and shivering in his flea-ridden cloak.

Always one with an eye on the main chance, whether personally or professionally, Alcibiades had launched an affair with Timaea, the wife of King Agis, perhaps fathering the son she bore not long after. As a result of this no doubt thrilling, but perhaps rather ill-advised adventure, things became too hot for Alcibiades among the Spartans. He had already crossed the Aegean with a Spartan fleet to the coast of Asia Minor, where he was engaged in doing further damage to the Athenian cause. When the news of his affair with the queen became public – and when a death warrant was issued for him – Alcibiades was forced to desert his erstwhile Spartan allies. He therefore began a lengthy, energetic, and highly convoluted campaign to get himself reinstated into Athenian good graces. An impossible goal, one might think, but that would be to underestimate Alcibiades and his charisma. Through a series of devious and brilliant manoeuvres, he managed first to charm the men of the Athenian fleet operating along the Asia Minor coast (the common soldiers and sailors were always Alcibiades' firmest support base), and then ultimately to convince the Athenians that he was their best hope both for victory in the war and for political stability at home.

By 407, Alcibiades had succeeded so far in recapturing the affection of the Athenian people that they recalled him in glory, celebrating the many military victories that he had achieved while operating in an unofficial capacity with the fleet in Asia Minor. He was proclaimed *strategos autokrator* (chief general, with independent authority), and was cleared of all the charges of impiety that had led to his removal from the Sicilian expedition. The Athenians were now convinced that he was the only one who could have saved Athens from the Sicilian disaster, and blamed themselves for removing the one man who could have made it a success. Yet this new enthusiasm for Alcibiades brought with it – as it had before – a deep

unease about the dynamism of the man. The Athenians might love Alcibiades, but they never really trusted him, and the Athenians themselves, suffering through a war that had now lasted more than two decades, were becoming more and more volatile. So when one of Alcibiades' subordinates – against Alcibiades' own direct orders – fought an engagement with the enemy (the so-called Battle of Notion) in the following year, and lost, the Athenians were outraged and removed Alcibiades from the generalship. Alcibiades – by this time fed up with the fickle Athenians – went into self-imposed exile and retired to an estate near the Hellespont. Once again the Athenians had deprived themselves of one of their own most energetic and capable leaders, and had only themselves to blame.

Alcibiades never returned to Athens. But even in exile, he made a last-ditch effort to save the Athenians from themselves. In the summer of 405, the entire Athenian fleet was encamped near the Hellespont, at a place called Aigospotamoi (“Goat’s Rivers”); across the narrow strait from them was the Spartan fleet under the immensely capable leader Lysander. Alcibiades, whose estate was nearby, visited the Athenian camp and tried to warn the Athenian generals that their position was a dangerous one: they were too exposed and they were too lackadaisical about the threat posed by Lysander’s Spartans. The generals rejected his advice and told him to be off, but when the Spartans made a sudden attack, they proved the worth of Alcibiades’ advice: caught on the beach with no shelter and no strategy to save themselves from their situation, the Athenian forces were massacred. Aigospotamoi was the last battle of the Peloponnesian War: following a protracted siege that lasted over the winter of 405/4, the Athenians surrendered to Sparta.

When the Athenian playwright Aristophanes produced his comedy *The Frogs* in the spring of 405 BCE, Alcibiades had been recently disgraced by the actions of his lieutenant at

Notion. The play reflects the deep ambivalence the Athenians had about this golden boy of theirs. One character in the play asks another, “What do the Athenians think about Alcibiades?”, and the response is “They love him, they hate him, they want him back.” In the midst of their misery and despair after the Battle of Aigospotamoi and the dreadful siege of 405/4, the Athenians might indeed have begged Alcibiades to come back to them. The biographer Plutarch says that the feeling in Athens was that their cause was never lost so long as Alcibiades was alive.

Others evidently felt the same way. In 404, viewing Alcibiades as a loose cannon that might cause trouble for them in the future, the Spartans conspired with the Persian governor of Phrygia to have Alcibiades put out of the way. Assassins were despatched by night to surround the house in which Alcibiades (true to form) was living with a courtesan by the name of Timandra. Afraid to confront him at close range, the killers set the house on fire, and then shot Alcibiades down with arrows and javelins as he ran out. Timandra gave him as costly a burial as she could afford.

Thucydides’ final judgement on Alcibiades is also an ambivalent one, naturally enough, since he himself was an Athenian. He remarks that Alcibiades’ extravagant and imperious character and lifestyle were to blame for his rocky relations with the Athenians: his fiercely democratic fellow citizens were afraid that Alcibiades was setting himself up to be a tyrant. Yet at the same time, Thucydides blames the Athenians themselves for refusing to give Alcibiades their full trust. “Although in a public capacity, his conduct of the war was excellent,” says Thucydides, “his way of life made him objectionable to everyone as a person; thus the Athenians entrusted their affairs to other hands, and before long ruined the state.” (6.15).

Suggested Reading:

Plato *Symposium* (Platonic dialogue on the nature of love, in which two of the main characters are Socrates and Alcibiades)

Plutarch *Life of Alcibiades*

Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War, books 6 and 7 (on Alcibiades, Nicias, and the Sicilian expedition)

Novels:

Steven Pressfield, *Tides of War*

Mary Renault, *The Last of the Wine*

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