

BOOK REVIEWS

Peter J. Rhodes, *Alcibiades: Athenian playboy, general and traitor*. South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2011. Xv + 143 pp. ISBN 9781848840690.

Neither his contemporaries nor later generations have ever ceased to wonder at 'What Alcibiades did and what happened to him'. It might, therefore, seem surprising that the book reviewed is the first full length biography of this flamboyant and important character in more than twenty years. Rhodes (henceforth R.) does not explain why we need a new biography, but an attentive reader will notice the use of new data accumulated since then. A work under this title is perhaps intended for a wider readership, but in the instance of the present author it cannot fail to uphold academic standards. As in other works of R., the approach is cautious and at times even conservative. Some recent innovative hypotheses concerning Alcibiades and other controversial scientific issues are not discussed, presumably deemed less suited for a work of wider interest than the purely academic.¹ On the other hand, despite the word 'playboy' in the title, the author overlooks many of the anecdotes found in later sources and an analysis of their validity.

Ever since his time, Alcibiades has generated strong feelings, a mixture of both admiration and censure, as described in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (1.1425). Modern scholars see Alcibiades as either inspired or opportunistic, and more than one have noted that the earliest sources give credence for both views. The most thorough work is that of Jean Hatzfeld, *Alcibiade* (1951), who presents Alcibiades as a military genius. Similarly, Walter M. Ellis in his *Alcibiades* (1989) saw him as one of Athens' greatest strategists. On the other hand, he is seen as a disaster, full of egotism and self-interest, in Edmund F. Bloedow's monograph, *Alcibiades Reexamined* (1973), and in Peter Green's many publications, e. g., *Armada from Athens* (1970). In this respect, R. leans more toward the view of Bloedow. Practically every one of Alcibiades' political and military schemes proved to be failure whatever side he served (34). 'He was flamboyant and ambitious, and he was good at persuading people that what he wanted to achieve could be achieved' (92).

The book under review is essentially a chronological account of what is known from literary and epigraphic sources about Alcibiades' life and career from childhood to death. The narrative is put in the context of the rise of Athens as a democracy and empire in the fifth century alongside her conflict with Sparta. R. opens with a chapter on 'Sources and Modern Studies', then proceeds to discuss fifth-century Greece in Chapter Two ('Background'). There follow five chapters, arranged chronologically, dealing with Alcibiades' life and career. The book concludes with a bibliography and index of names, though far from complete.

Chapter Three deals with Alcibiades' 'Childhood and Early Career: 451-416'. An inscription found in 1988 'provides us with reliable evidence for Alcibiades' activity in the assembly slightly earlier than had been attested before' (30): it appears that he had already proposed a decree in 422/1 BCE. R. finds the story of his alleged deception of the Spartan deputation in 420 hard to accept 'exactly as it stands' (31-3).

Chapter Four explores 'The Sicilian Expedition and Alcibiades' Exile: 415-413'. R. prefers 415 as the year of the notorious last ostracism (43-4). If so, the ostracism was intended to decide the fate of the Sicilian expedition, but failed to accomplish this purpose. On the expedition R.'s verdict is severe: 'We may guess that if Alcibiades had not been recalled to stand trial, the

¹ Many of these hypotheses can be found in M. Munn, (2000). *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London.

surrender of Syracuse would have been achieved ... However, Sicily is large and distant from Athens, and ... it is hard to believe that the Athenians could have kept control of it against opposition for any length of time' (53). As for Alcibiades' advices to the Spartans, R. wonders 'whether Alcibiades' presence in Sparta made less difference than Thucydides suggests', and adds that 'Perhaps he had more effect on Spartan morale than on Spartan policy' (52). Regrettably, R. does not discuss Aristophanes' judgement of Alcibiades in *The Birds*.

Chapter Five, 'Sparta, Persia and Athens: 413-411', examines the most dramatic page of this exceptional story. Since the beginning of the Peloponnesian War each side had been eager to obtain Persian support. R. accepts a treaty between Athens and Darius II, essentially a non-aggression pact, as historical fact (55-56). The pact was possibly violated by the Athenians in 414, when things were still going well for them, and that is why two Persian satraps of western Asia Minor offered their help to Sparta (56). The Spartans had to decide whether to concentrate on the Aegean or on the Hellespont. This was a rare instance when Alcibiades' influence was really important in supporting their Aegean strategy (56-7).

Alcibiades' real influence on Tissaphernes and their true plans are as enigmatic now as they had been for their contemporaries (59-65). Alcibiades attempted to persuade influential Athenians on Samos that Persian support could be obtained if Athens were governed by an oligarchy. Finally, he offered his services to the democrats in the fleet at Samos while still claiming that Tissaphernes wanted to support the Athenians if only they would take him back. It is hard to believe that Tissaphernes was now prepared to support the Athenians (and that the King would buy this change of policy). It is even harder to say whether Alcibiades believed that what he was saying was true, 'but he was the kind of man who could believe his own propaganda, and here perhaps he did' (65). It was primarily Alcibiades, who along with Thrasybulus, calmed the soldiers when they wanted to sail for Piraeus at once and attack the oligarchs in Athens (Th. 8.86.4-5).

In Chapter Six, R. discusses 'Alcibiades and the Athenian Navy: 411-406'. These years witnessed a procession of striking naval victories of the Athenians, for which Alcibiades was largely credited. How far was he really responsible for these successes? The answer depends on which source we believe: Xenophon's *Hellenica* gives credit for most of these victories to Alcibiades, whereas the detailed account preserved in Diodorus and Nepos's *Life of Thrasybulus*, tell a different story. Here Alcibiades is, at best, a second-in-command, especially at Cyzicus. R. tends to embrace the latter view. Twice R. quotes a scathing comment of Nepos, that 'whereas Thrasybulus achieved much without Alcibiades, Alcibiades achieved nothing without Thrasybulus, yet by some innate quality got the credit for everything' (76, 105). It would, however, be fair to note that the victory at Byzantium was achieved by Alcibiades and Theramenes, without Thrasybulus. The successful policy of a mild and generous treatment of cities returned to the Athenian side should in likelihood be primarily associated with Alcibiades (80-82).

The most conspicuous shortcoming of Xenophon's *Hellenica* is that while he marks a new year at the beginning of summer, he does not number the years, and instead of seven new years, from 410 to 404, he notes only six. Between the two relatively secure dates, that of the battle off Cyzicus (early spring 410; see D.S. 13.49.2) and that of the trial of the generals after Arginousae (autumn 406, the time of Apatouria; see X. *Hell.* 1.7.8) one new year is missing. What especially concerns us here is the date of Alcibiades' return to Athens (X. *Hell.* 1.4.8-21). Some scholars follow a 'high' chronology dating it to 408 BCE, but R. sides with most historians of the twentieth century in assuming that the missing new year is that of 410; hence the first new year which Xenophon marks is that of 409 (73), Alcibiades' return to Athens should be accordingly dated to

407. The titles of this and the next chapters reflect the 'low' chronology, dating the final exile of Alcibiades to 406.²

A great deal was expected of Alcibiades after his return, but he was unable to live up to these expectations. R. suggests that after the defeat at Notium Alcibiades was not condemned, but formally deposed and no prosecution was brought to court (91-92).

The title of Chapter Seven speaks for itself: 'Final Years: 406-404/3'. R. suggests that of the two probable motives for Alcibiades' visit to the Athenian fleet near Aegospotami, the more important was not his desire to warn the Athenians of the danger of their position, but rather to obtain a share in the command in return for the support of his Thracian friends (99). After being rebuffed, in 404 Alcibiades was murdered in Phrygia. We do not know who exactly was responsible: the Thirty, the Spartans, or Pharnabazus. R. finds it unlikely that Alcibiades was murdered by the outraged brothers of a seduced woman, though seduction is of course not out of character (103).

The chapter is concluded by an evaluation of Alcibiades as general, politician and individual. As the latter, R. notes that 'Alcibiades was a spoiled upper-class man who liked enjoying himself in selfish and ostentatious ways', whereas 'As a public figure, he was exciting, and fond of clever and ambitious policies; persuasive, and apt to work by making friends and influencing people' (105). His contribution to whatever side he fought for was probably more on the level of morale than strategy. The author concludes that Alcibiades was primarily interested in his own aggrandizement and loyal to Athens only when that loyalty benefited him.

Discussion of some noteworthy issues could have been raised in this biography, in view of students' interest in this character: to what extent, for example, was Alcibiades unique in his epoch, or a child of his place and time, especially in regards to the Sophistic and/or Socratic education? We could also ask how he could best be compared with other colourful characters like Phrynichus or Theramenes?

The book is very competent and concise. I am not sure that it will be easy for non-specialists, for it requires some previous knowledge of the subject. However, this short analysis should be very useful for a student or a general reader willing to understand fifth-century Athenian history.³

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² For defense of 'high' chronology see Munn (n. 1 above), Appendix C.

³ There is a misprint of Selinus instead of Egesta on p. 45.