

The demos yearns for
him and hates him
too essay



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Alcibiades is one of the most colourful and controversial characters of Classical Greece, whose influence was felt in not just Athens, but in Sparta, other Greek cities, and even Persia. At first glance, his relationship with the Athenian demos appears to have been an inconsistent one – he fell badly out of favour with the people twice, but was able to win it back on both occasions. This fact perhaps suggests something about both Alcibiades' character and that of the Athenian demos as a whole, and appears to support Aristophanes' assertion. A more detailed examination of Alcibiades' relationship with the demos is required in order to answer the question thoroughly, however. Firstly, I shall consider whether the personal aims of Alcibiades were compatible with those of the Athenians.

I believe that there was some compatibility present – both, for example, were keen to expand the Athenian empire and its influence. The Sicilian expedition was Alcibiades' brainchild as part of a wider imperial plan¹, according to Plutarch, and it seems that the people needed little persuasion on his part to give their support for the campaign: ' He succeeded at once in capturing the imagination of the young men with these prospects... their seniors too.

.. ' and ' Nicias tried... [to] put a stop to the campaign.

But Alcibiades... carried all before him. ' ² Thucydides casts some doubts on Alcibiades' imperial ambitions however – he claims that Alcibiades' almost fanatical support for the Sicilian expedition was not the result of a devotion to the expansion of Athens' empire, but in equal parts due to his personal dislike of Nicias, who had attacked him personally in a speech on Sicily, and

his desire for personal glory; he hoped to use the Sicilian expedition as a vessel to bring him ' both wealth and honour.

' Alcibiades was also responsible for the daring diplomatic victory against Sparta in 420 where he deceived a Spartan delegation, causing them to insult the Assembly and thus lead to an Athenian alliance with Argos, Mantinea and Elis, 4 states close enough to Sparta to pose it a serious threat. However, Plutarch says that ' Nobody liked the way in which he brought this about...

,⁵ which suggests that there was a side to Alcibiades' character which the Athenians found distasteful – a line of investigation I shall pursue later. I think it would be hard to deny that the imperial ambitions of Alcibiades were popular with the Athenian people, regardless of their sincerity or the way in which they were expressed. The most important thing to the Athenians was that their own patriotic attitudes and imperial ambitions were represented. This is further evident in Thucydides where, despite Nicias' attempts to act as the voice of reason, a large majority of the Athenians still favoured a campaign in Sicily. Plutarch asserts that Alcibiades led an extravagant personal life with no regard for how others thought he should conduct himself.

He is described as living ' a life of prodigious luxury, drunkenness, debauchery and insolence. ' ⁷ Plutarch goes on to say that he caused other leading men of Athens to be ' deeply disturbed by his contemptuous and lawless behaviour' because they ' suggested the habits of a tyrant. ' ⁸ Thucydides also mentions that the people were ' frightened' by him because

they thought he was ' aiming at becoming a dictator, and so they turned against him. ⁹ This brings up the issue of whether Alcibiades was really a democrat, which would have been tremendously important to the Athenians. Democracy was, after all, their preferred form of government, as is exemplified by their overthrow of the oligarchic coup of 411, and the puppet Spartan regime installed in Athens after the Peloponnesian War. The fact that Alcibiades was the man who stirred up the 411 coup suggests that he had no love for democracy, but Plutarch claims that he was no friend of oligarchy either.

¹⁰ It seems that Alcibiades had no affiliation with a political ideology, but sought only to ensure power for himself, regardless of the political framework within which it was achieved. This led to him taking actions which would either have been pleasing to the demos, or anathema, depending on how he tried to gain power (McGregor claimed that Alcibiades' realised that successive regime changes in Athens could lead to his recall there¹¹). This lends further weight to Aristophanes' claim of a ' love-hate' relationship. However, returning to Alcibiades' personal conduct – he was accused of acts of religious disrespect bordering on sacrilege in the year of the Sicilian expedition.

The accusations levelled at him were the disfigurement of the Hermae and the profaning of the Eleusian Mysteries. It seems that the Athenians were a religiously suspicious people and they took a very dim view of these accusations. Plutarch also mentions that the ' great majority' of the people believed that the sacrilege was ' part of a daring conspiracy aimed at higher matters. ¹² Ostensibly this is a perceived threat to the democracy, so we see <https://assignbuster.com/the-demos-yearns-for-him-and-hates-him-too-essay/>

again that the preservation of the democratic system was a primary issue for an Athenian citizen, especially, Thucydides claims, as the memories of the tyranny of Hipparchos and Hippias were dredged up at this time.

13 It is easy to see why the Athenians ‘hated’ Alcibiades for what they believed was his lack of respect for accepted customs and democratic principles. Whether or not he was actually guilty (Plutarch says the accusations were made on fabricated evidence¹⁴) seemed to be secondary to the desire to make him a scapegoat. It also seems that they were easily influenced by speeches given by his opponents, such as Androcles, and given to wild bursts of what can only be described as ‘purging’ – Plutarch claims that they ‘went on...

arresting and imprisoning anyone who happened to be denounced.’¹⁵ The demos, on this evidence, was a fickle entity and thus it is easy to see that it could have had a mercurial attitude towards Alcibiades even without much action on his part. However, an interesting point brought up by Malcolm McGregor is that Alcibiades’ already poor reputation for drunken misconduct (Plutarch mentions such things as stealing gold cups from his admirers, cutting off his dog’s tail and drinking from precious ceremonial cups as if he owned them¹⁶) and his abundance of personal enemies prejudiced the demos’ view of Alcibiades and led to their sudden turning against him, ¹⁷ rather than than pure fickleness: the Athenians were certainly responding to provocation. Looking at the other side of the personality issue, Alcibiades seems to have had some personal traits that were far more endearing to the people of Athens.

Plutarch wrote the following of his contribution to society: The fact was that his voluntary donations, the public shows he supported, his unrivalled munificence to the state, the fame of his ancestry, the power of his oratory and his physical strength and beauty, together with his experience and prowess in war, all combined to make the Athenians forgive him everything else, and they were constantly finding euphemisms for his lapses and putting them down to youthful high spirits and honourable ambition. ¹⁸The content of this quotation suggests that a mystique built up around Alcibiades – the state benefactor; the warrior; the speaker; the ancient model. Yet despite Plutarch's claims of the people trivialising his 'lapses,' we have seen that in some cases they did not – such as with the Hermae and the Eleusian Mysteries. Plutarch's says by way of conclusion on the issue: 'All this suggests how difficult public opinion found it to judge Alcibiades, because of the extreme inconsistency of his character. ¹⁹ This assessment is one which I am inclined to agree with, and it supports Aristophanes' view: The people would have yearned for his patronage yet at the same time have been disgusted by the way he carried out his daily life, the result being that they could not form a permanent opinion on his character.

Plutarch also likens him to a chameleon when he claims that he could fit in and rise to the top anywhere (including Sparta and Persia) because there was 'never a characteristic which he could not imitate or practise. ²⁰ The chameleon metaphor is apt as it reinforces the idea that his character was not static and was therefore liable to confuse the Athenian view of him.

Alcibiades' military achievements are one more important area that should be studied in order to answer the question in hand. He had distinguished

himself in battle in his youth and fought as the tent-mate of Socrates, and was elected to the stratega almost constantly from about 420 until his flight to Sparta in 416, and from 411 until 406 when he was dismissed for the debacle at Notium. Military success seems to have been a major factor in how a person was viewed by the demos.

Alcibiades is described by Plutarch as ‘... [risking] his life far beyond any necessity for doing so.’²¹ and dedicates a number of pages to Alcibiades’ numerous military victories after he returned to Athenian service. McGregor argues that ‘his military strategy was impeccable’²² on his return, and that when he finally came home from campaign in 407, he returned to a hero’s welcome because his military successes had caused his detractors to ‘dwindle to a minority.

²³ The Athenians obviously yearned for a war hero – since Alcibiades’ departure from the Sicilian expedition everything seemed to have gone wrong for them, and his subsequent successes solidified their view of him as a great military leader. Plutarch claims that ‘...

they reflected that they would never have suffered the Sicilian disaster or any other of their terrible disappointments if only they had left Alcibiades in command... and kept him at the head of affairs.

²⁴ Here again is the mystique of Alcibiades – his good qualities were heavily exaggerated to the point of hero-worship. However, his good standing with the demos was short-lived and, according to Plutarch, he was destroyed by his high reputation²⁵ when he was defeated at Notium – the people had built him up so much that if he failed to win they accused him of ‘lacking the will
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to succeed. '26 Thrasybulus stirred up the demos with talk of Alcibiades' drunkenness and debauchery in command and soon public opinion had changed once more – the people had yearned for him, and now they hated him again. There is little evidence for there being anything but equal parts yearning and hatred for Alcibiades from the Athenian people. He was a man of contrasts who had some qualities that they adored, and others they despised.

It was true that he had what seemed like an inconsistent character – he was a drunken reveller who made a mockery of Athens' culture in his personal life, but was a stirring speaker who appealed to the ambitions of the Athenians in his public life, and made great donations to the city. He defected from Athens and damaged them greatly, but returned to win them great victories. His driving aim was to attain power and personal glory, but to the demos this made him appear to act in a contradictory way. Overall, they yearned for his public generosity, his imperial fervour and his military guidance, while simultaneously they hated him for his personal excesses, his lack of respect for established tradition, and his untrustworthiness.

Aristophanes' judgement of the attitude of the Athenians to Alcibiades is accurate, if simplistic – at times they hated him or yearned for him more than others, but generally I believe it is a sound assessment.