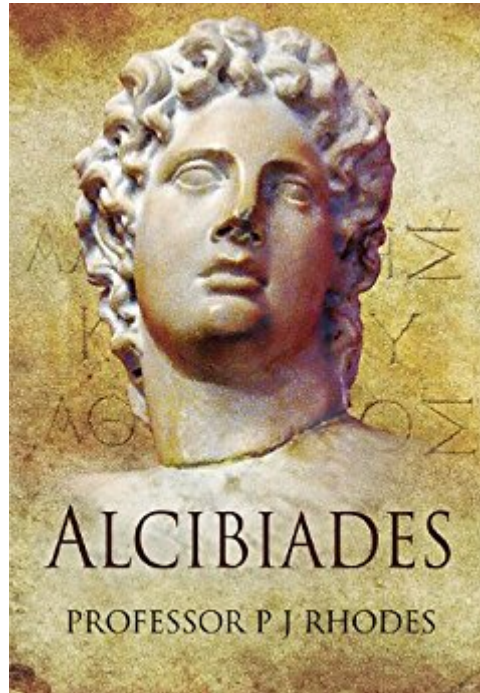




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Alcibiades



Synopsis

Alcibiades is one of the most famous (or infamous) characters of Classical Greece. A young Athenian aristocrat, he came to prominence during the Peloponnesian War (429-404 BC) between Sparta and Athens. Flamboyant, charismatic (and wealthy), this close associate of Socrates persuaded the Athenians to attempt to stand up to the Spartans on land as part of an alliance he was instrumental in bringing together. Although this led to defeat at the Battle of Mantinea in 418 BC, his prestige remained high. He was also a prime mover in Athens' next big strategic gambit, the Sicilian Expedition of 415 BC, for which he was elected as one of the leaders. Shortly after arrival in Sicily, however, he was recalled to face charges of sacrilege allegedly committed during his pre-expedition reveling. Jumping ship on the return journey, he defected to the Spartans. Alcibiades soon ingratiated himself with the Spartans, encouraging them to aid the Sicilians (ultimately resulting in the utter destruction of the Athenian expedition) and to keep year-round pressure on the Athenians. He then seems to have overstepped the bounds of hospitality by sleeping with the Spartan queen and was soon on the run again. He then played a devious and dangerous game of shifting loyalties between Sparta, Athens and Persia. He had a hand in engineering the overthrow of democracy at Athens in favor of an oligarchy, which allowed him to return from exile, though he then opposed the increasingly-extreme excesses of that regime. For a time he looked to have restored Athens' fortunes in the war, but went into exile again after being held responsible for the defeat of one of his subordinates in a naval battle. This time he took refuge with the Persians, but as they were now allied to the Spartans, the cuckolded King Agis of Sparta was able to arrange his assassination by Persian agents. There has been no full length biography of this colorful and important character for twenty years. Professor Rhodes brings the authority of an internationally recognized expert in the field, ensuring that this will be a truly significant addition to the literature on Classical Greece.

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Customer Reviews

Good research, great notes. Over all a good factual breakdown of the historic records on an intriguing person. Worth the time if you are interested in the character.

On the care of self, is not egocentric, is the right thing to do in many fronts of today's life and since the ancient Greeks philosophers. The conversations between Plato and Alcibiades presents the right arguments of the importance of the care of one self to assure the care of those we care about and love in our lives.

This tends to be the traditional and popular view of Alcibiades, rich aristocrat descended from some of the oldest Athenian families, raised in the household of Pericles and pupil of Socrates, like so many of the sons of the Athenian nobility. P.J. Rhodes shows that he was that, but also much more complex than that. In this short biography, P.J. Rhodes lays out what we know about Alcibiades, the very controversial Greek aristocrat and politician that some have equated to the decline and fall of Athens and its Empire. Although scholarly, this short book has the immense merit of showing to what extent the character and real achievements of Alcibiades are difficult to establish. This is partly because he has attracted so much attention, positive and negative in equal in equal shares, both during his lifetime and ever since his death (something that might have delighted him!). It makes a balanced assessment of his personality and of his achievements all the more difficult to achieve and this is what P.J. Rhodes has endeavoured to achieve. In this, I believe he has been very successful. The author shows throughout the book that there is little doubt that Alcibiades was very talented, in addition to being very handsome. He became a good orator, was extremely charismatic

and also probably too clever for his own good. One of the most valuable elements of this book is to show his ambivalence. Each of his qualities seems to have been matched by something much less sympathetic and he appears, above all, to have been supremely self-confident and utterly self-centred ("the selfish spoilt brat", as my mother always used to refer to him). He also seems to have had a tendency to systematically use and deceive people, whether his friends, his lovers, his political allies and, more generally, everyone who developed the rather bad habit of trusting him blindly. We do not know, of course, to what extent the portrait that Rhodes pieces together from the sources reflects the "real" Alcibiades, and we will never know for sure. However, the picture is not exactly a flattering one: he seems to have let down every one who trusted him at one point. His resilience is remarkable and so is his lack of ethics. Both seem to have been born from and supported by arrogance and self-confidence (the man must have been in turn irresistible and insufferable!). After having betrayed the Athenians, the Spartans and the Persian Satraps, he was still trying to bounce back yet again by appealing to the Persian King of Kings and making himself useful to him when he was murdered. Although there is no absolute certainty as to "who did it" (because there were too many plausible candidates), the author believes it may have been the 30 Tyrants who put pressure on the Spartans who in turn arranged the deed with Pharnabaze. Anyway, as the author makes out very well, all had more than sufficient reasons to want to get rid of him once and for all. Despite his sexual profligacy (he was a notorious womanizer with at least four illegitimate sons, in addition to one legitimate one and also probably had a number of male lovers), it is most likely that his murder was a political assassination and not the result of an angry husband or brother. The second major task and hurdle that Rhodes had to achieve and overcome was to assess Alcibiades' record and achievements. The author's interpretation, after a careful analysis of the sources and their respective biases, is that he was a tremendous morale booster for the Athenians both just before the Sicilian expedition and between 411 and 407 BC when he sided again with the Athenians and help win a string of victories that made it look like they could finally win the war. His actual record was much more mixed. His attempt to win the war on land against Sparta by siding with Argos ended in defeat. The expedition to Sicily, from which he was removed before it achieved anything, ended in disaster and his military role in the victories towards the end of the war, and that of Cyzicus in particular, seems to have been inflated since he was one of the three commanders. His well-known talent for taking all the credit for whatever was achieved, including the advice he gave to the Spartans against Athens when he was a refugee in Sparta, and his ability to deceive just about anyone, and perhaps even himself to some extent, meant that by the end nobody trusted him. It also led the Athenians to dismiss him as soon as he suffered a set-back and to refuse to listen to

his advice before the fateful and disastrous last naval battle. In this book, Rhodes has managed to portray the complexity and ambiguity of one of the most fascinating characters of Antiquity. Someone who, given his multiple talents, gave the impression that he could achieve so much, and who largely failed to deliver because of his multiple flaws. For those wanting to learn more about the second half of the Peloponnesian War, I can recommend the four tomes of Donald Kagan, and particularly the last two, "The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition" (1981) and "The Fall of the Athenian Empire" (1987). Those looking for some lighter reading but nevertheless wanting to understand the turmoil and the trauma caused by this long war, and how it could produce someone like Alcibiades may want Steven Pressfield's "Tides of War".

Alcibiades, P.J. Rhodes, Pen & Sword, 2011, 143pp This is a fairly short account of the life of the 5th century Athenian general, aristocrat and occasional traitor, Alcibiades. It is a fairly short book due to the amount of information available on its subject, a problem with many Greek and Hellenistic figures, many of whom are known only by name in a sentence or paragraph of contemporary writing; and there are many, many more known only by an inscription somewhere. However, Alcibiades lived in interesting times, and had a hand in many of the events in the latter part of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, and therefore has been the subject of much study due to the relative abundance of contemporary quotes about his life. The historian John D. Grainger has bemoaned the number of books written about "unworthy" subjects, such as mad or evil Roman Emperors, who have innumerable biographies written about them merely because there is a lot of contemporary writing available; whereas really interesting or important characters are ignored because writers would have to do long and detailed research to study them, or publishers have never heard of them, and therefore there is unlikely to be a market for books about them "the cult of celebrity" at work. Grainger gives Antiochus the Great as an example of someone of great importance in his time, but is hardly written about in English. Alcibiades probably does deserve to be the subject of books, due to his involvement in the events of his day. Unfortunately, this is a short book due to the shortage of contemporary information about him. This could be made up for by an in-depth analysis of his place in contemporary Athenian society, how he came to have so much influence there, and his apparent influence "family or personal" - in other regions where he operated in military campaigns. Unfortunately, the current author does not delve very deeply into some of these more interesting byways, if at all. Whether this is because of the lack of evidence, we do not know, because he doesn't tell us. He just casually mentions some things and then moves on; other things he

does expand on, and we must assume he has taken the easy option of just going with the information that is easily accessible from secondary sources. I recently read Donald Kagan's *Thucydides: The Reinvention of History*, and, although Alcibiades is but one character among many in *Thucydides' History*, Kagan manages to give a great deal of depth and analysis to his life and activities, and I felt as if I had learned more from Kagan than I really did from this book. I would recommend reading both, if you are interested in the subject. What I did take away from this book was the sense of just how chaotic Athenian politics and public life must have been. We are taught to think of Athens as somehow being a forerunner of modern maritime democracies, whereas it seems more like a city run by demagogues and mob rule, France or America during their Revolutions.

The Contents are

- P001: Sources and Modern Studies
- P005: Background
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For those so inclined, Rosemary Sutcliff wrote a novel set during Alcibiades' time *Flowers of Adonis*.

"Alcibiades: Athenian Playboy, General and Traitor" by P.J. Rhodes is a condensed and erudite portrayal of a complicated character during a complicated period in Ancient Greece. The book is a noble attempt at a complex biography. On a certain level, that of a scholar of classical Greece, the book succeeds immensely. But as a readable introduction to Alcibiades, there seems to be far too much information crammed into its meager 106 pages. Greek names are dropped by the author more for show than importance, from playwrights to politicians. There is often unnecessary background information on Ancient Greece and its political structure. As for the book itself, there are three maps included, with a map of the classical Mediterranean world broken by the binding, making the map worthless. I think publishers should seriously consider rethinking their inserting maps that are useful rather than just window dressing. As for a scholarly approach an interesting and evocative book, but unless you have studied Ancient Greece at Oxford for ten years a bit of a tough slog. The author should have focussed less on Ancient Greece and more on the man, Alcibiades. There is a lot of information in this slim volume, but I guess like Alcibiades it is complex and enigmatic.

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