

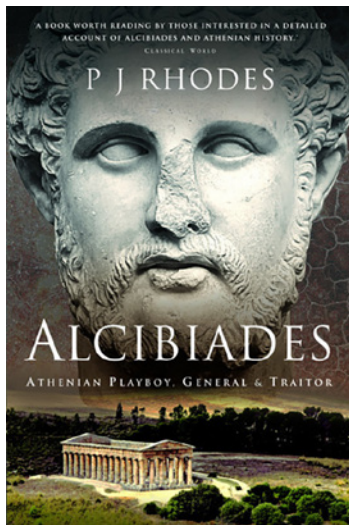
## Book Review

### Alcibiades. Athenian Playboy, General & Traitor

Rhodes (P.J.) Pp. xvi + 143, maps, b/w pls.  
Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 2021  
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*Alcibiades: Athenian Playboy, General and Traitor* was first published some 12 years ago, and now for the first time appears in a soft cover edition. Along with this first soft cover edition must also come the question of whether Rhodes' book has stood the test of time. With a highly provocative title the audience that this book was aimed at would have always been a popular, non-specialist or student readership. The appeal of Rhodes' book lay in a very simple formula of using a fast-paced narrative to hook a reader quickly and

keep them involved in the study of Ancient Greece after they had put the book down. Certainly after 12 years this initial aim has translated very well as the quality of Rhodes's scholarship is quite evident as a true reflection of a man who was a true master of his own field and could with ease popularise a complicated and polarising figure like Alcibiades for a modern readership. The book is short and to the point and an ideal starting point for a student reader being exposed to the history of Athens in the fifth century BCE for the first time.

P.J. Rhodes was one of the best scholars and teachers of Ancient Greek history in the last 25 years. His biography of Alcibiades, even in this popularised form, is an exemplary introduction to the man and his actions within a highly complex historical period. By examining all the various elements of Alcibiades' character as mentioned in the book title Rhodes manages to bring to life a very controversial figure to a wide audience without sacrificing any of his intellectual scepticism and vigour. This is what makes this book such a great read for students being introduced to the politics of Athens during the time of Alcibiades. The intelligent and exciting

narrative also works well for teachers who are presenting a course on Ancient Greek History, as they do not have to worry about lengthy and dull descriptions that would normally dissuade most new students from taking their subject.

The book begins with an overview of the ancient sources used normally as evidence of the life and deeds of Alcibiades. Rhodes also discusses the problems associated with these sources and highlights the questioning approach any first-time scholar must take when reading them. This chapter also provides the necessary guidance to students or general readers who wish to take their study of Alcibiades further. Rhodes indicates where readers can find any additional information on Alcibiades and on the time period in general. Having the indexed endnotes at the back of the book also helps in this respect. The next chapter deals with the overarching theme of the war with Sparta from the beginning to how it unfolded and its resulting end in the fourth century BCE. Again, this is perfect for a student beginning the study of the Peloponnesian War as it guides the student to broaden their horizons once they have become familiar with the overview that Rhodes has presented. In the same chapter Rhodes gives an overview of the functioning and development of the Athenian democracy while trying to place the familial history of Alcibiades in this context.

In the following chapter Rhodes takes this introduction and sketch to create a biography of Alcibiades. Anyone can also by now realise that to write about the life of Alcibiades is quite a difficult thing especially for a new reader or student because they will have to deal with all the anecdotal and biased opinions from several historians. Some like Xenophon, who had a genuine axe to grind with Alcibiades, can prove extremely difficult to read unless a student or reader has been given the tools of reasonable scepticism. Even Thucydides must be examined in the light of this greater historiographical context. Again, Rhodes uses his deep subject knowledge to condense these anecdotes and histories into something that is appealing and easy to read for a new reader or student. The narrative that Rhodes uses starts with Alcibiades' involvement in the expedition to Sicily down to his murder in Phrygia in 403 BCE.

Rhodes continuously portrays Alcibiades in the midst of the wider political world of that time namely with all the interactions and intrigues between Athens, Sparta and Persia. During the course of the Peloponnesian War Rhodes continues to view the details that are presented by historians of the period with healthy scepticism. He also does not venture down the alley of philosophy or fiction by not dealing with the character of Alcibiades found in Platonic dialogues. His continued depiction of Alcibiades as a man within the context of his time does give a balanced view and makes the reading of the book a far greater success in giving over information to a new readership. The balance that Rhodes strikes is thus not only with the character of Alcibiades but also with his book, being equal parts informative and compelling reading.

In the final chapters of this book Rhodes places Alcibiades in a better space that befits a true character study. Alcibiades was a man who was sure of his abilities and he transmitted that surety to the people of importance and power around him. In the end however his efforts and deeds were just plain disastrous. Although Rhodes employed the technique of creating an even-handed picture of

Alcibiades in the end the new reader or student will confidently come away with the same opinion of the career and character of Alcibiades. The key here is not just that Rhodes presented the reader with the facts on the life of Alcibiades but also that he has taught the new student the techniques of even handedness and healthy scepticism when approaching the study of any historical character. The emphasis must also be on thorough investigation

and balanced depictions. These are truly the greatest skills that any future Ancient Historian or Classicist will need in their work. This is justly also then the legacy that Rhodes leaves behind – one that promotes sound scholarship but does not detract from the overall enjoyment of delving deeply into the work.

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