



Alcibiades (ca 450-404/3 B. C. E.)

by Nikolai Endres

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A classical bust of Alcibiades.

Strikingly handsome but extravagantly self-centered, widely admired and bitterly hated, Alcibiades (alternatively transliterated as Alkibiades) was a brilliant but unscrupulous Athenian politician and military commander. In glbtq history, he is especially noted for his (failed) "seduction" of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, his transgression of gender roles, his sexual "versatility," his violent and unpatriotic *eros*, and his appropriation as a gay icon in later literature.

Life

Born in Athens around 450 B. C. E. to an aristocratic family and raised by the statesman Pericles, Alcibiades soon came into contact with the keen mind and powerful philosophy of Socrates, who--in turn--was strongly attracted by Alcibiades's intellectual promise and outstanding beauty. In the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B. C. E.), they served together at the battles of Potidaea (432) and Delium (424), where they saved each other's lives.

Soon, though, Alcibiades strayed from the Socratic path of reason and moderation. Consequently, Alcibiades's restless ambition greatly contributed to the charge brought against Socrates in 399 of corrupting the youth of Athens, of which he was found guilty and for which he was subsequently executed.

After the Peace of Nicias (421), Alcibiades turned to politics. As general, he formed the Argive Alliance of Athens with Argos, Mantinea, and Elis against Sparta in 420, but the city states were defeated at the Battle of Mantinea (418). In 415, one year after entering seven chariots at Olympia and taking first, second, and fourth places and thus rehabilitating himself, Alcibiades persuaded the Athenians to go to war against the city of Syracuse in Sicily.

However, on the eve of this megalomaniac expedition, Alcibiades was accused of mutilating sacred statues of Hermes and profaning the Eleusinian Mysteries. He was consequently stripped of his command. He escaped his prosecutors but was condemned to death *in absentia*, and went into Spartan exile, where he advised the king and seduced his wife.

After Alcibiades grew unpopular in Sparta, he negotiated with the Persian satrap Tissaphernes in 412. Following a change of regime in Athens (the fall of the oligarchy and reestablishment of the democracy) in 411, his native city recalled him. Alcibiades helped defeat the Spartan fleet at Cyzicus in 410 and recovered Byzantium. In 407, he triumphantly returned to his city of birth and was given supreme control.

Once again, Alcibiades fell out of favor (especially when Lysander, a new Spartan commander, defeated the Athenian fleet at Notium in 406). He retired to a castle in Thrace, and eventually took refuge in Phrygia (now in Turkey), where he was murdered in 404 or 403, probably at the behest of the Persian satrap Pharnabazus and his Spartan allies.

Contemporary Reputation

In his biography of Alcibiades, Walter Ellis describes him as a dubious character: "[Alcibiades] was very handsome, and he was known to have had many affairs with people of both sexes. He drank heavily and caroused through the streets of Athens at night associating with actors, musicians, and prostitutes. He was wild, reckless and extravagant, and . . . indulged his desires beyond his means."

John Finlay contends that "the one motive which united [Alcibiades] through [his] shifting and elusive world was self-interest, for him a solipsistic pride and safety of the self in imposing his irrational will upon others. Ironically and tragically that self-interest caused the destruction of the self."

Among his contemporaries, Alcibiades proved a complex figure. "The city loves him and hates him, yet it longs to have him back," Aristophanes proclaimed in his comedy *Frogs* (405 B. C. E.).

According to the verdict by the Greek historian Thucydides, a contemporary who knew Alcibiades well, Alcibiades was a creature of *paranomia* (non-conformity). Centuries later, the Roman biographer Plutarch accused Alcibiades of *hubris* (outrage).

David Gribble argues that "the key to understanding the presentation of Alcibiades lies in civic discourses about the relationship between individual and city, discourses which portrayed him as the sort of figure who could not be incorporated into the city, as 'outside' the city."

The common denominator in ancient literature about Alcibiades is his refusal to value the good of the *polis*, his lack of patriotism, and his overbearing *philotimia* (love of honor).

These aspects can be discerned in the charge against Alcibiades that he mutilated the sacred statues of Hermes. As Victoria Wohl shows, the Herms represented the Athenian male subject: "their rigid stances and lack of differentiation symbolized the notional equality and individual freedom of all citizens in the democracy; their erect phalloi represented the sexual dominance that was one marker of citizenship in Athens." Vandalizing the Herms, therefore, is a tyrannical and castrating deed, challenging Athens' phallocentrism and assaulting democracy.

Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* and in the *Alcibiades*

The most famous depiction of Alcibiades is, of course, that in Plato's *Symposium* (ca 380), where the most beautiful young man in Athens offers himself as the lover of the ugliest, Socrates. Alcibiades tells a "love story," which in the end, as Martha Nussbaum notes, turns out to be "a story of waste and loss, of the failure of practical reason to shape a life."

Alcibiades relates how Socrates's "beauty," which is clearly not the physical beauty of a boy (he is over 50 years old), inspired in him such an intense feeling that he made the first move as an *erastes* (lover) and tried to seduce Socrates, "as if I [Alcibiades] were his [Socrates's] lover and he my young prey," but to no avail.

At the same time, Alcibiades is a clear threat to Socrates, who complains: "I can't so much as look at an attractive man but he flies into a fit of jealous rage. He yells; he threatens; he can hardly keep from slapping me around. Please, try to keep him under control." In their banter, Alcibiades and Socrates display strong emotional tension, including jealousy, abuse, frustration, and retaliation.

Alcibiades's entrance to the dinner party is quite a *tour de force*: he is almost carried in by a woman and wants to be taken to the host of the banquet, Agathon. He appears crowned with green ivy and bright yellow and white violets, the latter the symbol of Aphrodite and the *polis* of Athens with its patroness Athena, the former the sign of Dionysus, the god of irrationality who undergoes, once a year, a ritual death.

Everything is topsy-turvy. As Gribble notes, Alcibiades is already drunk when he enters. He deposes the democratically elected symposiarch and drains a whole mixing-bowl of wine (an immense undrinkable quantity). The *symposium* is bound to turn into a revel.

Alcibiades equates Socrates with statues of satyrs, the mythological wild beasts of gross, animalistic sexual appetites (*hubristes*), monumental erections, and phallic nicknames, "flute players." Alcibiades wants to "open up" Socrates, to see what is "inside" him, but an *eromenos* (beloved), unlike satyrs, should not allow his body to be penetrated.

For Alcibiades, the presence of Socrates is both unsettling and arousing: "the moment [Socrates] starts to speak, I am beside myself: my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face." In the end, Socrates and Alcibiades remain worlds apart and fail to communicate, either erotically or politically.

In the pseudo-Platonic dialogue *Alcibiades* (ca 350), beautiful and young Alcibiades is dismayed to discover that he has no knowledge of himself, that he lacks the virtues of the soul, justice, and intellectual skills, and is thus fit to be ruled, not to rule: he is in the depths of stupidity (*amathia*), running into politics entirely ignorant.

Socrates there observes that a lover of Alcibiades's beautiful body is not loving Alcibiades, just something that belongs to Alcibiades. Here we see one reason for Alcibiades's modern appeal. Unlike Socrates, many lovers would not stay when Alcibiades's "body has lost its bloom and everyone else has gone away"--hence Socrates's exclusive interest in Alcibiades's soul in the *Symposium*.

Another trait that may be particularly interesting to modern students of Greek life is Alcibiades's "versatility": he is an aggressive *eromenos*, a passive *erastes*, a Greek man with affinities for the exotic or foreign, a womanizer, a demagogue verging on the lifestyle of a tyrant, a figure of theatricality and hyperbole. In short, throughout his life, Alcibiades transformed himself, in Plutarch's memorable depiction, like a "chameleon."

Alcibiades's Afterlife

Alcibiades enjoys an important *Nachleben*, or afterlife, in literature and art. He early acquired symbolic status as a historical figure of ambition and sexual profligacy. For example, Persius's Satire 4 (ca 55 C. E.) compares Alcibiades's depilating his genitals to a farmer weeding his field, while Petronius's *Satyricon* (ca 65) refers to Alcibiades to spoof the ethereality of Platonic love.

In the Middle Ages, Alcibiades appeared as a female character (caused by mistranslations), but he was soon restored to his rightful gender in medieval and Renaissance works such as Chaucer's "Franklin's Tale" in the *Canterbury Tales* (ca 1387), Erasmus's adage "The Sileni of Alcibiades" in *The Praise of Folly* (1515), Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528), Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1534), Montaigne's *Essays* (1588), Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (ca 1607) and *Henriad* (1597-1599), and Thomas Otway's tragedy *Alcibiades* (1687).

In the above listed examples, Alcibiades is presented as a more or less historical figure, a military commander and student of Socratic teaching. In Marlowe's *Edward II* (ca 1592), Sir Francis Bacon's essay "Of Beauty" (1597), and Antonio Rocco's *Alcibiades the Schoolboy* (1652), however, the allusions are specifically homoerotic. In these works, Alcibiades is presented as a symbol of homosexual desire.

Even in our times, Alcibiades remains a pertinent symbol. He is referred to in Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948, revised 1965) and *Messiah* (1954), and in Mary Renault's *The Last of the Wine* (1956). Lawrence Schehr entitles his study of gay discourses in French literature *Alcibiades at the Door* (1995). In these works, the emphasis is on Alcibiades and Socrates as lovers and their dysfunctional relationship in the end.

Alcibiades is also a prototype of the dandy. As such, he inspired Charles Baudelaire, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, Charles Kingsley, John Addington Symonds, Lytton Strachey, and André Gide. This aspect of Alcibiades is explored in Dietmar Jovy's drama *Alcibiades the Athenian: Dandy, Statesman, and Strategist* (2000).

Even for lesbians, Alcibiades has become a symbolic figure. For example, Margaret Fuller, in a diary entry in 1842, describes her relationship with Anna Barker, as well as the friendship between Madame de Staël and Madame de Récamier, in terms of the intimacy between Socrates and Alcibiades.

The best-known artistic depictions of Alcibiades include Raphael's *School of Athens* (1508-1511), Peter Paul Rubens's *The Drunken Alcibiades Interrupting the Symposium* (ca 1600), and Pietro Testa's painting of the same title (1648).

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