



English Summaries: Sections 1-22

Section 1

Alcibiades was the son of Cleinias, who had fitted out a trireme at his own expense at Artemisium in 480 BC during the Persian Wars between Greece and Persia. Cleinias died fighting in another war when Alcibiades was still a young boy; Pericles and his brother Ariphron became Alcibiades' guardian. Much is known about Alcibiades, in part since he was a friend of Socrates. He was very handsome, his lisp seemed to fit nicely with his voice and he was a charmer.

Section 2

His character became inconsistent, being very passionate and competitive. Three anecdotes from his boyhood highlight his willingness to challenge others: when taunted by a boy he was wrestling that he had a woman's bite he replied that he bit like a lion; when stopping a cart so he could first throw his dice in the alley, he invited the cart driver either to wait or to ride over him; when refusing to learn to play the pipes claiming they were not appropriate for those of noble birth, his actions resulted in pipe-playing being removed from boys' education.

Section 3

The orator Antiphon recorded a number of anecdotes which do not cast Alcibiades in a good light: one where he ran away from home to one of his lovers, another where he supposedly killed one of his servants by striking him with some wood. But these stories are probably untrue, written out of personal hostility.

Section 4

Socrates loved him and believed his appearance reflected a virtuous excellence in Alcibiades. He protected him from the flattery of various wealthy individuals who sought favours and indulged him. Alcibiades realized that Socrates' love led him to want to steer Alcibiades away from pride, so Alcibiades began treating only Socrates correctly, showing his other lovers only contempt. An incident concerned with one of his lovers, Anytus, highlights this. Invited to dinner one night, Alcibiades instead got drunk at home with friends, went over to Anytus' house but did not enter the dining-room; rather he had his men take half the silver and gold cups back to his house and left with them. Anytus remarked to his outraged guests that at least Alcibiades left half the cups.

Section 5

Alcibiades did treat one man, a foreigner resident in Athens, well. To win Alcibiades' favour he sold all he had, which was not much, and offered it to Alcibiades, who entertained him well at his house and gave him back his money. Alcibiades also told him to outbid everyone else for a public tax contract, in part since he held a grudge against the tax-collectors. Naming



himself as the man's guarantor, the result was that the tax-collectors paid off the foreign resident a large sum to withdraw his bid; in this way Alcibiades helped at least one man.

Section 6

Socrates' views did keep Alcibiades in check but often Alcibiades also gave in to temptation and joined his other lovers, escaping Socrates like a runaway slave. His flatterers stoked his ambition, saying that when he entered politics he would become a greater leader even than Pericles, the Greek leader who had been instrumental in securing an empire for Athens. On each occasion Socrates would take Alcibiades back and teach him to be self-controlled and humble, showing him how far his behaviour was from being virtuous.

Section 7

Three brief anecdotes show his outspoken nature: first punching a teacher who said he did not have any books on Homer; next making fun of a teacher who claimed to have corrected Homer himself; and then on attempting to visit Pericles at his house suggesting that he considered politicians to likely be corrupt. At the campaign at Potidaea in northern Greece Alcibiades was Socrates' tent-mate and companion. When Alcibiades was wounded while fighting bravely, Socrates saved him; yet Socrates later spoke of Alcibiades' courage so that Alcibiades was awarded the symbols of honour, as he tried to steer Alcibiades' competitive spirit towards noble pursuits. At Delium during a conflict in central Greece Alcibiades, though on horseback, waited for Socrates and some of his companions who were in difficulties, and safely defended them and accompanied them away from the enemy.

Section 8

After punching a noble man called Hipponicus for a bet, Alcibiades visited him the next morning and offered to be thrashed as a punishment. Hipponicus, however, forgave him and later even gave him his daughter, Hipparete, in marriage. Some say in fact it was Hipponicus' son Callias who gave his sister to Alcibiades with a considerable dowry, and that Alcibiades then demanded and received more money once they had a child. Hipparete could not endure Alcibiades' various affairs and went to live with her brother before petitioning for divorce. Alcibiades himself went to the divorce court and forcibly led her home through the market square. She stayed with him until her death soon after and no-one thought his behaviour outrageous since the law for divorce required the wife to appear publicly, so a husband had just such an opportunity to intervene.

Section 9

Alcibiades had an expensive, large and attractive dog whose tail he cut off. When his friends criticized this act, he remarked that he preferred the Athenians to be talking about this type of behaviour of his and nothing worse.

Greek Selection summary

Section 10



Alcibiades' first entry to public life occurred by chance, when he heard applause and learned that a public donation of money to the state was being made. He went forward and made a donation but caused commotion when a quail he was carrying got loose and many joined in the chase. Not only relying on his birth, wealth and connections, he wished to win over the people through persuasive speeches and this rhetorical skill. The great orator Demosthenes and comic poets attest to his skill in this respect, but the philosopher and author Theophrastus notes that Alcibiades' real ability lay in extracting the essence of an issue; his attempts to phrase his views perfectly, however, were hampered by not having enough Greek words at his immediate command, so he would hesitate during speeches while searching for the right expression.

Section 11

Alcibiades was famous for his horse farms and even entered seven chariot teams in the Olympic Games, winning first and second place (as well as either third or fourth) – achievements unrivalled by kings or private citizens. His fame for this is immortalized by writers including Euripides, whose ode declares Alcibiades to be the first to take the first three places in a chariot race.

Section 12

Communities vied with one another to give Alcibiades the best gifts on the occasion of these Games but a rumour went round that some of his methods had been unscrupulous: one of the chariots he had bought from the Argives on behalf of a friend, Diomedes, he had then entered under his own name. This led to a later lawsuit, with a defence speech for Alcibiades' son written by Isocrates.

Section 13

Alcibiades quickly became an important politician, humiliating rival popular leaders, and came into competition with the military leader Nicias and Phaeax, a man who could not compete with Alcibiades in public speaking; Phaeax accused Alcibiades of outrageous behaviour, treating ceremonial utensils belonging to the city as his own at home. The demagogue Hyperbolus tried to get one of his rivals, in particular Alcibiades or Nicias, ostracized and therefore exiled, so he could gain in power in their stead. But Alcibiades colluded with Nicias – or Phaeax according to some – to win enough support that it was Hyperbolus who ended up being ostracized and banished, though, as Plato says, this punishment was not really meant for such insignificant individuals.

Section 14

Alcibiades was envious of the respect in which Nicias was held at home and of the awe which Athens' enemies had for him, particularly with regard to the Spartans, whose *proxenos* (ambassador) in Athens Alcibiades was. For the Spartans attributed the state of peace to Nicias and indeed the common name for the treaty was 'The Peace of Nicias'. Therefore Alcibiades looked for ways to undermine this peace, first by creating a secret pact with Argos, a Spartan ally, and second by publicly accusing Nicias of being too pro-Spartan in his outlook and his actions; he catalogued a number of events where Nicias' behaviour appeared to be favourable towards Athens' main rival city-state, especially with regard to some recent Spartan actions which seemed to be in contravention of the terms of the peace. When a



deputation from Sparta came to Athens to negotiate a solution to their dispute, the Athenian council received them warmly and they were to appear before the Assembly the next day. Alcibiades met with the ambassadors and warned them to say to the Assembly that they did not have full powers to negotiate a resolution as otherwise the Assembly would pressure them into accepting its own terms. Alcibiades said he would support the delegates as a favour to Sparta and they took his advice and sided with him. On the next day in the Assembly Alcibiades asked them if they really could negotiate terms and they, playing their part, said no. Alcibiades, however, turned on them, accusing them of lying; the Assembly and Council were outraged and Nicias was humiliated by this episode.

Section 15

As general, Alcibiades brought about an alliance between Athens and three Spartan allies, Argos, Mantinea and Elis, which destabilized Spartan power in the Peloponnese. Though the force assembled was defeated by the Spartans at Mantinea, Alcibiades had ensured that such an important conflict took place in Spartan territory where a defeat for Athens did not do them significant harm but a victory would have given them a great advantage. The democracy of Argos was overthrown by a Spartan-backed oligarchy but Alcibiades' support soon helped topple this government and he persuaded them to build their city walls to the sea so they could always rely on help from Athens that way, providing experts and manpower from Athens for the project. As a result he won favour for Athens but also for himself. He had Patrae build long walls too, but he also advised Athens not to neglect the importance of land power.

Section 16.1 – 16.5

Alcibiades' positive traits were countered by his extravagant lifestyle, considered excessive by the Athenian people; his purple clothing and his gold-traced shield with a depiction of Eros wielding a thunderbolt in place of his ancestral emblem sum up his decadence. Aristophanes remarked that the people had a love-hate relationship with him and compared him to a lion whose moods had to be tolerated. Indeed the Athenians did endure his behaviour, due to his generosity, charisma and military accomplishments, constantly excusing his conduct. Instances of his outrageous behaviour included locking up an artist in his house until he had painted all his walls, only to release him with a gift; hitting a rival with a stick at a dramatic contest; and having a female prisoner from the island of Melos, once Athens had decreed its destruction for not joining her empire, installed in his house, even raising the child she had by him. Many people thought a painting of him by Aristophon, in which he was cradled by a personification of Nemea, was wonderful, but the older citizens considered it almost tyrannical. The remark that Athens could not have endured two Alcibiadeses was appropriately made.

English Selection summary – Part 2

Section XVI.6

The misanthrope Timon walked up to Alcibiades and congratulated him on dragging Athens down towards ruin. Some laughed, others were upset at Timon, but Alcibiades' own inconsistency and the Athenians' inability to make their minds up about him meant that such words gave them pause for thought.

*Section XVII*

The Athenians had wanted to win control over Sicily for a long time; Alcibiades roused them to commit to such an undertaking, making Sicily the first in a series of conquests which would include Carthage and Libya then Italy and the Peloponnese; Nicias opposed such plans, thinking even the capture of Syracuse, the largest city in Sicily, would be too much for them. But the young men were eager for such a campaign while such stories also delighted the old, so that soon everyone was talking about it. Socrates and the astronomer Meton, however, interpreted signs to mean the expedition was doomed; the latter was able to have his son's name removed from the expedition after going, or pretending to go, mad, with some saying he burned his house down and pleaded that he should not be left alone in such a state.

Section XVIII

Nicias was put in charge of the operation but was reluctant, in part due to his colleague. Alcibiades was chosen to go with him, his bold nature tempered by Nicias' cautious approach. The third general was Lamachus who was older than Alcibiades but of similar temperament. In a debate about equipping the army Nicias tried to get the war stopped but Alcibiades argued against this and won, before a decree giving the commanders the power to decide on the size and equipment of the army was passed. As the army was about to set sail, two incidents occurred, which could be interpreted as ominous. One was that it was the festival of Adonis, when the women of Athens acted as though in mourning while they buried statuettes of the god which resembled human corpses. The other was the mutilation of the herms: in one night almost every herm (a large stone pillar with the head of Hermes – the god of messengers and also travellers - on top and a phallus in the appropriate place) was vandalized; many thought this was a bad portent. Some thought the Corinthians did it to scare Athens from war, since Syracuse was their colony, but the common people thought rather that it was the behaviour of young men who had had too much to drink and that it had gone beyond what was fun or acceptable. Angry and fearful, they suspected a conspiracy and a thorough investigation was launched.

Section XIX

An enemy of Alcibiades, Androcles, accused him and his friends of mutilating other statues and of desecrating the Eleusinian Mysteries by acting them out when drunk. Alcibiades was accused of showing disrespect to the two goddesses of the cult, Demeter and Persephone, but initially he thought that the loyalty of the military about to set sail for Sicily was enough support, so he took the chance to defend himself. This discouraged his enemies, who feared that popular support for his abilities as a general would lead to him being cleared of wrongdoing. His enemies therefore made a plan to delay such a trial until after Alcibiades returned from the campaign; Alcibiades argued against this and wanted a trial at once, saying that he should either be put to death if found guilty or be freed from such dangers hanging over him if he proved his innocence.

Section XX

The Athenians ordered him to set sail with an enormous force. First they captured Rhegium, an Italian city. Then they sailed towards Sicily, since Alcibiades' plan, though opposed by Nicias, was supported by Lamachus. Alcibiades won over the city of Catana but before



anything else could be accomplished he was recalled to Athens to stand trial. In his absence, Alcibiades' enemies had made more out of the incidents he had been accused of, linking the mutilation of the herms and the desecration of the Mysteries and saying that both had been committed by those conspiring to take control of Athens. Many were imprisoned for connection to these events and the Athenians regretted not resolving Alcibiades' role in them. Though some of the evidence against those accused of involvement in these affairs was flimsy or even seemed incorrect, the people were carried away in their anger and happily passed guilty verdicts against those who had been denounced.

Section XXI

The orator Andocides was accused of playing a part in the mutilation of the herms, primarily since the herm near his house was one of the very few which was not vandalized. In prison Andocides met a man called Timaeus, who convinced him that it would be better to confess to the crime and gain immunity from punishment rather than risk the possibility of the punishment of death. Andocides therefore gave information against himself and a number of others; while he was immune from punishment, the others either fled into exile or were put to death. This was not enough for the Athenian people, who now turned their focus and anger on Alcibiades. They sent their vessel the *Salamina* to bring him home but ordered those sent not to use force but to persuade Alcibiades to return to Athens to prove his innocence – they did not want the army to become restless. Due to his departure the soldiers did lose heart, fearing a protracted war under Nicias and Lamachus, now that the instigator of the expedition had gone.

Section XXII

Alcibiades immediately worked against Athens, preventing her from winning over Messana by informing the pro-Syracusan faction about those who were about to give up their city to the Athenians. He escaped the clutches of his captors at Thurii; there someone asked him if he trusted Athens, to which he replied that essentially he did but he did not trust the voters. When he heard that he had been condemned to death, he was determined to show the Athenians that he was still alive. He was found guilty *in absentia* of desecrating the Mysteries, as the quoted text of the charge shows, and all his property was confiscated. A decree was passed that all priests and priestesses should curse him in public, but one priestess refused, objecting that she was priestess of prayers, not curses.