



Why read Plutarch's *Life of Alcibiades*?

Plutarch is not a Greek author who often appears on school reading lists, primarily since he lived and wrote in the 1st and 2nd century AD, when the Roman Empire dominated the Mediterranean and beyond. It is usually Latin texts from this period which are read, such as the works of the historian Tacitus or the letters of his friend and contemporary Pliny; the biographer of the Caesars, Suetonius, is often read too, often in translation by those studying the period, whereas the biographies of Plutarch do not always get a look in. Different from the Classical Greek usually studied in school, exemplified by the writings of the historians Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon, the philosopher Plato and the orators such as Lysias and Demosthenes, the Greek of Plutarch is rather different. Often his word order and style appears unusual – products of his literary context (see below) – and his vocabulary is varied and can require a fair amount of looking up. In this respect he is similar to the novelist and satirist Lucian, whose works have appeared on the recent GCSE syllabus. But reading Plutarch biographies, the source material for many plays throughout the Renaissance and beyond, is rewarding in itself, with their insights into Plutarch's subjects' natures and characters and their examination of great Greeks and Romans on a human level. Our views of many great leaders, including Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Alexander the Great, have been largely shaped by Plutarch's accounts. When he writes about individuals whose actions meant they have been written about in histories such as those of Thucydides, it is possible through comparison of the relation of events to conclude that Plutarch knew his history and did his research yet was not afraid to distort events or their sequence or alter his material to fit his purpose.



The *Life of Alcibiades* is in some ways an obvious choice for study, since the Greek general is such a fascinating figure. The Athenians of his own time were not able to make up their mind about him, nor those who wrote about him, and so even now it is impossible to pass judgement on his career and his character with conviction. A loveable rogue whose faults could be forgiven due to his affable nature and his charisma, Alcibiades achieved many victories for Athens and was voted their general a number of times. But he was also exiled twice, avoided an ostracism (a vote by the Athenians which would have led to his exile) early on in his career and was able to change sides when favour was turned against him, aiding the Spartans against his homeland in the first instance before advising the Persians, where he managed to do harm to the Spartans; ultimately he joined the Athenians again before being blamed for a subordinate's failure and exiled for a second, final time. Clearly he was a multi-faceted character who could not be pigeon-holed. The selection we read (Sections I-IX and XVI.5-XXII in English, Sections X-XVI.4 in Greek) is a little over the first half of the biography, taking us from Alcibiades' ancestry and youth to the first occasion when he was exiled from Athens. Indeed in his absence he was condemned to death, after just embarking on a grand undertaking - the Sicilian Expedition of 415 BC, which was in part his idea; without him, it resulted in a huge humiliation for the Athenians, who came to regret their treatment of him. The last we see of him is when he is working against Athens as he becomes an important adviser to the Spartans. In the Greek selection we read about Alcibiades' chaotic entry into public life, his political acumen, his ability to work a crowd and much more; many anecdotes amuse but also illuminate his life, and he is seen to be a rather extravagant and larger-than-life individual. These anecdotes sit beside passages of historical narrative and the student reading this selection will, by the end, be able to pass some initial judgements on the character of this entertaining, brilliant and, above all, controversial figure.