INTRODUCTION

Biography and History

There must be a special place in hell reserved for biographers. And in the lowest part of the inferno suffer the biographers of ancient figures.

Plutarch wisely informed his readers that he was not a historian but a biographer, and was therefore more interested in the chance remark or anecdote revealing the subject's character than in the narrative of battles and great events.[1] But Plutarch should have gone further, admitting that even the best descriptions of jokes, personal demeanor, and physical appearance cannot capture a human being's actual nature. A biographer – a word derived from Greek roots meaning "life writer" – remains a kind of charlatan, presenting depictions that may gain credence more by verisimilitude than by accuracy. By contrast, a historian who seeks to describe (say) a battle may have accounts of dozens of eyewitnesses and the testimony of commanding officers as well as the battlefield topography to help him reconstruct his nonetheless imperfect account of the event. But his object of study – the battle itself – remains insensate, without its own will or purpose, unconflicted by emotions and morals, without lost loves, false hopes, or crushed dreams. While a battle can be misrepresented, it cannot be defamed, its character or reputation cruelly twisted by the caprice, malice, or incompetence of the historian.

Perhaps this very fact about biography – its willingness to attempt the impossible while running the risk of either maligning or deifying its subject – has made it such a popular genre from antiquity to the present. Every reader of a biography knows (or should know) that the figure in the volume he is reading cannot be the real person, that something essential has

been lost in the process of reducing a human life to a few thousand words. And yet we eagerly read on, gauging the written "life" against our own experience and estimates of plausibility.

Pericles of Athens lived before the creation of biography. Certainly during his lifetime and shortly thereafter Greeks composed works that included biographical information, especially anecdotes (often unflattering) about famous Athenians or other Greeks. Such stories often reflected the very obvious biases of their ultimate sources, a fact that will be helpful to keep in mind when we attempt to analyze them. But no one in the fifth century BC attempted to document Pericles' life or career. No person or institution saved his letters or copies of his speeches. No journalists composed accounts of his day-to-day dealings with other statesmen or foreign dignitaries. None of his wives, sons, friends, or lovers wrote an account of "life with Pericles." Even the statesman's younger contemporary Thucydides, who had heard Pericles speak and undoubtedly knew him personally, made almost no effort to inform us about the statesman's *life* (as opposed to his public policies and beliefs).

Given these circumstances, can one write a proper biography of Pericles more than 2,400 years after his death? The obvious answer to this question is no. Plutarch's own *Life of Pericles*, written some 500 years after the statesman's death, if anything confirms the impossibility of the undertaking. The "real" Pericles arguably does not emerge from that text, despite the fact that Plutarch had access to many precious contemporary documents and accounts now lost to us. Plutarch, for example, had the scandalous pamphlet on Pericles, Themistocles, and Thucydides son of Melesias (a different Thucydides than the historian) by Stesimbrotus of Thasos, a work that apparently included considerable information about private matters like the sexual liaisons of his subjects. He also had many contemporary Athenian comedies that made Pericles the butt of numerous jokes about matters ranging from his physical appearance to his relationship with his notorious consort Aspasia. Plutarch possessed the histories written in the fourth century BC and later, especially the lost account of Ephorus of Cyme.[2] Plutarch, moreover, could walk through an Athens that still boasted an unspoiled acropolis, where the Periclean constructions of the Parthenon and Propylaia testified eloquently to the greatness of the Athenian statesman's vision.

And yet Plutarch's brief biography, if intriguing, remains deeply unsatisfying, as much for what it does not tell us as for what it does.[3] Perhaps it was not so to the ancients themselves. They were, after all, not inured to the obscene amounts of personal detail and popular media analysis of public figures that moderns take for granted. We inhabit a world in which public figures strive to project a personal biography – indeed, the construction of that very public biography features as a crucial part of their strategy to sell themselves or their works. The personal and biographical attract so much of modern society's interest that we arguably often lose sight of the actual public policies our leaders pursue. It seems we want to feel good about or empathize with the men and women who serve in office or make the music or movies we like. Thus, we want to know as much as possible about their lives, even as some of us realize that the picture presented is hardly real.

A reader of Plutarch's biography might object that the work does provide us with a remarkable number of stories about Pericles' personal life. Some of the tales could easily feature prominently in Yahoo! News or on the front page of today's *People* magazine. Since I make no effort in this book to deal with the scandalous aspects of Pericles' personal life except insofar as they could affect his political life, some readers may find Plutarch's attention to this aspect of Pericles' biography more satisfactory than the present volume. However that may be, where Plutarch fails by the standards of modern biography, one could argue, is that he provides the reader with no sustained analysis of Pericles' family, education, or environment in order to help us understand how the Athenian became the man he did. Plutarch also fails to provide any clear thesis about Pericles' thought and political ideals, beyond his view that the Athenian acted as a demagogue early in his career and a statesman after he had achieved predominance. What, in short, did Pericles want for Athens? What drove him to take the actions and support the policies he did? Finally, did Pericles succeed?[4]

The last question had an obvious answer for Plutarch and others of his day and thus had no need to be asked. Any leader who had left such an indelible mark on his world had surely been a success. Plutarch's admiration of the Athenian – if not unbounded – could hardly be more clear. It remains striking, therefore, that some Athenians in the years just before and after Pericles' death had a different view. Here again, Plutarch fails us. For while he admits that Pericles had serious detractors and opponents while he

was alive, the biographer does little to show us what happened to Pericles' reputation after his death.

Here we must call on Thucydides, whose defense of Pericles (2.65) clearly aims to counter attacks on the leader's reputation in the years just after Athens had lost the great Peloponnesian War against Sparta (404 BC). In those days – two and a half decades after Pericles' death in 429 – and in subsequent years, some Athenian elites had grave questions about Pericles and his policies. He had, after all, driven Athens into the war that led to the loss of its empire and the bankrupting of its public treasuries, not to mention the deaths of thousands of Athenians and other Greeks. Plutarch, writing around AD 100 and thus looking back on Pericles' life after more than five centuries, gives us little sense of the way in which Pericles' reputation had fallen and then recovered. By the time of Plutarch, Pericles and fifth-century Athens – the greatest Athenian and the period of Athens' greatest achievements – had both already achieved an exalted if not mythic status. By Plutarch's day, no one expected the Athenians ever to produce another Sophocles, Pheidias, or Socrates. If, by that time, the "Age of Pericles" had not yet crystallized into a moment when literature, architecture, philosophy, and empire had reached unprecedented and unequaled heights in classical Greece, it was still true that no Greek in AD 100 living under Roman domination could write about once independent, formidable, and remarkable Periclean Athens – and its foremost leader – with anything other than a degree of respect.[5]

In the almost two millennia since Plutarch, views of Pericles and Periclean Athens have not remained perfectly constant. The Italian humanists of the Renaissance, for example, generally found Athenian democracy unstable and problematic but occasionally found a way to praise Pericles.[6] The American Founders saw in Periclean Athens a dangerous tendency to mob rule that made the idea of direct democracy anathema.[7] And yet by the late twentieth century Pericles and his Athens had attained (or regained) something like heroic status. Today's English-speaking scholars have tended to see Pericles and his Athens as potential models for the contemporary world.[8] And while a few have begun to question the popular view that Thucydides presents Pericles as a kind of hero, even they have usually claimed to be speaking only of "Thucydides' Pericles," a character in a literary work rather than the historical figure. Pericles himself – the real man – it seems, remains virtually untouchable, an ostensible and perpetual

champion of modern democratic and cultural values like freedom and diversity.[9]

This book attempts to recapture the critical spirit of those against whom Thucydides so vehemently argued (even as he often provided ammunition for future attacks). Pericles, as we shall see, did inspire the Athenians to make war on the Spartans and numerous other Greek states. Pericles intensified the long-standing Athenian tradition of aggression and acted as an amplifier for the Athenian people's desire to dominate other Greeks. In domestic affairs, Pericles introduced the idea that the Athenians should pay themselves from public moneys (including moneys collected from their allies under compulsion) for public services like sitting on juries, a policy that had a debilitating effect on Athenian (and later) democratic practice and ideology. Pericles pursued an ideal of moral and public excellence (*arete*) that placed the greatest emphasis on an individual's service to the state, while he held up the acquisition of future glory for that state as the citizenry's highest possible goal. To secure these ends, Pericles played on the Athenians' native discomfort with their heritage and emphasized their supposedly unique identity when compared with other Greeks. Though sprung from the ancient Athenian aristocracy, Pericles sacrificed certain privileges of his class in order to raise Athens (and himself) to new heights. Athens' greatness, he saw, depended on a relatively underutilized resource: the common Athenian populace. By empowering and ennobling Athens itself, Pericles believed all Athenians could partake in the old heroic ideal of *kleos* – a fame that included the renown the future grants to the past.[10] To achieve this goal, no sacrifice was too great, and the deaths of thousands of Athenians and other Greeks constituted a price Pericles was all too ready to pay in order to achieve his vision of securing Athens' place in history.

And yet this is not the whole picture. Thucydides rightly argued that Pericles far surpassed those who followed him in terms of his integrity and wisdom. Pericles, at least by the 430s BC, was no mere demagogue, manipulating the populace and playing on the electorate's hopes and fears in order to empower himself. Pericles' political honesty – his willingness to oppose the Athenian people and tell them what they did not wish to hear – marked him as a true leader in a sense modern democratic governments rarely experience. These qualities gave Pericles a kind of moral authority

that none of his successors and few democratic politicians in any period have possessed. They made Pericles, in short, the greatest and the most dangerous leader in Athenian history.

Analysis of Pericles' career requires that we pay special attention to the contemporary evidence provided by Thucydides and by Athenian inscriptions. The public records, laws, and decrees the Athenians inscribed on stone in the fifth century provide a marvelous if often problematic and controversial source of information about Periclean Athens. A recent (and long overdue) reassessment of the orthodox dating of these documents has removed many of them from the Periclean age and moved them to later periods.[11] Nonetheless, our inscriptional record of this period remains relatively strong, often informing us about the environment in which Pericles operated even if telling us little about Pericles himself. Indeed, to evaluate Pericles' political career we must rely heavily on the literary record.[12]

Thucydides remains our most important witness for any attempt to reconstruct the historical Pericles, and the three speeches he puts into the mouth of the statesman in his great history of the war between Athens and Sparta arguably provide invaluable evidence for the thought and policies of Pericles. His report of the Funeral Oration that Pericles delivered after the first year of the Peloponnesian War contains the most influential description of Athenian culture and government to survive antiquity. Scholars have long debated whether this speech (and Pericles' other orations in Thucydides) should be treated as mainly the words and ideas of Pericles or the words and ideas of the historian, with the latter view now clearly holding sway. Thucydides tells us (1.22.1) that he has made the speakers in his history say "what it seemed to me was required" (*ta deonta*), "while holding as closely as possible to the general sense of what they actually said." The historian thus asserts that he knew the "general sense of what was actually said" for each speech he recounts, while admitting that he has elaborated on those themes by making the speakers say what seemed necessary given their general drift and purpose.[13]

My own view is that the speeches in the history do not reflect Thucydides' own views on any particular subject, but rather reflect what Thucydides believed the speaker could or *should* have said given the demands of the occasion and the general sense of his actual speech. What this means for Pericles' speeches – which were heard by many thousands of

Athenians – is that we should usually, I believe, treat the major themes of the speeches as Periclean and the actual words as Thucydidean. Thucydides has elaborated on the theses of these speeches, adhering to them "as closely as possible" given the situation without having the speaker say types of things he never would have said.[14]

I want to make it clear that I treat these speeches not as verbatim accounts of Pericles' orations but rather as the works of a contemporary of Pericles who had heard the leader speak, knew him personally, and had every reason not to have the Pericles of his history speak in a way that his contemporary readers would recognize as grossly inauthentic.[15] Thucydides, who is at such pains to explain his desire for accuracy (1.22), would not have provided us with a Pericles who was more or less sheer invention. I take it that the things Pericles says in Thucydides are usually the kinds of things Pericles did say, even if Thucydides has put them into his own extremely idiosyncratic language. I do not, therefore, rest my arguments on the *ipsissima verba* ("the very words") of Pericles' speeches in Thucydides, but I do maintain that ideas and themes from those speeches that comport with our knowledge of Athenian history and Pericles' biography, and especially those ideas that appear repeatedly in the speeches Thucydides puts in Pericles' mouth, should be treated as "Periclean." The issue is not, therefore, "Did Pericles actually say that?" The issue is whether Pericles could have said something like that and whether his contemporaries would have recognized Periclean ideas and themes in the speeches they read in Thucydides.[16]

I must emphasize that my interpretation of Pericles' career and policies does not depend on the historical content of his speeches in Thucydides. The actual history of Athens over the 20 to 30 years that Pericles acted as the city's leading statesman amply demonstrates that the belligerent and nationalistic picture painted in Pericles' speeches in Thucydides reflects an accurate picture of mid-fifth-century Athenians. Indeed, if the Pericles in Thucydides had spoken in a less bellicose fashion we would be more than justified in questioning whether Thucydides had given us a relatively authentic picture of the statesman. As it stands, the events of Athenian history support the conclusion that Thucydides' Pericles is closer to his actual historical model than to a fictional character.[17]

I make no apology for using Pericles' speeches in Thucydides in an attempt to flesh out our understanding of Periclean thought, goals, and

policies. Thucydides surely included these speeches precisely to allow us better to grasp the figure of Pericles as well as the historical situation he faced. And while I do not claim Thucydides has given us the very words of Pericles, I remain quite comfortable with the conclusion that he has not attempted to mislead us or to make *his* Pericles into someone different from the man Athenians encountered in the fifth century. Historians have been unapologetically using Pericles' words about democracy in Thucydides to characterize Athenian government and society for many decades. It is time to use the speeches – treated carefully and informed by our other evidence – to help us characterize Pericles himself.

The reader will not always like the Pericles he encounters in these pages. One is, indeed, hard-pressed to find evidence of likability in our evidence about the Athenian statesman. Pericles resembled nothing so little as the "man of the people" image we moderns so often claim to seek in democratic leaders (and yet we will see that his relationship with the Athenian people was remarkably strong). Pericles also had troubled relations with his own family and friends. Scandalous rumors circulated about his private life. He was not a particularly handsome man, or at least had some unusual physical features that could be considered unattractive. And yet all these factors make his political success all the more remarkable. Pericles did not try to whip up the crowd after the fashion of the later demagogue Cleon or offer an attractive physical appearance and seductive manner as did his young relation and ward Alcibiades. What Pericles offered, I will suggest, was a vision of Athenian power and greatness that resonated very deeply with the Athenian people even as he showed how that power could benefit them in very tangible terms. Pericles offered the Athenians political, economic, and emotional satisfaction. This required only that the Athenians accept the need for almost constant warfare. Pericles' ability to convince the Athenians to make this kind of exchange tells us a great deal about fifth-century Athens and the belligerent environment in which democracy first arose.

Pericles embodied and fostered the links between Athens' democratic government and the Athenians' drive to control other Greeks. The greatest lesson of Pericles' biography may be that a people who prize their own freedom may happily vote – and then march or sail out – to take it away from others.

ONE

To Be an Athenian

The unique profile and history of Athens spawned Pericles and provided him with the raw material and tools with which he constructed his career. While sharing many characteristics with their Greek contemporaries, the fifth-century Athenians possessed unusual traits and traditions that would ultimately play considerable roles in Athens' rise to political and cultural hegemony.

The Athenians' heroic-age heritage was weak and suspect compared with the traditions of Thebes, Sparta, Argos, and even (by the classical age, relatively backward) Thessaly. The fame of the Athenians' national hero Theseus rested largely on remedial feats that all too often mimicked those of the great Herakles, merely placed Athens on a more equal footing with other important Hellenic states, or transplanted classical Athenian accomplishments (especially democracy) to the heroic past. The Athenians' claim to "autochthony" – the idea that they were Attica's original inhabitants, sprung from the very soil – perhaps bespeaks a recognition of their tenuous connection with the great Hellenic achievements and migrations of the late or just post-heroic age, including the return of the descendants of Herakles and the wanderings of the Ionian Greeks.

Ultimately the Athenians would make much of their claim to have offered organization, protection, and respite to the Ionian Greeks (who were on their way to Asia Minor and the islands). Their putative role as metropolis ("mother city") to these Hellenes came to figure prominently in tyrannic and democratic imperial propaganda. Yet the Ionian connection cut two ways, and the Athenians appear to have been acutely aware of the disadvantages the connection transmitted when it came to their mainland (and often

Dorian) Greek neighbors. The latter saw the Ionian branch of the Greek people as weak, effeminate, and inured to luxury and slavery.

Indeed, while inhabiting the largely Doric (and Aeolic) mainland, the Athenians had much in common with the Ionian islanders to their east. Athens' external ambitions looked to the Aegean long before attempting major conquests on the mainland. The Athenians had already incorporated the nearby island of Salamis by the early sixth century, and not long after this they began a pursuit of interests in the northeastern Aegean and Hellespont that would not end until the age of Alexander. Athens' aggressive foreign policy predated the sixth-century tyranny of the Peisistratids, and the city's attempt to control areas of the Aegean remained largely immune to changes in Athens' government over almost two centuries: aristocratic, tyrannic, democratic, and oligarchic regimes all sought to project Athens' power into the islands and especially into the Hellespont, a trade route crucial for the city's grain supply.

Many Athenians by Pericles' day had come to view the tyranny of the Peisistratids (ca. 546 to 510) as a period of oppression. But a different and much more positive tradition remained alive. Peisistratus and his sons enjoyed a largely successful reign until the murder of Hipparchus, brother of the ruling tyrant Hippias, caused a falling-out with certain aristocratic families. Ultimately the Spartans (and not the Athenian people) overthrew Athens' tyrants, but the tyranny had made Athens a more urban and self-assured polis, weakened entrenched aristocratic power, and provided the demos (common people) with a new view of itself as a political and social force. During the same period, the Athenians had probably begun to exploit their local silver mines, a source of wealth that was without parallel on the Greek mainland and that would provide Athens with a fundamental source of its power in the classical age.

All these factors (and others) combined to provide the Athenians of Pericles' day with a complicated self-image. Moreover, early fifth-century victories allowed the Athenians to make previously unwarranted claims about their military standing. The Athenians ultimately placed much more emphasis on their martial prowess than on their cultural or political advances.

Like all men, Pericles emerged from a particular environment, and the culture, history, and traditions of his city and his family left indelible marks on the statesman's character and career. Yet Pericles also demonstrated a remarkable ability to abstract himself and his contemporaries from their environment – to think beyond the world of fifth-century Athens to