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Alkibiades and the Hermai

Throughout the Peloponnesian War, Athens became a militaristic powerhouse that continued to pride itself on inventing democracy many years ago. To fully comprehend the socio-political climate of the polis during this tumultuous period, it is important that one inspects the *Hermai* incident of 415 BCE. This event of religious vandalism represents a great turning point in the polis' influence on the ancient world. When describing this situation, Thucydides offers a seemingly factual report, but uses the incident to bolster the idea that the citizens were paranoid and divided. He looks to critique—what he believes—a failing democracy that would ultimately collapse because of this division. In contrast, Plutarch deliberately focuses on Alkibiades and his power. He creates this story of him and his enemies, which is dramatized for a Roman audience. Above all, during the Peloponnesian War, Athens entered a demagogic era that had *strategos* (military generals) like Alkibiades hold overwhelming power over the polis. However, the Hermai incident and its consequences were not solely the causation of a few characters. Rather, it was a complex event that involved multiple social classes and various leaders that eventually led to the demise of Athens and its democracy.

The writings of Thucydides are often difficult to dissect. Although he is not as egregious as Herodotus, his interpretations of events are shrouded in a veil of bias, favoring the *aristoi*

(nobility) and the strategos while undermining the demos and system of democracy in Athens. When describing the infamous event before the Sicilian expedition, he first contextualizes it with the reactions of the people, labeling it as a “bad omen” and a “part of a revolutionary conspiracy to overthrow the demos”. With this, Thucydides aims to undermine and highlight the lack of confidence the Athenians have in their power structure. He describes the demos as being on edge and “in a constant state of fear and suspicion”. He paints this picture of a fragile democracy that is traumatized from past tyranny. The mutilations of Hermai and the Eleusinian Mysteries serve as cornerstones for the arguments against Alkibiades. He was in charge of the expedition and a popular leader among the general populace. Worried that someone like him, who is described as “lawless and undemocratic” would take the opportunity to seize Athens for his own, the demos decide to latch onto any evidence that would hint towards the establishment of an oligarchy or tyranny. These descriptions made by Thucydides purport the idea that the democracy of Athens has its flaws, and the unease of the demos shows that they are not confident in the system they once paraded around.

Plutarch believed that Thucydides and his writings could come off as rather boring. He was more inclined to create a narrative that centered around Alkibiades and his enemies. However, his approach to describing the event around a small group of characters allows us to better understand the grip that demagogues like Alkibiades have on the polis. According to Plutarch, the famously handsome strategos feared the consequences of democracy, reinforcing the notion that he was a proponent of an oligarchic government. This is shown through his descriptions of Alkibiades’ realization that “all who were about to embark for Sicily were on his side”. Given that the soldiers and sailors were of the thetic class, Plutarch has readers inclined to

believe that the assembly deliberately waited for possible supporters of Alkibiades to leave the polis before his trial. He continues this notion that Athens is suspicious, and they want to keep its democracy intact by labeling any wrongdoing as a possible tyrannical overthrow. Furthermore, Plutarch mentions how the “democratic leader” Androkles had various men speak out and accuse Alkibiades for both the mutilation and for parodying of Eleusis. He reinforces this image of Alkibiades as a tyrant and the harbinger of an anti-democratic Athens. Plutarch’s stories were dramatic, but previous texts support the idea that the political landscape of Athens was in a volatile state. Looking back on the ostracism of Hyperbolos, the Athenians had previously seen the immense influence that the wealthy (such as Nikias and Alkibiades) had on the polis. Andokides further reinforces this when he criticizes the character of Alkibiades writing, “he then gave particular proof of his power; for he summoned his friends, and snatching his wife carried her off from the agora”. It is evident that Plutarch’s focus on a few rather than many allows us to further comprehend the influence that the aristocracy still has in this democracy. Thucydides was more inclined to use the reactions and resentment of the demos in his critiques of this failing empire. However, both historians purport that the Athenians became untrustworthy, because they believed Alkibiades would try to manipulate them into establishing an oligarchy. Plutarch emphasizes the characters that come into play, but his end results are not far off from those of Thucydides. There is not a binary answer to who caused the failure of the Sicilian expedition and Athenian democracy. The complex conclusions can only be drawn after visiting multiple sources and melding them to create one larger picture.

In summary, the Hermai incident serves as the starting point for the downfall of Athenian influence in ancient Greece. While Plutarch centralizes the events around Alkibiades, his

dramatization allows us to better understand the overwhelming power that statesmen and strategos have over the polis, despite Athenian pride in democracy. Coupling that with the writings from Thucydides that are critical of the Athenian power structure, we can conclude that the demagogic era had Athens move back toward a society heavily influenced by the wealthy. Thus, the demos became paranoid that their power would come to an end; they had seen someone the likes of charismatic Alkibiades (Peisistratos) once before. While Plutarch highlighted the anti-democratic power of few over many, Thucydides described the fear and anger that the Athenians felt during this time. Above all, the flaws of Athenian democracy were exacerbated by this incident, and it highlighted how structures of tyranny continued to haunt the ancient world.