



The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives

Plutarch , Ian Scott-Kilvert (Translator/Introduction)

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Plutarch's *Greek Lives* can be seen as a summing up of the classical Greek age and its great writers.

The nine *Lives* translated here and arranged in chronological order follow the history of Athens from the legendary times of Theseus, the city's founder, to its defeat at the hands of Lysander, its Spartan conqueror. Included in this selection are the biographies of Themistocles, a brilliant but heavy-handed naval commander, Aristides 'the Just' and Pericles, who was responsible for the buildings on the Acropolis. Plutarch's real interest in these men is not in the greatness of their victories or achievements but in their moral strengths, and for him responsibility for the eventual fall of Athens lay with the weakness and ambition of its great men.

Varying in historical accuracy, these accounts are nevertheless rich in anecdote, and Plutarch's skill as a social historian and his fascination with personal idiosyncracies make them of timeless interest.

The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives Details

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From Reader Review The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives for online ebook

Mallory says

I'm glad I read it because as a historian it's important for expanding my frame of reference. But, man, was it painful to get through.

John Conquest says

BORN TO DIE
WORLD IS A FUCK
Kill Em All 410 BC
I am perioeci man
410,757,864,530 DEAD SPARTANS

Nathan Jerpe says

I consulted this Penguin Edition for notes and introductions, for the biographies themselves I used Arthur Hugh Clough's edition of the Dryden translation. It has a 19th c. English ring to it, which suits Plutarch nicely. My copy is a single-volume Britannica Great Books edition printed in the 1950s, two columns to a page, and contains all fifty extant lives -

FOUR STARS:

Theseus
Themistocles
Alcibiades

THREE STARS:

Solon
Aristides
Cimon
Pericles
Nicias
Lysander

The notes and introductions for this Penguin Edition are helpful but scant. For some reason the Penguins covering the Romans contain much more research.

Eric says

Interesting but hard to get through.

Gregg Wingo says

The nature of the polis has been floating around my head of late. The clear decline of American democracy has been chronicled from the Classical perspective by the late Senator Robert C. Byrd in his "The Senate of the Roman Republic: Addresses on the History of Roman Constitutionalism". It is a look at the failure of republicanism from a distance of 2000 years. This excerpt from Plutarch's "Parallel Lives" covers the rise and fall of not just the Athenian Empire but Athenian democracy from Plutarch's perspective of 400 years.

Covering the lives, intrigues, and machinations of eight Athenians and one Spartan it follows the heights of honor and patriotism, and the lows of avarice and traitorous behavior. As one reads the work one realize that the capacity of brilliance and darkness is a commonality of the human experience. While the Ancients are alien to us, they are also still lurking within for better and worst. As Plutarch envisioned in his original historiography these individuals are meant to provide a moral lesson on the nature of the body politic.

It is as applicable today as it was 2000 years ago. As we regard the antics and corruption of our democracy at all levels we see the same repugnant behaviors and greed acting as a disintegrating process including wars, recessions, trading and military alliances, and irrational partisanship. Hopefully, through the positive insights we can find a way to redeem our politics and our nation.

Tony says

Plutarch. THE RISE AND FALL OF ATHENS. (This ed. 1967). ***. This edition was published by The Folio Society and selects the biographies of eight Greeks to illustrate the political history of the Athenians. Plutarch (46 – 120 AD) was born in Boetotia to a cultured and wealthy family. Although he spent most of his later life there, he studied in Athens and travelled in Italy and Egypt, building up a circle of cultivated and influential friends. From existing records, only about half of his work survives. These fall into two classes: the historical works and those falling into the class of Opera Moralia. To the former class belong his "Parallel Lives," the work by which he is best known. These are biographies of 23 Greek and 23 Roman lives that are grouped together, or, better, paired off, to show the similarities between the two in each group. The lives concentrate on the moral character of each subject rather than the political events of the times. Because of this focus, a minor incident or anecdote will acquire a greater importance in the narrative than it would in a standard history or biography. The eight lives selected for this work include: Solon, Themistocles, Aristides, Cimon, Pericles, Nicias, Alcibiades, and Lysander. There is an excellent introduction by Ian Scott-Kilvert, along with copious footnotes and appendices to provide some grounding in the historical times. Unless you are a classical scholar, much of these biographies will pass over your head. What is interesting, however, is that Plutarch tries to have his subjects speak in words they were said to have uttered through other works that came down to his time. For example, Solon said..."we are told, that men abide by their agreements when neither side has anything to gain by violating them..." He goes on to tell us that: "Another law of Solon's which is highly praised is the one forbidding anybody from speaking ill of the dead, for piety requires us to regard the dead as sacred, justice to refrain from attacking the absent, and political wisdom to prevent the perpetuation of hatreds." You also learn tidbits of history, such as "the export of figs (from Athens) was prohibited in ancient times, and that those who exposed or informed against such exporters were called sycophants, or 'fig-declarers.'" Little asides like this perk up your interest as you read about political in-fighting and the constant wars being fought by Athens with her neighbors. This is not an easy read, but I would recommend your dipping into it when you have a chance, especially the lives of Solon and Pericles.

Zardoz says

A good companion read to Thucydides's Peloponnesian War. Not as detailed, but each life can be read almost like a collection of short stories.

Very striking similarities between Athens and America. Showing how democracies can be empires that overreach.

Perry Whitford says

Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* is one of the great works of antiquity, in which the 1st century AD writer juxtaposed biographies of celebrated Greek and Roman statesmen, comparing and contrasting them by their various actions and legacies.

I particularly love everything Athenian, the birthplace of democracy, so as you can imagine this highly selective editing and translation of Plutarch's work, summarized perfectly in the title, is like ambrosia to me.

For the first life Plutarch had to delve back into the time of myth and sift the various conflicting stories to try and tell a coherent tale of the city's founder, Theseus.

It's pretty obvious that he was a figure created by the aspiring Athenian's in need of a hero. In his early career *'he was following Heracles' example'* rather too closely, whereas the minotaur legend clearly speaks of how Athens overcame Crete on the way to independence.

Next up is Solon, famed for his wisdom, who *'stood apart from the injustices of the time'* and became the trusted lawmaker of Athens.

His laws established, he left his homeland for ten years, traveling in Egypt, Crete and Lydia, where he famously met and exasperated King Croesus by failing to recognise him as a happy man despite his great wealth.

Returning to Athens, he failed to prevent the rise of the tyrant Pisistratus, despite seeing through his deceitful public image as a friend to the poor. But he was revered until his death, declaring that *'I never cease to learn as I grow old'*.

'No man has ever been more ambitious than Themistocles'. Quite a claim if you consider that a biography of Alcibiades is not far off, yet it may be true of the Athenians' victorious general at Salamis, a man of the people and yet very much for himself.

After the Greeks defeated the Persians at Marathon, he didn't celebrate. Instead *'he prepared, as it were, to anoint himself ... and come forward as the champion of Greece: in face he sensed the danger while it was still far away, and put his city into training to meet it.'*

Do you know who he reminds me of?

That pessimistic yet accurate vision, as well as so many other things, such as his work with the navy, his love of the good things in life, his sharp tongue, and his belief that the people only called for him when they had their backs up against it, reminds me of a similarly pugnacious politician from the best part of two and a half thousand years in the future - one Winston Churchill.

Themistocles' great rival, Aristides, could not have been more different in character and behaviour. The hero of Platea was modest and uninterested in fame or fortune. His abiding principle was justice, which he always tried to serve, even at his own expense.

Plutarch clearly approved of Aristides' principles, moralising that *'a life that is spent in the midst of power and great fortune and authority still needs justice to make it divine, for injustice renders it merely brutish.'* Of course the Athenians still found a way to ostracize him, though he was recalled when the Persians attacked. Plutarch probably gives Aristides the most blameless of all the biographies here, though the editor points out that a few of the anecdotes of his admirable actions could not possibly have been true.

Cimon was Athens' general of empire, harrying the Persians out of Ionia and establishing colonies along the way. Though he admired the Spartans to a degree which often called his loyalty into question, it was his wise leadership that effectively relegated Sparta below Athens in terms of influence amongst the combined Greek army.

He was the champion of the aristocracy, but also generous and charitable to an extravagant degree (though how he acquired his money was often questioned). Says Plutarch, *'in a sense, he restored to human experience the fabled conditions of the golden age of Cronos, when men owned everything in common.'*

At its zenith in the middle of the 5th century BC the primary politician of Athens was indisputably Pericles, whose building projects and rousing oratory brought both himself and his city lasting acclaim.

Plutarch is amazed by both the splendor of the public works he commissioned, how each *'possessed a beauty that seemed venerable the moment it was born'*, and by the speed with which they will built, all in Pericles' time.

He was called 'the Olympian' by his peers in mockery of his lofty manor, but Plutarch concludes that he was worth the title without irony. But even he was less than perfect, antagonizing their allies by the tributes he demanded and very much leading the Athenians towards the confrontation with Sparta that would prove their undoing.

Nicias was the obvious successor to Pericles for the aristocratic element in Athens. Things started well for him with victory after victory, at the same time his natural timidity preventing him from over stretching his ambitions.

Obsessed with divination, things ended in disaster for him when he led a sizable war party to Sicily against his better judgement, making numerous mistakes there leading to a crushing defeat and his own execution.

No single figure better personified all that was great and misguided in the Athenian spirit than Alcibiades. Feted from an early age due to his beauty and prowess, he was besieged with lovers yet scorned them all in favor of Socrates, a wise choice.

Yet he was hubristically vain, refusing to play the flute because it ruined his features, defaming the sacred Mysteries of Eleusis in a drunken revel, turning traitor and assisting both the Spartans and the Persians when he lost favor at home.

But the Athenians' fortunes in the Peloponnesian War seemed to wax and wane with his own. Despite betraying his countrymen at every turn they recalled him again and again because nobody could galvanize the populace as he could.

Inevitably he came to a bad end.

Lysander was not even an Athenian, was in fact a hated Spartan, but it's fitting that the narrative arc ends with his biography as he was the man who more than any other brought to an end the Athenian ascendancy in Greece.

Born poor and no richer by his death, he none the less enriched his city. His victories decimated the Athenian navy and when the city surrendered he demolished their democracy. He was harsh and unstinting on prisoners.

He was criticized at home for his deceitful tactics, which were considered not in keeping with the descendants of Hercules, to which he replied *"Where the lion's skin will not reach, we must patch it out with the fox's."*

He subdued Athens, but he made new enemies for Sparta and died upon the field. Within a generation Sparta too would be ruined.

This is a great place to start if you have an interest in either Plutarch or Athens of the Golden Age. The translation is highly readable, the footnotes few but informative and the choice of biographies spot on.

As for Plutarch, despite deciding not to include dramatists or philosophers for his Lives, he calls on both sets frequently for quotations, as well as providing a great insight into how the oracles and ceremonies of the Greeks shaped and symbolized them.

Essential.

Jesse says

Athens had a direct democracy in the 5th century, and, apropos of such radicalism, frequently exiled people considered too powerful or too rich. Aristides was one such man, who, when the voting for the exile took place, helped a blind man fill out his vote against him. Cimon allowed anyone to plunder his fields and have dinner with him, and Pericles spoke to the populace in terms of a philosopher, namely, Anaxagoras. Reaffirm your faith in democracy, and get to know the sort of people relative political equality can cultivate (I'm sure the slaves packed powerful personalities too, mind you).

Genni says

This edition of Plutarch serves as something of a Plutarch reader. It takes some of the Grecian biographies from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and titles them *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, tracing the chronological order from the earliest part-mythological founding of Athens by Theseus to Lysander, the Spartan general who subdued Athens. It may serve as a good introduction to Plutarch's writing, but I left feeling I should have just committed to the full work. I think that separating the biographies into Greek and Roman misses a major point of what Plutarch was trying to accomplish. Maybe some day I will have time to read all of them....

David says

The story of Athens as told through its great leaders, from Theseus to Lysander.

Paul Haspel says

The rise and fall of the Athenian empire, in the estimation of the biographer Plutarch, had everything to do with the good and bad decisions made by nine powerful Greeks. And the biographies of Theseus, Solon, Themistocles, Aristides, Cimon, Pericles, Nicias, Alcibiades, and Lysander that are brought together for this Penguin Books volume tell quite effectively the story of how Athens first gained great-power status, and then lost it.

A word, first, about who Plutarch was and how he came to write his biographies, as the way these nine biographies are presented to us by translator and editor Ian Scott-Kilvert is not the way Plutarch's original readers would have encountered them. When Plutarch, a Greco-Roman historian of the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., first set down his histories, he did so in the form of *Parallel Lives* – 23 pairings of an eminent Greek

and a comparably famous Roman, with two biographical essays followed by an evaluative comparison of both individuals. Thus, Alexander and Caesar are compared and contrasted as conquering generals, Demosthenes and Cicero as noted orators, and so on. In practice, many modern scholars presenting Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* to a contemporary audience have reorganized the biographies around a particular period of history or thematic framework, as Scott-Kilvert does here.

Taken in those terms, *The Rise and Fall of Athens* works well as a concise history of Athens. Theseus, the legendary founder of Athens, is of course more a mythological than an historical figure, and therefore it is no surprise to find Plutarch grappling with a variety of accounts of Theseus' life and deeds, and considering his sources, as when he looks at the variety of unfavourable Athenian depictions of King Minos of Crete and states "how dangerous it is to incur the hatred of a city which is the mistress of eloquence and poetry" (p. 23).

Plutarch is on firmer historical ground, and seems more comfortable, when considering the career of Solon, the Athenian lawgiver who worked to reform the once-Draconian legal code of Athens. It is Plutarch who gives us the famous story of the fabulously wealthy king Croesus of Lydia hosting Solon and asking, "Am I not the most fortunate of men?" Solon's cautious reply: "The future bears down upon each one of us with all the hazards of the unknown, and we can only count a man happy when the gods have granted him good fortune to the end" (p. 71). Croesus dismisses Solon as a fool – until he is defeated in battle by Cyrus of Persia, and placed on a funeral pyre to be burned alive, at which point he understands the wisdom of Solon's words and cries out the lawgiver's name.

Themistocles, the general and politician who advocated a strong Athenian navy, and who led that navy to victory over the Persians at the decisive battle of Salamis in 480 B.C., was, in Plutarch's reading, as controversial as he was ambitious. In pushing naval tactics on a city-state whose people had always preferred a straight fight on land, "He turned [the Athenians], to use Plato's phrase, from steadfast hoplites into sea-tossed mariners, and he earned for himself the charge that he had deprived the Athenians of the spear and the shield and degraded them to the rowing bench and the oar" (p. 81).

Plutarch's tone becomes more unambiguously laudatory when he examines the life and career of the statesman Aristides, whose concern for the welfare of Athens' ordinary people earned him the epithet "Aristides the Just." In his praise for Aristides, Plutarch offers an insight to the values that no doubt motivated the writing of the *Parallel Lives* generally – his beliefs regarding what truly makes a life great:

"Of all Aristides' virtues it was his justice which most impressed itself on the masses...For this reason, although he was poor and had no standing but that of a popular leader, he won that most royal and godlike title of The Just. That is an epithet which was never sought after by kings or tyrants: some of them delighted in being styled The Besieger of Cities, the Thunderbolt, or the Conqueror, and others The Eagle or The Hawk, but all of them, apparently, preferred a renown which was founded on power or violence rather than on virtue. And yet the divine nature, with which these men strive to be associated and to resemble, is believed to be distinguished by three superior attributes, immortality, power, and virtue, and of these the noblest and most truly divine is virtue." (pp. 115-16)

Cimon (510-450 B.C.), like Solon and Aristides, is praised by Plutarch for his moderation; Plutarch places Cimon, a successful general who defeated Persian forces in a number of crucial battles, among those "moderate statesmen who succeeded better than any others in giving their countries a breathing space in which to recover from the violence of party strife, though each of them set up trophies and won resounding victories" (p. 143).

Pericles (495-429 B.C.), the wise and eloquent leader who provided the Athenians with steady leadership during the early years of the Peloponnesian War, receives comparably high praise from Plutarch: "Pericles deserves our admiration...not only for the sense of justice and the serene temper that he preserved amid the

many crises and intense personal hatreds which surrounded him, but also for his greatness of spirit....[A] character so gracious and a life so pure and incorrupt in the exercise of sovereign power might well be called Olympian” (p. 205).

But things turned much less Olympian for the Athenians with the next leaders whose lives and careers are analyzed by Plutarch. Nicias emerges as a deeply religious and reverent man whose career was dogged by ill-fortune; when the Athenians, hoping to break the years-old Peloponnesian stalemate by opening a new front, made the questionable decision to invade the Sicilian city-state of Syracuse, Nicias was given the command of an expedition that he had strongly opposed. Accordingly, Nicias had the unhappy distinction of presiding over Athens’ most decisive and ignominious defeat. “What perhaps moved [Nicias’] men the most,” Plutarch writes, “was not merely the sight of his distress, but the memory of the speeches and the warnings whereby he had done everything in his power to dissuade the Athenian people from the whole venture, and as they recalled these, they felt that his misfortunes were the least deserved of all” (p. 240).

When it comes to Alcibiades, I am struck by this particular passage of characterization: “Alcibiades possessed, we are told, one special gift which surpassed all the rest and served to attach men to him, namely that he could assimilate and adapt himself to the pursuits and the manner of living of others and submit himself to more startling transformations than a chameleon. Even the chameleon cannot take on the colour of white, but Alcibiades was able to associate with good and bad alike, and never found a characteristic which he could not imitate or practise” (p. 267). It is an apt descriptor, as the wily Alcibiades was quite the political chameleon; at various times during the Peloponnesian War, he aligned himself with (a) his Athenian homeland, (b) the Spartan enemy, and (c) agents of the Persian Empire that was watching the long war while hoping to advance its own interests in the region. With leadership like that of Alcibiades, the original “triple agent,” is it any wonder that, by his time, Athens was on the decline and headed toward defeat?

And the last of the *Nine Greek Lives* included in this volume is the only one that is not an Athenian life: Lysander, the Spartan admiral who finally forced the Athenians to surrender in 404 B.C., ending the then 27-year-old Peloponnesian War. Plutarch acknowledges Lysander’s importance as the Spartan leader who was in at the kill, but one senses the disapproval with which Plutarch writes that Lysander “did not believe truth in itself to be any better than falsehood, but valued each of them according to the needs of the moment. He laughed at those who insisted that the descendants of Heracles should not stoop to trickery in warfare and remarked, ‘Where the lion’s skin will not reach, we must patch it out with the fox’” (p. 293).

Scott-Kilvert’s introduction and notes are informative, and his translation captures the workmanlike if stylistically uninspiring quality of Plutarch’s prose style. For Plutarch, as for Aristotle before him, character is action and action is character: a person is what a person does. For Plutarch, an individual life is to be revered to the extent to which a person pursued virtue; too many leaders waste their time pursuing immortality, “to which no flesh can attain”, or power, “which remains for the most part in the hands of fortune”, when they could be working to achieve virtue, “the only divine excellence of which we are capable” (p. 116).

The Rise and Fall of Athens is helpful as history, and is even more useful in terms of its own insights regarding how Plutarch, and the Greco-Roman world of which he was a part, judged human action and evaluated its consequences.

Dawid ?azi?ski says

This subset of Plutarch “Lives” deals with Athens and her most prominent statesmen and generals. You will

find here all that can be expected of Plutarch: colourful characters, anecdotes and occasional digressions. To those beginning their journey with this great ancient biographer, keep in mind that the sources the author relied on had not always been the most reliable. He also had a propensity for extolling his protagonists. While vigorously praising their strengths he frequently misportrayed their blatant malefaction as mere expedience. Still, Plutarch remains a great read and a perfect supplement to any history study, breathing life into otherwise meaningless names and dates. Penguin edition, which I used and recommend, has useful footnotes to help readers keep track of time and alert them of any glaring historical discrepancies.

Blake says

I know that Plutarch set up his Lives in pairs, Roman and Greek, and that the symbiosis is set that way to reveal more about each life, etc. However, it was great to read some of his biographies set up contextually. Both this and Penguin's 'On Sparta' are excellently presented, and really allow one to delve into Plutarch's artistic and historical merits, which are many. Not that one shouldn't read them in the traditional pairs... it's just that I have nothing but praise for Penguin's Plutarch as introductions to a rad classical historian.

Jesus says

Countering Thucydides in a few places, this work may be useful to readers who learn by example.

Sections 3 & 6 from this site <http://adsabs.harvard.edu/full/2005JL...> help explain this anecdote from Lysander:

...there were certain who affirmed that the stars of Castor and Pollux were seen on each side of Lysander's ship, when he first set sail from the haven toward his enemies, shining about the helm; and some say the stone which fell down was a sign of this slaughter. For a stone of a great size did fall, according to the common belief, from heaven, at Aegos Potami, which is shown to this day, and held in great esteem by the Chersonites.

And it is said that Anaxagoras foretold that the occurrence of a slip or shake among the bodies fixed in the heavens, dislodging any one of them, would be followed by the fall of the whole of them. For no one of the stars is now in the same place in which it was at first; for they, being, according to him, like stones and heavy, shine by the refraction of the upper air round about them, and are carried along forcibly by the violence of the circular motion by which they were originally withheld from falling, when cold and heavy bodies were first separated from the general universe. But there is a more probable opinion than this maintained by some, who say that falling stars are no effluxes, nor discharges of ethereal fire, extinguished almost at the instant of its igniting by the lower air; neither are they the sudden combustion and blazing up of a quantity of the lower air let loose in great abundance into the upper region; but the heavenly bodies, by a relaxation of the force of their circular movement, are carried by an irregular course, not in general into the inhabited part of the earth, but for the most part into the wide sea; which is the cause of their not being observed.

Daimachus, in his treatise on Religion, supports the view of Anaxagoras. He says, that before this stone fell, for seventy-five days continually, there was seen in the heavens a vast fiery body, as if it had been a flaming cloud, not resting, but carried about with several intricate and broken movements, so that the flaming pieces, which were broken off by this commotion and running about, were carried in all directions, shining as falling stars do. But when it afterwards came down to the ground in this district, and the people of the place

recovering from their fear and astonishment came together, there was no fire to be seen, neither any sign of it; there was only a stone lying, big indeed, but which bore no proportion, to speak of, to that fiery compass.

It is manifest that Daimachus needs to have indulgent hearers; but if what he says be true, he altogether proves those to be wrong who say that a rock broken off from the top of some mountain, by winds and tempests, and caught and whirled about like a top, as soon as this impetus began to slacken and cease, was precipitated and fell to the ground. Unless, indeed, we choose to say that the phenomenon which was observed for so many days was really fire, and that the change in the atmosphere ensuing on its extinction was attended with violent winds and agitations, which might be the cause of this stone being carried off. The exacter treatment of this subject belongs, however, to a different kind of writing.
