

7.3. Plutarch / Pericles and Cimon

Though Athens was a democracy, the citizens still looked to prominent generals for guidance. In the years after the Persian Wars, Cimon was much admired for his campaigns against the Persians. Opinion turned against Cimon, and Pericles gained popular support by helping bring about Cimon's exile under a democratic process known as *ostracism*.

Plut. *Per.* 7-10. Source: Plutarch. *Parallel Lives*, vol. 3. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press. 1923.

7) As a young man, Pericles was exceedingly reluctant to face the people, since it was thought that in feature he was like the tyrant Peisistratus; and when men well on in years remarked also that his voice was sweet, and his tongue glib and speedy in discourse, they were struck with amazement at the resemblance. Besides, since he was rich, of brilliant lineage, and had friends of the greatest influence, he feared that he might be ostracized, and so at first had naught to do with politics, but devoted himself rather to a military career, where he was brave and enterprising. However, when Aristides was dead,¹ and Themistocles in banishment,² and Cimon was kept by his campaigns for the most part abroad, then at last Pericles decided to devote himself to the people, espousing the cause of the poor and the many instead of the few and the rich, contrary to his own nature, which was anything but popular. But he feared, as it would seem, to encounter a suspicion of aiming at tyranny, and when he saw that Cimon was very aristocratic in his sympathies, and was held in extraordinary affection by the party of the "Good and True," he began to court the favour of the multitude, thereby securing safety for himself, and power to wield against his rival.

Straightway, too, he made a different ordering in his way of life. On one street only in the city was he to be seen walking,—the one which took him to the market-place and the council-chamber. Invitations to dinner, and all such friendly and familiar intercourse, he declined, so that during the long period that elapsed while he was at the head of the state, there was not a single friend to whose house he went to dine, except that when his kinsman Eurypotemus gave a wedding feast, he attended until the libations were made,³ and then straightway rose up and departed. Conviviality is prone to break down and overpower the haughtiest reserve, and in familiar intercourse the dignity which is assumed for appearance's sake is very hard to maintain. Whereas, in the case of true and genuine virtue, "fairest appears what most appears," and nothing in the conduct of good men is so admirable in the eyes of strangers, as their daily walk and conversation is in the eyes of those who share it.

And so it was that Pericles, seeking to avoid the satiety which springs from continual intercourse, made his approaches to the people by intervals, as it were, not speaking on every question, nor addressing the people on every occasion, but offering himself like the Salaminian trireme, as Critolaüs says, for great

emergencies. The rest of his policy he carried out by commissioning his friends and other public speakers. One of these, as they say, was Ephialtes, who broke down the power of the Council of the Areiopagus, and so poured out for the citizens, to use the words of Plato, too much "undiluted freedom," by which the people was rendered unruly, just like a horse, and, as the comic poets say, "no longer had the patience to obey the rein, but nabbed Euboea and trampled on the islands."

8) Moreover, by way of providing himself with a style of discourse which was adapted, like a musical instrument, to his mode of life and the grandeur of his sentiments, he often made an auxiliary string of Anaxagoras, subtly mingling, as it were, with his rhetoric the dye of natural science. It was from natural science, as the divine Plato says, that he "acquired his loftiness of thought and perfectness of execution, in addition to his natural gifts," and by applying what he learned to the art of speaking, he far excelled all other speakers. It was thus, they say, that he got his surname; though some suppose it was from the structures with which he adorned the city, and others from his ability as a statesman and a general, that he was called Olympian. It is not at all unlikely that his reputation was the result of the blending in him of many high qualities. But the comic poets of that day, who let fly, both in earnest and in jest, many shafts of speech against him, make it plain that he got this surname chiefly because of his diction; they spoke of him as "thundering" and "lightening" when he harangued his audience, and as "wielding a dread thunderbolt in his tongue."

There is on record also a certain saying of Thucydides, the son of Melesias, touching the clever persuasiveness of Pericles, a saying uttered in jest. Thucydides belonged to the party of the "Good and True," and was for a very long time a political antagonist of Pericles. When Archidamus, the king of the Lacedaemonians, asked him whether he or Pericles was the better wrestler, he replied: "Whenever I throw him in wrestling, he disputes the fall, and carries his point, and persuades the very men who saw him fall."

The truth is, however, that even Pericles, with all his gifts, was cautious in his discourse, so that whenever he came forward to speak he prayed the gods that there might not escape him unawares a single word which was unsuited to the matter under discussion. In writing he left nothing behind him except the decrees which he proposed, and only a few in all of his memorable sayings are preserved, as, for instance, his urging the removal of Aegina as the "eye-sore of the Piraeus," and his declaring that he "already beheld war swooping down upon them from Peloponnesus." Once also when Sophocles, who was general with him on a certain naval expedition,⁴ praised a lovely boy, he said: "It is not his hands only, Sophocles, that a general must keep clean, but his eyes as well." Again, Stesimbrotus says that, in his funeral oration over those who had fallen in the Samian War, he declared that they had become immortal, like the gods; "the gods themselves," he said, "we cannot see, but

¹ Soon after 468 BCE.

² After 472 BCE.

³ That is, until the wine for the symposium was brought in, and drinking began.

⁴ Against Samos, 440-439 BCE.

from the honours which they receive, and the blessings which they bestow, we conclude that they are immortal." So it was, he said, with those who had given their lives for their country.

9) Thucydides describes the administration of Pericles as rather aristocratic,—“in name a democracy, but in fact a government by the greatest citizen.” But many others say that the people was first led on by him into allotments of public lands, festival-grants, and distributions of fees for public services, thereby falling into bad habits, and becoming luxurious and wanton under the influence of his public measures, instead of frugal and self-sufficing. Let us therefore examine in detail the reason for this change in him.

In the beginning, as has been said, pitted as he was against the reputation of Cimon, he tried to ingratiate himself with the people. And since he was the inferior in wealth and property, by means of which Cimon would win over the poor,—furnishing a dinner every day to any Athenian who wanted it, bestowing raiment on the elderly men, and removing the fences from his estates that whosoever wished might pluck the fruit,—Pericles, outdone in popular arts of this sort, had recourse to the distribution of the people’s own wealth. This was on the advice of Damonides, of the Deme Oa, as Aristotle has stated. And soon, what with festival-grants and jurors’ wages and other fees and largesses, he bribed the multitude by the wholesale, and used them in opposition to the Council of the Areiopagus. Of this body he himself was not a member, since the lot had not made him either First Archon, or Archon Thesmothete, or King Archon, or Archon Polemarch. These offices were in ancient times filled by lot, and through them those who properly acquitted themselves were promoted into the Areiopagus. For this reason all the more did Pericles, strong in the affections of the people, lead a successful party against the Council of the Areiopagus. Not only was the Council robbed of most of its jurisdiction by Ephialtes, but Cimon also, on the charge of being a lover of Sparta and a hater of the people, was ostracized,—a man who yielded to none in wealth and lineage, who had won most glorious victories over the Barbarians, and had filled the city full of money and spoils, as is written in his Life. Such was the power of Pericles among the people.

10) Now ostracism involved legally a period of ten years’ banishment. But in the meanwhile¹ the Lacedaemonians invaded the district of Tanagra with a great army, and the Athenians straightway sallied out against them. So Cimon came back from his banishment and stationed himself with his tribesmen in line of battle, and determined by his deeds to rid himself of the charge of too great love for Sparta, in that he shared the perils of his fellow-citizens. But the friends of Pericles banded together and drove him from the ranks, on the ground that he was under sentence of banishment. For which reason, it is thought, Pericles fought most sturdily in that battle, and was the most conspicuous of all in exposing himself to danger. And there fell in this battle all the friends of Cimon to a man, whom Pericles had accused with him of too great love for Sparta. Wherefore sore repentance fell upon the Athenians, and a longing desire for Cimon, defeated as they were on the confines of Attica, and expecting as they did a grievous war with the coming of spring. So then Pericles, perceiving this, hesitated

not to gratify the desires of the multitude, but wrote with his own hand the decree which recalled the man. Whereupon Cimon came back from banishment and made peace² between the cities. For the Lacedaemonians were as kindly disposed towards him as they were full of hatred towards Pericles and the other popular leaders.

Some, however, say that the decree for the restoration of Cimon was not drafted by Pericles until a secret compact had been made between them, through the agency of Elpinice, Cimon’s sister, to the effect that Cimon should sail out with a fleet of two hundred ships and have command in foreign parts, attempting to subdue the territory of the King, while Pericles should have supreme power in the city. And it was thought that before this, too, Elpinice had rendered Pericles more lenient towards Cimon, when he stood his trial on the capital charge of treason. Pericles was at that time one of the committee of prosecution appointed by the people, and on Elpinice’s coming to him and supplicating him, said to her with a smile, “Elpinice, thou art an old woman, thou art an old woman, to attempt such tasks.” However, he made only one speech, by way of formally executing his commission, and in the end did the least harm to Cimon of all his accusers.

How, then, can one put trust in Idomeneus, who accuses Pericles of assassinating the popular leader Ephialtes, though he was his friend and a partner in his political program, out of mere jealousy and envy of his reputation? These charges he has raked up from some source or other and hurled them, as if so much venom, against one who was perhaps not in all points irreproachable, but who had a noble disposition and an ambitious spirit, wherein no such savage and bestial feelings can have their abode. As for Ephialtes, who was a terror to the oligarchs and inexorable in exacting accounts from those who wronged the people, and in prosecuting them, his enemies laid plots against him, and had him slain secretly by Aristodicus of Tanagra, as Aristotle says. As for Cimon, he died on his campaign in Cyprus.

¹ 457 BCE.

² 450 BCE.