

THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES AND
POLITICAL TIMING IN THE *LIFE OF ALCIBIADES*

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1. *Alcibiades and the Scandals of 415 BC*

Among modern scholars and readers of Plato, Socrates' trial is usually considered to be the most important case of religious impiety (*asebeia*) and, according to the sources, it was also the most widely discussed, already in antiquity. Nevertheless, that perspective is mainly due to Plato's influence and to his success in presenting his master as a kind of martyr of philosophical thinking. Conversely, for the average Athenian of the end of the fifth century, the serious events that occurred in the days before the expedition against Sicily must have had a much greater impact, once they inspired a feeling of collective fear, which would be converted into an intense "witch hunt", i.e. into a restless search for information which might lead to the presumptive authors of such provocative actions. The importance of these events, whose effects would be felt in Athenian society for years, is well known, wherefore this paper will not aim at analysing the subject in detail once again, except for evoking the historical context that underlined the involvement of Alcibiades—the most emblematic politician of the time—in the scandals of that moment.¹ The scandals comprised a double crime of *asebeia*: the mutilation of the Herms and the parody of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Nonetheless, only the first was intended to have public visibility, since the evidence points to the idea that the parody of the Mysteries was designed primarily to remain secret and in the private sphere. Probably it was the anxiety raised by the need of finding the culprits for the

¹ For a more detailed analysis of this problem, see D.F. Leão, "Matéria religiosa: processos de impiedade (*asebeia*)", in D.F. Leão et al. (eds), *Nomos. Direito e sociedade na Antiguidade Clássica / Derecho y sociedad en la Antigüedad Clásica* (Coimbra—Madrid 2004) 201–226. The main arguments presented there are partially recovered in this paper. I want to thank Ana Balula and Manuel Tröster, who read an earlier version of this paper and whose comments helped me to improve it, especially at the linguistic level.

mutilation of the Herms that led to the disclosure of other *asebemata*. On the other hand, Alcibiades' connection to the Mysteries' case not only potentiated the global dimension of the scandal, as it also made him suspicious of being involved in the disregard for the Herms, even though he was probably innocent regarding the second accusation. Finally, because the crimes occurred just before the expedition to Sicily, the consequence was that the political "timing" would also hurt Alcibiades' defence.

2. *The Mutilation of the Herms*

In its most elaborate representation, the statues that depicted Hermes' image consisted of a quadrangular column, adorned with a big phallus in the centre and with an image of the god's head on top. It is over these pillars that a group of unknown people would exert their violence, an act that, according to Thucydides (6.27.1–2), provoked astonishment and indignation among their contemporaries. The first clues indicated that the sacrilege had been committed in an orchestrated way, since the transgression, although with a wide range, had occurred in one single night. Thucydides mentions that the pillars were mutilated only in the face, but Aristophanes underlines that the phallus was also attacked.² Thucydides also relates that it affected "most" (οἱ πλείστοι) of the Herms; yet, Andocides (1.62) says that all of them were mutilated, with the exception of the one next to the house of his own father, the one that was meant for him. It is not unlikely, though, that the orator's words are somehow exaggerated, to facilitate Andocides' defence, since he had been the only one that did not follow the instructions apparently agreed to by his former accomplices. Consequently, Thucydides' version seems to be the most accurate, and this must be the reason why Plutarch also uses his presentation of the episode as guideline, in the biography of Alcibiades:³

ἡ μέντοι τῶν Ἑρμῶν περικοπή, μιᾶ νυκτὶ τῶν πλείστων ἀκρωτηριασθέντων τὰ πρόσωπα, πολλοὺς καὶ τῶν περιφρονούντων τὰ τοιαῦτα διετάραξεν.⁴

² Ar., *Lys.* 1093–1094. In this passage, the playwright uses the expression *Hermokopidai* ("mutilators of the Herms") to name the people responsible for the aggression against the statues of the god.

³ However, Plutarch seems to endorse Andocides' declarations in a different context (*Nic.* 13.3). For more details on this, see D. MacDowell, *Andokides. On the Mysteries* (Oxford 1962) 103; Leão, "Matéria religiosa", 220–224.

⁴ Plu., *Alc.* 18.6.

Then there was the mutilation of the herms, when in the course of a single night every herm had its facial extremities broken off; this disturbed a great many people, even if they were normally inclined to be indifferent to such things.⁵

ἐν γὰρ ὀλίγοις πάνυ τῶν ἐπιφανῶν μόνος σχεδὸν ἀκέραιος ἔμεινε· διὸ καὶ νῦν Ἄνδοκίδου καλεῖται, καὶ πάντες οὕτως ὀνομάζουσι, τῆς ἐπιγραφῆς ἀντιμαρτυρούσης.⁶

[The tall herm ...] was almost the only one of the few really conspicuous statues to remain unharmed. That is why to this day it is known as the Herm of Andocides, which is the name everyone gives it, despite the contradictory evidence of the inscription it bears.

The nature of the impious act under discussion is quite clear, wherefore the mutilation of the Hermes statues represented a direct expression of disrespect to the god, whose wrath could thereby affect the whole society. The Athenians took this act of insolence very seriously, and because of that a quick and vigorous reaction was called for, as can be seen in the aforementioned testimony of Thucydides (6.27.1–2). Actually, the special mechanism of *menysis* (“providing information”) was activated, giving any person (*ho boulomenos*) the right to supply information that might lead to the identification and arrest of the authors of the crime.⁷ Thucydides even suggests that the authorities aimed at encouraging denunciation on the part of possible accomplices, since the decree guaranteed *adeia* (“impunity”) to the informants. The *adeia* should not prevail in any circumstances, but only if the information proved to be true; otherwise, its author would be punished with death.⁸ This accountability, required by the *menysis*, is related to the gravity of the crime that motivated it, once, as the historian clarifies, the one indicted of *asebeia* faced the risk of the death penalty. Thucydides also mentions additional measures that are corroborated by the remaining sources.

⁵ All the English translations are taken from R. Waterfield, *Plutarch Greek Lives* (Oxford 1998).

⁶ Plu., *Alc.* 21.3.

⁷ The most comprehensive source concerning the enactment of a *menysis* procedure is precisely Andocides' speech *On the Mysteries*. Demosthenes (24.11), Dinarchus (1.95) and Plutarch (*Per.* 31.2) provide other instances of *menysis*, even if not adding anything new from a legal perspective. On the characteristics of this mechanism, see D. MacDowell, *The Law in Classical Athens* (London 1978) 181–183.

⁸ As can be deduced from And. 1.20, who had to live with the consequences of having denounced not only the accomplices, but also his own father. The justification for this decision (as well as the denial of having denounced the father) occupies a good deal of his defence, by the time when he presented the speech *On the Mysteries* (see 1.48–60). See also Plu., *Alc.* 21.4–6.

In fact, in order to guarantee that the guilty would be handed over to justice, a team of investigators (*zetetai*) was created and a reward was established for those that might provide information that would lead to the imprisonment of those responsible for the sacrilege.⁹ As a consequence of this effort to get valid information, the name of Alcibiades became associated not only with this crime, but also with another one involving the Eleusinian Mysteries, as Plutarch himself states:

Ἐν δὲ τούτῳ δούλους τινὰς καὶ μετοίκους προήγαγεν Ἀνδροκλῆς ὁ δημαγωγός, ἄλλων τ' ἀγαλμάτων περικοπὰς καὶ μυστηρίων παρ' οἶνον ἀπομιμήσεις τοῦ Ἀλκιβιάδου καὶ τῶν φίλων κατηγοροῦντας. [...] ταῦτα γὰρ ἐν τῇ εἰσαγγελίᾳ γέγραπται Θεσσαλοῦ τοῦ Κίμωνος, εἰσαγγείλαντος Ἀλκιβιάδην ἀσεβεῖν περὶ τῶ θεῶ.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the popular leader Androcles produced some slaves and resident aliens who accused Alcibiades and a group of his friends of mutilating other statues, and of parodying the Mysteries when drunk. [...] These were the charges contained in the impeachment brought by Thessalus the son of Cimon, which accused Alcibiades of impiety towards the two goddesses.

This association between both sacrileges can be found in the sources as well as in the discussions of modern scholars. Nevertheless, there are enough indications suggesting that, at the beginning, these events were independent and even that, after a first moment of political exploitation, they must have resulted in two separate trials. In fact, the elements provided by the informants revealed that there had been other mutilations of statues and, most important, they unveiled a second scandal, which dealt with the profane celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries in private houses. Alcibiades was directly implicated in this second sacrilege and his involvement turned out to be a determining factor in strengthening the general public indignation towards the crimes of *asebeia*.

Bearing in mind these assumptions, it is now time to discuss the possible motivations behind the behavior of the *Hermokopidai*. The informants disclosed former mutilations, thus showing that this act of vandalism was not an isolated instance of this kind of disorder. Moreover, Thucydides (6.28.1: μετὰ παιδιᾶς καὶ οἴνου) as well as Plutarch (*Alc.* 19.1: παρ' οἴνου) are both inclined to accept an explanation that has nothing to do with the possibility of a political conspiracy: they believe that the mutilation of the Herms was just a bad-taste joke, motivated by a night of wine and excesses. Although

⁹ See And. 1.14; 1.27; 1.40.

¹⁰ Plu., *Alc.* 19.1–3.

simple, this justification is quite admissible. In fact, even nowadays it is not unusual to detect the effects of the same kind of night disorder in cities marked by a concentration of students, as happens e.g. at the University of Coimbra. Throughout the year (especially during the academic celebrations), there are small acts of vandalism against statues and pillars on the streets—curiously the preferred “victim” of the bohemians. It would not be correct to interpret these acts as a special way of protesting and, although they may carry some degree of disturbance and of material losses, they represent nothing more than episodic manifestations of euphoria. Nonetheless, one should also recognize that the correct interpretation of similar acts was not always this linear in the past. For instance, during the students’ struggles, by the end of the 1960s, analogous demonstrations of vandalism could and should be seen as means of expressing political dissent and defying the existing regime.

In sum: everything depends on the context of the events, and it is true that the Athenian context around the year 415 BC was quite singular and particularly sensitive. In the first place, the mutilation of statues could be considered a crime of *asebeia* and, as such, be punished with the death penalty; second, the huge dimension and public impact of the sacrilege raised the suspicion that it might have been the result of a premeditated plan; finally, it occurred just before the beginning of an important military enterprise, for which it represented a very bad augury.¹¹ This way, although the explanation given by Thucydides and Plutarch may be accurate, the political context surrounding these scandals, as well as their huge public visibility, provided credibility to the idea that a conspiracy to overthrow democracy was under way. Alcibiades’ political enemies then wisely explored this theory, which seemed quite convincing because he was well known by his unconventional behaviour, marked by some tendency towards tyrannical attitudes, often disregarding legal boundaries (*paranomia*).¹²

¹¹ On the relation between ominous signs and the Sicilian expedition, see C.A. Powell “Religion and the Sicilian Expedition”, *Historia* 28 (1979) 15–31.

¹² See Th. 6.28.1–2; Plu., *Alc.* 16.2; 16.7; 20.4–5. Because the word *nomos* embraces both the idea of constitutional law and of traditional religious regulations, *paranomia* may denote a transgression falling within the realm of those two fields. On this see K. Dover, “Excursus: the Herms and the Mysteries”, in A.W. Gomme—A. Andrewes & K.J. Dover: *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, IV: Books V25–VII (Oxford 1970) 264–288 at 285.

3. *Parodic Representation of the Eleusinian Mysteries*

When discussing the problem of the mutilation of the Herms, a first mention was already made of the other great scandal of 415: the parodic celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries, a sacrilege in which Alcibiades was directly involved. As seen in the last section, his rival politicians tried to create the idea, in public opinion, that he was implicated in both scandals, although Thucydides was already aware of the fact that the reality was probably quite different (6.53.1; 6.61.1). Accordingly, the evidence suggests that two independent processes were started and that Alcibiades was called back from Sicily to answer only in the one deriving from the Mysteries issue.¹³ Conversely, the tendency to associate an exceptional character with deeds equally spectacular led already to the circumstance that, even in the fourth century, Demosthenes would maintain that Alcibiades “had mutilated the Herms” (21.147), and confusion around this topic made its way into the historiographical tradition, as is clearly illustrated by Diodorus (13.2.3–4; 13.5.1).¹⁴

Even before considering the possible motivations for this second sacrilege, one should start by pointing out the existence of some fundamental differences between the two cases. The mutilation of the Herms was a crime of a public nature, probably premeditated and, because it was perpetrated at once in only one night, it had much greater impact and visibility. By contrast, the impious celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries occurred in the private domain and, in principle, was not meant to get out of the restrained circle of the persons who had participated in that parodic representation. On the other hand, there are clear hints indicating that those acts were repeated several times and by separate groups of participants, as can be deduced from the fact that the information (*menysis*) on the scandals was provided by different persons and with reference to distinct circumstances.¹⁵ Consequently, it is legitimate to infer from these official denunciations that the sacrilege had been perpetrated four or five times, that

¹³ See F. Graf, “Der Mysterienprozeß”, in L. Burckhardt & J. von Ungern-Sternberg (eds), *Große Prozesse im antiken Athen* (Munich 2000) 114–127 at 118–120.

¹⁴ For a presentation of the personalities involved either in both sacrileges or in only one of them (as well as of the people who denounced their involvement), see Dover, “Excursus”, 276–280.

¹⁵ For more details on the question, see O. Murray, “The Affair of the Mysteries: Democracy and the Drinking Group”, in O. Murray (ed.), *Symptica. A Symposium on the Symposium* (Oxford 1990) 149–161.

Alcibiades had taken part in two or three of these incidents, and even that he played a leading role in the parody. Even without assuming that other occurrences remained unrevealed, it seems evident that the disrespect for religious practices enjoyed a certain popularity in symposiac contexts and that Alcibiades was not the only one to be blamed for this kind of behaviour.

Despite the seriousness of the crime, the political enemies of Alcibiades thought that judging an Athenian general with such a great popularity, in the moment when the fleet was about to leave for Sicily, could seriously diminish the chances of getting a condemnation. They therefore argued that the *kairos* was favourable to the expedition, which should not be delayed by legal procedures (Plutarch, *Alc.* 19.5). This spirit of abnegation, apparently observed in the interest of the city, was nothing more than a political ambush destined to undermine Alcibiades' credibility and to prepare a stronger attack when he would be absent from Athens and without the support of the soldiers. Alcibiades understood well the manoeuvring, but he was not able to convince the Athenians and had to embark with the others, despite the fact that he was leaving behind a distasteful track of accusations.¹⁶ The political "timing" was therefore doubly unfavourable to him: the accusation struck him when his popularity was at its highest point, but instead of helping him, this circumstance was playing against his interests, not only because it increased the dimension of the scandal but also because the urgency of the expedition prevented him from staying in Athens, defending himself at a time when he had good chances of prevailing against his accusers.

The sacrilege under analysis has been described by using terms like "celebration", "representation" and "parody"—words that cannot be properly considered as synonyms. The first applies primarily to the religious domain and can be applied, with legitimacy, to define the cult held in Eleusis; only the last one carries manifestly negative connotations, while "representation" can be understood, in a certain way, as being placed in the middle of the other two. This terminological oscillation has been voluntary until now, in the sense that the exact nature of this act of *asebeia* is not known with certainty.¹⁷ In fact, when mentioning the nature of the sacrilege perpetrated by Alcibiades and other persons, the sources do not refer to it as

¹⁶ Plu., *Alc.* 19.7.

¹⁷ For a detailed analysis of the whole ritual concerning the way the Eleusinian Mysteries were celebrated, see G.E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton 1961); D. Lauenstein, *Die Mysterien von Eleusis* (Stuttgart 1987).

implying specifically a parody, because the verbs used to define the transgression primarily evoke notions of “making” (*poiein, gignesthai*) or “representing” (*apomimeisthai*).¹⁸ Accordingly, there seem to be enough reasons to think that it was not an inversion of the ritual, but a sacrilegious “celebration”. Its profane character derives from the circumstances that ceremonies typical of the cult were carried out in an inappropriate context (in private houses and not in the sanctuary), by the wrong people (common citizens and not by the official priests of the cult), and by transgressing the secrecy that should be observed in order to protect the Mysteries (among those attending the frivolous celebration, there were non-initiates).¹⁹ The way Plutarch mentions the terms of the accusation is quite significant, in what concerns the religious implications of the misdeed:²⁰

Θεσσαλὸς Κίμωνος Λακιάδης Ἀλκιβιάδην Κλεινίου Σκαμβωνίδην εἰσήγγειλεν ἀδικεῖν περὶ τῷ θεῷ, [τὴν Δήμητραν καὶ τὴν Κόρην,] ἀπομιμούμενον τὰ μυστήρια καὶ δεικνύοντα τοῖς αὐτοῦ ἐταίροις ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τῆ ἑαυτοῦ, ἔχοντα στολὴν οἴανπερ ὁ ἱεροφάντης ἔχων δεικνύει τὰ ἱερά, καὶ ὀνομάζοντα αὐτὸν μὲν ἱεροφάντην, Πουλυτίωνα δὲ δαδοῦχον, κήρυκα δὲ Θεόδωρον Φηγαῖα, τοὺς δ' ἄλλους ἐταίρους μύστας προσαγορεύοντα καὶ ἐπόπτας παρὰ τὰ νόμιμα καὶ τὰ καθεστηκότα ὑπὸ τ' Εὐμολπιδῶν καὶ Κηρύκων καὶ τῶν ἱερέων τῶν ἐξ Ἐλευσίνος.²¹

Thessalus the son of Cimon, of the deme Laciadae, charges Alcibiades the son of Cleinias, of the deme Scambonidae, of crimes against the two goddesses, in that he did parody the Mysteries and make them the subject of a show put on for friends of his in his house, while dressed in garments resembling those the High Priest wears when he shows the sacred objects, and calling himself the High Priest, Poulytion the Torch-bearer, Theodorus of the deme Phegaea the Herald, and the rest of his friends who were there Initiates and Watchers, contrary to the laws and institutions of the Eumolpidae, the Heralds, and the priests of Eleusis.

The terms of the accusation show that this crime of religious impiety (*asebeia*) derived from the performance of a ceremony designed to duplicate the most important moment of the initiation into the Eleusinian Myster-

¹⁸ See, for example, And. 1.12; 1.16–17; [Lysias], 6.51; Isocr. 16.6; Plu., *Alc.* 19.1.

¹⁹ As may be deduced from the defence of Andocides (1.12; 1.28; 1.29), during the legal procedure, special precautions were taken in order to prevent non-initiates from attending the trial. See Murray, “The Affair of the Mysteries”, 155–156; Graf, “Der Mysterienprozeß”, 124–125; Leão, “Matéria religiosa”, 220–224.

²⁰ Alcibiades was first object of an *eisangelia* by Pithonicus (see And. 1.14); however, taking into consideration that the Athenians agreed on postponing the judgment until he would come back from Sicily, it would be necessary to start by then a new procedure (probably the charge now brought by Thessalus). See Murray “The Affair of the Mysteries”, 154 n. 17.

²¹ Plu., *Alc.* 22.4.

ies, but without respecting either the appropriate context and the binding discretion, or the necessary presence of the persons officially habilitated to carry out the ritual. By doing so, they acted in clear contravention of the traditional laws and practices established by the entities responsible for the cult.

It is, now, time to discuss the possible motivations that were behind this religious sacrilege. It has already been pointed out that the Athenians established by then a connection between this impious act and the mutilation of the Herms, and also that they related both sacrileges to a plan to overthrow the democratic regime. As mentioned before, it is unlikely that this was the real motivation. In order to reach this conclusion, it is enough to consider the situation of Alcibiades, probably the personality involved in the episode with a higher public profile. By the time when the scandals became known, he was the most popular public figure of the moment, and the expedition to Sicily represented, principally, the visible expression of his extraordinary capacity to lead the multitude. Therefore, he would not benefit from such a putative plan of overthrowing democracy. It is very plausible, though, that Thucydides (6.28) was right when he underlined the political exploitation of the situation by the enemies of the statesman and also when he connected those events to a manifestation of *hybris*, which, in this context, may be interpreted as “irreverence” and “provocation”, in a certain way typical of the lifestyle of the aristocratic youth, dangerously expanded to the point of touching the margins of illegality. The coincidence of these excesses with a delicate period of Athenian history and with the visibility of other careless actions, had a strong impact on public opinion, which led to the inquiries and to the legal processes originated by them.

4. *The Return of Alcibiades to the Athenian Political Scene*

The analysis of the scandals of 415 shows that a crime of *asebeia* of great dimension demanded from the community a strong and efficient reaction, because, otherwise, the community as a whole would face the risk of having to expiate a misdeed that only some had committed. The political use of the sacrileges, in particular as soon as Alcibiades' involvement was unveiled, and the great impact on the morale of the population, help to explain, at least in part, the improvidence or even excess that would characterise the way the democratic regime dealt with the problem.

Actually, by agreeing to embark on the expedition to Sicily, and by condemning then its principal promoter, the popular sovereignty committed

successive mistakes, which would strongly undermine the credibility of its institutions. The *ekklesia*, besides not having listened to Nicias' objections, would elect him, against his own will, as one of the generals in charge of the command of the expedition; on the other hand, the *demos* was at first enthusiastic about Alcibiades' proposals, and then withdrew its support and took him out of Sicily, depriving the fleet of the sole general that could guide the soldiers to victory and endowing the enemies with a precious counsellor who would help the Spartans to occupy the fortification of Decelia, in Attic territory, only a few miles away from Athens.²² Finally, when good sense should have advised to abandon the expedition, the *demos* chose to send reinforcements, thus inflating the clamorous disaster of 413.

Some years after these events, which were largely provoked by Alcibiades' impetuous spirit, he would manage to have an influential return to Athenian politics, taking advantage of the great military successes accomplished by him, which contrasted with the difficult situation that Athens was then facing. Alcibiades was, therefore, able enough to choose the right "timing" for his return. In fact, the Athenians welcomed him with true enthusiasm and spared no efforts in order to give him back the status he had before leaving: they returned him his properties and the Eumolpidae and Kerykes also lifted the curses that had been put on him.²³ It is, however, significant that, at the moment in which his popularity reached a new peak (in 407), he had tried to use his influence to restore the dignity to the Eleusinian cult—as if he was trying to redeem himself from the nefarious consequences of his previous behaviour.

In reality, with the occupation of Decelia by the Spartans and their control of the access by land to Eleusis, the sacred *pompe* was now made by sea, in order to guarantee its safety, but lost in consequence a great part of its brightness. Alcibiades therefore decided to escort it by land, protecting it with his troops and getting an effect that was significantly comparable to the highest moment of the Mysteries. This initiative, which was carried out according to the designs of the priests of the sanctuary, enabled Alcibiades to legitimate, up to a certain point, the role of hierophant that he had

²² Th. 7.19, 27–28.

²³ Plu., *Alc.* 33.3. However, Plutarch (*Alc.* 34.1) himself does not fail to note that the *kairos* that favoured Alcibiades' return to Athens coincided nevertheless with some bad omens, which seemed in some way to prepare the path to the disgrace that would affect him soon thereafter. It was as if Athena herself was refusing to welcome Alcibiades' back to the city (*Alc.* 34.2).

usurped a few years before.²⁴ This diligence could symbolically represent a kind of epilogue to the scandals of the past, thus preparing Alcibiades' final rehabilitation in the eyes of the Athenians, just as Plutarch suggests:

ὥς δὲ ταύτ' ἔγνω καὶ προεῖπεν Εὐμολπίδαις καὶ Κήρυξι, σκοποὺς μὲν ἐπὶ τῶν ἄκρων ἐκάθισε καὶ προδρόμους τινὰς ἄμ' ἡμέρα προεξέπεμψεν, ἱερεῖς δὲ καὶ μύστας καὶ μυσταγωγούς ἀναλαβὼν καὶ τοῖς ὅπλοις περικαλύψας, ἤγεν ἐν κόσμῳ καὶ μετὰ σιωπῆς, θέαμα σεμνὸν καὶ θεοπρεπὲς τὴν στρατηγίαν ἐκείνην ἐπιδεικνύμενος, ὑπὸ τῶν μὴ φθονούντων ἱεροφαντίαν καὶ μυσταγωγίαν προσαγορευομένην.²⁵

Once he had decided to go ahead, he told the Eumolpidae and the Heralds of his plans. At dawn on the day of the procession, he posted lookouts in the hills and sent out an advance guard. Then he mustered the priests, the initiates, and their sponsors, provided them with a protective screen of armed men, and led them out in a calm, silent procession. On this occasion he made the post of military commander which he held such an awesome and majestic spectacle that he was described, by those who did not begrudge him his success, as a high priest and a sponsor of initiates, as much as a military commander.

Alcibiades' return to Athens, as well as that of many other men that had left with him, gave rise to huge expectations. To the emblematic decision of having him escort the *pompe* to Eleusis, other diligences were added, such as the elimination of the exile penalty against him (the stele with the condemnation was even thrown into the sea). As a corollary to all this, Alcibiades was entrusted with the responsibility of conducting the war. Still in the summer of 407, he would leave Athens, heading about a hundred ships, but the campaign did not meet the expected success—precisely because expectations were too high and because the aristocracy and the *demos* did not share the same political goals regarding the former exiled. Alcibiades' careful withdrawal to Thrace, to the bases that he had secured during his stay at the Hellespont, represents a clear sign that he felt that his position in Athens was fragile.²⁶ A remark made in Aristophanes' *Frogs* illustrates very well the mistrust and the contradictory feelings that this charismatic character inspired in his fellow citizens: he was someone “for whom [the city] longs,

²⁴ This was pointed before by S. Verdegem, “On the Road again. Alcibiades' Restoration of the Eleusinian *pompe* in Plu., *Alc.* 34.3–7”, in A. Pérez Jiménez & F. Casadesús Bordoy (eds), *Estudios sobre Plutarco: misticismo y religiones místicas en la obra de Plutarco* (Madrid 2001) 451–459.

²⁵ Plu., *Alc.* 34.6.

²⁶ See A. Andrewes, “The Spartan Resurgence”, in D.M. Lewis—J. Boardman—J.K. Davies & M. Ostwald (eds), *The Cambridge Ancient History, V: The Fifth Century B.C.* (Cambridge 2006 [1992]) 464–498, 487–488 and 490–495.

whom she hates and yet wants back”.²⁷ In antiquity, it was already broadly believed that Alcibiades wasted, because of his extravagance and ambition, what were exceptional rhetoric and military qualities, which could have made of him a true successor of Pericles.²⁸ Instead, his impetuous and polemic character garnered him envy and mistrust, precluding him from triumphing until the end.

To sum up: it is quite significant that Alcibiades’ political *kairos* or “timing” was twice directly connected to the celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries—which thereby underlined two moments of great projection of this figure, although the political and military outcome was, in both cases, adverse to him. In the days before the departure to Sicily, his involvement in the scandals projected even more the impact of those religious crimes that would indelibly stain his promising political career and contribute to the collective disaster of 413. Some years later, after having returned to Athens, the way Alcibiades escorted the *pompe* to Eleusis became once more a visible symbol, as Plutarch vividly points out, of the huge expectations that he had created in the Athenians. Once again, however, they were not fulfilled, thus making him fall, a last time and definitely, in disgrace.

²⁷ Ar., *Ra.* 1425: Ποθεῖ μὲν, ἐχθαίρει δέ, βούλεται δ’ ἔχειν.

²⁸ M.C. Fialho, “Sócrates e a *paideia* falhada de Alcibiades”, in C. Soares—J. Ribeiro Ferreira & M.C. Fialho, *Ética e Paideia em Plutarco* (Coimbra 2008) 31–46, sustains that the benefits of Socratic *paideia* were wasted in Alcibiades.