

ALCIBIADES: VICTIM OR OPPORTUNIST?

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

ACTIVITY

The Athenians in 407 BCE were divided on the topic of Alcibiades. Xenophon records some of the ways that different people interpreted his life.

SOURCE 1

Xenophon, Hellenica 1.4.13-17, trans. adapted from Carleton L. Brownson.

XENOPHON ON ATHENIAN ATTITUDES TO ALCIBIADES

[Some Athenians said that Alcibiades] was the best of the citizens; that he alone was banished without just cause. They said he was banished because he was plotted against by those who had less power than him and spoke less well and ordered their political doings with a view to their own private gain, whereas he was always advancing the interests of the general public, both by his own means and by the power of the state.

At the time in question [the religious scandals just prior to the Sicilian Expedition], they said, he was willing to be brought to trial at once ... his enemies, however, postponed the trial, which was obviously his right, and then, when he was absent, robbed him of his fatherland. Thereafter, in his exile, helpless as a slave and in danger of his life every day, he was forced to pay court to those whom he hated most. And though he saw those who were dearest to him, his fellow-citizens and kinsmen and all Athens, making mistakes, he was debarred by his banishment from the opportunity of helping them.

It was not the way, they said, of men such as him to desire revolution or a change in government; for under the democracy it had been his fortune to be not only superior to his contemporaries but also not inferior to his elders, while his enemies, on the other hand, were held in precisely the same low estimation after his banishment as before; later, however, when they had gained power, they had slain the best men, and since they alone were left, they were accepted by the citizens merely for the reason that better men were not available.

Others, however, said that Alcibiades alone was responsible for their past troubles. And as for the ills which threatened to befall the state, he alone would probably prove to be the prime cause of them.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Based on Source 1 and your own knowledge, answer the following questions:

1. How did the supporters of Alcibiades explain his work with the Spartans and Persians?

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2. Does that explanation fit with other facts that you know about his life and character? Cite evidence supporting your answer.

3. How did the supporters of Alcibiades explain his role in the oligarchic coup of 411 BCE?

4. Does that explanation fit with other facts that you know about his life and character? Cite evidence supporting your answer.
