

Introduction

Pericles is a familiar figure in school textbooks and books on Greece. He enjoys the rare privilege of, on his own, embodying a whole “age,” condensing within his name the peak of Athens’s glory and the flowering of the first democracy in history. We know him from a bust made in the Roman period: the impenetrable face seems to defy the efforts of any historian. What angle can one adopt in order to apprehend this bust without prejudice? How can one suggest a new way of looking at a figure so often scrutinized? Confronting a monument such as this clearly involves a risk: that of wandering for ages over wave after wave of historiography, with the risk of never reaching a safe harbor.

METHOD: A BIOGRAPHICAL INQUIRY CONSIDERED AS AN ODYSSEY

Many a pitfall lies in wait for the rash or unsuspecting historian who launches himself into this adventure. First, he needs to steer between two symmetrical perils: idealization and its opposite, relativism. With the ballast of such a weighty laudatory tradition, it is hard for historians of Antiquity to approach Pericles without eminently positive preconceptions. Since the nineteenth century, this figure has often been regarded as one of the principal creators of the “Greek miracle,” the very embodiment of “an ideal of beauty crystallized in the marble of Pentelicus,” to borrow the famous words of Ernest Renan.¹ Pericles, at the head of a peaceful and harmonious city, appears as the model of a wise and incorruptible leader, just as he is portrayed in the laudatory portrait of him presented by the historian Thucydides.

However, over the past fifty or so years, that enchanted vision has been battered by numerous studies. To be sure, in Pericles’ day Athens was the scene of intense political and cultural fervor: direct democracy was lastingly established and meanwhile the Acropolis was covered with grandiose monuments that, in our eyes, still today proclaim that Greece had reached the peak of its glory. All the same, those undeniable successes cannot mask the

2 Introduction

limitations of the Athenian system. Its democracy had nothing to do with human rights, for it was solely concerned with the rights of citizens. In Pericles' day, the civic community remained an exclusive club from which slaves, metics, and women were all excluded and that, moreover, had no hesitation in tyrannizing its allies within the framework of a maritime empire that became increasingly hegemonic.

So, as the scales abruptly tip the other way, should we now topple the statue of Pericles that tradition has sculpted so carefully? In a switch from miracle to mirage, does the Athenian general (*stratēgos*) deserve to be relegated to a forgotten page of history, as no more than an emblem of a macho, slave-based, and colonialist world—in short, as a prefiguration of the Western imperialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? To do so would be to lurch from Charybdis to Scylla, from unbridled idealization to radical relativism. For in truth, that negative vision is just as reductive as what it replaces, for it judges the ancient city by the yardstick of contemporary realities.

The other reef that a historian must endeavor to avoid in an inquiry such as the present one is anachronism. To condemn Pericles in the name of today's values would be to make a remarkable error in perspective. To reduce the past to the present would be to view one's prey with only one eye, like the *Odyssey's* Cyclops. The whole perspective is distorted . . . We should bear in mind that slavery was not abolished in Europe until the nineteenth century, and, in France, women did not acquire the right to vote until the end of World War II. But should we, on that account, deny the role played by the Second and the Third Republics in the democratization of the French nation? To gauge the break that occurred in the time of Pericles, we should, in truth, compare it, not to the situation today, but to that which then prevailed in the ancient world. A "one-eyed" view definitely tells us far more about today's obsessions than about fifth-century Athens. Such anachronisms can, in a more insidious fashion, often be traced to the analogies to which historians resort in order to evoke the Greek world and its "great men." It is probably totally pointless to regard Pericles as the leader of a political party—as if any such structures existed in Athens—or to interpret the building site on the Acropolis as the fruit of Keynesian policies *avant la lettre*, with Pericles assuming the mantle of Roosevelt.²

Should we, then, simply draw attention to the radical difference of the Greek world, at the risk of boring readers confronted with an Antiquity shrouded in its singularity? If Pericles resembles our contemporary politicians not at all, why continue to take an interest in that figure? Yet is it possible totally to shed the preoccupations of the present day, as we confront

the past? Again, it is all a matter of balance. The present book favors an un-Cyclopean, two-eyed view founded upon a constant “toing and froing” between the present and the past. Provided it is kept under control, anachronism may have pedagogic or even heuristic virtues.³ The narrow path that I intend to follow involves drawing comparisons with the present, without, however, succumbing to the dizzying prospects of analogy.

In this odyssey strewn with pitfalls, there is one last trap that is particularly hard to avoid—namely, personalization, which is an inherent part of all biographical projects. Like the traveler who, enraptured by the siren’s songs to the point of losing all recollection of his family and homeland, a biographer often tends to neglect the social and political environment in which his hero moves. By focusing on a single individual, a historian risks leaving in the shadows the role played by the collectivity. That would, to put it mildly, be paradoxical when one is tackling the first democracy in history. It has to be said that the ancient sources do nothing to dispel such an enchantment. By the end of the fifth century, already Thucydides was declaring that “Athens, though in name a democracy, gradually became in fact a government ruled by its foremost citizen” (2.65).

That famous declaration has for many years been taken quite literally, as if the history of the Athenian democracy and the career of its leader could be superposed one upon the other and completely fused.⁴ But such personalization is eminently challengeable: Thucydides, himself a *stratēgos*, was far from being as “objective” as a certain line of historiography has long maintained. In so far as historians today are more objective than their famous predecessor, it is fair enough to declare “No, Thucydides is not a colleague,”⁵ for the author of *The Peloponnesian War* was heir to a deep-seated tradition that tended to envisage history solely in relation to the great men who, it was supposed, molded it.

So should we tip the scales in the opposite direction and dilute Pericles’ own actions with those of the Athenian people? In order to render to Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to the people that which is theirs, it would be tempting to write a history of Athens animated by an anonymous collective: in short, to write a history not of Pericles, but of 50,000 citizens. A number of studies on the *stratēgos* do have that tendency and, on the pretext of producing a life of Pericles, in fact sketch in a portrait of fifth-century Athens.⁶

All the same, that would be a simplifying, if not simplistic approach to the problem. Rather than choose between the people and a single individual, it would better to consider that very question as the subject to be studied. Even if Pericles did undeniably weigh heavily upon the city’s collective decisions, on the other hand, reading between the lines, the life of the great man

4 Introduction

illuminates the influence that the Athenian *dēmos* exerted upon its leaders. In order to wield the slightest degree of power, the great man was obliged to take popular expectations into account and to align, adjust, and adapt his own behavior in response to them. It is precisely that complex interaction between the crowd and its leaders that deserves to be placed at the heart of the inquiry.

A project centered on Pericles has to walk a tightrope. We should take care not to idealize Athens but, at the same time, not to deny the rupture introduced by the invention of democracy; if possible, we should also avoid misleading parallels without, however, renouncing certain carefully controlled anachronisms, given that history, even when positivist, always feeds on present-day debates; and finally, we should succumb neither to the illusion of the power of one great man nor to that of the all-powerful masses. Rather, we should inquire into the productive tension that developed between the *stratēgos* and the Athenian community. If we accept those three conditions, we have some hope of plumbing the true historical depths of both Pericles and the city, at the same time emphasizing the profound differences as well as the few resemblances that it has with our own contemporary democratic life.

Instead of launching into a new biography of Pericles, we must instead seek to set this great figure in context, reinserting it into the democratic political culture of the fifth century B.C. Pericles, the man, is surrounded by numerous and sometimes contradictory accounts where, reading between the lines, we find embedded⁷ a picture of the social and historical world of classical Athens. Pericles thus seems to operate as a good reagent—to borrow a chemical metaphor—that reveals the multiple aspects of the workings of Athenian democracy.

In order to evaluate the extent and scope of these interactions, we must begin by reconstructing the background against which Pericles' life unfolded. These salient chronological points are necessary in order to seize upon both the disagreements that crystallized around his actions and also the degree to which he left his mark on the destiny of Athens.

CHRONOLOGY: A BRIEF HISTORY OF PERICLES

The city (*polis*), which appeared around the eighth century, constituted a new form of political and territorial organization that rapidly spread throughout the Mediterranean region, from the Black Sea right across to the shores of Andalusia. In the early fifth century, the Greek world was composed of a mosaic of communities that were independent of one another but were linked by their language and their cults. Among them was the city of Athens, which

at that time appears to have been a community undergoing serious changes. At the time of Pericles' birth in 494/3 B.C.,⁸ the city had recently freed itself from the domination of tyrants who, for the past half-century, had held the reins of power. This was an important change. Once the tyranny had collapsed, in 510 B.C., all forms of personal domination remained for many years discredited—a factor that Pericles had to take into account throughout his career. In 508/7 B.C., this upheaval acquired an institutional form: a series of reforms, inspired by Cleisthenes, introduced profound changes into the political organization of the city, laying down the bases of the democracy that then developed in the course of the fifth century.

Pericles was related to Cleisthenes the reformer and so belonged to an extremely prestigious family. However, very little is known of his youth except that he probably spent a few years in exile, as his father Xanthippus was banished by the Athenian people when he was ostracized. This was a procedure that made it possible temporarily to get rid of any member of the elite considered to be too powerful and so prevent any return to tyranny. That sanction of ostracism lapsed in 485, halfway between the two Persian Wars, in which a fraction of the Greek cities stood against the Persian Empire.

Pericles grew up against the background of this struggle, which was, right from the start, an unequal one. The imbalance between the two worlds was flagrant: on the one side, disunited Greek communities of, at the most, a few thousand citizens, on the other side, the immense Achaemenid Empire, the center of gravity of which was positioned in the high Iranian plateaux but whose domination extended from the shores of the Black Sea, in the West, all the way to Afghanistan in the East, encompassing Egypt in the South. The First Persian War, in 490, was no more than a skirmish from which, to general surprise, the Athenian heavy infantry (the hoplites) emerged as victors. But the Second Persian War was a far greater confrontation. By land and by sea, the Persian forces invaded the territory of continental Greece and, in the face of this threat, no more than thirty-one cities—out of the hundreds that then made up Hellas—united to resist the offensive. Although Sparta was nominally in command of the Greek forces, Athens controlled most of the fleet, the construction of which had been financed by the silver extracted from the Laurium mines, in southern Attica.

It was in this dramatic context that Pericles' father, Xanthippus, was recalled by the Athenians who, in the face of danger, momentarily desisted from their quarrelsome divisions. Led by the *stratēgos* Themistocles, the Greek troops destroyed the Persian fleet in September 480 B.C., in the straits of Salamis, not far from Athens. The Athenian oarsmen, recruited from among the poorest citizens (known as "thetes" in the classification established by

6 Introduction

Solon the lawgiver at the start of the sixth century), were responsible for this decisive victory, and this encouraged them to lay claim to a political role in keeping with their military importance. As for Pericles' father, Xanthippus, he lost no time in excelling himself personally in the conflict by leading the Athenian fleet to victory off Cape Mycale, in 479 B.C., in one of the war's last engagements.

At this stage, nothing precise is known about the young Pericles, and it would be another twenty years before he came to the fore of the political scene. Ever since the ostracism of Themistocles, who was accused in 471 B.C. of having treated with the Persian enemy, it had been the *stratēgos* Cimon who exerted the most influence in the city of Athens, thanks to the military prestige that he had acquired within the framework of the Delian League, founded in 478 B.C. After the Second Persian War, Athens had in effect taken the lead in an alliance designed to prevent a return of the Persians to the Aegean. This was centered on the little island of Delos, in the middle of the Cyclades archipelago. Although it began as an alliance freely joined, the league soon developed into an instrument in the service of the Athenians, who exploited the allied cities on the pretext of defending them against the Persian threat. Although the Athenian poorer citizens derived considerable material profit thanks to this advantageous position, their political influence within the city remained limited. To maintain the status quo, Cimon could depend upon the support of the venerable Council of the Areopagus, the seat of the city's most prestigious magistrates: retired archons and members of the traditional Athenian elite.

It was within that roughly sketched-in context that, in 463 B.C., Pericles entered upon the political stage as an opponent of Cimon, laying accusations against him. Once he had kicked this bothersome rival decisively into touch, there followed thirty or so years in the course of which Pericles clearly took over all the major roles in the city, while the democracy gradually became stronger. All the same, his authority at no point went unchallenged. At first he suffered attacks from all those who, led by a relative of Cimon's, Thucydides of Alopeke (who should not be confused with the historian of the same name), opposed the rise to power of the people (the *dēmos*) in the city. Even after the ostracism of this dangerous rival, in 443 B.C., Pericles was assailed by virulent criticisms, as is testified by the attacks launched, in the course of the 430s, against several of those close to him—namely, Anaxagoras the philosopher; Aspasia, Pericles' partner; and the sculptor Phidias.

The mark that Pericles made upon the city was nevertheless undeniable. In the first place, it was he who pressed for the most prestigious magistracies to be open even to the most poverty-stricken of the citizens; next, the

census disqualifications that had been established at the beginning of the sixth century were progressively removed, although access to the post of archon continued to be denied to the thetes. It was also thanks to Pericles' initiative that pay, in the form of *misthoi*, was for the first time introduced as remuneration for taking part in civic life. By the end of the 450s, the juries serving in Athenian courts were reimbursed so that the least wealthy citizens could be in a position to serve in lawsuits without fear of losing a day's wages. From being purely a formality, democracy gradually became a reality. Meanwhile, Pericles initiated a policy of major public works, the building of the Parthenon between 447 and 438 B.C. being its most dazzling manifestation; and, finally, he completed the construction of the Long Walls that linked the town to its port, Piraeus, and also built a war-fleet, to the great advantage of the thetes, who manned the triremes and received a wage for this. In this respect, internal democratization and external imperialism kept in step as they developed.

So it was by no means by chance that Pericles also became a passionate defender of Athenian interests within the Delian League. In, at the latest, 454 B.C., at the height of its influence, the federal treasury was transferred to the Acropolis. Now the Athenians could draw on it as they wished, in order to finance the functioning of their democracy. But among their allies, these developments gave rise to discontent that was all the more fervent given that the Persian peril had been dispelled as early as the 460s. With the swearing of the Peace of Callias in 449 B.C., the situation became critical. This treaty drew a final line under the confrontation that began with the Persian Wars, thereby rendering the maintenance of the Delian League pointless. However, Athens refused to dissolve this alliance, from which it acquired substantial profits; and Pericles had no compunction about putting down the uprisings that followed, in Euboea in 446 B.C. and then a long war against Samos, which lasted from 441 to 439.

Meanwhile, over and above these sporadic revolts, the democratic city had to cope with the growing hostility of Sparta and its Peloponnesian allies. Alarmed by Athens's rise to power, the Spartans headed an alliance designed to counter its influence. After a series of clashes between their respective allies, followed by a brief interlude of calm—the "Thirty Years' Peace" of 446 B.C.—tensions rose again until, in 431 B.C., the conflict erupted openly. This was the start of the Peloponnesian War. It was to last for twenty-seven years and end in the defeat of Athens in 404 B.C. It was Pericles who elaborated the strategy that, during the early years, made it possible for the Athenians to resist the Peloponnesians despite the latter's numerical superiority and their redoubtable infantry. Thanks to their own superiority at sea

8 Introduction

and their impregnable defense system, the Athenians even appeared to be in a good position to triumph. But from 430 onward, a serious “plague” ravaged the city, and one year later Pericles was dead, carried off by this scourge.

Those few milestones trace a complex biographical path, the subtle twists and turns of which it is hard to pinpoint. The fact is that the ancient sources are full of gaps and can seldom convey a clear idea of the role that Pericles played in the evolution of the city of Athens in the mid-fifth century.

SOURCES: THE ANCIENT CONSTRUCTION OF THE FIGURE OF PERICLES

I should first point out that the epigraphical and archaeological sources throw very little light upon the *stratēgos*'s actions. No decree proposed by Pericles has come down to us, and he is mentioned by name in only two inscriptions. The first, engraved more than a century after his death, records that, as *kborēgos*, he financed three tragedies (including *The Persians*) and a satyr play, by Aeschylus. The second, on which Pericles' name was restored by epigraphists, alludes to his involvement in the construction of a fountain in the sanctuary of Eleusis in Attica.⁹

The archaeological evidence leaves the historian equally at a loss. The bust of Pericles that adorns the covers of so many books is merely a marble copy dating from the Roman period. The bronze original, sculpted by Cresilas, a craftsman of Cretan origin, used to stand on the Acropolis, no doubt as a votive offering (a gift to the deity) dedicated after his death by those close to him.¹⁰ Pericles was represented wearing his famous helmet, raised to expose his brow. In this case too, we should remember that it was an idealized image, designed to represent a function—that of *stratēgos*—rather than the individual himself, as a snapshot might do.¹¹

To tackle Pericles' actions, historians are thus reduced to consulting literary sources. These are marked by two major features: first, the essential role that is played by a late text, Plutarch's *Life of Pericles*, which gathers together many pieces of evidence dating from the fifth and fourth centuries, whose relative reliability has been demonstrated by historians;¹² second, the two-edged nature of the documentation on the *stratēgos*, some of which is laudatory, some critical.

Topping the list is Herodotus, an author whose loyalties remain hard to pin down. That is not really surprising. In the course of his work devoted to the Persian Wars and their cause, this historian, a younger contemporary of the *stratēgos*, mentions Pericles only once. Despite the absence of any tangible evidence, many interpreters nevertheless portray Herodotus as an

enthusiastic partisan of the *stratēgos*.¹³ He was living in Athens in the 450–440s and was even thought to have slipped in a discreet laudatory reference to Pericles when he recounted a dream that his mother had had just before the baby’s birth.¹⁴ However, there is nothing to support this hypothesis, which rests upon a questionable assumption—namely, that “the father of history must surely have been a friend of the father of democracy.” The fact is, though, that in his *Histories* Herodotus gives a critical account, if not of Pericles himself, at least of his ancestors, and does not hesitate to record traditions hostile to the Alcmaeonids and to Pericles’ father, Xanthippus.¹⁵ The historian is certainly no totally committed eulogist of Athens. Even if he admired the city that emerged victorious from the Persian Wars, he expressed barely veiled criticisms of the imperialist power that, guided by Pericles, oppressed the Ionian Greeks within the framework of the Delian League. As a native of Halicarnassus, he was well placed to see that his own community had simply exchanged one form of domination for another, when it passed from Persian control into that of the Athenians.

While Herodotus’s view of Pericles may lead to some confusion, that is not the case of other contemporary testimonies. The criticism of the comic poets is undeniably bitter, as are the comments of Ion of Chios and Stesimbrotus of Thasos. However, Thucydides, the historian of the Peloponnesian War, was clearly full of admiration.

In Pericles’ lifetime, in the theater, comic poets such as Cratinus and Hermippus were quick to depict the *stratēgos* as a ridiculous figure.¹⁶ The comic authors were writing about the contemporary scene, and their often violent and sometimes abusive plays were performed before the entire city, on the occasion of the great religious festivals in honor of Dionysus. Most of those comedies have come down to us only as fragments, but they nevertheless do allow us to sense the virulence of the accusations launched against Pericles. The poets reproached him for his tyrannical behavior and, above all, for connections of his that were harmful to the city. On the stage, Pericles was represented sometimes as an all-powerful leader, sometimes as a puppet manipulated by his friends (such as Damon) or his lovers (such as Aspasia).¹⁷

All the same, those theatrical works are tricky for a historian to handle: in the first place, for the very reason that they are fragmentary and this often makes it difficult to reconstruct their authors’ intentions; second, because they aim to shock and deliberately magnify certain characteristics in order to provoke laughter, in what seems to be a ritualized verbal ranting; and finally, because they inevitably make their criticism personal and always attack clearly identified figures—rather than political and social mechanisms. Attacks *ad personam* are one of the mainsprings of comedy, which defines itself

10 *Introduction*

by naming names (*onomasti komoidein*).¹⁸ So it is that Comedy invariably tends to concentrate exclusively on individuals whom it certainly denigrates but nevertheless positions very much centerstage.

The extant fragments of Ion of Chios and Stesimbrotus of Thasos are equally difficult to interpret. Ion of Chios, who was contemporary with Pericles, excelled in a range of public genres, including tragedy and dithyrambs. When he visited Athens, he was a guest of Cimon, whom he describes in flattering terms, whereas he denigrates the behavior of Pericles, particularly at the time of the war against Samos.¹⁹ As for Stesimbrotus of Thasos, he was equally ill-disposed toward the *stratēgos*. In his treatise on *Themistocles, Thucydides, and Pericles*, he launches into a classic attack on these three Athenian political leaders, criticizing both their upbringing and their characters.²⁰ It is not surprising that he criticized the seemingly high-handed behavior of Pericles; in the Greek world, lifestyles were an integral part of the definition of politics.²¹

These many attacks were the source of a tradition hostile to Pericles. Thucydides (the historian) was indisputably at the origin of an idealized representation of the *stratēgos*.²² This historian, who was himself a *stratēgos* before he was exiled from Athens in 424, presents, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, an idealized account of the actions of Pericles, reconstructing several of his speeches, including the famous funeral oration delivered in 431 in honor of the Athenians killed in the first year of the war. Yet Thucydides gives a detailed account of only the last two years of Pericles' life. In part I of his *History*, which contains an account of the *pentēkontaetia*, the fifty-year period between the end of the Persian Wars and the start of the Peloponnesian War, the *stratēgos* is mentioned, fleetingly, only three times: when he beat the Sicyonians and attacked Oiniadae in 454 (1.111.2), when he defeated Euboea in 446 (1.114), and when he crushed the revolt in Samos in 440/39 (1.116–117). In effect, Pericles takes on the foremost roles only at the end of book I and already disappears halfway through book II (2.65) in this work that runs to a total of eight books. Thucydides dwells upon the *stratēgos* only as an actor in the Peloponnesian War and is not concerned to present a detailed account of his life before the outbreak of those hostilities. The historian is, in any case, interested in power and its mechanisms more than individuals themselves—although he does take care to underline the mark that Pericles left on Athenian political life (2.65).²³

Throughout the fourth century, the ancient sources continue to oscillate between praise and blame, depending on the objectives of the authors and those of their public. With very few exceptions, the attitude of the philosophers is negative. Among Socrates' disciples, Pericles becomes a subject of reflection both political and philosophical, and soon turns into an anti-model.

Antisthenes (445–365), an admirer of Sparta and full of contempt for democracy, criticizes Pericles openly and showers insults upon his companion, Aspasia. As for Plato, he presents the *stratēgos* as a dangerous demagogue who corrupts the masses and is incapable even of raising his own children in a suitable manner. The Socratics thus used Pericles as a foil, within the framework of critical thinking about democracy and its innately vicious functioning.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Attic orators are more inclined to celebrate Pericles, although the *stratēgos* is frequently eclipsed by the brilliant aura surrounding Solon. Their discreet but positive comments may be explained by the fact that they were addressing a popular public rather than a select audience such as that of philosophic circles, in which anti-democratic views could be expressed more freely.²⁴

In the last third of the fourth century, Aristotle and his school presented two contrasting pictures of Pericles. In his *Politics*, Aristotle turns the *stratēgos* into the very embodiment of *phronēsis*, prudence—that is to say, the ability to deliberate skilfully in an ever-changing world.²⁵ Meanwhile, the author of the *Constitution of the Athenians*—whether Aristotle himself or a member of his school—unequivocally criticizes the introduction of the *misthos* and accuses Pericles of having sought by this means to corrupt the masses. In this way, he picks up the Platonic line.

In this succession of ancient texts, there is one that, although late, is a decisive link in the chain: *The Life of Pericles* by Plutarch (A.D. 46 to 125). This Greek gentleman, a native of Chaeronea in Boeotia, composed his *Parallel Lives* in the early second century A.D., at a time when Greece had already long since fallen under Roman domination. When setting up this particular parallel between a Greek and a Roman, Plutarch chose, in the name of the prudence that characterized them both, to compare Pericles and Fabius Maximus. This work, which was influenced by Plato, gathered together, in the form of more or less explicit citations, most of the comic fragments on Pericles, the criticisms of the *stratēgos* made by Ion of Chios and Stesimbrotus of Thasos, and also the hostile remarks of Antisthenes and the Socratics. So Plutarch's handling of the subject inevitably presents today's historians with a delicate problem.

In the first place, his work is marked by a desire to construct a unifying framework—a *Life*—drawing on material that, although abundant, is heterogeneous. This profusion of texts often leads Plutarch to attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable and, in his account, to juxtapose totally opposed traditions. For example, he devotes equal space to, on the one hand, Thucydides' cool analysis of the underlying causes of the Peloponnesian War and, on the

12 Introduction

other, to the vituperations of the comic poets who delighted in emphasizing the role that Pericles' partner, Aspasia, played in the outbreak of hostilities.

In this combination of as much praise as blame, Plutarch himself conveys a mixed view of Pericles' actions. On the one hand, he is clearly intent on celebrating the man behind the great architectural works—the monuments that, at the time when he was composing his *Lives*,²⁶ testified to the ancient power of Greece; yet, at the same time, as a good disciple of Plato and an admirer of Cimon, he wanted to denigrate Pericles, the democrat. This tension sometimes makes it difficult to grasp his true intentions. To resolve this contradiction, Plutarch divides the life of his hero into two artificially opposed parts. He suggests that at first Pericles behaved as a demagogue, showering gifts upon the masses and thereby fostering pernicious habits among them (9.1). Then, when his own position was definitively assured, following the ostracism of Thucydides of Alopeke, Pericles is portrayed as radically changing his attitude and, without hesitation, restraining the aspirations of the people, at the risk of incurring its anger (15.2–3).

One further difficulty makes interpreting Plutarch's text a particularly delicate matter. Because he lived at the time of the Caesars, he does not always understand the facts that he claims to describe. He tends to interpret Pericles' actions in the light of his own time, attributing to his hero the behavior or even the authority of a Roman emperor. The fact that the people might exercise truly effective sovereignty never even crosses his mind.

Exhaustive though it is, the *Life of Pericles* does not herald an end to the controversies that surrounded the figure of the *stratēgos*. A few decades after the death of Plutarch, Aelius Aristides (A.D. 117–185), in his speech *Against Plato; in Defence of the Four*, without the slightest reservation, pays emphatic homage to the democratic leader. On the strength of Thucydides' authority, he maintains that Pericles never corrupted the people in the slightest way, contrary to the popular view among Platonists, echoed by Plutarch.²⁷

In roughly the same period, Pausanias adopted a radically opposed view in his *Periegesis*, in a passage in which he digressed on the subject of the famous men of the Athenian past. While happy to praise the military exploits of Themistocles, Xanthippus, and Cimon against the Persians (8.52.1–2), he expresses the greatest scorn for the warmongers of the Peloponnesian conflict, “especially the most distinguished of them.” His judgment is categorical: “they might be said to be murderers, almost wreckers of Greece.”²⁸ Scandalized by the Greek internal wars, Pausanias does not deign even to mention the name of Pericles and assigns him to a kind of *damnatio memoriae*.

Without any clear suggestion of a cause-and-effect link, the memory of the *stratēgos* thereafter progressively continued to fade right down to the early

fifteenth century, at which point the humanist Leonardo Bruni, inspired by the writings of Thucydides and Aelius Aristides, revived it.²⁹

From this rapid survey of the sources of Antiquity, it is possible to draw two clear conclusions. The first is somewhat disappointing: to produce a straightforward biography of Pericles involves guesswork or even an illusion, unless one imitates Plutarch and creates an imaginary itinerary that reveals more about the preconceptions of its creator than it does about the trajectory of the *stratēgos*. For what can be said about Pericles' youth prior to 472, the date when he financed Aeschylus's *Persians*? What do we really know of his life between 461 and 450? No linear account of the *stratēgos*'s life is conceivable—unless, that is, one cheats with the information provided and arranges it into a chronological order that, although coherent, is arbitrary. Only the last three years of his existence, from 432 to 429, rise to the surface in this ocean of ignorance, and they do so thanks to the unique shaft of light shed by Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*.

Does this amount to an insurmountable defect that rules out writing any book about Pericles? Not at all. A perusal of the ancient sources in fact indicates another, surely more fruitful avenue of research. The ancient sources, ranging from Thucydides to Plutarch and from the comic poets to Aelius Aristides, all, in their own ways, ponder the relations established between Pericles the individual and the community in which he lived. Is Pericles an all-powerful figure or simply a ventriloquist who expresses the aspirations of the people? A wide range of answers can be envisaged, and they deserve to be closely scrutinized. And this is the line of investigation that will serve as a guiding thread for the present inquiry, which will be organized into two major parts, the one historical, the other historiographical.

The first section will start with a study of the genealogical, economic, and cultural trump cards that were held by the young Pericles at the point when he stealthily embarked upon his political career (chapter 1). The following two chapters will be devoted to the bases of Pericles' power. These were clearly twofold: his success rested on military glory—as head of the Athenian armies and navies (chapter 2)—and on his expert handling of public discourse—to the point of embodying the orator par excellence who fascinated the Athenians from the Assembly tribune (chapter 3).

As *stratēgos*, Pericles was deeply implicated in the development of Athenian imperialism. With no misgivings at all, he ruthlessly crushed the revolts of the allied cities, adopting in this respect a policy that was widely favored in Athens: possibly his sole originality lay in his theorizing its necessity and establishing imperial power on an unprecedented scale (chapter 4). Within the city, Pericles actively promoted the genesis of a truly democratic economic

14 *Introduction*

policy—a policy that was founded on widespread redistributions of the city's wealth to a newly redefined civic community (chapter 5).

Both within the city and beyond it, Pericles responded to the demands of the people or even anticipated them. The pressure that the *dēmos* exerted could be felt at every level. It was because the least of his actions and gestures were all scrutinized and, frequently, criticized that Pericles seems to have kept his relatives, friends, and lovers at a distance. He no doubt hoped in this way to ward off the many attackers who described him as a man who was manipulated, ready to put the interests of those close to him before the well-being of the Athenian people (chapters 6 and 7). Such reproaches were likewise leveled against his attitude toward the city gods, for he was also accused of fostering friendships with impious men (chapter 8).

At Pericles' death, these weighty suspicions faded away: the *stratēgos* now, at least for a part of tradition, came to symbolize a golden age that was gone forever. A number of ancient authors even treated the passing of Pericles as a pivotal moment in the history of Athens, as if his death marked the starting point of the city's decadence—a view that calls for serious qualification (chapter 9).

Having completed this historical journey, it will be necessary to reconsider this whole investigation and return to the question formulated right at the outset—namely, how did the Athenian democracy react to its experience of this great man? In short, we must try to understand Athens as a reflection of Pericles and Pericles as a reflection of Athens (chapter 10).

Pericles was neither a hero nor a nobody. He should be restored to his full complexity, and we should endeavor to free ourselves from a historiography that, over a long period, either ignored him or exposed him to public contempt, before eventually transforming him into a veritable icon of democracy. The Periclean myth is a recent re-creation. Up until the end of the eighteenth century, Pericles was for the most part judged with disdain, if not arrogantly ignored. Blinded by Roman and Spartan models, the men of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment regarded the *stratēgos* as an unscrupulous demagogue who headed a degenerate regime (chapter 11). It was not until the nineteenth century—and, in particular, Thucydides' return to favor—coupled with the advent of parliamentary regimes in Europe—that, progressively, a new Pericles emerged in the writings of historians, where he was now presented as an enlightened bourgeois. Prepared by Rollin and Voltaire and completed by George Grote and Victor Duruy, this slow metamorphosis engendered the figure of an idealized Pericles who, still today, is enthroned in school textbooks on a par with Louis XIV (chapter 12).