

“Themistocles” By Plutarch

Introduction: Plutarch (c.46-119) was a Greek historian and biography writing in the 1st Century CE, during the early period of the *Pax Romana*. He most well-known for his *Lives*, in which he recounts the lives of Roman Emperors, often pairing them against ancient Greek leaders and famous figures. These were usually followed by a sort of commentary, in which Plutarch presents some of his own ideas on the quality of government and leadership. Keep this in mind as you are reading the excerpt below, Plutarch is not necessarily an eyewitness to the actual life of Themistocles. Therefore, we need to keep in mind his purpose and potential bias.

Themistocles (c. 524-459 BCE) himself was an Athenian politician and general during the second Persian Wars. He is mostly known to be responsible for persuading Athenian citizens (elite men) to invest in nearby silver mines, using these resources to fund the building *trieres*, Greek war ships. These were eventually successful against the Persians during the naval Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. The results of this battle would eventually lead to Athens leading the Delian League and creating an Athenian “Empire” and the Greek Golden Age. Also, he is the lead figure for the Hollywood movie *300: Rise of an Empire*.

What understanding of Greek democracy can we gain from these excerpts?

Themistocles By Plutarch (Translated by John Dryden)

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And, first of all, the Athenians being accustomed to divide amongst themselves the revenue proceeding from the silver mines at Laurium, he was the only man that durst propose to the people that this distribution should cease, and that with the money ships should be built to make war against the Aeginetans, who were the most flourishing people in all Greece, and by the number of their ships held the sovereignty of the sea; and Themistocles thus was more easily able to persuade them, avoiding all mention of danger from Darius or the Persians, who were at a great distance, and their coming very uncertain, and at that time not much to be feared; but by a seasonable employment of the emulation and anger felt by the Athenians against the Aeginetans, he induced them to preparation. So that with this money an hundred ships were built, with which they afterwards fought against Xerxes. And henceforward, little by little, turning and drawing the city down towards the sea, in the belief that, whereas by land they were not

a fit match for their next neighbours, with their ships they might be able to repel the Persians and command Greece, thus, as Plato says, from steady soldiers he turned them into mariners and seamen tossed about the sea, and gave occasion for the reproach against him, that he took away from the Athenians the spear and the shield, and bound them to the bench and the oar. These measures he carried in the assembly, against the opposition, as Stesimbrotus relates, of Miltiades; and whether or no be hereby injured the purity and true balance of government may be a question for philosophers, but that the deliverance of Greece came at that time from the sea, and that these galleys restored Athens again after it was destroyed, were others wanting, Xerxes himself would be sufficient evidence, who, though his land-forces were still entire, after his defeat at sea, fled away, and thought himself no longer able to encounter the Greeks; and, as it seems to me, left Mardonius behind him, not out of any hopes he could have to bring them into subjection, but to hinder them from pursuing him.

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When the king of Persia sent messengers into Greece, with an interpreter, to demand earth and water, as an acknowledgment of subjection, Themistocles, by the consent of the people, seized upon the interpreter, and put him to death, for presuming to publish the barbarian orders and decrees in the Greek language; this is one of the actions he is commended for, as also for what he did to Arthmius of Zelea, who brought gold from the king of Persia to corrupt the Greeks, and was, by an order from Themistocles, degraded and disfranchised, he and his children and his posterity; but that which most of all redounded to his credit was, that he put an end to all the civil wars of Greece, composed their differences, and persuaded them to lay aside all enmity during the war with the Persians; and in this great work, Chileus the Arcadian

was, it is said, of great assistance to him.

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The number of the enemy's ships the poet Aeschylus gives in his tragedy called the Persians, as on his certain knowledge, in the following words:-

"Xerxes, I know, did into battle lead

One thousand ships; of more than usual speed

Seven and two hundred. So it is agreed."

The Athenians had a hundred and eighty; in every ship eighteen men fought upon the deck, four of whom were archers and the rest men at arms.

As Themistocles had fixed upon the most advantageous place, so, with no less sagacity, he chose the best time of fighting; for he would not run the prows of his galleys against the Persians, nor begin the fight till the time of day was come, when there regularly blows in a fresh breeze from the open sea, and brings in with it a strong swell into the channel; which was no inconvenience to the Greek ships, which were low-built, and little above the water, but did much to hurt the Persians, which had high sterns and lofty decks, and were heavy and cumbrous in their movements as it presented them broadside to the quick charges of the Greeks, who kept their eyes upon the motions of Themistocles, as their best example, and more particularly because, opposed to his ship, Ariamenes, admiral to Xerxes, a brave man and by far the best and worthiest of the king's brothers, was seen throwing darts and shooting arrows from his huge galley, as from the walls of a castle. Aminias the Decelean and Sosicles the Pedian, who sailed in the same vessel, upon the ships meeting stem to stem, and transfixing each the other with their brazen prows, so that they were fastened together, when Ariamenes attempted to board theirs, ran at him with

their pikes, and thrust him into the sea; his body, as it floated amongst other shipwrecks, was known to Artemisia, and carried to Xerxes.

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He was, indeed, by nature, a great lover of honour, as is evident from the anecdotes recorded of him. When chosen admiral by the Athenians, he would not quite conclude any single matter of business, either public or private, but deferred all till the day they were to set sail, that, by despatching a great quantity of business all at once, and having to meet a great variety of people, he might make an appearance of greatness and power. Viewing the dead bodies cast up by the sea, he perceived bracelets and necklaces of gold about them, yet passed on, only showing them to a friend that followed him, saying, "Take you these things, for you are not Themistocles." He said to Antiphates, a handsome young man, who had formerly avoided, but now in his glory courted him, "Time, young man, has taught us both a lesson." He said that the Athenians did not honour him or admire him, but made, as it were, a sort of plane-tree of him; sheltered themselves under him in bad weather, and as soon as it was fine, plucked his leaves and cut his branches.

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Next he proceeded to establish the harbour of Piraeus, observing the great natural advantages of the locality, and desirous to unite the whole city with the sea, and to reverse, in a manner, the policy of ancient Athenian kings, who, endeavouring to withdraw their subjects from the sea, and to accustom them to live, not by sailing about, but by planting and tilling the earth, spread the story of the dispute between Minerva and Neptune for the sovereignty of Athens, in which Minerva, by producing to the judges an olive-tree, was declared to have won; whereas Themistocles did not only knead up, as Aristophanes

says, the port and the city into one, but made the city absolutely the dependant and the adjunct of the port, and the land of the sea, which increased the power and confidence of the people against the nobility; the authority coming into the hands of sailors and boatswains and pilots. Thus it was one of the orders of the thirty tyrants, that the hustings in the assembly, which had faced towards the sea, should be turned round towards the land; implying their opinion that the empire by sea had been the origin of the democracy, and that the farming population were not so much opposed to oligarchy.

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But other foxes have lost tails." When the citizens of Athens began to listen willingly to those who traduced and reproached him [Themistocles], he was forced, with somewhat obnoxious frequency, to put them in mind of the great services he had performed, and ask those who were offended with him whether they were weary with receiving benefits often from the same person, so rendering himself more odious. And he yet more provoked the people by building a temple to Diana with the epithet of Aristobule, or Diana of Best Counsel; intimating thereby, that he had given the best counsel, not only to the Athenians, but to all Greece. He built this temple near his own house, in the district called Melite, where now the public officers carry out the bodies of such as are executed, and throw the halters and clothes of those that are strangled or otherwise put to death. There is to this day a small figure of Themistocles in the temple of Diana of Best Counsel, which represents him to be a person not only of a noble mind, but also of a most heroic aspect. At length the Athenians banished him, making use of the ostracism to humble his eminence and authority, as they ordinarily did with all whom they thought too powerful, or, by their greatness, disproportional to the equality thought requisite in a

popular government. For the ostracism was instituted, not so much to punish the offender, as to mitigate and pacify the violence of the envious, who delighted to humble eminent men, and who, by fixing this disgrace upon them, might vent some part of their rancour.

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Various honours also and privileges were granted to the kindred of Themistocles at Magnesia, which were observed down to our times, and were enjoyed by another Themistocles of Athens, with whom I had an intimate acquaintance and friendship in the house of Ammonius the philosopher.

Accessed from: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/themisto.html> on 21 Jan 2021