

Who Made Athens Great? Three Recent Books on Pericles and Athenian Politics

Matt Simonton

Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

Matt.Simonton@asu.edu

Vincent Azoulay

Pericles of Athens. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. xviii + 312pp. \$39.95. ISBN 9780691154596 (hbk).

Thomas R. Martin

Pericles: A Biography in Context. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xx + 253 pp. \$89.99. ISBN 978521116459 (hbk).

Loren J. Samons II

Pericles and the Conquest of History: A Political Biography. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xvi + 343 pp. \$24.99. ISBN 9781107526020 (hbk).

In 2008, a rescue excavation in the Athenian suburb of Kifissia uncovered a series of burials dating from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE. The graves were unspectacular except for one, from which a simple but elegant black-slip skyphos was recovered. The pottery style and letter forms of certain names carved on the cup date it roughly to the second quarter of the fifth century. And it is those names that captured archaeologists' attention: the only decoration on the cup, the names were inscribed upside-down, almost in 'stoichedon' or grid-style, and set within a trapezoidal border. The names, in Attic dialect and in at least three different hands, were the following: Aristides, Diodotus, Daisimos, Ariphron, Pericles, and Eucritus. The excavator, Galini Daskalaki, immediately made the observation that while Pericles is a fairly common Attic name, Ariphron is not, and is known primarily as the brother and homonymous grandfather of Pericles the son of Xanthippus, the most famous Athenian politician of the later fifth century and probably of all time. Seeing Ariphron paired with Pericles on the cup, Daskalaki and commentators since have been unable to resist the conclusion that what we have here is the 'Holy Grail' of

Pericles himself, a drinking cup used by him and his boon companions (among whom may have numbered the illustrious Aristides ‘the Just’) at a symposium some time ca. 470.¹

Given the new evidence afforded by the cup, the discovery of which was quickly trumpeted by the press, one feels sympathy for the authors of the books under consideration here. Surely this will issue in a new crop of biographies of Pericles, eager to add the cup to our existing (rather limited) sources for the life of the Athenian statesman. In fact it is not clear what the cup can securely tell us beyond what we already could have guessed: that Pericles and his brother belonged to a *hetaireia*, or club; that they were socialized in the drinking party, the usual venue for an elite young Athenian’s *Bildung*; and that yes, even the famously staid Pericles got tipsy now and then. (Considering the context and the orientation of the writing, we might fairly label this not so much the ‘Holy Grail’ as the ‘Flip Cup of Pericles’.)² Indeed the cup highlights the importance of collective practices and institutions (list-making, the symposium, joint ownership) rather than individualistic ones. Pericles, if this is him – and I, for one, believe the cup to be genuine – was very much a product of his cultural and socio-economic milieu, one in which he continued to operate with other political actors during his long career. This elite strata to which he belonged was also in constant contact, both informally and through the institutional channels of Athens’ democracy, with the mass of average citizens, the *demos*. And thanks in part to the intensive and unprecedented cooperation within and between these rough social groupings over the course of the fifth century, Athens as a polis increasingly dominated other poleis and communities, under its *archê* or empire, and eventually fought the greatest war the Greek city-states had yet experienced.

Individual and group; class, polis, and Hellas: these are categories of analysis that present themselves *prima facie* as ways to think about Pericles’ life, and that are variously on display, to differing degrees, in all three books. Yet the attempt to understand Pericles, using whatever categories, also holds important ramifications for historiography and for political thought (assuming,

1 G. Daskalaki, ‘Ἐνεπίγραφος σκύφος ἀπὸ Κηφισιά’, *HOPOS*, 22-25 (2010-2013), pp. 179-86; A. M. Matthaiou, ‘Ὁ ἐνεπίγραφος σκύφος τῆς Κηφισιάς’, *ΓΡΑΜΜΑΤΕΙΟΝ*, 5 (2016), pp. 53-65.

2 In addition to seeing the Aristides on the cup as the son of Lysimachus, many are also tempted to identify Diodotus with the man who opposes Cleon in the Mytilinean Debate in Thucydides (3.41), otherwise unattested. If the Aristides named on the cup is the Just, the cup nicely aligns with Plutarch’s notice that it was only after the death of Aristides (ca. 468) that Pericles got serious about politics, in the process eschewing all dinner party invitations (*Per.* 7.2-4).