PLUTARCH AND THE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT
OF PERICLES

BY

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In his masterly introduction to the commentary on Thucydides, Gomme wrote that "Plutarch’s Life of Pericles is the most complex and the most interesting of his biographies on 5th century Athenian statesmen, and the most valuable to historians; it best discovers Plutarch’s own strength and weaknesses". Whatever may be its value as a source on 5th century history, it clearly demonstrates the difficulties of a conscientious biographer in dealing with the sources on this period, so often distorted by political bias, panegyrical or slander. We have often been told that Plutarch’s picture of Pericles is far from consistent. Such an inconsistency must be due to the variety of opinions in his sources: in fact, Plutarch knew that it was nearly impossible to attain truth in the brushwood of conflicting testimonies. To trace Plutarch’s sources has been the object of many scholarly publications. Such studies are useful and necessary, though we should, for all that, never forget that Plutarch does something more than simply register his ‘Quellen’; the problem of the specific Plutarchean perspective, however, has not yet received the attention it deserves. If it is true that "l’image que Plutarque nous laisse de Pétriclé reste floue"; he certainly en-

1) Vol. 1, 65 ff.
2) H. Sauppe, Die Quellen Plutarchs für das Leben des Perikles (1867), F. Rühle, Über die Quellen des phutarcheischen Perikles, Jb. f. Kl. Phil. 1868. Cf. the useful monograph of E. Meinhardt, Perikles bei Plutarch (Frankfurt 1956). A good survey on the ‘Quellenfrage’ is to be found in the review of this work by S. Buchner, Gnomon 1960, 307 ff.
visaged to offer a consistent picture of the Athenian statesman. There is no doubt that this biography is more than simply the result of a more or less fortunate attempt to account for different traditions.

In this article I want to examine some aspects of Pericles' political career as traced by Plutarch. I hope to show that his picture is less inconsistent than it is often thought to be. Though his understanding of Athenian politics is often defective, he tried to do justice to Pericles as a statesman and a politician.

In chapter 9 Plutarch starts from the famous description of Thucydides II 65, who, according to Plutarch, qualified Pericles' government as a 'kind of aristocracy'. However, many others were of the opinion that Pericles was the first one to spoil the people by cleruchies and gratifications, making it reckless and undisciplined. Plutarch does not take side, but proposes to his readers to observe the causes of this change by looking into the facts.

What does μεταβολή mean? Gomme thought that Plutarch, confronted with such authorities as Thucydides, to whom Pericles was στροφώντας, and others like Plato, to whom he was not, could not make a choice. "Both must be right" 1). But Plutarch did not sufficiently recognise that Thucydides and Plato used different standards. "His only solution of the problem, which is really not there at all, is that there must have been a radical change in Pericles' methods of conducting public affairs, amounting practically to a change in character: he was first a demagogue, then a true leader of the people". We may ask, however, whether the notion of a μεταβολή which is presented with such uncorroborated evidence, could really be called a solution to a problem. As we shall see, there is no evidence that Plutarch really shared the point of view of those who made Pericles the scapegoat for the deterioration in Athenian public morality. Even if the idea of a sudden 'transformation' has something arbitrary, it does not preclude that Plutarch had some grounds for distinguishing certain periods in Pericles' political career. And, finally, it is very doubtful whether we are entitled to speak of a change in Pericles' character.

1) Gomme, o.c., 65 ff.