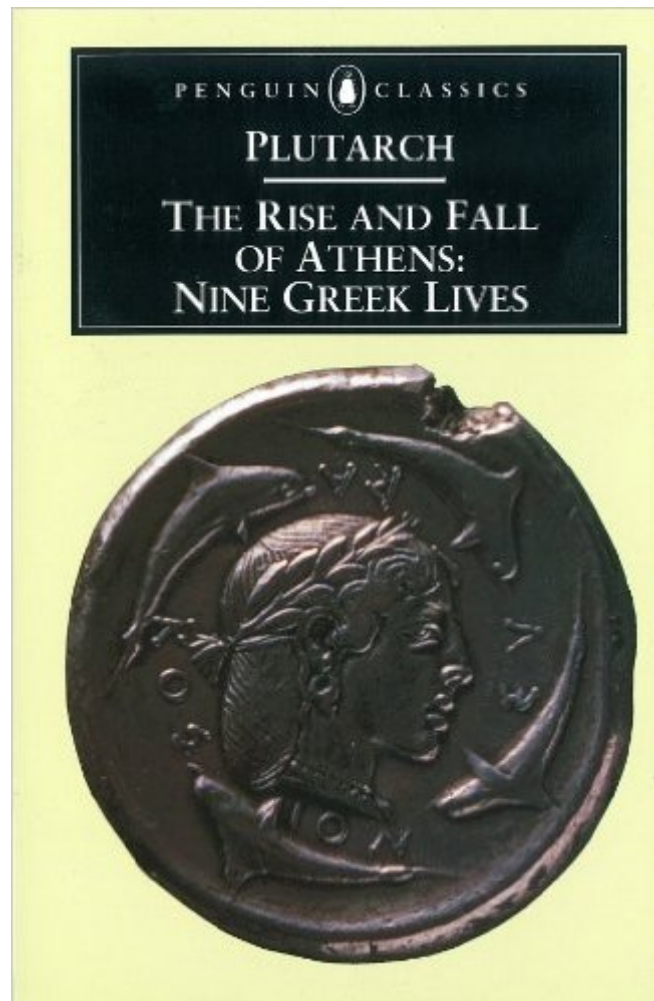


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The Rise And Fall Of Athens: Nine Greek Lives



Synopsis

Nine Greek biographies illustrate the rise and fall of Athens, from the legendary days of Theseus, the city's founder, through Solon, Themistocles, Aristides, Cimon, Pericles, Nicias, and Alcibiades, to the razing of its walls by Lysander. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

While categorized as more of a biographer than a historian, Plutarch is nevertheless one of the most often-cited scholars of antiquity. In Plutarch we gaze at history through the lens of the great avatars of history. This is actually preferable in many ways to Plutarch's original organization. As Plutarch's method was to teach on ethics via the lives of great men, he would write parallel lives of famous Greeks & Romans. Many times the similarities would be stretched and occasionally merely artificial. Penguin Classics has broken up Plutarch's LIVES into several different books, each focused on a particular historical genre. The current one places its emphasis on Athens. The book covers 7 Athenians (Solon, Themistocles, Aristides, Cimon, Pericles, Nicias, Alcibiades), 1 mythological figure (Theseus) and 1 Spartan (Lysander). The inclusion of Lysander is due to the fact that

Lysander was the primary instrument by which the Spartans conquered the Athenians in 404BCE. Athens would never again be a major player on the world stage, so the section on Lysander's life is one of transitions. All of the essays in this book are the standard by which contemporary historians write on the world of ancient Greece. That makes this book a must for persons who are even remotely interested in classical history. Even if you were to only read one book on the Greeks, this one might be the one to grab. The book is THAT influential.

I like Plutarch because the guy really knows how to call a spade a spade. He had the guts to admit when the record was less than straight, provided alternative views, sources and dialogues, and let the reader decide when the facts and interpretations got fuzzy. He was no ideologue. In that sense a lot of writers in our present century could learn from him. There are many versions of Plutarch's "Lives" and the traditional versions (maybe the original?) render one Roman life in comparison with one Greek life evincing similar traits or historical characteristics. In this Penguin Series the tendency has been to divide the Greek and Roman lives into separate works. I loved his Roman lives unequivocally and I love this one as well, but Plutarch makes a better writer the more he moves from myth to factual lives. In this sense his early lives like Theseus and Solon are less interesting than those of Nicias, Alcibiades, Lysander and Themistocles. Plutarch is best when he is working with solid sources, not mythology. But, to his credit, his early mythical lives reflects a very sceptical note, one as befits the subject matter. Later when he is citing Xenophon, and Plato, his lives are exciting in the extreme (I shall always remember the utter destruction of Nicias and his expeditionary force to Syracuse, by Gylippus and his Syracusan allies). The corruption of Lysander by money, and the general message perhaps in this tome -- the danger of overextended wars in far flung lands not supported or understood by the people. All in all this book puts the "C" in Classic.

Through 9 Greek Lives (Theseus, the democracy builder; Aristides, the 'Spartan' Athenian; Themistocles, the arrogant but victorious supreme commander; Solon, the legislator; Cimon, the alcoholic but conquering oligarch; Pericles, the noble and unselfish democrat; the richissime Nicias, exploiter of silver mines; Alcibiades, the debauched double-dealing chameleon; and Lysander, the killer of Athens and its democrats), Plutarch sketches eminently the main political and social issues of ancient Greece and of Athens in particular. In Athens, the vicious battle between the few and the many, the haves and have-nots, equality and liberty was fought through two political parties: the aristocrats (oligarchs) supported by Sparta, Socrates, Plato and the priests ('the power of the ruler as the image of the god') on the one hand, and on the other hand, the democrats. The Greek cities

were evidently united against their common enemy, Persia, whose policies aimed at defeating the Greek outright or at inciting them to destroy one another. But the cities fought one another even in foreign countries (e.g. for the gold mines in Thrace). It all ended with Nicias's disastrous expedition in Sicily and Lysander's bloody victory over Athens. Plutarch's book is still very actual indeed. He shows us Pericles as the first Keynesian, organizing huge public works and 'transforming the whole people into wage-earners', or the anti-scientific stance of religion ('natural philosophers belittled the power of the gods by explaining it away as nothing more than the operation of irrational causes'). Plutarch is an excellent psychologist: 'people as so often happens at moments of crisis, were ready to find salvation in the miraculous rather than in a rational course of action'. Market manipulation with foreknowledge is of all times: 'Solon confided to his most intimate friends that he did not intend to touch land, but had decided to abolish debts. They promptly took advantage by borrowing large sums ...' But Plutarch times were still extremely barbarous: a decree ... that all prisoners of war should have their right thumb cut off to prevent holding a spear, although they could still handle an oar.' This book is a must read for all those interested in the history of mankind.

Even though I liked this book, Plutarch really does not know his subjects that well. Plutarch enjoys making each of his characters into moral lessons. So, there may be truth behind the writing but do not take it full on. Takes a story and takes bad qualities and rewrites to a moral lesson. Plutarch emphasizes qualities for his own purposes. Read critically.

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