Since his own time, the Athenian statesman Pericles has been the subject of both strong praise and vehement denigration. He has been hailed as the preserver of the Athenian state and as the architect of its downfall. This tendency toward polarizing interpretations has fueled the tendency to attribute to Pericles a power over the Athenian democracy that likely never existed, but finding a middle ground proves difficult when the ancient sources themselves are prone either to hyperbole or to a frustrating lack of detail on exactly how much authority and influence the famous stratēgos had. Pericles has thus stood as a powerful figure in Greek history, but also one who can appear rather two-dimensional upon reflection. He is touted as an exemplar, his name synonymous with a period of Greek history that is seen as uniquely vibrant, creative, and democratic, the “Age of Pericles.” However, the tendency of ancient writers to ascribe major policies, laws, and decisions to well-known figures, regardless of their actual involvement, makes it difficult to untangle the historical Pericles from both contemporary and later accounts of the major events in fifth-century Athens. Consequently, Pericles has achieved in the modern era a near-mythical status that reveals very little about the man himself, his accomplishments, or his failures.

In his new biography, Vincent Azoulay attempts to redress this imbalance between the historical and mythical Pericles without falling victim to becoming either a fanatical proponent or critic of the man himself. Through exhaustive analysis, Azoulay argues that Pericles cannot be understood without both a historical and a historiographical approach. Understanding Pericles the man requires untangling what we can actually know about him historically from the uses to which he has been put by historians and politicians, both positive and negative, since his own lifetime. Therefore, Azoulay splits his analysis into two parts. In the first nine chapters, Azoulay examines Pericles through the lens of a series of issues with which he is associated by historians, including his background, the basis and nature of his political power, and his involvement in and leadership over Athens’ burgeoning imperialist enterprise. Demonstrating a thorough command of the ancient and modern sources, Azoulay takes a skeptical approach to reconstructing Pericles’ life. The Pericles who emerges is one whose dedication to his position—both social and political—and to shaping public opinion led him at times to neglect his family, and to act the autocrat, treating the Athenian people “as he would a capricious child who would change its mind depending on the circumstances” (p. 43). In war and in foreign policy, Azoulay argues that Pericles was a man of his times “swept up in a dynamic that, both upstream and downstream, shaped far more than his own individual actions,” and that he participated in an “imperialist system that was initiated before him and that went on after him” supported by the Athenian people (p. 51). In other words, Pericles was not the puppet master who shaped Athens to his will, nor a statesman whose death marked the end of an era. Rather, he was one of many Athenian leaders whose actions sought to lift their city above other Greek city-states.

Carrying this tempered approach into his historiographical section, Azoulay traces approaches to Pericles from the fifteenth century to the present. He breaks his analysis into three broad attitudes toward Pericles that are roughly chronological. He begins with the tendency
to ignore him in favor of Sparta and Rome, whose examples of rough, upstanding heroes and hierarchical systems appealed to early modern writers. He then scrutinizes the denigration of Pericles and democratic Athens by Renaissance and Enlightenment writers, paying particular attention to the late eighteenth-century portrayal of Pericles as an “opponent of liberty” (p. 184). In his final chapter, Azoulay tackles the more recent tendency to popularize Pericles as a democratic hero or attack him either as the man responsible for leading Athens into disaster or as a dangerous representation of an overtly imperialist nation. After paying close attention to the political uses of Pericles in the twentieth century, particularly during the Second World War, Azoulay concludes that Pericles should not be touted as an example for modern politics, that he “has no useful lessons for our times” (p. 226).

In arguably one of the most significant sections of his biography despite its brevity, Azoulay traces the Periclean myth into the modern classroom, where he argues that “as a result of being used as a mouthpiece for democratic values, the stratēgos has become a mere symbolic sketch, a silhouette possessing neither substance nor charm, a symbol that, although, to be sure, admirable, is insipid” (pp. 224-225). The value of Azoulay’s biography is its ability to restore to Pericles his complex character and to shine a light on the generations of reimagining that have turned Pericles into the flat “symbolic sketch” that dominates higher education today. And while the historical scope of the historiographical section might cause difficulties for undergraduate readers, this biography is well suited to any student of Greek history.

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