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Pericles and Aeneas

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Pericles and Aeneas

Emma Sternlof

Aeneas: I greet you, Pericles, leader of Athens.

Pericles: Hail, Aeneas, father of Rome. I know you from the reports of others, though we have never met here in the company of heroes. It is an honor to speak with you at last.

Aeneas: The honor is mine as well. Your achievements are also renowned in both worlds. How will you spend the evening before us?

Pericles: I plan to walk the riverbank. Will you accompany me?

Aeneas: I would be grateful for such a companion. I sometimes long for talk of earthly things, so slowly does time pass below the ground.

Pericles: Even perfect peace grows tiresome. Come walk with me, and we will speak of leadership and war, those pastimes now lost to us.

Aeneas: We have much in common, as we share an uncommon destiny. Both of us were responsible for the guidance of a people, and received immortal fame accordingly.

Pericles: It was your task to found an empire, and mine to uphold one.

Aeneas: Both worthy tasks, yet heavy burdens. Tell me about the workings of your government and Athens at her height.

Pericles: I was general, first citizen of the Athenian democracy. The city then was a wonderful place to behold. In private life we minded our own business, but all took part in civic life. In architecture, in art, in trade, in culture and in thoughtful conversation, we had no equal. We prized aesthetics and rhetoric, tolerance and kindness. Yet our love of the beautiful did not make us frivolous, and our intelligence did not detract from our strength¹. We were willing to fight, but never bloodthirsty.

Aeneas: Your people remind me of my valiant Trojans in that last quality. We never sought war with the Latin nation, but hoped for friendship in our home and place².

Pericles: Leadership in war is a difficult feat, as one seeks to balance the nation's safety with the need for her advancement. You know that Athens warred with Sparta in my time, as the Trojans battled the Latins in yours. I recognize the stress and sorrow of your life as a general. But there is one striking difference between the two of us, despite our common calling. I chose a life of prominence and the wartime duties it entailed. Your role was already written, established despite the efforts of some gods. Even before your birth, you were fated to found the Roman state.

¹ History, II: 40

² Aeneid, XI: 145-149

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Aeneas: Yes. Struggle and strife were my inheritance from my divine mother and princely father. The gods bestowed on me an iron-clad mandate: to cross the seas, to build a new Troy. It was a unique and precious honor, to be charged with the foundation of a mighty homeland. On my shoulders lay the fate of my son, the fame of his sons. The god-forged shield I wielded never weighed so heavy as that knowledge³.

Pericles: Although we both were blessed with worthy women, our calling does not always accommodate private happiness. I heard from others that your fate cost you the queen of Carthage.

Aeneas: Indeed, I loved her greatly. Yet the wedding torches could never flare for us, and grief burned within her as I sailed toward my new homeland⁴. That fire consumed her. Her desperate act, her fury followed me. Years later, our descendants still made war.

Pericles: Tell me, exactly what convinced you to leave her bed for Latium? An inner conviction, or the voice of some god?

Aeneas: Great Mercury appeared to me, bearing a message from the king of heaven. I trembled, voice locked within my throat, as he reminded me of my duty to my son. I remembered Ascanius' birthright, the wild land of Italy, and the eternal glory assigned to Rome.

Pericles: Divine intervention! An advantage I never had. At low times I sometimes wished for some overwhelming oracle, an answer in the entrails to a problem that plagued me. But I am a son of Xanthippus, not of Venus, with only mortal wits and courage to sustain me.

Aeneas: Such intervention was not always cause for cheer. The gods in their private quarrels care little for earthly lives lost, for earthly pain and earthly grief. I will honor my mother forever and I owe her more than meager speech can tell, but it is not an easy thing to be the son of a deity.

Pericles: I understand you. On earth, I found the intrigues of men were more than enough to contend with. Also, I know the gods inspired Troy's destruction. I greatly regret your suffering on the Ilian fields, and I thank the gods for sparing me such sorrow.

Aeneas: Pericles, I tell you, I could never have imagined the destruction of my city. The howls of war resounded within the very walls, so soon after the cries of grief for Hector had echoed there⁵.

Pericles: I have met with Hector here. I could see his famous nobility in his bearing and manner.

Aeneas: Indeed, it was Hector who appeared to me in the chaos, who set me on that voyage to Latium. He charged me to build new walls for the holy things, to preserve the

³ Aeneid, VIII: 951-955

⁴ Aeneid, IV: 457-458

⁵ Aeneid, II: 408

sacred memories of Troy. So I fled with the household gods, with my father Anchises and my son Ascanius, out of my ruined city. The memories of evil pass before my eyes even now: Polites murdered before his lordly father, honored Priam cut down like a dog before the altar, Cassandra dragged screaming from the sanctuary. What words, what tears can ever equal that ancient agony?⁶ I will stop my tongue. But I have learned that you too saw the desecration of holy things and the savagery of man.

Pericles: You speak of the great sickness that struck Athens during my rule?

Aeneas: Yes, I have heard a small part of the chaos it spawned.

Pericles: If only I could blame those barbarities on some other, inferior race. It was Athenians, not Achaeans, who lost all respect for order and law in the wake of the plague. Having had the sickness and happily survived, I know the horror of the disease. With the overcrowding within the walls and the heat of the season, it spread with frightening swiftness. As you have heard, the corpses were piled high in the temples, with no hope of funeral rites. What hideous suffering! Nothing could restrain the healthy, neither the terror of God nor the rule of man⁷. As they saw fellow citizens dying like animals, proud Athenians behaved like beasts.

Aeneas: Did you question yourself and your city?

Pericles: My confidence did not prevent me from some measure of concern. Worry is a product of our position. I feared for the stability of the state and the outcome of the war, though I hid it well. You must also have struggled with doubts, fleeing destruction and fighting for a new land.

Aeneas: Doubts coupled with grief. Perhaps it is the most difficult duty of a leader of men: hiding one's weakness to preserve the people's strength. I remember cruel Juno battered us with a fearsome storm as our ships limped toward Carthage. I wished my blood had soaked the Trojan fields instead, fearing a dishonorable death upon the crashing seas. As we struggled toward the sheltering shore, Trojan hearts were heavy with despair. I forged counterfeit hope for my people, hiding my pain⁸.

Pericles: Ah, I know that pain. How it tore at me in those dark days, how it tormented me through sleepless nights!

Aeneas: What was the final outcome of the plague?

Pericles: As the fighting continued, the Athenians began to grumble against me. Fear moved them to bitterness and discontent. I had anticipated their fruitless anger and needed to guide them past it. Did you ever face the possibility of rejection by your Trojans?

Aeneas: No, but it was a mere gift of my situation that discord did not destroy our hopes.

⁶ Aeneid, II: 488-490

⁷ History, II: 52-53

⁸ Aeneid, I: 133-143, 290-292

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Pericles: It is true that a founder faces different struggles than a politician. I had my own fears over the circumstances in Greece. The plague had decimated our forces, and the annual Spartan invasion had caused more damage than any before. The Athenians went so far as to send ambassadors to our enemies, so low was their morale.

Aeneas: How did you instill fresh hope and renewed ambition within your once-proud people?

Pericles: The times called for realism over flowery oratory. I reminded the citizens of our naval superiority and of the treasured values they were called to defend. Most importantly, however, I made Athens understand the ramifications of renouncing our imperial dignity.

Aeneas: You mean the loss of military reputation, and political influence?

Pericles: Not only these, but also retribution for what Athenian power had countenanced in the past. The people had been so eager for the rewards of empire, but they had forgotten the obligation to defend it. While it may be wrong to seize the tail of a wild boar, it is even more dangerous to let it go⁹. Having established the empire, for better or for worse, Athens needed to maintain it.

Aeneas: Give me bloody battle with the Latins over such thorny concerns!

Pericles: I admit I sometimes felt the same, though most times I relished the exercise of political skill equal to that of military strategy. As I stood before the crowd, I could not acknowledge my own fears for Athens' safety, but must project the confidence they needed. The individual had to serve as a model for the city. True strength comes in facing calamity with a clear mind and a steady hand¹⁰. It is a lesson held dear by leaders of men, as well you know, Aeneas. Not all can hold true to it, though I hear your descendant is a worthy successor. They know him now as Augustus, or so I hear from the new arrivals.

Aeneas: Even now, Rome moves toward new heights. My descendants rule well, in keeping with the oracle I received from my venerable father.

Pericles: I had forgotten that death was not your first voyage to the underworld. Tell me of that perilous journey.

Aeneas: Living and terrified, I hurried with the Sibyl through the darkness. I had only moments to speak with my lost comrades, to reach in vain for fierce-eyed Dido. When I reached these blessed groves, where the melodies of Orpheus drift through the air and the deserving are crowned with immortal garlands, I saw my beloved father once more. Overcome with wonder, I sought to embrace him, but he slipped through my grasp like a breeze or a dream.

Pericles: Did you speak to his shade?

⁹ History, II: 63

¹⁰ History, II: 64

Aeneas: We spoke, and he showed me unimagined marvels. My father revealed to me the souls who awaited second bodies, who would rise to the world as Italian sons. My own child Silvius, fierce Romulus, great Julius Caesar, even that leader of Rome's golden age stood among them. I saw my nation's future, my proud descendants, arrayed before my eyes. With every blow I struck in the Latin war, I recalled their image; as I thrust my sword into my enemy's heart I remembered my father's words. Rome's art was not to be in the marble or the stars, but in the rulership of nations. Rome would learn to teach the ways of peace, to humble the proud and spare the defeated. These were my father's prophecies¹¹.

Pericles: I was never granted this grace, the knowledge that my city's high position would endure beyond my lifetime.

Aeneas: I hear tell of Athens' defeat, and I grieve for the sorrow it caused you.

Pericles: Regret found me, even in Elysium. I hope you never hear such painful news from the upper world. Athens humiliated by incompetent demagogues! After my death, policies were shaped by private ambition and personal greed. The city's reckless invasion of Sicily was the end of our naval supremacy, prelude to our wretched defeat. And yet the Acropolis still stands, battered but intact. It is a blessing to know Greeks still look upon my great achievement.

Aeneas: I sometimes yearn to walk where broad streets have replaced the wilds I knew, to view the city's mighty buildings, to feel the power of the Roman state. Where I dream of a city I will never see, you long for that which you knew.

Pericles: Knew, and cherished, and shaped in a manner befitting her greatness. With each new morning of my life I fixed my mind and my heart on Athens, and fell in love with her anew¹². Yes, I long for my city, and think often of her people in all their nobility and folly. But my time at her helm has passed.

Aeneas: Now other men live and lead on the earth where we once stood, as it should be.

Pericles: And now we enjoy our rest, and our descendants' reverence. Our struggles were temporary, but our fame is eternal. The brilliance of our past is the glory of our future in the memories of man, even after death¹³.

Aeneas: I see Creusa and Lavinia waiting beneath the trees, with your Aspasia at their side. Let us walk with them through the laurel groves, under these strange and dazzling stars.

Pericles: Let us go to them, my friend.

¹¹ Aeneid, VI: 1129-1137

¹² History, II: 43

¹³ History, II: 64

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