

Bias of Priene

Located in Ionia, Priene was a colony founded by Boeotians from Thebes, but most of its settlers were Ionians from the north Peloponnesian city of Helike.



The most powerful neighbor of Priene was the Kingdom of Lydia. By the year 680 BCE, Gyges became King of Lydia, and he wanted Ionia to be part of his kingdom. After the Lydians had failed to conquer Priene's neighboring city of Miletus, Gyges made peace with the Milesians. Yet in the year 644 BCE, he was killed in battle against the Cimmerians, and so his son Ardys became King of Lydia.

During his reign as King of Lydia, Ardys disregarded his father's peace treaty with the Milesians, and he led the Lydian army to attack Miletus. Although they once again were *unable* to capture Miletus, the Lydians *were* able to capture Priene. Yet in the year 637 BCE, Ardys was killed in battle while fighting against the Cimmerians, and so his son Sadyattes became King of Lydia. Hoping to do what his father and grandfather failed to do, Sadyattes planned to conquer Miletus. Yet in 635 BCE, he was killed in battle against the Cimmerians, and so his son Alyattes became King of Lydia. By the year



625 BCE, the Lydians joined the Scythians in finally defeating the Cimmerians once and for all. As a result, Alyattes was able to expand the territory of the Kingdom of Lydia as far east as the Halys River. At least for now, the cities in the land to the west (such as Miletus and Priene) were safe, but that would change.

Sometime around the year 620 BCE, Bias of Priene was born. Even though very little is known about his background and early life, his ancestors were Boeotians from the city of Thebes, and his father was a man named “Teutamēs”. Yet beyond that, little is known about his background and his early life. According to some sources, Bias was born in Thebes, and then he later moved to Priene. Yet according to other sources, Bias was born in Priene. Moreover, some sources claim that he was born into a rich family, whereas other sources instead claim that he was a laborer, who was employed in the household of a wealthy family. Either way, he would become a legendary figure, and his very first claim to fame came about when he fooled Alyattes (and the Lydians).



1. By the year 612 BCE, the Lydian-Milesian War began when Alyattes led the Lydian army in an attack against the Ionian city of Miletus, which he wanted to make part of the Kingdom of Lydia. Under the leadership of their tyrant Thrasybulus of Miletus, the Milesian army put up a serious fight, but the Milesians were suffering, and the only Greeks who came to their aid were the Ionians of Chios. In fact in the nearby Ionian city of Priene, Bias of Priene advised, “We ought not dwell on the suffering of others.” What do you think? Do you agree with Bias? Why or why not? Explain.

2. Although the Lydian-Milesian War was *primarily* between the Lydians and the Milesians, Miletus was not the only Greek colony involved in the conflict. Indeed by the year 600 BCE,

the Lydian army had captured Smyrna, and it was besieging Priene. As the siege wore on, the Prieneans were prepared to surrender to the Lydians. Priene was running out of food, and its army did not want to keep on fighting. Yet as his city was staring disaster in the face, Bias of Priene said, “It is difficult to face misfortune with a good attitude, but whoever cannot do so is *truly* unfortunate! Nothing is more sweet than hope!”

(a) How is hope good? Explain.



(b) Is hope always good? Why or why not? Explain.

3. Bias of Priene was not about to let the Lydians conquer his city. Indeed, he once had said, “Cherish prudence (or resourcefulness).” Hence in hopes of fooling Alyattes into thinking

that Priene was doing much better than it truly was, Bias fattened two mules, and he sent them off in the direction of the besieging Lydian army. As soon as Alyattes saw how plump and healthy the two mules were, he began to think that Priene was doing so much better than it truly was, so he sent a spy off to Priene to determine whether or not the Prieneans were trying to trick him. Yet in anticipation of what Alyattes would do, Bias remarked, "Naïve men are easily fooled." As the Lydian spy was fast approaching Priene, Bias had his fellow Prieneans build a wall of dirt around the city, and then he had them put lots of food on top of the dirt. As a result, Priene had no more food to eat! Yet upon seeing the wall of dirt with food on top of it, the Lydian spy immediately raced back to Lydia to tell Alyattes about Priene's apparent abundance of food. Trusting his spy's inaccurate information, Alyattes promptly sued for peace with the Prieneans, who happily accepted the offer. Hence as a result of being outwitted by Bias, Alyattes lifted the Lydian army's siege on Priene, which the Lydian army very easily could have captured. After the Lydian army's siege on Priene had been lifted, Alyattes of Lydia invited a young Bias of Priene to visit Lydia as a guest of honor. Yet declining the invitation, Bias instead sent a messenger to tell Alyattes to cry. Indeed speaking to Alyattes through the Prienean messenger, Bias said, "Eat onions!"

- (a) Perhaps explaining his insulting reaction to Alyattes, Bias once remarked, "If a wealthy person is unworthy of your praise, do not praise them merely because they are wealthy." Do you agree with his advice? Why or why not? Explain.
- (b) Bias said, "Merely by chance, many people have become wealthy." For any rich person, does *chance* (or *luck*) ever play a role in how they became rich? Why or why not? Explain.
- (c) When someone asked him is most pleasurable to each and every human being, Bias replied, "Making money is most pleasurable to each and every human being!" Is there anything more pleasurable than making money? Why or why not? Explain.

Thrasybulus of Miletus was friends with Periander of Corinth. By the year 594 BCE, Periander had shipped Thrasybulus a bronze tripod that had been inscribed with an inscription, which read, “To he who is wise!”¹ Yet as the ship transporting the bronze tripod was *en route* from Corinth to Miletus, it was shipwrecked. According to one version of the story, the shipwreck occurred off the coast of Cos, and the bronze tripod fell into the Coan Sea. Yet according to another legend, the shipwreck occurred in the Saronic Gulf, where the bronze tripod fell to the very bottom of the Athenian Sea. Some years later, Athenian fishermen reeled in a bronze tripod from the Saronic Gulf, and they noticed that it had an inscription, which read, “To he who is wise!”



Around the same time that Athenian fishermen had netted the bronze tripod, a group of Messenian maidens had just returned home to Messenia after spending years in captivity. While they were little girls, the Messenian maidens had been taken prisoner, but Bias of Priene paid a ransom for their freedom, and he raised them as if they were his very own daughters. After caring for them, Bias sent the maidens on a ship back to their home in Messenia, where they told their fathers about how kindly Bias had treated them.

Upon being told about what Bias had done, the fathers declared, “Bias is wise!” Hence, the bronze tripod was offered to him. Yet when it was presented to him, Bias politely declined to keep the bronze tripod. In order to explain *why* he had declined to keep it, Bias declared, “Apollo is wise!” Yet according to a different version of how the story ends, Bias had dedicated the bronze tripod to Heracles by sending it off to the Temple of Heracles in Thebes. Either way, Bias said, “Ascribe your good actions to the gods.” Accordingly, he believed that, whenever he did a good deed (such as helping the Messenian maidens), the gods were the real reason why

¹ τῷ σοφῷ

he did the deed. Hence imparting his Delphic Maxim, he said, "Most humans are bad people."

6. If somebody does good deeds *only* because they are encouraged or compelled to do so [by law, by nature, or by the gods (or God)], are they a bad person? Why or why not? Explain.

7. Bias said, "Love your friends as if you'll hate them one day, because most humans are evil." Do you agree? Why or why not? Explain.

8. Bias was a highly pious man, and he often said, "Admit that the gods exist!" Once, he was on a voyage with some impious men. When one of the impious men asked him to define piety, Bias was silent. When he was asked why he didn't answer the question, Bias replied, "I gave no answer, because you are asking questions about what does not concern you."

Then when their ship encountered a storm, the impious men began to call upon the gods for help. Hearing their cries, Bias said, "Quiet! If the gods hear you, then they'll realize that you're here on this ship!" Indeed, if the gods truly did exist, then they would have no apparent reason to help save impious men, because impious men don't honor (or respect) the gods. Alternatively, if the gods *didn't* exist, then it'd be pointless to beg for their help. In fact to this point, Bias said, "It's a disease of the soul to desire things that one can't have." How should people deal with their desires for things that they can't have?

In the year 585 BCE, Alyattes died, and his Carian son Croesus became King of Lydia. By the year 582 BCE, Bias of Priene was regarded as one of the Seven Sages of Greece. Thales of Miletus even said, "Bias is wiser than me!" As a prize for his wisdom, Bias had received a golden tripod, a solid-gold beaker, a golden goblet, and a bowl. At a certain point, he was invited by Croesus to visit Lydia's capital city of Sardis. When he arrived in Sardis, Bias met the five sages Pittacus of Mytilene, Solon of Athens, Cleobulus of Lindos, Chilon of Sparta, and Anacharsis the Scythian. (Thales of Miletus also was invited, but he refused to attend.)

Like many wealthy men, Croesus of Lydia wished to expand his sphere of influence, and so he asked Bias of Priene and Pittacus of Mytilene about the best way to fight a sea battle against the Ionians of the Aegean islands (such as the islands of Samos and Chios). Bias and Pittacus wished to avoid bloodshed, and so they told Croesus the lie that the Ionians were buying ten-thousand war horses to use in a land battle against the Lydian army. Believing the lie, Croesus changed his war plans, and he prepared for a land battle against the Ionians. At that point, Pittacus and Bias told Croesus the lie that the Ionians were also building many new warships. In the end, Croesus decided to ally with the Ionians (rather than attack them). Hence just like how Bias had fooled the father Alyattes, Bias had fooled the son Croesus. Perhaps this is why Bias said, "Naïve men are easily fooled." While visiting Croesus in Lydia, Bias and the five other sages were invited to Corinth by its tyrant Periander, who also invited Thales. This time, Thales actually attended. Perhaps due to his travels, Bias remarked, "Wherever you happen to be, get along well will everyone else there."

9. In reference to Bias of Priene, his contemporary Demodocus of Leros notoriously remarked, "Whenever making a decision, make a Prienean decision." To clarify, a Prienean decision was an excellent decision, because it was the kind of decision that would be made by Bias,

whose admirable reputation as a fair judge had preceded him for and wide.

- (a) Bias said, “Be slow to make a decision. Think before you act!” Should judges or juries always take that advice of his? Why or why not? Explain.
- (b) Bias said, “Once you have made your decision, steadfastly stick to your decision with all of the perseverance that you have.” Should judges or juries *a/ways* take that advice of his? Why or why not Explain.
- (c) Despite his talent, Bias nonetheless was always uneasy about settling a dispute between two of his friends. In fact to this point, he’d remarked, “I’d rather settle a dispute between two of my enemies than between two of my friends. Indeed, if I were to settle a dispute between two of my enemies, then I’d turn one of my enemies into a friend, but if I were to settle a dispute between two of my friends, then I’d be turn one of my friends into an enemy.” What do you think? If you were a mediator of some sort of dispute, which would you prefer: to settle a dispute between your *friends* or to settle a dispute between your *enemies*? Explain.

10. Hipponax of Ephesus said, “For a lawyer, the greatest compliment of all is to be described as being mightier in pleading cases than Bias of Priene.” Throughout the Greek world, Bias had a legendary reputation for being a highly skilled lawyer (or advocate), but he had an even far greater reputation as a man who would advocate *only* for just (or righteous) causes. Around the year 550 BCE, an elderly Bias of Priene was pleading in court on behalf

of his client, who was a victim of some injustice. After pleading his client's case before the judge, Bias rested his head on his grandson's shoulder, and he awaited the judge's verdict. Thanks to how mighty Bias was as an advocate, the judge ruled in favor of his client. Yet by the time that the favorable judgment was made, Bias had died, still resting his head on his grandson's shoulder. Grieving at the loss of their hometown hero, the Prieneans gave him a magnificent funeral, and he remained highly-respected long after his death.

- (a) By the time that he had died, Bias advised, "For the journey from youth to old age, treat wisdom as your most prized possession, because wisdom is a far more reliable resource than any material possession." Do you agree? Why or why not? Explain. (Explain how wisdom is a resource, and explain how it differs from material resources, such as food, water, land, tools, building materials, money, and so on.)

- (b) By the time that he had died, Bias advised, "Live life as if you have both a short time to live and a long time to live." Do you agree? Why or why not? Explain.