

THE SAGES OF ATHENS (by Guillermo Balmori Abella)

The men meet on the steps of the Parthenon. They observe amazed the fantastic final result, the meticulous decoration and harmony of the set. They are the first privileged human beings to see it finish again.

- *No doubt, Phidias, you did an excellent job.*

The man who talks is Pericles, the so-called first citizen of Athens. There is sincere affection in his eyes for his friend Phidias, sculptor of the Parthenon.

The third of them is Herodotus and he also reveals admiration for the amazing monument. He, as a lover of History, is especially interested in the metopes that decorate the building, some of them recreating more or less real events, legends that tell the origin of Greek people.

And so he says:

- *Your statue of Athena is really awesome, my friend. Undoubtedly, future generations will talk about it as your great work. But I think that, without a doubt, the most interesting thing about this temple are those works that tell stories* - he says, pointing to the top - *Those will be the ones which tell our children about the greatness of Athens.*
- *I do agree* - Pericles determines.
- *I´m flattered by your praise, but I think they are the result of your own self-interest. Herodotus, you, as a storyteller, argue that this is what future generations will learn. And you, Pericles, in your vanity, you´d like to think that those same generations will talk about you and your achievements. That´s why you are more interested in those sculptures than that of goddess Athena.*

Herodotus and Pericles don´t answer immediately. They look at each other as letting the other talk first, but they are actually trying to gain time. Maybe Phidias is somehow right but neither of them will admit without trying to challenge him. In the end, the statesman takes the floor:

- *I think, my friend, that in your words there is also the reason for your preferences. Your dedication to sculpture could be interpreted as a yearning for moving on to posterity. It is exactly this need to be remembered what drives you to create the most colossal work of art in our culture.*
- *I couldn´t have said it better!* - Herodotus laughs - *Be honest, Phidias; we all have an interest in our time in the world being remembered.*

Phidias lowers his head. Maybe he also blushes. He turns in his heels and going down the stairs, he walks away from his friends, looking for an appropriate answer to which is certainly a great truth. At last, he finds the words:

- *I won't deny that, like you, I enjoy the recognition so much in the present as in the future. Although, at this point, I will tell you that without a doubt in this aspect I'm in better disposition than you. It's obvious that my work will last longer, and therefore my name will be remembered when yours is but a vague memory in the memory of the Greek people.*
- *I knew it!! - Pericles exclaims - I knew that the need to be eternal also affected you. What I didn't know is that you were so naive, Phidias.*
- *Naive? Why do you say that? - the sculptor asks.*
- *It can't be true that you really think that your name will remain the memory of Greek people for longer than mine. For Athena's sake, who you admire so much! It may sound vain, but it is obvious that the successes achieved by Athens in this century or the victories against the Spartans will be remembered even if there is no stone-on-stone left in this Parthenon or even when the whole Acropolis has disappeared from the surface of the Earth.*
- *Don't even think about it, Pericles! Stone is much more resilient than the memory of the people. What do Egyptians remember about their ancient pharaohs? Not even names. But there are their famous pyramids, facing time, practically intact.*

Herodotus, who has remained attentive to the conversation without intervention, believes it's the moment to do it. But not to agree with any of them but to give his point of view:

- *You are both wrong*

Pericles and Phidias immediately shut up and turn their faces to the historian, who smiles with an air of triumph and watches them, although he has already reached the end of the staircase as if he was above them. After his interruption, he turns his steps and continues walking. The other two rush to finish going down as fast as their tunics and their age allow them and reach Herodotus at the same time.

- *What do you mean?*
- *Who will be most remembered, according to you?*

The aforementioned goes on walking, smiling and without answering. He enjoys his moment of glory and the bitter anguish that the pride of his friends is suffering. Few steps further, and without stopping, begins to explain his point of view:

- *My friends, both of you are wrong because you both forget what the people really remember. It is true, as Phidias says, that sometimes buildings last longer than the memory of our heroes but - raising his hand interrupting the sculptor's gesture of triumph - but it's also, as Pericles defends, that in other occasions we remember events of the peoples from which no material remains have reached us.*

Now Pericles seems to be most satisfied with the explanation but both he as Phidias seem intrigued:

- *So, which of us will be most remembered, in your opinion as a scholar of History?*

And the answer leaves both of them equally surprised.

- *Me, of course.*
- *How? You? Explain yourself.*
- *It's easy. In the future, this work to which I dedicate my days will be of vital importance. Neither the most outstanding heroes nor the most excellent monuments will be remembered if we don't keep a memory of them. And there, my friends, is where the work of a historian is essential.*

The silence of Phidias and Pericles is intense but brief. In just a few seconds, both answer at the same time repeating again their arguments to refute Herodotus. Soon the discussion turns out to be unproductive, with the three men talking at once and even losing composure.

In this way, the three reach the forum. There, the activity is very little because the afternoon has advanced quickly and light begins to be scarce. When they realise it, they keep silent and look around, surprised at how far their steps have reached and how little their intellectual positions have reached.

- *You don't want to agree with me but you both know I'm right* - Pericles determines, undoubtedly the most accustomed to saying the last word.
- *This is not a debate in the Assembly, I think it won't be so easy to reach an agreement* - Phidias protests.

Herodotus doesn't answer. He looks at the few people still walking on the street like looking for someone and finally, he turns to his friends with an idea:

- *I make you a proposal. As it is very clear that each of us has a particular view of reality, influenced by our own interests, let's find someone to act as an impartial judge and give us the solution to our debate.*
- *And who can we choose from this collection of ignorants?* - asks Pericles with superiority - *A shopkeeper? A cartwright?*

Phidias jokes:

- *Or a slave? Or that woman who is walking away?*

Herodotus ignores their jokes and replies seriously:

- *None of them. I thought of that blind old man who begs. Nothing could be more suitable to exercise justice. And besides, don't tell me he looks like Homer himself.*

His two friends stop their comments and look at each other with surprise, but, little by little, both of them nod:

- *Ok. But don't tell him who we are* - Phidias suggests.

The three men approach to the blind man. Herodotus bends down to talk to him while he puts a coin in his plate. The man raises his empty gaze towards them and thanks to them with a barely noticeable gesture. Herodotus explains him the situation and the old man smiles toothlessly. After meditating for a while, he replies:

- *I think I have the solution but I'm afraid none of you will like it. It's true that sometimes we do remember the name of those who govern us but it is also true that men's work can last longer than their memory. And it's also true that in these times it seems that the work of those who write about both will have more and more importance. But* - he goes on after a short pause - *this time we are living won't be remembered for these achievements.*
- *And why will it be remembered?* - asks Pericles
- *Without a doubt* - replies the old man, very sure of what he is saying - *thanks to our form of government. democracy is our great legacy.*

The three men nod. This old man has given them an unexpected answer although they can't deny he's right. But they will be even more astonished with his following answer when they insist again:

- *But then, who will be more remembered?*

The blind man raises his head again, fixes his lifeless eyes on those of the three men observing him anxiously and adds in a deep voice:

- *Me, of course, that I'm the people. That's what democracy is about.*

VOCABULARY

Sages: wise men

Metopes: spaces in a Doric frieze.

Praise: speak highly about somebody

Take the floor: start talking in a meeting

Yearning: an intense desire

To blush: sudden reddening of the face

Aforementioned: mentioned earlier

Outstanding: exceptional

Cartwright: the person who makes carts

Nod: say yes with the head

Approach: move nearer