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# Thucydides

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## 14

The Humanitarian Aspect  
of the Melian Dialogue

Brian Bosworth

My title is deliberately provocative. What could be less humanitarian than the Melian Dialogue? For most readers of Thucydides it is the paradigm of imperial brutality,<sup>1</sup> ranking with the braggadocio of Sennacherib's Rabshakeh in its insistence upon the coercive force of temporal power.<sup>2</sup> The Melians are assured that the rule of law is not applicable to them. As the weaker party they can only accept the demands of the stronger and be content that they are not more extreme. Appeals to moral or religious norms are quite irrelevant, for in their position the Melians simply cannot afford them—as little as Mr. Doolittle could afford middle-class morality. The message is a hard one, and it has elicited outrage over the centuries from the majority of scholars (usually comfortable citizens of a colonial empire) who tend to prefer the *kala onomata* of propaganda to the harsh underlying realities

<sup>1</sup> For bibliography to 1970 see William C. West III, in Stadter [014] 158–60 (there is also a review of scholarship in S. Cagnazzi, *La spedizione ateniese contro Melo del 416 a.C.* [Bari 1983] 85–90). I have found most helpful the two treatments by the late A. Andrewes: 'The Melian Dialogue and Perikles' last speech', *PCPS* 6 (1960), 1–10, and in *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 155–92 (Andrewes' comments are interlaced with—and usually subvert—the original notes by Gomme). See also G. Deininger, *Der Melier-Dialog* (Erlangen-Bruck, 1939); Romilly [373]; W. Liebeschuetz, 'Structure and function of the Melian Dialogue', *JHS* 88 (1968), 73–7; Macleod [372]. This material will be referred to by author's name. Other literature will be cited as it is relevant.

<sup>2</sup> The most recent addition to the literature, Canfora [371] begins with a comparison between the Melian Dialogue and the Rabshakeh's intervention at Jerusalem (5–10).

of imperial expansion.<sup>3</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus, writing shortly after a war to protect western values had resulted in a new world order, finds it inconceivable that Athenian generals could discount divinely-inspired hope and insist on the imperative of force or that the Melians, that tiny state, would prefer the nobler to the safer course.<sup>4</sup> In this he is echoed by George Grote, writing in the expansionist days of the early nineteenth century: 'a civilized conqueror is bound by received international morality to furnish some justification—a good plea, if he can—a false plea or a sham plea if he has not better'.<sup>5</sup> Instead, says Grote, the Athenian envoy 'disdains the conventional arts of civilized diplomacy'; and the inevitable conclusion for him, as it had been for Dionysius, is that the Dialogue is fundamentally bogus, a composition of Thucydides 'to bring out the sentiments of a disdainful and confident conqueror in dramatic antithesis'.

Grote interprets the Dialogue as the most extreme expression of the imperial ideology. That is the modern consensus. Even Tony Andrewes, that most sensitive and sophisticated of commentators, saw the Dialogue as the outcome of Thucydides' private meditations on the morality of power, illustrating in the privacy of a closed conclave the timeless truth that great powers in fact pursue their own interests.<sup>6</sup> I would not deny that there is some validity in this approach. What the Athenians say in the Dialogue is of course echoed in other speeches where the context is explicitly the justification for empire and the defence of

<sup>3</sup> 'Few can read the Dialogue with comfort' wrote Andrewes (*PCPS* 6 [1960] 9). The typical verdict is that of Liebeschuetz: 'An outstanding feature of the Melian Dialogue is the repulsive' (so Andrewes) 'form in which the Athenian arguments are expressed. They characterise the Athenians as bullying and arrogant to the weak, boundlessly self-confident, lacking humility even towards the gods.' See also the remarkable effusion of Hermann Strasburger, *Studien zu alten Geschichte* (Hildesheim, 1982), vol. 2, 993, who has the Athenians 'brainwash' the Melians by a dialectical destruction of their intellectual and moral foundations and finds consolation in their failure ('einzigster Trost, dass sie nicht gelingt' ['the only consolation is that it does not succeed']).

<sup>4</sup> Dion. Hal. *Th.* 40–1; cf. W. K. Pritchett, *Dionysius of Halicarnassus: On Thucydides* (Berkeley 1975) 32–4 (note the quotation of B. E. Perry at 126 n. 12).

<sup>5</sup> I quote from the edition of 1862 (London, John Murray): 5.101–3.

<sup>6</sup> *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 186, slightly modifying his earlier position (*PCPS* 6 [1960] 5, 9–10). Compare too de Romilly 297, arguing that the Athenians present the 'basic essence' of imperialism: 'They go beyond the Athenians of 416 and reach the very basis of imperialism, with the fixed intention of explaining the laws which govern its development'. The same view is expressed by Deininger 51–81, esp. 61.

empire.<sup>7</sup> But the Melian Dialogue is significantly different. It presents two sides and two perspectives. The overwhelming tendency in modern times is to see it exclusively from the Athenian side, to look for justification and explanation of the action against Melos. But the dilemma of the Melians is equally compelling, the dilemma of a small state facing insuperable odds and deciding between capitulation and resistance. Thucydides may have agonised over the morality of empire, but he also sympathised deeply with the problems of what has been described as 'the Greek Third World';<sup>8</sup> the small run-of-the-mill *poleis* which had to chart a perilous course between the great powers of the day. The Dialogue, I shall argue, is more concerned with the Melians than it is with the Athenians. It emphasises the delusive and destructive effects of patriotic catchwords, and focuses upon the immediate practical choice: either incorporation in the empire on favourable terms or resistance and destruction. The morality of empire is a secondary, almost irrelevant issue. What matters is the Melians' response to the Athenian threat. Thucydides makes it brutally plain that they must compromise their independence or their existence, and the purpose of the Dialogue is to force them to a decision which minimises suffering on all sides.

### I. THE SETTING OF THE DIALOGUE

Perhaps the most frequent error in the literature on the Dialogue is disregard of its context. The speeches in Thucydides are placed with especial care, and they do not always appear at the most obvious point in the narrative. The Mytilenean debate comes not at the original vote of the death penalty but during the second session, when the question was reconsidered.<sup>9</sup> That allows a greater depth and

<sup>7</sup> Notably the stress on fear as a motive force for imperialism (cf. 1.75.3–5; 2.63.1–2; 3.37.2, 40.4; vi 18.2–3; 6.85.1, 87.1–2). De Romilly 289–90 makes much of the restriction of the motivation to fear, but fails to note its particular relevance to the situation of the Melians.

<sup>8</sup> Coined (apparently) by H. J. Gehrke, *Jenseits von Athen und Sparta: Das dritte Griechenland und seine Staatenwelt* (Munich, 1986). Cf. David Whitehead, *Aineias the Tactician* (Oxford, 1990), 2–4.

<sup>9</sup> Th. 3.36.5–6. Thucydides implies (36.2) that the initial vote of condemnation was carried in a mood of anger, and the debate may not have been as subtle as its

greater wealth of themes, not least the need for consistency in political resolution. Similarly the issues of the Sicilian expedition are debated only after the first decision to send the fleet,<sup>10</sup> and the dramatic disagreement between the generals can take its full tragic force. When we turn to the context of the Melian Dialogue, it is evident that its primary aim cannot be to explain or justify Athenian imperialism. It is not staged at Athens before the sovereign assembly, where the morality and expediency of the expedition against Melos might have been fully expounded. It comes at a point at which the fate of the island is already decided—by Athens at least. The expedition has been voted, its composition determined, its generals commissioned by the *demos*.<sup>11</sup> The army is settled on Melian soil, poised to take the first step of ravaging the land, but first the generals send envoys to make representations (5.84.3).<sup>12</sup> Those representations can

sequel. But contrary opinions were voiced and Cleon's proposal was approved (*enenikênai hôste apokteinai* 'that the proposal to kill them had won'). Thucydides, had he wished, could have restricted the debate to the merits of execution and enslavement—but Cleon would have ended as victor.

<sup>10</sup> Th. 6.8.2–4 (cf. 6.6.2–3). See W. Kohl [352] for full discussion of the content of the speeches.

<sup>11</sup> Th. 5.84.1–2. Thucydides names the generals and gives the Athenian and allied contingents. He also recapitulates Melos' history of neutrality, which had resulted in Athens' ravaging her land in the past (e.g. by Nicias in 426—a rather desultory operation by a force intended for action elsewhere [3.91.1–4 with Andrewes' comment at *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 156 n. 1]) and ultimately in a state of war. What the state of war amounted to or what Athens' specific grievances were (*adikoumenoi nun* 'currently being wronged': 5.89) Thucydides does not say, and he did not consider it important. What mattered was the military situation of the Melians, and he leaves that in no doubt.

<sup>12</sup> I assume that the envoys at Melos were private emissaries sent by the generals, much as Cleon in 422 sent his own delegates to do business with the dynasts of Macedon and Thrace (Th. 5.6.2). However, as Simon Hornblower has observed (in conversation and correspondence), the envoys are later termed ambassadors of the Athenians (5.84.3, 114.1). That might suggest that they had been instructed by the Council of Five Hundred, not the generals on the spot, and had some latitude in negotiation. But Thucydides expresses himself quite unambiguously: 'before inflicting any damage on the land the generals sent envoys to make representation first'. If these envoys were commissioned by the Athenian state, his wording is perversely misleading. On the other hand, as envoys of the generals, they were *ipso facto* representatives of the Athenians in the invasion force (cf. 84.1: *Athênaioi estrateusan* 'the Athenians made an expedition'), and are quite properly termed envoys of the Athenians. Indeed, if the Council did send an official delegation, one would expect it at an earlier stage. Once the expedition was launched, there were precise instructions from the *dêmos*, which the generals were obliged to implement (cf. Th. 3.3.1, 4.2 on the outbreak of hostilities at Mytilene).

only be to convince the Melians to surrender before they suffered damage or the Athenians casualties. That was seen long ago by Thomas Hobbes, who had the advantage of writing in 1629, before the advent of modern imperialism. In answer to Dionysius' strictures upon the content of the Dialogue he focused squarely upon its context: 'howsoever, if the Athenian people gave in charge to these their captains, to take in the island by all means whatsoever, without power to report back unto them first the equity of the islanders' cause; as is most likely to be true; I see no reason the generals had to enter into disputation with them, whether they should perform their charge or not, but only whether they should do it by fair or foul means; which is the point treated in this dialogue.<sup>13</sup>

Hobbes, I think, was absolutely right. Cleomedes and Teisias, the generals at Melos, had their instructions from the assembly, and they disregarded them at their peril. They will have remembered the fate of the generals of 426/5, who were exiled and fined for their presumed failure in Sicily, or, more pertinently, the generals at Potidaea who were censured for negotiating a settlement without reference to the *dêmos*.<sup>14</sup> That settlement was draconian, but not sufficiently so to satisfy the Athenian commons. Even when the generals were free to negotiate (*autokratores*)—and there is no suggestion of that in the case of Melos—they might still refuse to take any radical step without direct authorisation.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the Melians said in reply to their embassy, Cleomedes and Teisias would certainly not withdraw

<sup>13</sup> From Hobbes' address to his readers. I am quoting from vol. 8 of *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London, 1843), p. xxix. Hobbes' observation is not unique. Romilly [373] (273), for instance, begins with a concise statement of the context of the dialogue ('to obtain the surrender of the island'), which she then largely ignores for its 'wider and more general significance'. So too M. Amit, 'The Melian Dialogue and History', *Athenaeum* 46 (1968), 216–35, esp. 234–5 (arguing that the Melians then get the better of the debate). The closest approximation I can find to the position expressed by Hobbes and defended in this paper is G. E. M. de Ste. Croix [078] 13–16, 21–2 (see also Andrewes, *HCT* vol. 4, 185, para. 5).

<sup>14</sup> Th. 2.70.2–4 (Potidaea). A still more apposite case is that of the fourth century general, Callisthenes, who made a unilateral truce with Perdicas of Macedon and was impeached and executed for his pains (M. H. Hansen, *Eisangelia* [Odense, 1975], 93–4). See in general the comments of R. K. Sinclair, *Democracy and Participation in Athens* (Cambridge, 1988), 146–52.

<sup>15</sup> As did Nicias at Syracuse (Th. 8.48.3). The behaviour of the *dêmos* was not the sole factor in his refusal, but it was undeniably important (cf. 7.14.4).

their forces and explain to the *dêmos* that its commission was a violation of the traditional norms of justice! The grounds of debate were strictly limited. Would the Melians surrender immediately and accept a settlement which subjected them to tribute and control by Athens but would leave them with their own territory and institutions,<sup>16</sup> or would they resist and risk annihilation? In that context the morality of the expedition was irrelevant. Right or wrong, just or unjust, it had been commissioned and the Melians had to face that fact. If they were to persuade the Athenians to withdraw, they needed very solid proof that withdrawal was in the Athenian interest. The type of argument required was something like Euphemus' ingenious harangue at Camarina, proving that Athenian self-interest required the continuing autonomy of her Sicilian allies and that Camarina required the Athenian alliance for her survival.<sup>17</sup> The Melians would have to do the same and show that by leaving them independent Athens lost nothing and gained something. The circumstances anchored debate firmly to questions of utility.

The harsh tone adopted by the Athenians is also provoked by the circumstances. The debate concerned only a select few, the Athenian envoys on the one hand and on the other the magistrates and voting members of the Melian oligarchy.<sup>18</sup> They were the members of the state who had a vested interest in retaining independence of Athens, and they refused to introduce the envoys to a plenary assembly where some of the members at least would be sympathetic to capitulation. At a later date the government of the newly reconstituted city of Mantinea flatly refused to allow King Agesilaus to address the assembly,<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *xummachous genesthai echontas tèn humeteran autôn hupoteleis* 'become tributary allies while retain their own land' (5.111.4).

<sup>17</sup> Th. 6.84–6. Note the summary at 6.86.3 (we cannot remain in Sicily without your help and we could not hold you in subjugation because of the distance involved; while you have the continuing threat of your powerful neighbour and will succumb if we depart). See also n. 50, below.

<sup>18</sup> *en de tais archais kai tois oligois legein ekeleuon* 'they bade them speak among the officeholders and the few' (5.84.3). Nothing is known of the constitution of Melos or the numbers involved in the oligarchy (cf. Andrewes, *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 159). The Melian participants are more likely to have numbered dozens rather than hundreds, but even so there would be enough to ensure that the details of the debate were widely known.

<sup>19</sup> Xen. *Hell.* 6.5.4. For the background see M. Moggi, *I sinecismi interstatali greci* (Pisa, 1976), 251–6 and my remarks in 'Autonomia: the use and abuse of political terminology', *SIFC* 106 (1992), 123–53, esp. 139–40.

and that was at a period when Sparta was weak and unpopular and there was general enthusiasm for the synoecism at Mantinea. Even so, it was felt prudent to protect the *dêmos* from Agesilaus' powers of persuasion. The Melian situation was far more precarious, and the oligarchic government deliberately restricted the audience to those most likely to resist the Athenian blandishments.<sup>20</sup> That determined the tone of the debate. The Athenians had an audience predisposed to reject their overtures and they could only confront them with the reality of their position in the bluntest terms. Harsh their language undoubtedly is, but it has a humanitarian end, to convince the Melian oligarchs of the need to capitulate and save themselves and the commons the horrors of a siege. If they acted sensibly, there would be no bloodshed, or even damage to property. In that context the rhetoric is not extreme. It contrasts favourably with (say) the language Shakespeare puts in the mouth of that noted psychopath, Henry V of England, when he browbeats the governor of Harfleur into surrender:

'This is the latest parle we will admit.  
Therefore to our best mercy give yourselves,  
Or like to men proud of destruction  
Defy us to our worst. For, as I am a soldier...  
I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur  
Till in her ashes she lie buried.'

(*Henry V* iii. 3.2-9)

The Athenians are less hyperbolic. They understate the horrors of capture, while making it clear that the Melians risk destruction, and there is a real urgency in their final appeal. Do not think it shameful to accede to a reasonable demand from a superior power and do not be misled by a perverse sense of honour. The very survival of your city depends on this single deliberation and you should reflect many times over before giving your answer.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The Athenians imply that the assembly (or rather, the commons) would be attracted by their arguments (5.85). That is no doubt true and is supported (but not confirmed) by the fact that there was later treachery in the city (5.116.3: cf. *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 190).

<sup>21</sup> 5.111.4-5. Even Gomme (*HCT* [032] vol. 4, 179) conceded that 'there is almost a sincerity in this appeal'. That puts it rather churlishly.

## II. THE SENSELESSNESS OF RESISTANCE

Viewed as a compulsion to surrender, the final portion of the Dialogue makes perfect sense. The Melians are forced relentlessly to admit that their position is untenable from any rational calculation and their only resource is hope in the gods, in the Spartans and in the justice of their cause.<sup>22</sup> The first part is more complex. The debate moves sharply from theme to theme, and the Athenians have been thought (by some at least) to concede ground.<sup>23</sup> But here again the argument is closely correlated to the Melians' military and political situation. While their interlocutors attempt to divert the issue to questions of right and morality, the Athenians firmly keep the focus upon the present realities. Indeed they threaten to break off the debate (5.87) if the Melians address anything other than the actual, visible situation which confronts them. In practice they are more flexible, and they do present a justification of the invasion; but the justification emphasises the fragility of the Melians' predicament. The Melians are shown indirectly that they have nothing to rely upon and nothing remotely advantageous to offer their aggressors, and the way is paved for the final explicit exchanges which show them devoid of anything but hope.

The first exchanges show the interplay of practical realism and emotive moralizing. The Melians accept the Athenian invitation to discuss the crisis step by step but protest against their situation. Their interlocutors are not equal partners in the debate but control its outcome, which will be war or slavery for them, the Melians (5.86). The language is provocative. It equates the settlement the Athenians propose with servitude (*douleia*) and takes it as axiomatic that the Melians will resist if they show they have right on their side

<sup>22</sup> 5.102-10, neatly summarised at 5.112.

<sup>23</sup> e.g. Romilly [373] 294; Liebeschuetz 75 ('Thucydides has deliberately drawn the Athenians as wrong and deluded'); Amit, *Athenaeum* 46 (1968), 234 ('in the rhetorical contest it was the Melians who had the upper hand'); Macleod [372] 391-3; Hussey [127] esp. 127. A very different picture emerges if one accepts Cagnazzi's reorganisation of the Dialogue (above, n. 1, 10-28), which ascribes 5.86-7 to the Melians and 5.88-91 *in toto* to the Athenians. On this reading (which is very hard to swallow) the Athenians begin politely and in conciliatory vein, only to encounter rudeness and intransigence from the Melians (Cagnazzi 29-41).

(*perigenomois* . . . *tôi dikaiôi*).<sup>24</sup> That leads to the first blunt Athenian threat (5.87). What matters is the city's immediate salvation (*sôteria*) and that is the only subject they will admit to the debate.<sup>25</sup> Their language is almost as emotive as the Melians'. They see the issue from the perspective of the invading army, the Melians from that of a ruling élite which would lose its independence under Athens. But the Athenians, as both sides admit, control the debate. They refuse to discuss the nature of the eventual settlement or anything other than the immediate survival of Melos. Their interlocutors have no choice, although they grudgingly state that equity and compassion should allow them to make any and every argument and claim (5.88). To this the Athenians reply with the ground rules of the debate. It is not a question of *kala onomata* ('pretty words'), justification of Athenian imperialism or Melian neutrality, but of immediate practicalities—what each side genuinely considers within its reach. They add that decisions on the basis of justice are made when equal necessity applies to both sides;<sup>26</sup> the achievable is what is exacted by the superior and conceded by the weak. That excludes questions of justice as inappropriate in a debate between participants who are not subject to the same constraints.

Interestingly the first response of the Melians is to circumvent the rules, claiming that it is in the Athenians' advantage to allow appeals to reason and justice; for they may possibly stand in need of similar leniency themselves if they are eventually defeated (5.90). As Gomme observed, there is an echo here of the Plataean defence. Unable to

<sup>24</sup> This is well discussed by Macleod [372] 389–90, emphasising the emotive quality of the language but rather understating the force of the Athenian case. The Athenians do not 'gloss over the fact that survival entails enslavement'. One could object that the Melians gloss over the fact that surrender guaranteed their survival as a civic entity. It was slavery only in the most metaphorical sense, whereas resistance could—and did—bring slavery in its fullest form. In fact no Athenian speaker in Thucydides calls submission to empire *douleia*, though it is conceded that it was a restriction upon *eleutheria* ('freedom'). In certain circumstances it could be seen as release from actual *douleia* (cf. 6.20.2; 6.82.4).

<sup>25</sup> The Athenians dismiss the Melians' foreboding of impending slavery as supposition about the future (*huponoias tôn mellontôn*). That can hardly refer to the terms of settlement which are clearly stated at 5.111.4 (above, n. 16); it is what the terms would mean in practice. There is to be no speculation about the limits of autonomy under Athenian rule. The issue at present is security and the practicality of resistance.

<sup>26</sup> 5.89. See the full discussion III below with nn. 45–9.

satisfy the *brachu eperôtêma* ('short question') posed by their Spartan judges, the Plataeans had launched on an admittedly irrelevant appeal to justice in the hope of avoiding condemnation that was otherwise inevitable.<sup>27</sup> The Melians in effect concede their situation to be hopeless, but the Athenians do not immediately press the point. They first dispose of the fantasy about their ultimate downfall, arguing that they will never be in the same jeopardy as the Melians. If their defeat comes, they will be negotiating with the Spartans, not their own embittered allies (5.91),<sup>28</sup> and so they will not risk destruction or stand in need of the *koinon agathon* ('advantage shared by all') of moralising irrelevancy. The Athenians stress that they are not at odds with the Spartans and so their hypothetical downfall is far removed (as is Spartan help from Melos). They also make an important generalisation: imperial powers tend to be lenient to the vanquished. In that they clearly include themselves. Within the context of their empire they wish the best for Melos, as they go on to claim. Their object is to annex Melos without bloodshed, so that her continued existence will be of advantage to both parties. The Melians are not facing destruction, provided that they act sensibly and submit to the imperial power. That is the positive side of the argument, to which the Melians respond emotively yet again; how could it be as advantageous for them to suffer enslavement (i.e. submit) as it is for the Athenians to add them to the

<sup>27</sup> See particularly 3.53.3 (adduced by Deininger 10 n. 15): *καὶ γὰρ ὁ μὴ ῥηθεὶς λόγος τοῖς ᾧδ' ἔχουσιν αἰτίαν ἂν παράσχοι ὡς, εἰ ἐλέχθη, σωτήριος ἂν ᾔην* ('For people in our situation a failure to give a speech would incur the charge that, if it had been given, it might have saved us'. Cf. Macleod [336], esp. 103–4).

<sup>28</sup> I am not here concerned with the evergreen controversy whether the passage was written in the light of Athens' final defeat in 404 (for the issues see the recent discussion by Rawlings [220] 243–9, arguing that the Dialogue would have been structurally central in Thucydides' completed work). Andrewes (*PCPS* vi [1960] 3–4; *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 166–7) seems to me correct in emphasising that the thought is quite consistent with composition during the war, before Athens' downfall. Thucydides seems to envisage a disjunction between defeat by Sparta and defeat by insurgent allies and has the Athenians arguing that the first alternative is the more likely. He is not even raising the possibility of coalition between Sparta and Athens' former subjects (cf. Rawlings [220] 244–5, n. 43). The most favoured scenario is probably defeat of Athens in a land war, as the Peloponnesian League had intended during the Archidamian War; she might be forced to surrender while her empire was intact. In that case there is no necessity to conclude that Thucydides had the events of 404 in his mind.

empire?<sup>29</sup> The answer comes plain and unambiguous. You would escape the extremities of suffering and we would profit by not destroying you.<sup>30</sup> It could not be clearer that the Melians' salvation is in their own hands. The confrontation with reality is harsh and explicit.

We may leave the subsequent development of the argument and turn to a climax. The Athenians discount reprisals they might suffer from other neutral states. Their action against Melos would only be seen as a threat by the weakest members of the Hellenic world (5.99), and they observe with some emphasis that it is the weakest party that is most prone to take a course contrary to reason and commit everybody to a peril that was foreseeable and foreseen. Here Thucydides combines two dominant themes, the contrast between reason and irrationality and the folly of preferring future hope to present reality, and brings the first stage of the Dialogue to an emphatic close. The Melians have been confronted with their poverty of resource, and their feeble efforts to argue from expediency have been effectively countered. All that they can do now is to expand the pleas of justice with which they began the Dialogue and expound their reasons for expecting help from the gods and the Spartans. It is conceded that they have no hope of survival on the current balance sheet of resources, and they can only call upon the most intangible of assets. There is already ample justification for the Athenians' parting comment: 'in our opinion you are unique<sup>31</sup> in taking from these deliberations the conviction that future events are plainer than the situation before your eyes and viewing what is uncertain as a present actuality in your volition' (5.113).

For the Athenians the Melian position is the ultimate triumph of hope over expediency, and the appeals to justice are simply an evasion of reality. But the exclusion of *kala onomata* is an important theme,

<sup>29</sup> 5.92. The language (*xhrêsimon... douleusai... arxai*, "useful... be slaves... rule") is a deliberate echo of the Athenians' last distinction (5.91.2), except that *douleusai* is deliberately substituted for *sôthênai* 'be saved' (cf. Macleod [372] 390).

<sup>30</sup> 5.93. *hêmeis de mê diaphtheirantes humas kerdainoimen an* 'we would profit from not having destroyed you'. This seems a clear statement (*pace* De Ste. Croix [078] 21) that the Athenians envisaged the total destruction of Melos if she resisted annexation (cf. 3.56.6 *dedimen mê diaphtharômen* 'we are afraid of being destroyed').

<sup>31</sup> *monoi ge*. This is not simply unreal exaggeration (Andrewes, *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 181). The Athenians do not imply that other people have not been equally deluded. Their emphasis is on the present deliberations. The Melians are uniquely perverse in cherishing their fantasy even after it has been exploded by every rational argument.

dealt with at length in the opening exchanges and recapitulated in the final warning not to be misled by the persuasive force of an attractive catchword (5.111.3). For many scholars this exemplifies the degeneration of moral terminology which Thucydides illustrates and stigmatises in his Corcyrean digression; in their opinion the Athenians rewrite the language of moral discourse to serve their immediate interests.<sup>32</sup> On the contrary I would argue that the Athenians use highly traditional arguments and it is the Melian position which is sophistical. A parallel may make this clearer. The closest Thucydides comes in his own right to echoing the language of the Melian Dialogue is when he criticises the wisdom of the cities which swallowed Brasidas' propaganda and revolted after his capture of Amphipolis. They underestimated Athens' military power, judging the issue by the clouded eye of volition rather than calculations based on security, and followed the human tendency to back their desires with uncritical hope and use sovereign reason only to reject what they find unpalatable.<sup>33</sup> The sentiment—and the language—is exactly paralleled in the Athenian criticism of the Melians—and Thucydides also stresses the attractive and mendacious nature of Brasidas' overtures (*epholka kai ou ta onta*).<sup>34</sup> The substance of this judgement is amply illustrated by Brasidas' initial speech to the Acanthians, which exhorts them to join the crusade for the liberation of Greece and embrace an autonomy which they cannot refuse without betraying the general cause of liberty.<sup>35</sup> The speech ends in an emotive haze of abstracts (into which Brasidas cunningly inserts a warning that the Acanthian harvest is at his mercy), invoking freedom, everlasting glory and urging his audience to invest the entire city with the fairest name (*to kalliston onoma*). Brasidas had a standard pitch, as Thucydides repeatedly emphasises. His mission, he always stated, was

<sup>32</sup> See (e.g.) Finley [038] 211, comparing the Athenians' insistence that humans believe that the gods endorse the rule of force (5.105.2—hardly 'superior power sanctions any conduct' [my italics]), with the general statement at 3.82.6 that 'belief in divine law vanished' (again a misrepresentation).

<sup>33</sup> 4.108.4, echoing the Athenian remarks at 5.103.2, 111.2–3 and 113.

<sup>34</sup> 4.108.5 (cf. 88.1); compare 6.8.1 (*epagoga kai ouk alêthê* 'seductive and untrue') with 5.85 and 111.3.

<sup>35</sup> 4.85.5, 87.2–5 (cf. 87.5: *an adikoimen, ei xumpasin autononiam epipherontes humas tous enantioumenous periidoimen* 'we (Spartans) would be unjust if while we are bestowing autonomy on all we were to overlook your opposition to us'). There is also an echo of the Athenian arguments at 5.95–7 when Brasidas insists that it would fatally weaken the Spartan cause if the first city he approached failed to respond (4.85.6).



the liberation of Greece, and the message to Acanthus was repeated in similar terms—and fatefully—at Torone and Scione.<sup>36</sup> All were deluded by specious oratory to confront superior forces.

Scione is of course the paradigm case. At the news of the city's revolt (two days after the truce of 423) Brasidas made a surreptitious entry and praised the populace to the skies. His main point of commendation was that they were virtually islanders (like the Melians), enclosed within the peninsula of Pallene and particularly vulnerable to Athenian power,<sup>37</sup> but they had defected without coercion. They would be considered the truest friends of Sparta and honoured accordingly. But the fine words meant little in practice. Brasidas made little effort to defend Pallene. The wives and children of some at least of the defenders of Scione and Mende were evacuated to Olynthus<sup>38</sup> while Brasidas took the majority of his Peloponnesian troops as well as allied forces from Chalcidice and assisted the Macedonian king Perdiccas in his expansionary campaign against Arrhabaeus, dynast of remote Lyncestis. The insurgent cities of Pallene were left to face the avenging expeditionary force from Athens with 500 Peloponnesian hoplites and 300 Chalcidian hoplites.<sup>39</sup> Vastly outnumbered, they had no hope of defending themselves. Mende fell immediately, thanks to internal dissension, and the Athenian generals wisely prevented a general massacre, confirming the citizen body in its property and polity.<sup>40</sup> The people of Scione would have had hopes that the strict terms of the decree of Cleon, which promised death and enslavement, would

<sup>36</sup> 4.114.3 (Torone); 120.3 (Scione); 5.9.9.

<sup>37</sup> 4.120.3: *ontes ouden allo è nêsîôtai autappangeltoi exhôrêsan pros tèn epeutherian*. This fatally echoes and inverts the Athenian declaration at Melos (5.97) and recalls Cleon's indictment of Mytilene (3.39.2). It comes as no surprise that Cleon proposed slaughter and enslavement for Scione (4.122.6).

<sup>38</sup> 4.123.4. The evacuation was apparently far from complete (cf. 5.32.1).

<sup>39</sup> 4.123.4, 129.3. The Athenian expeditionary force comprised 50 triremes and a fighting force of some 3,000 (Athenian hoplites, archers, Thracian mercenaries and local peltasts)—not perhaps of high calibre but far outnumbering the defenders. Brasidas had taken 3,000 hoplites into Macedon (4.124.1) and irreparably weakened the resistance to Athens in Pallene.

<sup>40</sup> 4.130.6–7. Mende had revolted at a significantly later date than Scione (4.123.1–2) and should have incurred the same sanctions (*polloi eti mallon orgisthentes* 'The Athenians were) now much more angry' 123.3). Her comparatively lenient treatment must have given some hope at Scione.

not be enforced. Even so there was no surrender. Scione was blockaded by land and sea by the end of summer (4.133.4), and no Spartan attempt to relieve her is recorded. The Peace of Nicias explicitly abandoned the defenders (other than Brasidas' men) to the tender mercies of the Athenians (5.18.7–8). Shortly afterwards the city was forced to surrender, its male population slaughtered and the remaining women and children enslaved (5.32.1). The fine promises of Brasidas had brought utter ruin in two short years.

By the time of the Melian Dialogue Thucydides has given us a surfeit of propaganda. Now it is time for realities. Melos was a comparatively small state. Its population numbered perhaps 3,000, and its contribution to the Hellenic cause in 480 had been two pentekonters.<sup>41</sup> It faced an Athenian invasion force of 38 triremes and 3,000 fighting men. The numbers were quite overwhelming. Even the detachment which the Athenians left to conduct the siege probably matched Melos' entire male population. It could not be more apparent that resistance was suicidal, and then, if ever, calculations of utility should have taken the first priority. That is the blunt message which the Athenian envoys convey to the Melian oligarchs. They are weak and their very weakness compels Athens to incorporate them in her empire. There is no sanction they can invoke, no alliance or treaty to give them protection, and no possibility that Athens herself will ever face the same situation. Under such conditions justice is an irrelevancy and there is no point invoking it.

### III. THE LOGIC OF WEAKNESS

It cannot be denied that the Athenians put their case as harshly as possible. They cannot do otherwise if they are to overcome the oligarchs' vested interest in resistance. But it remains to be seen whether their arguments are inconsistent with conventional Greek thinking. For

<sup>41</sup> Hdt. 8.48 (pentekonters at Salamis). For a highly speculative calculation of the Melian population (based on Thucydides' statement [5.116.4] that 500 Athenian colonists occupied its land) see C. Renfrew and M. Wagstaff (eds.), *An Island Polity* (Cambridge, 1982), 140–5 with the criticisms of G. D. R. Sanders, 'Reassessing ancient populations', *ABSA* 79 (1984), 251–62.



commentators like Gomme this was axiomatic. The Melian Dialogue was seen as sophistic in character, in both form and content.<sup>42</sup> For myself I cannot see anything in the form of the Dialogue which resembles the classic sophistic *elenchos*, where one party is pressed to a definition and reduced to self-contradiction by skilful questioning.<sup>43</sup> Here there is no question and answer in the true sophistic sense. The direct questions by the Melians are either rhetorical (5.93, 96, 98) or proposals directed in the interrogative mood (5.94). Similarly the Athenians' limitation of the subject to questions of immediate relevance and the Melians' attempt to widen it by considerations of justice stem rather from the logic of their respective positions. If the Athenians 'are the mouthpieces of a critical and disillusioned rhetoric', they are so because they are required by the situation to prove to the Melians that there is no room for illusions of justice and honour. Similarly the Melians cannot accept the Athenian perspective without losing the argument outright, for their position is untenable except on the most abstract level. The Dialogue may well be influenced in its colouring and vocabulary by current rhetorical thinking, but fundamentally it is a compressed and vivid representation of what was feasible for each side to argue, expressed in a series of antiphonic exchanges which may indeed have appealed to the Melian oligarchs as a viable procedure.<sup>44</sup> Thucydides, it may be assumed, used dialogue form because something

<sup>42</sup> *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 162–3, 175, 178, 182. See also Deininger 123–30; Macleod [372] 387–92 (citing earlier literature) with *GRBS* 18 (1977), 233 n. 12; M. Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law* (Berkeley, 1986), 307–10. Others (e.g. Romilly [373] 298–307 and Andrewes) are much more sceptical.

<sup>43</sup> Macleod, for instance, draws formal parallels with the sophistic techniques used by Dionysodorus and Euthydemus against Socrates, but he makes the important concession (391) that the methods are 'analogous': Thucydides is doing in the sphere of practical reason what the sophists are doing in logic. I do not accept that. The Athenians do indeed replace one emotive vocabulary with another (see II above with n. 24), but they do not insist upon a definition of the terms which will automatically bring them victory. Their restriction of the debate to the question of utility derives from the logic of the situation, the military necessity to win capitulation, not from any adaptation of eristic theory. See also Hussey [127] 126: 'The Melian dialogue... is not much of a dialogue.'

<sup>44</sup> The parallel is 4.22.1, where the Spartan envoys of 425 propose a conclave to discuss possible conditions of peace, each side 'quietly' (*kath' hēsuxhian* is echoed later at 5.86) discussing the individual terms. Admittedly there is a world of difference between 'haggling over detail' (*HCT* [032] vol. 4, 159) and debating the survival of a sovereign state. But the fact remains that the Spartans were more comfortable in a restricted forum and felt that they could do fullest justice to their case. The Melians may well have had similar reactions.

like a dialogue actually took place. The gist of the exchanges was remembered and perhaps transmitted at first or second hand by the Athenian ambassadors or the generals to whom they reported. We may well believe that the Athenians stressed the futility of resistance and the inevitability of capitulation, while the Melian oligarchs attempted to shift the argument to issues of justice and hinted at the possibility of human and divine assistance. Thucydides retained the themes and the dialogue style of the conclave, albeit in a more artificial and balanced form than it can have had in reality. It allowed him to juxtapose the two perspectives more subtly than was possible in a single pair of contrasting speeches. Above all it enabled him to emphasise the weakness of the Melian position. Every argument is dismissed as specious or irrelevant, and the folly of resistance is illuminated from a variety of perspectives. Practicality not sophistry governs the debate.

What has impressed modern readers most unfavourably and has the strongest sophistic connotations is the Athenian insistence that the strong inevitably rule the weak. That is explicitly formulated in two emphatic and carefully phrased passages. Firstly (5.89) the Athenians assert that matters of justice are decided 'when the *compulsion* on each side is *equal*' (*apo tēs isēs anangkês*).<sup>45</sup> This is something more than the common insistence that justice, particularly distributive justice, presupposes some basis of equality.<sup>46</sup> On such an interpretation the Athenians would be arguing that the concept of justice does not apply to their relationship any more than it does to the relationship between master and slave in civil law.<sup>47</sup> Thucydides'

<sup>45</sup> This does not of course imply that justice only subsists between powers of approximately equal magnitude, as is commonly alleged (cf. K. von Fritz, *Die griechische Geschichtsschreibung*, vol. 1 [Berlin, 1967], 719: 'von Recht immer nur zwischen einigermassen Gleichmächtigen die Rede sein könne' 'that one could speak of justice only between more or less equal powers'). Even Deininger (99), for all his sensitive and perceptive handling of the passage, maintains that 'Recht an ein gewisses Gleichgewicht der Macht... gebunden ist' ('justice is linked to a certain equilibrium in power').

<sup>46</sup> The classic discussion is of course Arist. *EN* 5.1131 a 11 ff. See also *Pol.* 3.1280 a 11 (*dokei ison to dikaion einai*, 'justice is thought to be equality', 1282 b 18). The corollary is that justice subsists between individuals who are to some degree equal and not between those who are blatantly unequal, as slaves and their owners (cf. Plato *Laws* 6.757A).

<sup>47</sup> This is a pervasive assumption. Cf. Andrewes, *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 163 ('the Athenians do assimilate the relation between an imperial power and its subjects to

thought is considerably deeper than this. In practice, he would argue, all states, whether equally or unequally matched, only decide their disputes on a basis of justice (*dike*) if the logic of their situation compels them to do so. Both Athens and Sparta, as Thucydides makes eminently plain, had compelling reasons to make peace in 421, and, given that the *compulsion* (*anangkê*) was equal,<sup>48</sup> both sides could hammer out particular conditions which they agreed were fair. But in 425 the compulsion was not equal. The Spartans had every reason to make peace and save their men trapped on Sphacteria, but there was no corresponding pressure upon the Athenians, who demanded the surrender of the territory lost in 446 as the price of peace.<sup>49</sup> Consequently the Spartan envoys broke off the debate; otherwise they would be seen to be the weaker power conceding the demands made by the stronger (4.22.3). Relations of justice (*dikê*) could subsist between powers of different magnitude; Athens and Corcyra (or even Athens and Camarina) could agree that the threat to them both compelled them to an alliance and then decide which type of alliance was appropriate.<sup>50</sup> When it came to the Melians in 416, the compulsion was all on one side; they had every reason to negotiate, the Athenians had none, except to bring the campaign to the swiftest, cleanest end. Given the absence of sanctions, the Melians had no effective choice but to concede; the situation was such that haggling over equity was irrelevant. The Athenians do what they can

the relation between master and slave'): Romilly [373] 298 ('justice... can play a part only when *two equally strong*' [my italics] 'adversaries stand face to face'; Ostwald [114] 58 ('arguments from justice are eclipsed when one side is stronger than the other', see, however, 41, 54, where the text is given its proper force).

<sup>48</sup> As Thucydides makes crystal clear at 5.14–16, which is a perfect illustration of the general principle (cf. Deininger 102). The necessity or compulsion was not equal for the Boeotians, Corinthians, Eleans and Megarians, who refused the peace (5.17.2).

<sup>49</sup> 4.21.3. Thucydides observes that the Athenians themselves had made concessions in 446 because of *their* need for peace (cf. 1.115.1)—*isê anangkê* ('equal compulsion') again.

<sup>50</sup> One might also adduce Euphemus' explanation of the autonomy of the western islanders (6.85.2): their security demands alliance with Athens and their strategic position protects their autonomy. Similar considerations advise alliance between Athens and Camarina (cf. 6.87.4: *amphoterôi anagkazontai, ho men akôn sôphronein, ho d' apragmonôs sôzesthai* 'Both sides are under compulsion, the one to be prudent against its will, the other to survive by taking no action'—a somewhat different emphasis).

because there is no limiting constraint and the Melians should concede. That is admittedly a harsh doctrine, but it is an accurate enough description of contemporary practice; and its expression without prevarication was called for by the circumstances of the Dialogue.

The second passage (5.105.2) is the Athenian response to the Melian attempt to enlist divine aid. The Melians had argued that the gods may well redress the balance of fortune because they are the injured party, 'men of religious scruples who face unjust aggressors'.<sup>51</sup> This is the insult direct, and the Athenians react with one of their most telling ripostes. What we are doing is entirely consistent with what we believe of the gods and what men wish for themselves. The principle that one rules wherever one has the power is one that we believe the gods observe, and we know that men practice it invariably by nature and by necessity. For the Athenians the subjugation of the weaker by the stronger is no injustice but a categorical imperative of nature. In this they echo their earlier defence of empire at Sparta; they are only following the human impulse to rule and the established practice that the weaker is constrained by the stronger.<sup>52</sup> But it is not only the protestation of the imperial power. The Syracusan Hermocrates concedes that he has no quarrel with the Athenian desire to rule, only with those who are too ready to submit. 'It is universal human nature' (*pephuke gar to anthrôpeion dia pantos*) to rule those who yield and to resist aggression (4.61.5). That is the general truth which the Athenians expound at Melos: it is in our nature and forces us to subjugate you and it is in your nature too. Few contemporaries would have quarrelled with the principle. As Andrewes once again observed, the Athenians do not take the line of those self-confessed amoralists, Callicles and Thrasymachus, who argued that conventional law was a conspiracy of the weaker against the stronger.<sup>53</sup> There is no attempt to deny the normal force and the normal practice of justice. That coexists with the drive to rule others,

<sup>51</sup> *hosioi pros ou diakaious* (5.104), on which see Andrewes' note ad loc.

<sup>52</sup> 1.72.2. The parallel passages were adduced by Romilly [373] 304–5 (cf. Ostwald [114] 41), who draws attention to the rarity of the sentiments in Thucydides' work. Perhaps one answer would be the rarity of the situation which called for such bluntness.

<sup>53</sup> *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 174. See also Deininger 105–7; Romilly [373] 299–300; de Ste. Croix [080] 15; H. Erbse, [060] 107. The common misreading of the Dialogue had

which is morally neutral but an irresistible motive force.<sup>54</sup> So Diodotus claims when he notes that the most vital issues (freedom and empire) elicit the most irrational responses; no sanction of law or anything else can have a deterrent effect when human nature is eagerly set on its objective (3.45.4). As a general truth what the Athenians say is in no sense subversive. Indeed it falls short of what Pindar states (*Nem.* 9.15) when he describes the ousting of the sons of Talauus from power at Argos: 'the stronger man does away with the right that was there before' (*kressôn de kappauēi dikan tan prosthen anêr*). For Thucydides there is no violation of any norm of justice, rather the inevitable working out of human nature, where there is nothing to constrain it.<sup>55</sup>

Hermocrates, we have seen, regarded it as equally human to resist aggression as to rule others.<sup>56</sup> That in effect is what the Melians say when they protest that it would be cowardice not to prefer any alternative to enslavement (5.100). The Athenians have their answer, this time firmly based on equality. Our struggle is not on equal terms, to

begun by the time of Dionysius of Halicarnassus: 'The Athenian generals... introduced the law of violence and greed and declared that for the weak justice is the will of the stronger' (*Th.* 41, cf. Pritchett [above, n. 3] 34).

<sup>54</sup> That (or the feebler sentiment that it is proper for the best to rule) is what underlies Democritus' statement *phusei to archein oikêion tōi kressoni* 'by nature it is proper for the stronger to rule' (*VS B* 267, adduced by Ostwald [above, n. 42] 308). I do not think that Democritus influenced Thucydides. Both probably drew upon a common stock of popular belief. Similarly, when Democritus claims that men construct the image of chance to excuse their own failure to plan (*B* 119, adduced by Hussey [127] 121), he may be echoing the Athenian message to the Melians but it is nothing more than sound common sense.

<sup>55</sup> Although he disapproves of the thought, Aristotle admits that most people consider despotic rule acceptable in an international context (*Pol.* 7.1324 b 5–42); and he mentions the admiration for Sparta voiced by Thibron and other writers because her training produced a large empire (*Pol.* 7.1333 b 12–22). But even he concedes the basic drive to rule and approves it if military training is used 'to seek hegemony for the benefit of the subjects, not the despotic rule of all mankind' (1333 b 38–34 a 2). In its most extended form the principle that one rules whatever one has power over is practically a truism. Cf. Galen, *de plac. Hippocr. et Plat.* 3.3.5 (v. 302–3 Kühn): *archein men gar en hapasi kai krastein esti dikaioteron to phusei kreiton, hippeus men hippou ktl.* 'it is more just that the thing stronger by nature rule and dominate in all circumstances, horsemen over horse.'

<sup>56</sup> 4.61.5. The Plataeans also refer to the universally accepted law that it is proper (*hosion*) to resist aggression (3.56.2; cf. Macleod [336] 223). See Dem. 8.7 for the same sentiment.

demonstrate our sense of honour or avoid reproach.<sup>57</sup> What is at issue is your salvation, to avoid your measuring yourselves against a far superior power. The Melians are not in the same category as the Spartans, burning to redress the diminution to their honour which they suffered in the Archidamian War.<sup>58</sup> The context is that of Hesiod's hawk and nightingale: 'senseless is he who wishes to match himself against the stronger; he is deprived of victory and suffers pain in addition to his shame'—or that of Odysseus' admonition to Thersites: 'do not venture to wrangle alone against the kings'.<sup>59</sup> To confront insuperable odds is not heroic but folly, the ultimate breach of the Delphic maxim, 'know thyself', *gnôthi sauton*. If one's sense of honour leads one to foreseeable destruction, it is a perverse act of delusion and can bring only dishonour. That is at the root of the play on words which precedes the Athenians' last appeal (5.111.3). Avoid the common tendency of being seduced by a misplaced sense of shame. Do not incur an irreparable disaster and shame which is the more shameful for being the result of folly rather than chance.

Foreseeable disaster brings reproach. That is a recurrent theme, found before and after Thucydides. In the fourth century Aeneas Tacticus advises his readers that the defence of their city demands the highest degree of preparation, so that defeat will not be manifestly their fault.<sup>60</sup> The thought is most trenchantly and emotively expressed by Polybius when he reprobates the folly of the Greek insurgents of 147/6 BC. Their fate was an example of *ἀτυχία* 'ill-fortune' rather than *ἀκληρία* 'mishap'. The latter is simple misfortune, suffered contrary to expectation, whereas *ἀτυχία* comes about because of individual folly and is a matter for reproach.<sup>61</sup> The men of 146 accordingly suffered an *atychia* which was preeminently shameful and blameworthy. This is

<sup>57</sup> 5.101. This is a very different sentiment from the statement at 5.89 that justice obtains where there is equal compulsion. The Athenians are saying that the contest has different objectives for the two sides. For the Athenians questions of honour may be at issue, but for the Melians it is a matter of survival.

<sup>58</sup> Compare Nicias' comments at 6.11.6. The Plataeans too refer to the Spartans as the paradigm of *andragathia* 'bravery' for the Greek world (3.57.1).

<sup>59</sup> Hes. *Op.* 210–11; Hom. *Il.* 2.247. See also the parallels adduced by M. L. West, *Hesiod: Works and Days* (Oxford, 1978), 209.

<sup>60</sup> Aen. *Tact. pref.* 3. Cf. Whitehead (above, n. 8) 45, 98–9.

<sup>61</sup> Polyb. 38.3.7 (*atuchein monous toutous hois dia tēn idian abouliaon oneidos hai praxeis epipherousi* 'only those to whom their actions bring reproach because of their

the situation of the Melians who can see what will befall them but adhere Micawber-like to their irrational hope that something unexpected will turn up. Once again Pindar echoes and caps the sentiment: 'there is a species among mankind most deluded which pours scorn on what is at hand and gropes at the distant, hunting fruitless goals with hopes which are denied fulfilment' (*Pyth.* 3.21–3). And Pindar makes it clear what the result is—ruin (*auata*).

In these circumstances hope is a dangerous liability, and the Athenians make the point repeatedly. Hope in itself is not a bad thing. For the Athenian dead of 430 it was highly commendable, for, as Pericles says, they had reason to be confident in their own performance and could commit the outcome to hope.<sup>62</sup> They were in a position of advantage. For the Melians hope will prove deceptive and it will be retained even when it is known to be deceptive; ultimately it will bring ruin (5.103.1). Few sentiments are more common in Greek literature. From Hesiod onwards there is repeated insistence that hope is undesirable or dangerous when one is poor, weak or in desperate peril.<sup>63</sup> 'Hope snatches away men's reason,' claims Bacchylides (9.18), and the Athenians could only say Amen. They had confronted the Melians with the desperate, visible weakness of their situation, had discounted any possibility of aid, any chance of surviving a blockade. Despite that their interlocutors stubbornly persist in placing their trust in the gods, the Spartans and the fortune which has preserved their city for 700 years. They even have the face once again to invite the Athenians to respect their neutrality and leave them in peace (5.113). The exasperation of the Athenians' parting message is one that one

bad counsel are said to suffer ill-fortune'). The whole context (38.1–3) is instructive. For the crowning instance of unreasoning folly see Polyb. 1.37.6. Polybius, it should be noted, is not wholly consistent and can write with admiration of acts of desperate resistance (16.22a.5: Gaza against Alexander; 16.32.1–6, 33.4: Abydos against Philip V). At the same time he laments the perversity of fortune (16.32.5) and clearly feels that virtue should have been rewarded against all the odds. It is an implicit admission that the events were instances of *atuchia*, and his encomium is inappropriate.

<sup>62</sup> 2.42.4 with Demosthenes' more vivid exhortations at 4.10.1. In both cases these men in action could be said to draw on hope *ek periousias* 'from their excess resources' (5.103.1).

<sup>63</sup> Hes. *Op.* 498–501; Theogn. 637–8. For further examples see Romilly [373] 292 and West (above, n. 59) 169. The *topos* is fully investigated by A. Corcella, 'Ελπής', *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia a Bari* 27/28 (1984/5) 41–100.

may sympathise with. Despite the vividness of their representations the Melians had not budged from their initial position and stubbornly refused to concede that their situation was desperate.

After the debate events moved quickly as the Athenians predicted. Melos was invested by a circuit wall and blockaded by land and sea (5.114). Two sorties by the defenders had limited success but failed to break the encirclement.<sup>64</sup> Hope finally died with the arrival of Athenian reinforcements in winter 416/5 and the Melians surrendered unconditionally. Then the Athenians killed all men of military age, enslaved the women and children and apportioned the Melian lands to 500 colonists (5.116.3–4). Thucydides, as has often been noted, records only the brute fact of the atrocity. He says nothing of the Athenians' reasons for such draconian reprisals and has no record of the Athenian decree which authorised them.<sup>65</sup> It reads as a dispassionate footnote to the affair. The Melians had had ample opportunity to realise the potential for disaster that their situation held, but they refused to accept it. Now they were involved in the worst of all possible scenarios, brought upon them by their perverse and hopeless resistance. There is no hint that Thucydides had any especial sympathy with the victims or even expected his readers to sympathise. It is not that human suffering failed to move him. Quite the reverse. The polar opposite of his treatment of the Melians is the description of the pillage of the little Boeotian town of Mycalessus<sup>66</sup> which matched the destruction of Melos in its scale. There Thucydides emphasises the wholesale slaughter of a defenceless and unsuspecting populace; it affected all ages but mostly the young, the boys who were trapped in their school by the marauding Thracians and

<sup>64</sup> 5.115.4 (resulting in a large haul of foodstuffs), 116.2. Aristophanes (*Av.* 186—produced in spring 414) speaks of 'Melian hunger' as proverbial (cf. *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 189–90).

<sup>65</sup> There is a tradition that Alcibiades was in some way connected with the decree, either supporting it (*Plut. Alc.* 16.5–6) or moving it ([*Andoc.*] 4.22). We have no means of control and the detail is somewhat suspect (*HCT* [032] vol. 4, 190–1: W. M. Ellis, *Alcibiades* [London, 1989], 49–50). Ostwald (above, n. 42) 310–12 suggests that Teisias was closely associated with Alcibiades, which 'explains the amoral and highly intellectualized justification of imperialism that we find in the Melian Dialogue'.

<sup>66</sup> The 'city' (located at modern Rhitsona) was too small to be listed among the Boeotian contingents at Delium (4.93.4) or in the later list of communities in the Boeotian League (*Hell. Ox.* 16.3 [Bartoletti]). For the site and relevant testimonia see John M. Possey, *Topography and Population of Ancient Boeotia* (Chicago, 1988), 80–5.

massacred without exception. The historian sums up in an emphatic sentence: 'the disaster struck the entire *polis* and was second to none in magnitude and eclipsed any other in its unexpectedness and horror'.<sup>67</sup> His final verdict a few paragraphs later is that (as regards its magnitude) the fate of Mycalessus called for lamentation as much as any other event in the war (7.30.4). Now Mycalessus was not wiped out as a civic entity (as was Melos).<sup>68</sup> What was striking was the peculiar horror of the event and its utter unexpectedness. There was nothing the inhabitants could do to ward it off,<sup>69</sup> and it was the ultimate visitation of fortune. In Polybian terms the people of Mycalessus had suffered *aklêria*, a stroke of fate, whereas the Melians were victims of *atuchia*, a reverse which they could have prevented had they done what it was in their power to do. Thucydides' emotions may well have been particularly in evidence in Book 7,<sup>70</sup> but it is evident that he gives Mycalessus a sympathy which is lacking in his treatment of the fall of Melos.

In my opinion Thucydides considered that the Melians ought to have surrendered immediately, on the best terms that they could negotiate. Scale here is the paramount factor. There was no comparison possible with the actions of the Athenians in 480 and 479.<sup>71</sup> The Athenians were not besieged in their city; they had the most formidable navy in the Greek world and a strong network of allies. Even if defeated they had the options of mass migration or coming to terms with the Persian invader.<sup>72</sup> The Melian situation was more exactly comparable to that of the small Aegean islands which found themselves in the path of Datis and Artaphernes in 490 or of Xerxes in 480. Resistance was hopeless and capitulation sensible. The fate of

<sup>67</sup> 7.29.5: *kai xumphora têi polei pasêi oudemias hêssôn mallon eteras adokêtos te epepesen hautê kai deinê*. The positioning of *adokêtos* is emphatic; the disaster was more unexpected than any other and horrific as well (see Dover's note at *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 409, underplaying the factor of unexpectedness).

<sup>68</sup> That is explicit at 7.30.3: *tôn de Mukalessiôn meros ti apanêlôthê* 'a significant part of the Mycalessians was destroyed.'

<sup>69</sup> Thucydides (7.29.3) goes to some pains to illustrate this, stressing the secrecy of the Thracian approach, the distance of Mycalessus from the sea and the peaceful conditions which the town had hitherto enjoyed.

<sup>70</sup> So Dover, *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 410.

<sup>71</sup> As suggested by Gomme, *HCT* [032] vol. 4, 178–9 (and approved by Andrewes) and many others (notably Connor [035] 155–7).

<sup>72</sup> On migration (to Siris in Italy) see *Hdt.* 8.62 and on the possibility of capitulation 8.136.2, 140–4; 9.4–9.

Carystus is instructive. In 490 the city refused to join the campaign against her neighbours. It was a brave but futile gesture, and once the Carystians had seen their land ravaged they prudently changed their policy and surrendered (*Hdt.* vi.99.2). Ten years later they provided token forces for Xerxes' navy and after Salamis faced reprisals from the victorious allied forces. Their heroism in Athens' earlier hour of crisis was disregarded. Once more they saw their land ravaged and, unlike Andros which sustained a siege, they paid a large indemnity.<sup>73</sup> Carystus had for the moment learned her lesson and would not fight unaided against the Hellenic coalition. The Melian government in comparison was pig-headed. It refused the overtures made by Cleomedes and Teisias and continued a hopeless resistance for more than six months. Given the military situation and the imbalance of forces the Athenian case was not unduly harsh; it emphasises the weakness of the Melians and the futility of any appeal to morality, religion or outside assistance. Humanitarian it certainly is in the limited sense that it is designed to force the Melians to accept the most advantageous terms from Athens and avoid bloodshed. We may regret the original decision to annex Melos and condemn the atrocity which ended the siege, but it is not Thucydides' concern to comment upon either. For him the great matter is the vulnerability of Melos and the perverse determination to hold out against overwhelming force. That is the dominant, overriding theme of the Melian Dialogue.

We should perhaps end on a rather lighter note. Thucydides, it seems, had little sympathy with a mentality which sets the highest priority upon personal or national honour, and saw no intrinsic merit in resistance à l'outrance. He does admittedly report a ferociously bellicose speech by Demosthenes, urging the abandonment of reason for unquestioning hope in the face of mortal danger<sup>74</sup>—the polar opposite of the Athenian exhortations at Melos. But nothing suggests

<sup>73</sup> *Hdt.* 8.66.2 (forces for Xerxes); 112.2 (indemnity paid to Themistocles); 121.1 (ravaging of Carystian land). The Carystians were left with no love for Athens and had to be dragged into the Delian League. It required a war (*polemos*), but once more the Carystians capitulated before it was too late (*Th.* 1.98.3; cf. R. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* [Oxford 1972] 69–70).

<sup>74</sup> 4.10.1. It should, however, be noted that Demosthenes goes on to enumerate the practical advantages of the Athenian position (10.2: *ta pleiô horô pros hêmôn onto*, 'I see that most factors are in our favor'). Cf. Gomme, *HCT* vol. 3, 446.

that Thucydides approved of the sentiment, which in any case applied to an imminent unavoidable battle against the odds. When he gives his own opinion, he echoes the Athenian words at Melos to commend the conservative, neo-Periclean strategy of Phrynichus, who withdrew his forces from Miletus in the face of a numerically stronger squadron from the Peloponnese. It was a lesser shame to retreat when retreat was appropriate than to incur danger irrationally and perhaps be forced to terms which *would* be shameful and might imperil the city.<sup>75</sup> That strategy led immediately to the loss of Iasus, the capture of Athens' ally Amorges and a rich windfall of booty for the Peloponnesians—for which Phrynichus was deposed from command later in the year.<sup>76</sup> Thucydides, however, had no doubts about the decision and praises Phrynichus for his practical intelligence (*kai edoxen... ouk axunetos einai*, 'and he was considered... to be not unintelligent').<sup>77</sup> The great thing was his avoidance of foreseeable danger. I feel that the model might be a latter-day Alcibiades, one Mogens Glistrup, a Danish lawyer who in the 1970s was desperately enmeshed by income tax obligations. His solution was to form a political party (which has since expelled him) and stand for office on a platform of tax abolition. The resulting problem of maintaining the Danish armed forces was easily solved. They were to be disbanded *in toto* and replaced by a single telex machine linked to Moscow, which, if war came, would send the pre-programmed message: 'we surrender'. *Ouk axunetôs* ('not unintelligently') might have been Thucydides' comment.

#### EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPT

Subsequent to this article (but without knowledge of it) Seaman [369] reviews the epigraphical evidence alleged to prove that Melos was not neutral before 416, which led some scholars to accuse Thucydides of misrepresentation; he concludes (as does this article)

<sup>75</sup> 8.27.2–3: *oudepote tōi aischrōi oneidei eixas alogōs diakindueneusein*, 'would never run an irrational risk because he had yielded to shaming criticism', exactly the Athenians' advice at 5.111.3, expressed in almost identical words.

<sup>76</sup> 8.27.6–28.5. For the recall see 8.54.3 (with 48.4).

<sup>77</sup> 8.27.5, on which see Andrewes' detailed discussion at *HCT* 5.65–7.

that the rationale given by Thucydides for the expedition is the correct one, and that even the substance of the dialogue might well be accurate.

Extending this article's interpretation of the Melian dialogue as cautionary for the reader (but applying it to Athenian statements as well as Melian) is Morrison [368].