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Power and Opposition in the Ancient Near Eastern and
Mediterranean World

edited by Mait Kõiv and Vladimir Sazonov

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Compliance and Endurance. The Athenian Power Building through the Melian Dialogue

Eleni TZOVLA*

Abstract. *The Melian dialogue in the 5th book of Thucydides can be seen as one of the most important texts for political science. Two opposing political ideas are confronted by the historian: on the one hand Thucydides presents the Athenians as promoters of the idea of legitimacy of unlimited growth of power; on the other hand, there were the Melians who did not accept the 'law of the stronger'. The Melians were conquered, and their arguments could not save them, but in the longer perspective the Athenian empire was destined to collapse. Through the dialogue, Thucydides compares the 'law of the stronger' ignoring the rights of others, and the appeal to justice by the weaker party trying to demonstrate their reasons to oppose the imperialist power.*

Rezumat. *Dialogul Melian din cartea a V-a a lui Tucidide poate fi văzut ca unul dintre cele mai importante texte pentru știința politică. Istoricul se confruntă cu două idei politice opuse: pe de o parte, Tucidide îi prezintă pe atenieni ca promotori ai ideii de legitimitate a creșterii nelimitate a puterii; pe de altă parte, erau Melienii care nu acceptau „legea celui mai puternic”. Melienii au fost cucerți, iar argumentele lor nu i-au putut salva, dar, în perspectivă mai lungă, imperiul atenian era sortit să se prăbușească. Prin dialog, Tucidide compară „legea celui mai puternic” ignorând drepturile celorlalți și apelul la justiție al părții mai slabe care încearcă să-și demonstreze motivele pentru a se opune puterii imperialiste.*

Keywords: Melian dialogue, Athenian imperialism, Greek political thought, Thucydides, democracy.

Introduction¹

In the fifth book of the history of Thucydides there appears one of the most discussed events of the Thucydidean narration of the Peloponnesian war, the Melian dialogue. Melos, an island-city of the Aegean, kin to the Lacedaemonians,² decided to stay neutral during the war. This fact provoked in the year 416³ the reaction of Athens which could not permit a

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¹ At this point, I would like to thank my Professor Nicola Cusumano for his very helpful supervising. Special thanks also to my partner Giovanni Ingarao for staying always by my side, both with his precious advice and his moral support.

² For Melos as perceived Spartan colony, see MALKIN 1994, 74ff.

³ All dates are B.C.

small island-city to stay independent in an area of the Athenian domination.⁴ This event led the Athenians to approach Melos and – through one of the most famous dialogues in the ancient history – to give to the islanders an ultimatum, in order to make them join the Athenian League and submit.⁵ The event itself was not of great importance for the continuity of the war since Melos was a poor island-city with an insignificant naval force. The conquest of the island would not have significantly changed the strength of the Athenian army. But the discussion that arose between these cities, both defending their own stance with several arguments, is one of the events that offers an idea of both the relationships between the Greek city-states of the 5th century, and of the size of power that Athens gained after the Persian wars and the way that the city used this power towards its allies.

The dialogue is considered by many scholars as the representative example of Athenian imperialism. The Athenians with an extreme demonstration of their power tried to convince the Melians that they had no hope to win a war against them and that the only way of salvation was the submission to the dominant power, Athens. The strict interlocutory form of the passage was created on purpose by Thucydides. The historian, according to De Romilly,⁶ wanted to offer a superior form of impartiality to the reader and additionally to intensify the dramatic nature of the dialogue in which both parts express different arguments intending to support their own point of view. In particular, the Athenians wanted the expansion of the dominance of their power, while the Melians struggled to save themselves. During this highly interesting dialogue, both cities supported their “own” truth which is relevant to the power that each part had. The core of the Thucydidean passage is how does each part understand the idea of justice.⁷ Is justice an objective value or a relative one?

The relativity of justice

If we try to analyse the text in more detail, we will observe that the relevance of justice is a main theme of the dialogue. By calling on the justice, τὸ δίκαιον,⁸ both parts try to support their position and prove that they are in the right. In the subsequent passages, we can observe the use of this key-word repeatedly from Thucydides: this was the main idea, on

⁴ Thucydides narrates that the Athenians under Nicias had attacked the Melians again in 426, but did not press the attack home (Thuc. 3.91.1-2).

⁵ For a more detailed narration of the events in Melos see among others the detailed work of DEININGER 1987, and RENGAKOS 1984, 93-102. See also CRANE 1998, 237ff. for similar examples of “confrontations between the ruthless strong and the helpless weak” before Thucydides and especially in the *Histories* of Herodotus. For a more philological approach of the dialogue see among others the very interesting work of CANFORA 1992, and the monograph of CAGNAZZI 1983.

⁶ De ROMILLY 1963, 307.

⁷ On the idea of power in Thucydides and its function in the work of the historian, see the interesting work of ERBSE (1989).

⁸ See BÉTANT 1847, *ad locum* for the translation of the term δίκαιος in Thucydides: iustus (just), aequus (equal), legitimus (lawgiving).

which both cities based their arguments. The idea of justice was of course a relative concept in ancient Greek thought. It can be perceived in many ways and I think that the Melian dialogue is an extremely representative example of the relativity of the idea of *δίκαιον* for the Greek thought.

The Melians, tried to convince the Athenians that the decision to stay neutral in the war was just and refused to obey them by becoming a part of the Athenian League. This decision was, in their opinion, the proof of the fact that justice was on their side, since the Athenians could not understand their right to stay neutral in the war:

“In our view you have come with your own preconceived judgement of this discussion. The result is likely to be that if we win the moral argument and so do not submit, we face war; and if we grant your argument, we face servitude (*κατὰ τὸ εἶκός περιγενομένοις μὲν τῷ δικάϊῳ καὶ δι’ αὐτὸ μὴ ἐνδοῦσι πόλεμον ἡμῖν φέρουσαν, πεισθεῖσι δὲ δουλείαν*).”⁹

The Melians clarified their just position but were completely aware that both options – to comply or not – would cause them trouble. This idea was maintained through the whole dialogue and was the main argument of the Melians against the authoritarian mood of Athens. The Melians would mention afterwards that “[...] yet, as for fortune, we trust that our righteous stand against injustice will not disadvantage us in divine favour (*ὅσοι πρὸς οὐ δικαίους ἰστάμεθα*).”¹⁰ Their innocence was, according to them, out of question.

It could be said that an argument like that of the Melians cannot be overthrown: who could say that a state, which is supporting its freedom and independence, is wrong? Yet the Athenian ambassadors managed to make a case for the fact that justice was on their side, a fact that would have clarified that the truth is a relative value:

“So keep this discussion practical, within the limits of what we both really think. You know as well as we do that when we are talking on the human plane questions of justice only arise when there is equal power to compel: in terms of practicality the dominant exact what they can and the weak concede what they must (*ἐπισταμένους πρὸς εἰδότας ὅτι δίκαια μὲν ἐν τῷ ἀνθρωπείῳ λόγῳ ἀπὸ τῆς ἴσης ἀνάγκης κρίνεται, δυνατὰ δὲ οἱ προύχοντες πράσσοσι καὶ οἱ ἀσθενεῖς ξυγχωροῦσιν*)”¹¹

As stated by the Athenians, justice exists between cities of equivalent power. When this rule does not apply and the one side is more powerful than the other one, then the law that matters is the law of the strongest. This absolute – arrogant– declaration of the Athenians

⁹ Thuc. 5.86, all transl. are taken from HAMMOND 2009, *ad locum*.

¹⁰ Thuc. 5.104.

¹¹ Thuc. 5.89.

was the core of their argumentation: the Melians should think *σωφρόνως*¹² and not even try to support their position since the Athenians were the possessors of power and the one that has the power has also justice on its side. According to De Romilly “men normally talk of justice only when they cannot act by force”.¹³ This is why justice exists only between cities of equivalent power: when the one city cannot dominate the other one by power, a common justice has to exist, in order to resolve the disputes. In the case of Melos and Athens however, there was no need to resolve the issues with justice: Athens was more powerful and could act by force and if someone can act by force, justice comes secondary.¹⁴

The law of the strongest was analysed afterwards by the Athenians:

“We believe it of the gods, and we know it for sure of men, that under some permanent compulsion of nature wherever they can rule, they will (*ηγούμεθα γὰρ τό τε θεῖον δόξῃ τὸ ἀνθρώπειόν τε σαφῶς διὰ παντὸς ὑπὸ φύσεως ἀναγκαίας, οὔ ἂν κρατῆ, ἄρχειν*). We did not make this law; it was already laid down, and we are not the first to follow it (*καὶ ἡμεῖς οὔτε θέντες τὸν νόμον οὔτε κειμένῳ πρῶτοι χρησάμενοι*); we inherited it as a fact, and we shall pass it on as a fact to remain true for ever; and we follow it in the knowledge that you and anyone else given the same power as us would do the same (*ὄντα δὲ παραλαβόντες καὶ ἐσόμενον ἐς αἰεὶ καταλείψοντες χρώμεθα αὐτῷ, εἰδότες καὶ ὑμᾶς ἂν καὶ ἄλλους ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ δυνάμει ἡμῖν γενομένους δρῶντας ἂν ταυτό*).”¹⁵

The nature of the human being is to rule and whoever can have the opportunity to possess the power, will do the same. The Melians would have done also the same if they had had this opportunity. According to the theory of the Athenians, the Melians had no other option than to obey the dominant power, since this is the nature of the human being when it is weaker than the one that has the power. Like BOSWORTH mentions, “they are weak and their very weakness compels Athens to incorporate them into their empire. There is no sanction they can invoke, no alliance or treaty to give them protection, and no possibility that Athens

¹² The term literally means to think with “soundness of mind, prudence, discretion” (see LSJ 1996, *ad locum* and BÉTANT 1847, *ad locum*, but NORTH 1966, 109) very accurately notes that *sophrosyne* in this case “means recognizing the realities of political life, acquiescence in the laws of nature that require the weak to obey the strong”.

¹³ DE ROMILLY 1963, 306.

¹⁴ See on this subject the very interesting discussion between ANDREWES and RADT. When it comes to the present passage, ANDREWES (1970, 16) believes that “terms like *δίκαιον* retained their standard meaning for Thucydides, as is shown most Athenians here allow that justice is a usable concept between cities on the same level of power: only in the case of disproportionate power it does not apply [...]. But the open admission is abnormal, for evidence enough remains to show that the ordinary citizen, even of great power acting arbitrarily, preferred to think that his city’s action was morally justified”. On the other hand, RADT (1976, 34f.) rightly notes that the cases in which two sides use justice in order to resolve their disputes because of their similarity of power are actually exceptional; the rule in the disputes of two cities is their dissimilarity, where justice can have no application, only the law of the strongest has.

¹⁵ Thuc. 5.105.2.

herself will ever face the same situation. Under such conditions justice is an irrelevancy and there is no point invoking it.”¹⁶

From the afore-mentioned passages, we can understand which idea existed in the Greek world of the last quarter of the 5th century about power and justice. From the text it is obvious that there is no common law among the Greek city-states, which can adjust the relationships between them. The Greek cities were organized in extremely different ways and the effort of the Athenians to create a united Athenian League of the island city-states could not work in the same way for each of them. As reported by Andrewes, “there existed between cities no sanction comparable to the rule of law within the city”, which means that “justice between cities was not merely flouted in practice but unmanageable in theory.”¹⁷ Every city-state had its own laws and it was completely normal that the political mentalities of the different cities would have been in conflict when their representatives had different interests. And in Bosworth’s opinion, in the case of the Melian dialogue, the discovery of a common law was even more difficult, since the two opposed parts were not of equivalent power: the two cities in conflict had a relationship comparable to the one between master and slave in civil war.¹⁸ Neutrality was impossible for the Melians, but this was not the norm for the relationships between the city-states during the Peloponnesian war. As Morrison justly remarks, there are examples of cities which remained neutral in the war, like Argos. According to this scholar, “The question is not whether neutrality can be a viable policy, but rather whether it is possible or advisable for a weak, small polis to claim neutrality”¹⁹ and this is the point of the Melian dialogue. Weakness of the enemy was the key-word for the tyrannical behaviour of the Athenians and because of this weakness the Melians had no possibility to escape from slavery.

The arrogance of Athenian Imperialism²⁰

As stated by Wassermann,²¹ the Melians stood against the Athenians as representatives not only of a different political ideal but also of a different age. The Melians represented the old Greek ideas of morality, according to which the gods support the weaker ones that suffer from the unjust power, because they have always the right to resist, like they did in the case of the war between the weak Greek city-states and the powerful Persian Empire.²² This idea

¹⁶ BOSWORTH 1993, 38.

¹⁷ ANDREWES 1970, 164. See also HEATH 1990, 385ff. for other examples of Athenian speeches, in which the speakers “dismiss considerations of justice as irrelevant to decision-making in questions of international relations”.

¹⁸ BOSWORTH 1993, 39.

¹⁹ MORRISON 2000, 144.

²⁰ On the causes of the Athenian Imperialism in the work of Thucydides see FORDE 1986; on the history of the Athenian Empire in general see MEIGGS 1972.

²¹ WASSERMANN 1947, 28.

²² Thuc. 5.104.

was perfectly expressed by the Syracusan Hermocrates who, in the year 425, spoke in front of the Greeks of Sicily, in order to convince them to unite their forces and protect the island from the imperialistic plans of Athens. Inter alia Hermocrates said:

“That the Athenians should be thus acquisitive and calculating is wholly understandable. My complaint is not of those who seek domination, but rather of those who are too ready to submit to it. It has always been in human nature to dominate the subservient — but also to defend against the aggressor (*καὶ οὐ τοῖς ἄρχειν βουλομένοις μέμφομαι, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ὑπακούειν ἐτοιμοτέροις οὖσιν*)”.²³

The Athenians had the right to be imperialistic, but the cities had not the right to comply without resistance. The nature of the human being is to resist anybody, who wants to attack him. This idea had been represented in grand manner by the Greek city-states during the Persian wars, when the cities showed an exemplary resistance to the huge empire that came to conquer them. In the case of the Melian dialogue, however, this idea seemed already distant in time. It was not a case that the Athenians rejected immediately this general belief by saying that the gods would support the strongest one since the nature of every human is to rule when he can,²⁴ and that the weaker one has no other choice than to comply and accept it.²⁵ This mentality of the Athenians may not have been new for human history, but was certainly new for the Greek world of the Persian wars, which was characterized by independent city-states with not much will of expansion outside the core of the city. Not even Sparta can be characterized by imperialistic strategy by ruling the Peloponnesian League: in this case, the League had strategic and political motives but does not move imperialistically in the Greek area. Athens was the first city to show clearly an imperialistic attitude and establish an Athenian hegemony in the Greek world.

The Melian dialogue manages to illuminate precisely this part of Athenian history: its transformation from the Greek city of the Persian wars focused on its salvation from the Persian invasion and its internal development to an imperialistic power. This was not the first time that Thucydides notices this transformation of Athens. In the first book of his work, during the speech of the Athenian ambassadors in the Spartan assembly before the beginning of the Peloponnesian war, in order to convince the Lacedaemonians to avoid the explosion of this war, the Athenians said the following:

“So too we have done nothing surprising or contrary to human nature in accepting an empire when it was offered to us and refusing to give it up, under the domination of the three most powerful motives — prestige, fear, and self-interest (*οὕτως οὐδ’ ἡμεῖς θαυμαστὸν οὐδὲν πεποιήκαμεν οὐδ’ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀνθρωπέου τρόπου, εἰ ἀρχὴν τε διδομένην ἐδεξάμεθα καὶ ταύτην μὴ ἀνεῖμεν ὑπὸ <τριῶν> τῶν*

²³ Thuc. 4.61.5.

²⁴ Thuc. 5.105.

²⁵ Thuc. 5.89.

μεγίστων νικηθέντες, τιμῆς καὶ δέους καὶ ὠφελίας). Nor again did we start anything new in this, but it has always been the way of the world that the weaker is kept down by the stronger (οὐδ' αὖ πρῶτοι τοῦ τοιούτου ὑπάρξαντες, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ καθεστῶτος τὸν ἥσσω ὑπὸ τοῦ δυνατωτέρου κατείργεσθαι). And we think we are worthy of our power (ἄξιοί τε ἅμα νομίζοντες εἶναι). There was a time when you thought so too, but now you calculate your own advantage and talk of right and wrong — a consideration which has never yet deterred anyone from using force to make a gain when opportunity presents (καὶ ὑμῖν δοκοῦντες μέχρι οὗ τὰ ζυμφέροντα λογιζόμενοι τῷ δικαίῳ λόγῳ νῦν χρῆσθε, ὃν οὐδεὶς πω παρατυχὸν ἰσχύι τι κτήσασθαι προθεῖς τοῦ μὴ πλέον ἔχειν ἀπετρέπετο).²⁶

The Athenians referred to the hegemony that they had gained over the city-states of their League during the Persian wars since the Athenian navy was the force to determine the victory of the Greek cities. Gomme characterizes this passage as “the first frank expression of selfish imperialism, the natural right of the stronger to act as he would, in the *History*; though here spoken in self-defence”.²⁷ The Athenians were, according to the text, not the first to establish the law of the strongest, but as reported by Andrewes, Athens “was the first to introduce it into the Greek political world.”²⁸ Andrewes believes that Athens since 445 had been “attempting to create some sort of unity in Greece, even while leaving a quite genuine ‘autonomy’ to each state in her league”. Obviously, Athens started the League with this motivation, that is to create a united force of Greek city-states, an effort that however ended with the transformation of the League into a cruel hegemony, in which the Athenians as the strongest ones had the absolute power. This was the new idea that Athens imported into the Greek world. In a world where the city-states created their own history and lives independently, Athens gained power and became the inhuman hegemon, because they considered this to belong to the nature of the stronger one. Although Thucydides narrates in the *Pentakontaetia* the establishment of the Athenian hegemony and its hegemonic attitude,²⁹ this raw admission of the Athenians about the law of the strongest at the beginning of the war seems a bit premature since the city had not demonstrated yet its cruel face. ANDREWES supports the idea that this passage was written by Thucydides at the same period when the historian wrote the dialogue, when he was already aware of the transformation of Athens into hegemony.³⁰ The statement of the Athenians already in the first book about the right of the stronger to impose himself on the weaker could be seen as the effort of Thucydides to prepare the reader for the cruel evolution of the Athenian power.

²⁶ Thuc. 1.76.2.

²⁷ GOMME 1945, 236.

²⁸ ANDREWES 1970, 174.

²⁹ Thuc. 1.97-101.

³⁰ ANDREWES 1970, 175.

Although this imperialistic policy of Athens is highlighted in other passages of the work of Thucydides, the dialogue is presented as the highpoint of this imperialistic attitude: the Athenians, without pretexts, declare once and for all their superiority. Lebow and Kelly note that “the Melian Dialogue represents the intellectual descent of Athens into despotism”,³¹ a form of power, in which ‘honour’ has no importance anymore, only ‘fear and profit’ has.³² In this passage of the Thucydidean history is pointed out, in Meiggs’s opinion,³³ more than any other place, the tyrannical character of the Athenian League, which is maintained for no other purpose than the interest of Athens. According to Lebow and Kelly, Thucydides wanted to make here an indirect comparison between the tyrannical behaviour of Athens and the hostile attitude of Persia during the Persian wars. Literally they mention that: “the Athenians have become the Persians, long the symbol of rank despotism to the Greek world”.³⁴ The same attitude which Athens had fought during the Persian wars was the attitude that the city showed toward Melos. The Athenians had been transformed from victims to perpetrators, from the ones to protect the Greek city-states to the ones to conquer them. Athens, a city based on a democratic regime, and the most important power to support the freedom of Greece during the Persian wars, had become the “Persian King”, conquering Greek cities, taking advantage of them financially and threatening with extinction every city that would dare to resist its power. In my opinion, this was the purpose of Thucydides by writing such a dramatic dialogue in this specific moment of the war: he wanted to highlight the Athenian imperialism and arrogance, just a year before the Sicilian expedition, which would change the history of Athens once and for all.

Conclusions: What is the purpose of Thucydides with the narration of the Melian dialogue?

When it comes to the end of the Melian dialogue, Thucydides delineates the cruelty of the Athenians towards the islanders:

“Of the Melian population the Athenians executed all the grown men who came into their hands and enslaved the children and women (*οἱ δὲ ἀπέκτειναν Μηλίων ὄσους ἡβώντας ἔλαβον, παῖδας δὲ καὶ γυναῖκας ἠνδραπόδισαν*). Later they colonized the place themselves, sending out five hundred settlers of their own.”³⁵

³¹ LEBOW – KELLY 2001, 599-600

³² See Thuc. 1.76.2, where the Athenian ambassadors justify the power of the Athenian empire on the basis of three elements, ‘honour’, ‘fear’ and ‘profit’, here reduced to two according to the scholars.

³³ MEIGGS 1972, 384.

³⁴ LEBOW – KELLY 2001, 600.

³⁵ Thuc. 5.116.4.

Obviously, Melos had not been the one and only island-city which rebelled against the oppression of Athens. Mytilene, another city-state of the Aegean decided in 427 to deny the alliance with Athens and join the Peloponnesian League.³⁶ The reaction of Athens was immediate and the Athenian *ekklesia* decided to punish the city and destroy it.³⁷ During the journey of the Athenian ship to Mytilene with the message to fulfil the decision of the *ekklesia*, however, a second assembly, influenced by the speech of Diodotus, decided to retract the destruction of the city and sent a second ship to Mytilene to catch the first one.³⁸ The story ends with the capitulation of the city to the Athenians, but not with the destruction of it, as was decided at the beginning.³⁹ It is interesting that in the case of Mytilene the Athenians realized the cruelty of their decision and interrupted the destruction of the island city even at the last minute, while in the case of Melos it seems that the Athenian ambassadors acted without a second thought. Kallet justly remarks that in the case of Mytilene, the Athenians changed their minds “on the basis of rational calculation of the economic benefit of leniency: in order to decrease the chance of costly sieges in the future”.⁴⁰ In the case of Melos, on the other hand, even if the starting point of the dialogue has been once more to avoid a costly siege, it seems that at the end the Athenians acted not by logic but by passion and revenge and destroyed the island city to the core. The next act of the Athenians described in the work of Thucydides was also characterized by passion, not for revenge this time, but for conquest and money, but this time it did not lead to a happy end for Athens.

The cruel act of destroying Melos appears in Thucydides as the narrative preamble to the next event in his work, the expedition of Athens against Syracuse. As Zimmern notes, “still hungry, the imperial city lifted up her eyes towards a better prey, from a small island in the East towards a larger in the West”,⁴¹ and it is not a coincidence that the chronological order of two episodes are extremely close in the Thucydidean narration. As already mentioned, even though Thucydides does not say so clearly, the dramatic way of describing the invasion against Melos by using a dialogue, the only dialogue in the work of the historian, highlights the next event, the Sicilian expedition, which ended dramatically for the Athenians. In the year 415 the Athenians, too confident about their power, decided to declare an extremely risky war and start an expedition against Syracuse, thinking that they could conquer the city. In just two years the Athenian soldiers suffered a total defeat from the united powers of Syracuse and Sparta, which resulted in Athens losing the biggest and strongest part of its army. This catastrophe, which Thucydides in 7. 87 characterizes as the most important event

³⁶ Thuc. 3.8.

³⁷ Thuc. 3.36.1-3.

³⁸ Thuc. 3.49.

³⁹ Thuc. 3.50.

⁴⁰ KALLET 2001, 11.

⁴¹ ZIMMERN 1924, 443.

of the war, defined once and for all the future of Athens – its final defeat by the Lacedaemonians in 404, after which the city never managed to restore its former power.

Knowing the continuation of the history, it is inevitable to connect the dialogue with the subsequent Athenian disaster in Syracuse and the consequent decline of Athenian imperialism: the Sicilian defeat almost appears as the consequence of the arrogant behaviour of the Athenians against the Melians. Hornblower justly remarks that Thucydides “did not invent the fact that 416 comes before 415, and ‘Melos’ before ‘Sicily’. But Th.’s juxtapositions and his emphases are his own contribution” by noting “the dramatic effectiveness of the transition straight from a successful attack on a small island [...] to a failed invasion of a large one”.⁴² Thucydides could have described the events at Melos without the dramatic dialogue. But he chose this way to describe it, in order to point out the subsequent disaster of Athens.⁴³ Our historian “is here both tragic and instructive”, as Hussey justly remarks.⁴⁴

It is not the first time that the Athenians commit a corresponding massacre. In the year 421 Athens attacked with the same cruelty Scione in Macedonia, which had rebelled against the Athenian League:

“At about the same time in this summer the Athenians succeeded in taking Scione by siege: they killed the grown men, enslaved the children and women (ἀπέκτειναν τοὺς ἡβῶντας, παῖδας δὲ καὶ γυναῖκας ἠνδραπόδισαν), and granted occupation of the land to the Plataeans.”⁴⁵

The way that Athens behaved to the city of Scione was the same as towards the Melians. But the way that the historian describes the events makes the difference. In the case of Scione, Thucydides refers to another cruel event of the Peloponnesian war, one of the many that are described in his work. In the case of Melos, however, the tone and the form of the narration changes into a detailed and intense dialogue, in which both parties support with passion their arguments. The Athenians, as reported by Liebeschuetz,⁴⁶ seem to commit *hybris*

⁴² HORNBLOWER 2008, 217.

⁴³ Note at this point the opinion of ANDREWES (1960, 3), who believes that “It cannot be said that the Dialogue is there solely, or even primarily, to explain the vote in favour of the expedition of Sicily”. According to him one should not consider the expedition in Sicily as the consequence of the Melian dialogue, since the two episodes of Thucydides represent other ideas, even if “the state of mind illustrated in the Dialogue is of course not irrelevant to 415”. ANDREWES believes that the purpose of Thucydides with the Melian dialogue is to point out the immoral character of the events, while in the case of Syracuse the historian does never speak about the morality of the intervention in Sicily but handles it more as the consequence of the ill-regulated ambition of Athens. ANDREWES believes that “the Dialogue is about quite other matters, the danger of revolt within the empire and the lengths to which Athens might legitimately go in forestalling it” (p. 4). Even if I understand the way of thinking of ANDREWES, I would disagree, since, for the reasons explained in my text, I think that the two episodes are connected and that Thucydides was aware of the events in Sicily and their importance for the city of Athens when he wrote the dialogue.

⁴⁴ HUSSEY 1985, 128.

⁴⁵ Thuc. 5.32.1.

⁴⁶ LIEBESCHUETZ 1968, 76.

with their arrogant behaviour towards the weaker city, a *hybris* that they had to pay for later when their own army was destroyed. De Romilly, who has thoroughly analysed the nature of Athenian imperialism, mentions that “the brutally imperialistic policy described by the Athenians in the Melian dialogue carries within it the seeds of its own destruction”.⁴⁷ The Athenians, as stated by Macleod, are presented as the victims of their own power, a situation not comparable to the time of Pericles when the leader managed “to control the natural impulses of the Athenian people and empire”.⁴⁸ In the case of Melos, the Athenians, aware of their power, were out of control and committed a crime which could not have remained unpunished in the continuation of the history. Thucydides manages to point out the nature of the human being: the more power someone gets, the higher is the risk to become arrogant and provoke his own destiny. Power, even in the hands of the most prudent men, can be transformed into despotism when those who possess it are not in the position to handle it. When this happens, the authoritarian use of power can become self-destructive for the one behaving in such an arrogant way. This is in my opinion the message that Thucydides wants to communicate with the Melian dialogue.

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⁴⁷ DE ROMILLY 1963, 295.

⁴⁸ MACLEOD 1974, 395.

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