

## **Athenian Assembly**

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While many fine citizens have spoken thus far to the assembly – some advocating the sensible view that Melos should be destroyed if they resist and others arguing the less sensible, that they should receive mercy – I have not yet heard anyone mention some of the more obvious facts advocating the former, so please indulge me while I do so.

You see, I am not alone when I say that Melos is a nuisance and is a risk to Athens. As other citizens have thus far pointed out, Melos, as a neutral state, is a great concern for us, for at any moment they could side with Sparta, who through her diplomacy and the greater sentiment of the Peloponnesus at this time has had great success in weaning lesser states to join their cause. Yet, if Melos did side with us, it would appear throughout all of the Hellas that we were weak, and though we had the power to place Melos under our thumb we didn't out of fear of them, which is a view that we cannot afford to tolerate.<sup>1</sup> They are also an island, which is much more troublesome for us than if they were landlocked, for it is we who are masters of the sea, not they, and though their geography forces them to rely on ships rather than infantry, if we allow them to remain unmolested it will again be considered Athenian weakness – that we are afraid of their navy if we do not exercise the power of our own against them.<sup>2</sup> We must not allow another entity to compete with us for mastery of the sea.

All these things Melos should know. They know that we are superior to them and that we could be rid of them with the wave of our hands. If they are truly foolish, they may argue in terms of right and wrong, that it is right for them to keep what they have, and wrong of us to take them under our wings. But, fair citizens, arguments of

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<sup>1</sup> Strassler, Robert B., *The Landmark Thucydides*.  
(New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1998)  
5.95

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, 5.97

morality are fit between those who are equals.<sup>3</sup> The weak cannot argue in such terms and must become subject to the powerful, for, I might point out, if they themselves were powerful, they would exercise their power as much as we have, if not more.<sup>4</sup>

We Athenians are giving the Melians superb grace and honor to become part of our empire. After all, it is we who saved the whole of the Hellas from the Mede,<sup>5</sup> and we deserve our empire, and have more right to one than any other city that graces the Aegean. If they refuse to cooperate, they are throwing our gracious offer back into our faces, and such disrespect and ungratefulness must be punished, for the sake of our empire. If we do not, then any other state we try to subjugate will remember the leniency we had towards the Melians—or even the Mytilenians—and likewise rebel, giving us much trouble before finally conquering them. Whereas if we make an example of Melos we shall save ourselves from much toil in the future, for any other state that hears of it will tremble, and surrender without a fight once we knock on their door.

I might point out the truth in this statement by referring to Sparta. She is notorious for not devastating the people and lands that she conquers; nay, in fact she gives them great mercy, and is much more lenient to those of her subjects that rebel.<sup>6</sup> Because of this fact, we Athenians have no reason not to do what we please in the Aegean and elsewhere, for what if the worst occurs? What if we do indeed lose this war and fail utterly? Based on Sparta's own past performance, we should expect a most lenient punishment, and this instills a fearlessness and courage in us that we otherwise might not have had. Let us not allow the other states in the Hellenes accumulate a similar fearlessness concerning us.

If Melos is wise, they will bear in mind the persuasion of our envoys. If they are unwise, they may appeal to the sentiments of bravery and cowardice. Would it not be

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<sup>3</sup> Thucydides, 5.89

<sup>4</sup> Thucydides, 5.105.2

<sup>5</sup> Thucydides, 5.89

<sup>6</sup> Thucydides, 5.91

cowardice for them to submit to us without a fight?<sup>7</sup> I would say no—for it is only bravery to resist the power of equals, but is mere foolishness to do so with those who are your masters. This we must press upon them, that no one will deem them cowards for desiring only self preservation and relenting to our might.<sup>8</sup> They then might trust in hope, but wisdom knows that hope is a fool’s chance. Those with the power and resources to hope may do so, but those who put their lives at stake for hope should die miserably, for there is no room for such simple people in the Hellas.<sup>9</sup>

Some of my fair citizens here have argued for mercy in fear of the gods. While the gods should be revered, my friends, we have little reason to fear them. Even the gods rule where they can. It is they that set the precedent, for it is they that are powerful and rule all they can, whereas it is we that are weaker and suffer what we must from them.<sup>10</sup> How many earthquakes has Sparta suffered? What of the plague, inflicted upon us through the gods’ arbitrary will? It is their will to humor themselves at our expense, and do we complain, bicker and moan? Nay, we suffer what we must and have no right to quarrel with them. Such is it on this earthly coil, and the gods will not find fault in any earth power that likewise inflicts its might upon the lesser and weaker among us.

Similarly, we need not fear the Spartans in this enterprise. Truly, it would be difficult to besiege Melos and fight off Sparta at the same time, but we will never have to, for Sparta’s sense of justice is that which is expedient and in her own interest.<sup>11</sup> To sally forth in the defense of one little island is hardly expedient. I need not remind you that the Spartans avoid danger whenever they can,<sup>12</sup> and even if they were to hear of our siege at Melos they wouldn’t lift a finger to help, for it would place their own forces in unnecessary danger. Neither we nor the Spartans make alliances so that we might be able to help *them*. We make alliances so that we ourselves might be helped. If Melos has

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<sup>7</sup> Thucydides, 5.100

<sup>8</sup> Thucydides, 5.101

<sup>9</sup> Thucydides, 5.103

<sup>10</sup> Thucydides, 5.105.1

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, 5.105.4

<sup>12</sup> Thucydides, 5.107

become more of a nuisance to the Spartans than a help, why would they extend their forces and come to their aid?<sup>13</sup>

We must impress these arguments upon the Melians, for they are reasonable and are sound. Logic is with us, and logic must be their master also. If they care not for the lives of their people, that is hardly our concern. We give them every chance to surrender peacefully, and if they do not? Well, if they do not, my dear Athenians, then we squash them under our heel so hard that there won't be a soul in all of the Aegean that will not hear their screams.

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<sup>13</sup> Thucydides, 5.109