

## Revolution in Corcyra

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To whomever finds this note,

I am a Corcyran citizen, Dingle son of Thingle of the deme Mingle, and I write this so that the children of our race will recognize the seeds of rebellion and stamp them out before they can catch flame; for indeed, rebellion is a raging fire that consumes everything in its path. As I lay here on the stone floor, having managed to find some loose parchment and some wayward ink, my life-blood flows incessantly, spilling out, staining the stone crimson, and I have no means to stop it. I only hope that I finish my tale before I pass from this world, and having done so, that this record will not be consumed by the flame, or whither into nothingness, for time rots all things.

Justice is a lofty perch upon which men can never stand. I have had the luxury of hearing of the most recent atrocities that have befallen the Hellas this year, and my own tale concludes this tragedy. I do believe, as I have said earlier, that rebellion is a dangerous thing, and is in itself an evil of the worst kind. If not for rebellion, none of what I will relate would have ever occurred. For Mytilene rebelled against our great ally Athens,<sup>1</sup> and that was the deed that almost destroyed her. I know that things were not perfect for Lesbos, but are they better now? Is it better to now be enslaved and to see ones land sold to others,<sup>2</sup> rather than to have accepted ones lot and lived as best as one could? Such rebels did indeed deserve to be punished for their rebellion, but to what extent? Who was it that first said that a proper punishment for treachery should be death? I suppose that this punishment seems only natural, and Cleon certainly championed an astute case,<sup>3</sup> for if not for the fear of death, many that are taken into alliance would betray their allies, if not for some monetary reason then for a darker one, one that all humans have; a desire for chaos. But instead of doing what most men have

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<sup>1</sup> Strassler, Robert B., *The Landmark Thucydides*.  
(New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1998)  
3.2.1

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, 3.50

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides, 3.37

concluded was just, Athens spared Mytilene the ultimate punishment,<sup>4</sup> harkening to Diodotus, who advocated mercy to the unfortunate.<sup>5</sup> Athens, then, concluded that it was just to rule in their own interest, to find advantage through the disadvantage of others, and all the while purport the semblance of mercy.

Or take Plataea, that miserable city, besieged for so long that starvation began to show its ugly head. They surrendered to Sparta,<sup>6</sup> not to Thebes, in hopes that their case might be heard and justice would be rendered. But again we see a foolish reliance on justice; she who is fleeing and is defined variously by different peoples. Despite helping the Spartans in times past<sup>7</sup> and despite the truly outrageous way in which this calamity befell them, they were judged to be in error, the wrongdoers, as if they themselves had infiltrated a Spartan or Theban town. Vengeance won that day—that day the remaining Plataeans were slaughtered, and only for defending their own—not justice. Again we find the perch untouched, first by Athens and again by Sparta.

But O! what terrors have befallen me! Though I cringe at the injustice done in the previous two examples, what is near to my heart is the fate of my home, Corcyra, and I weep openly at what has befallen her. If rebellion is the purest of all evils, revolution is nearly as close, for the two are mates, and thrive within each other, relishing each other as a murderer relishes his own bloody hands. If loyalty were to exist in such a world as this, it exists far from the Hellas. If it didn't, the captives freed by Corinth, our own flesh and blood, would not have induced the people to split with Athens,<sup>8</sup> so that they might breathe one more day of our accursed air. Even though we remained with Athens, the seed of foolishness was sown, for we refused to take sides against Sparta and her allies.<sup>9</sup> It is just, it is loyal, it is good to side with those who are good to you, not to find a middle ground and assume no fault, for as surely as I sit here bleeding, there is no such thing as a neutral party; there is no such thing as abstaining from taking sides, for those

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<sup>4</sup> Thucydides, 3.49

<sup>5</sup> Thucydides, 3.42

<sup>6</sup> Thucydides, 3.52

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides, 3.54

<sup>8</sup> Thucydides, 3.70

<sup>9</sup> Thucydides, 3.70.2

who do are reviled by *both* sides, and contentment wanes within the walls of a city that expresses such cowardice.

Greed, aye, greed plays a part. Greed it was that condemned the oligarchs to pay a stater for each stake they cut.<sup>10</sup> Did they deserve to be punished? Certainly. What they did was illegal and the punishment was suitable. But had the oligarchs not been condemned to pay such a price for their evil, Corcyra would not be in the state it is in today. I would ask anyone who would defend “justice,” as she presented herself to us that day, whether it is better to live under the rule of an evil elite that cares not for the rules and customs of our people, or to live as we are now, in fear of an arrow flying from any corner, in fear of old enemies arriving to enact their revenge, and in a city burning, our homes destroyed, and our relatives butchered in the streets, all in the name of justice. You tell me which is more evil.

We desired for democracy, oh, and we paid for it dearly. We fought the oligarchs, and they slaughtered us.<sup>11</sup> Brother against brother, mother against daughter, one ideology against another; we fought and slew each other, until we could kill no more. But the next day, we tasted freedom! We pushed them back, the twice-accursed oligarchs, until they had no recourse but to stave us off with fire. They burned their own homes and belongings,<sup>12</sup> the very things they sought to retain by holding their oligarchic authority, in fear for their own skin. In the end, every man cares only for his own neck. He may tout some high ideal. He may argue his opinion and his beliefs cleverly and tactfully, but if faced with the sword he would give it all up for one hour more of life.

The Athenians came then, Nicostratus leading them, and sought to make peace between our two factions.<sup>13</sup> But we had no leader. The oligarchs at least gave us leadership, but alas, a man suddenly possessed with his own freedom and power within his own hands will oft do what seems best to him, and each man thinks different

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<sup>10</sup> Thucydides, 3.70.6

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, 3.72.1-3

<sup>12</sup> Thucydides, 3.74

<sup>13</sup> Thucydides, 3.75

things are best. When the Spartans and their allies arrived with ships, did we listen to the Athenians, and let them face the Spartans first?<sup>14</sup> Did we listen to reason and order? Of course not. We opted for chaos – every man’s secret desire – and sailed against them with our own force. I do not blame the Athenians for being wary on the sea, and for fighting casually when we so rashly attacked. After losing thirteen ships we fled, chasing the Athenians back to what remained of Corcyra, and awaited the inevitable invasion of the Spartans.<sup>15</sup>

I wish now that the Spartans had invaded. Even if they slew each and every one of us, it would have been a better fate that the one we have now faced. But they didn’t, and instead sailed back to Sparta with the ships they captured.<sup>16</sup> This left our city free from Spartan oppression, so where did we turn to vent our murderous nature? Ourselves.

With an Athenian fleet on the way,<sup>17</sup> what seemed better than to get rid of a neighbor that owed you money? What seemed better than to slaughter he who held a different ideology than you? And so we saw the worst of humanity, there in Corcyra, as we slew our kinsmen for the simplest of reasons.<sup>18</sup> We satisfied that innate human desire for blood – human blood – a desire that we relieve with so-called “just” wars and with duels for honor or women. But take honor and justice and kinship away, and the desire is still there, and it will be satisfied.

I am not exempt. Call me a hypocrite if you wish, but it is only now as my face pales and my hands begin to quiver that I realize such things. For in the past days I killed more men than I can count, and at every moment my body trembled with excitement. There is no greater thrill than grasping the throat of a dying man, and watching as the light in his eyes fades and is extinguished. Only then can you inhale the scent of death, and it is a sweet, sweet scent. I have fed on such a thrill for a week now, and have become a glutton for murder, as have nearly all men in this city. The women

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<sup>14</sup> Thucydides, 3.77

<sup>15</sup> Thucydides, 3.78-79

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Thucydides, 3.80

<sup>18</sup> Thucydides, 3.81

weep openly in the streets and the children look about in wonder and horror, but they do not understand the thrill, nor do they understand any of our perfectly righteous reasons for tearing the very life from each other like feeding beasts.

But I see now how mistaken we were, and how our precious democracy has been a treacherous temptress. There is nothing so special about democracy that we should desire it above our very lives. Because of our politics, our population is decimated, and even now, after the majority of the killing has subsided, I still hear the sound of my countrymen raiding and ravaging their kin.<sup>19</sup> And for all our nobility, for all our pride, for all our rebellion against the evil we so perceived, justice has eluded us once again, and mocks us from a height that is beyond human grasp. Man can never even pretend any semblance of righteousness, true righteousness, without the help of the truly Divine.

I conclude by warning against rebellion and against revolution. If you have a tough master, be a better slave. If you have a corrupt government, live your lives uncorrupt. If your neighbor robs you, give him your best spear. I cannot write much more. My limbs are getting weak. I feel....I can feel what it is to die....O! my wife...tell her that I love her, that she is all I have ever loved...forgive me for sleeping with your sister...[indiscernible]...can see them laughing at me, dragging me into a pit...[indiscernible]...let go! oh gods save me...my eyes...can't see...so much blood...[indiscernible]...where are you taking me? ....fire...[indiscernible]...

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<sup>19</sup> Thucydides, 3.84