



Thucydides, the Athenian democracy and imperialism

Death for the Mytilenians

- ▶ Upon the arrival of the prisoners with Salaethus, the Athenians at once put the latter to death, although he offered, among other things, to procure the withdrawal of the Peloponnesians from Plataea, which was still under siege; [2] and after deliberating as to what they should do with the former, **in the fury of the moment determined to put to death not only the prisoners at Athens, but the whole adult male population of Mitylene, and to make slaves of the women and children.** It was remarked that **Mitylene had revolted without being, like the rest, subjected to the empire;** and what above all swelled the wrath of the Athenians was the fact of **the Peloponnesian fleet having ventured over to Ionia to her support, a fact which was held to argue a long-meditated rebellion.** Thucydides 3.36



Kleon

- ▶ An assembly was therefore at once called, and after much expression of opinion upon both sides, Cleon, son of Cleaenetus, **the same who had carried the former motion of putting the Mitylenians to death, the most violent man at Athens, and at that time by far the most powerful with the commons...** Thucydides 3.36.6

Your Empire is a Tyranny

- ▶ **'I have often before now been convinced that a democracy is incapable of empire, and never more so than by your present change of mind in the matter of Mitylene.** [2] Fears or plots being unknown to you in your daily relations with each other, you feel just the same with regard to your allies, and never reflect that the mistakes into which you may be led by listening to their appeals, or by giving way to your own compassion, are full of danger to yourselves, and bring you no thanks for your weakness from your allies; **entirely forgetting that your empire is a despotism and your subjects disaffected conspirators, whose obedience is insured not by your suicidal concessions, but by the superiority given you by your own strength and not their loyalty.** Thucydides 3.37

The Melos Episode, 416 BCE

- ▶ In 416 BCE, Athens decided to put an end to the neutrality of the island of Melos in the Aegean
- ▶ Melos was traditionally a Spartan colony



The Melian Dialogue

- ▶ The Melian Dialogue is a dialogue between the Athenian generals and the commanders of the Melians discussing a surrender.
- ▶ It is a unique piece of oratory in Thucydides.

The dark Face of imperialism

- ▶ ‘For ourselves, **we shall not trouble you with specious pretences**--either of how we have a right to our empire because we overthrew the Mede, or are now attacking you because of wrong that you have done us--and make a long speech which would not be believed; and in return we hope that you, instead of thinking to influence us by saying that you did not join the Lacedaemonians, although their colonists, or that you have done us no wrong, will aim at what is feasible, holding in view the real sentiments of us both; **since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.**’ Thucydides 5.89

Sparta: not much different

- ▶ **The Lacedaemonian judges decided that the question, whether they had received any service from the Plataeans in the war, was a fair one for them to put;** as they had always invited them to be neutral, agreeably to the original covenant of Pausanias after the defeat of the Mede, and had again definitely offered them the same conditions before the blockade. **...they brought them in again one by one and asked each of them the same question, that is to say, whether they had done the Lacedaemonians and allies any service in the war; and upon their saying that they had not, took them out and slew them all without exception...**The adverse attitude of the Lacedaemonians—in the whole Plataean **affair was mainly adopted to please the Thebans, who were thought to be useful in the war at that moment raging.** [5] Such was the end of Plataea in the ninety-third year after she became the ally of Athens. Thucydides 3.68 (excerpts).

Imperialism: Class discussion

- ▶ Consider the handout
- ▶ How have views of Athenian imperialism changed over time?