

HPAH4005 Cauldron of Democracy and Tragedy: Classical Greek History and Literature

Timeline Additions for 431-421 B.C

3.8-15 Conference at Olympia (Mytilenean speech)¹

Certain Athenian allies are beginning to revolt, for multiple reasons, but mainly due to lack of protection and Athenian tributes required to be paid by Athenian allies and the pressures of providing it². Tributes would be paid in the fashion of ships, men, or in talents of silver, all needed to fund the Athenian war effort. With Athens spending more and more on the war the pressures placed on its allies became ever greater³. One of the Peloponnesian tactics was to strike up new alliances with these defectors and use them in their own war effort with the promise of protection⁴. Others, such as the Mytileneans, needed no persuasion, and beg for a new alliance between themselves and the Lacedaemonians after revolting against the Athenians in 428/7⁵.

The Mytileneans open their plea, that the changing of sides in such an event is a common occurrence, and with it, the common convention or belief, to those on the outside, that it is a show of weakness and fear on behalf of those defecting. The Mytileneans hold this feeling to be true and just, but plead that in their case it is different and proceed to defend their virtue and their belief in 'justice and honour'⁶.

Perhaps, showing his Athenian bias and unable to remain objective to a point, Thucydides apportions some of blame in this present proceeding on the Lacedaemonians. Explaining that the sham alliance only came about because of actions taken by the Lacedaemonian withdrawal from the Median War⁷. Thucydides manages to turn the question of virtue and honour, using the mouthpiece of the Mytileneans on to the Lacedaemonians, rather than the Athenian behaviour that follows, although this to is acknowledged.

The relaxation of the Athenian offensive against the Medes, who are trying to 'enslave' the Mytileneans and their allies and with it, in the eyes of the Mytileneans, the whole of Hellas becomes the root of their discontent and distrust in the Athenians⁸. The Mytileneans conclude their speech with the benefits of an alliance. The Mytileneans suggest that it is the 'minor' poleis that enable a great polis to become even greater (an ideological view of Thucydides' perhaps)⁹. They urge for the alliance to be struck and at once to attack Athens, who are on the backfoot because of plague and financial mismanagement¹⁰.

¹ Thu. 3.8-15 (S. Lattimore translation 1998)

² Rhodes, 2010, p.97-100

³ Rhodes, 2010, p.102-103

⁴ Rhodes, 2010, p.104

⁵ Thu. 3.8-15 (S. Lattimore translation 1998); Rhodes, 2010, p.114

⁶ Thu. 3.9-10 (S. Lattimore translation 1998)

⁷ Thu. 3.10 (S. Lattimore translation 1998)

⁸ Thu. 3.11-12 (S. Lattimore translation 1998)

⁹ Thu. 3.13 (S. Lattimore translation 1998)

¹⁰ Thu. 3.13 (S. Lattimore translation 1998); Rhodes, 2010, p.97-100

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