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Greek Civilization

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“Flaws in Athenian Arguments from the Melian Dialouge”

If I was able to time travel to Athens in the year 416 BC to comment and attempt to persuade my fellow Athenians in the popular assembly on the grounds of overthrowing Melos, I would try to convince them that the Athenian arguments explaining their right to establish dominance over the Melians are flawed. After knowing what was spoken between both parties in the Melian Dialogue, it is clear that it is not right for the Athenians to try and force Melos into submission.

Based on the writing of Thucydides, the Athenians initial comments were clear that they had no obligation to trying to prove their right to rule over Melos and that that the truth of Melos’ peace and neutrality in all Spartan activity against Athens was useless. I would argue that this foundational claim is extremely flawed. If two governing bodies have had no previous contact or experiences with each other, the Athenians would have no right to comment on how to “help them” or that Melos’ past actions “forced this upon themselves”. Yet the Athenian negotiators continue to use these arguments throughout the dialogue. In line 93 the Athenians say that “To you the gain will be that by submission you will avert the worst; and we shall be all the richer for your preservation.” In other words, if Melos, a city that has never stood in Athens way or wished it harm, does not submit to Athens authority, they are choosing to stand against them. This is a false dichotomy that is formed in the minds imperial minds of Athens that they can only be at peace with those that serve them. This line also claiming the “gain” Melos will have is ludicrous because Athens would have no idea what Melos’ current experience was since they had never been there before. Another interesting point to add is that Athens, who is supposed to be democratic, is not listening to the voice of the people who they are going to call subjects. So far in the first line Athens is looking to fight someone they have just met, just because they do not have their full fledged support.

I would also try to argue a point brought up by Melos in the dialogue that I found intriguing. Melos asks in line 96 “But are your subjects really unable to distinguish between states in which you have no concern and those that are chiefly your own colonies and in some cases have revolted and been subdued by you?” To put it in simpler terms, they rhetorically ask why they would not want to be at peace with Melos when they have caused them less violence and issues than Athens’ own colonies. To this Athens respond that Melos’ freedom is a reason for these colonies’ revolts. The colonies believe that Melos can defend themselves and Athens is scared to attack them, and for this reason they must be put in place. And if this exchange proves anything, it was that Athens was on the brink of losing it all. The only way for them to keep their “alliance” was by keeping them in fear and terror by attacking all neutral cities. At the popular assembly, for the Athenians to see this anti-democratic way of conducting themselves would be a great argument on why it was wrong for Athens to force Melos in submission. They would have to do this with all the free world and it would take them from being democratic to being a tyranny. Later in response to the dangers pointed out by the Melians, Athens confesses to their biggest danger being people like Melos who appeared to be under no control. I find this so ironic because Athens never realized that they would be the only city under no control if they continued this prostitution of power, meaning that they were the only real danger, which in this time period was the actual truth.

Another point that I would try to argue in my attempt of persuading the popular assembly in Athens is based off of line 101 where Athens very “humbly” tells Melos that “you are not fighting against equals to whom you cannot yield without disgrace, but you are taking counsel whether or not you shall resist an overwhelming force.” Although very savvy and poetic, the Athenians make a fool of themselves again. They have switched the narrative of power so much. They say that they fear the free state of Melos but then profess they are not equal and that they are an overwhelming power. Why would you fear something you are infinitely greater than? Athens also stated that their colonies believe that Melos can defend themselves, yet Athens already proved to the small colonies under them that this is not true. The colonies were not revolting because they saw other cities have a chance against Athens, they were sending a message that they had to keep fighting. And in this case, Athens could come to the conclusion that they are not really better or greater, but that all Greeks are equal. And if they are, they have the right to live democratically, which is why forcing Melos would be improper. Altogether my dialogue at the Athens popular assembly would read like this:

“Fellow Athenians of the assembly, today I am here to defend an unpopular claim amongst the men who lust power and look to satisfy this lust in overthrowing Melos. The great virtue of democracy in Athens is based on the equality of all men and citizens. Every man has the right to have a voice that is heard and acted upon when agreed between many. The representatives of Melos who spoke on behalf of the people have said they prefer peace with Athens, and that to be out of the alliance is in their best interest. Who are we to say no to this claim? Let us look and see what is truly gained in overthrowing them. Security? We only secure war with other peaceful people and revolts in our colonies. Athens defeated the Persians with help from peaceful neighbors, not slaves. We are already strong on our own, so let us not thin our focus and resources on procuring and maintaining slaves when there can be advancements and great success in arts and our culture. Above all these things, let us act upon a future where Athens may be in a place of need. Only in placing our seeds of peace and selfless-protection may we one day reap it in the future.”

Unfortunately, I can not time travel and change what history has already played out. After the Melian Dialogue Athens forced Melos to surrender and made slaves of their women and children killing all people who were of military age. It is always great to ask what if questions and to see the past in the light of today. Clearly today's politicians and country powers would never say what the Athenians and Melians said, but the real question is what would they have said. I know that I would have defended Melos because in today's world looking at the circumstances, Athens had no right to coerce them and in breaking down their logic and using their beliefs, they could be convinced of this. I am not sure if my eloquent speech would work and I never will, but I do hope that if the day comes where similar situations arise, we learn from the Melian Dialogue and Greek history to progress forward in the world.

Works Cited

1. Melian Dialogue in Thucydides 5.84-116.