I lived through all this at a good age to observe the war, and I applied my mind to gaining accurate knowledge of each event. It turned out that I was living in exile for twenty years after my command at Amphipolis, and because I spent time with both sides (more time, in fact with the Peloponnesians, owing to my exile) I was able to observe things more closely and without distraction. So I will now discuss the quarrel that followed the ten-years’ war, the dissolution of the treaty, and what came afterwards as they waged war.

c. The Melian dialogue [v.84–116]

[84] (In 416) the Athenians made war against the island of Melos, with thirty ships of their own, six from Chios, and two from Lesbos. The Athenian contingent was twelve hundred hoplites, three hundred archers, and twenty mounted archers, while the allies, including islanders, contributed about fifteen hundred hoplites. The Melians are a colony of the Lacedaemonians, and so did not want to be subject to Athens as the other islands were. At the beginning, they had stayed at peace with both sides. Later on, however, when the Athenians drove them to it by wasting their land, they were openly at war.

Now the Athenian generals, Cleomedes and Tissias, set up camp in Melian territory with these forces. Before doing any harm to the Melian land, they first sent ambassadors to negotiate. The Melians refused to bring these ambassadors before the common people, but ordered them to deliver their message to a few officials and leading citizens. The Athenians spoke as follows:

[85] Athenians: Since we may not speak before the common people, for fear that they would be led astray if they heard our persuasive and unanswerable arguments all at once in a continuous speech—we know that is what you had in mind in bringing us to the few leading citizens—you who are sitting here should make your situation still more secure: answer every particular point, not in a single speech, but interrupting us immediately whenever we say anything that seems wrong to you. And first, tell us whether you like this proposal.

186. To be a general in 424 Thucydides should have been over thirty. If he was a very young general, he would have been born about 455, and would have been in his early twenties when the war began and in his early fifties when he wrote this sentence.


[86] To this the Melian Council replied: We would not find fault with the fairness of a leisurely debate, but these acts of war—happening right now, not in the future—do not seem to be consistent with that. We see that you have come to be judges of this proceeding, so we expect the result to be this: if we make the better case for justice and do not surrender because of that, we will have war; but if you win the argument, we will have servitude.

[87] Athenians: Well, then, if you came to this meeting to reason on the basis of suspicions about the future, or for any other purpose than to work out how to save your city on the basis of what you see here today—we should stop now. But if that is your purpose, let’s speak to it.

[88] Melians: People in our situation can be expected to turn their words and thoughts to many things, and should be pardoned for that. Since, however, this meeting is to consider only the point of our survival, let’s have our discussion on the terms you have proposed, if that is your decision.

[89] Athenians: For our part, we will not make a long speech no one would believe, full of fine moral arguments—that our empire is justified because we defeated the Persians, or that we are coming against you for an injustice you have done to us. And we don’t want you to think you can persuade us by saying that you did not fight on the side of the Lacedaemonians in the war, though you were their colony, or that you have done us no injustice. Instead, let’s work out what we can do on the basis of what both sides truly accept: we both know that decisions about justice are made in human discussions only when both sides are under equal compulsion, but when one side is stronger, it gets as much as it can, and the weak must accept that.

[90] Melians: Well, then, since you put your interest in place of justice, our view must be that it is in your interest not to subvert this rule that is good for all: that a plea of justice and fairness should do some good for a man who has fallen into danger, if he can win over his judges, even if he is not perfectly persuasive. And this rule concerns you no less than us: if you ever stumble, you might receive a terrible punishment and be an example to others.

188. “Under equal compulsion”: justice is relevant when both sides must feel the force of law; but when one side is more powerful, it does not apply. The Athenians are not saying that might makes right; merely that might supersedes right between unequals. For Brasidas’ view see iv.86.
[91] Athenians: We are not downhearted at the prospect of our empire's coming to an end, though it may happen. Those who rule over others (such as the Lacedaemonians, who are not our present concern) are not as cruel to those they conquer as are a subject people who attack their rulers and overcome them. But let us be the ones to worry about that danger. We will merely declare that we are here for the benefit of our empire, and we will speak for the survival of your city: we would like to rule over you without trouble, and preserve you for our mutual advantage.

[92] Melians: But how could it be as much to our advantage to serve, as it is yours to rule?

[93] Athenians: Because if you obey, you will save yourselves from a very cruel fate; and we will reap a profit from you if we don’t destroy you.

[94] Melians: So you would not accept a peaceful solution? We could be friends rather than enemies, and fight with neither side.

[95] Athenians: No. Your enmity does not hurt us as much as your friendship would. That would be a sign of our weakness to those who are ruled by us; but your hatred would prove our power.

[96] Melians: Why? Do your subjects reason so unfairly that they put us, who never had anything to do with you, in the same category as themselves, when most of them were your colonies, or else rebels whom you defeated?

[97] Athenians: Why not? They think we have as good a justification for controlling you as we do for them; they say the independent cities survive because they are powerful, and that we do not attack them because we are afraid. So when you have been trampled down by us, you will add not only to our empire, but to our security, by not staying independent. And this is especially true because you are islanders who are weaker than the others, and we are masters of the sea.

[98] Melians: But don’t you think there is safety in our proposal of neutrality? Here again, since you have driven us away from a plea for justice, and are telling us to surrender to whatever is in your interest, we must show you what would be good for us, and try to persuade you that your interests coincide with ours. Won’t this turn the people who are now neutral into your enemies? Once they’ve seen this, they will expect you to attack them eventually also. And what would this accomplish, but to make the enemies you already have still greater, and to make others your enemies against their will, when they would not have been so?

[99] Athenians: We do not think the free mainlanders will be terrible enemies to us; it will be long before they so much as keep guard against us. But islanders worry us—those outside the empire like you, and those under the empire who resent the force that keeps them that way—these may indeed act recklessly and bring themselves and us into foreseeable danger.

[100] Melians: Yes, but if you would face such extreme danger to retain your empire, and if your subjects would do so to get free of you, then wouldn’t it be great weakness and cowardice on our part, since we are still free, not to go to every extreme rather than be your subjects?

[101] Athenians: No, not if you think sensibly. Your contest with us is not an equal match of courage against courage; no honor is lost if you submit. This is a conference about your survival and about not resisting those who are far stronger than you.

[102] Melians: But we know that in war the odds sometimes are more even than the difference in numbers between the two sides, and that if we yield, all our hope is lost immediately; but if we hold out, we can still hope to stand tall.

[103] Athenians: Hope! It is a comfort in danger, and though it may be harmful to people who have many other advantages, it will not destroy them. But people who put everything they have at risk will learn what hope is when it fails them, for hope is prodigal by nature; and once they have learned this, it is too late to take precautions for the future. Do not let this happen to you, since you are weak and have only this one throw of the dice. And do not be like the ordinary people who could use human means to save themselves but turn to blind hopes when they are forced to give up their sensible ones—to divination, oracles, and other such things that destroy men by giving them hope.189

189. The application of this warning to the Sicilian Expedition is striking. In Sicily the Athenian armada was destroyed because their general, Nicias, had too much faith in divination. Again and again during the war, the Athenians were beguiled by hope into taking great risks. For the Athenian tendency to hope see i.70, i.74, ii.42, ii.62, vii.77. For the way hope leads to crime, see iii.45.
[104] Melians: You can be sure we think it hard to contend against your power and good fortune, unless we might do so on equal terms. Nevertheless, we trust that our good fortune will be no less than yours. The gods are on our side, because we stand innocent against men who are unjust. And as for power, what we lack will be supplied by the alliance we will make with the Lacedaemonians, who must defend us as a matter of honor, if only because we are related to them. So our confidence is not as totally unreasonable as you might think.

[105] Athenians: Well, the favor of the gods should be as much on our side as yours. Neither our principles nor our actions are contrary to what men believe about the gods, or would want for themselves. Nature always compels gods (we believe) and men (we are certain) to rule over anyone they can control. We did not make this law, and we were not the first to follow it; but we will take it as we found it and leave it to posterity forever, because we know that you would do the same if you had our power, and so would anyone else. So as far as the favor of the gods is concerned, we have no reason to fear that we will do worse than you.

As for your opinion about the Lacedaemonians, your trust that they will help you in order to preserve their own honor—we admire your blessed innocence, but we don’t envy you your foolishness. Granted, the Lacedaemonians do show a high degree of virtue towards each other according to their local customs; but one could say many things about their treatment of other people. We’ll make this as brief and as clear as possible: of all the people we know, they are the ones who make it most obvious that they hold whatever pleases them to be honorable, and whatever profits them to be just. So your plan will not support your hope for survival, and it now seems reckless.

[106] Melians: But on that point we most firmly trust the Lacedaemonians to pursue their own advantage—not to betray their colonists, the Melians, for in doing so they would benefit their enemies by losing the confidence of their friends among the Greeks.

[107] Athenians: Don’t you realize that advantage lies with safety, and that the pursuit of justice and honor brings danger? Which the Lacedaemonians are usually least willing to face?

[108] Melians: But we believe they will take a dangerous mission in hand for our sake. They will think it safer to do so for us than for anyone else, since we are close enough to the Peloponnese for action, and we will be more faithful to them than others because our kinship gives us common views.

[109] Athenians: But the good will of those who call for help does not offer any security to those who might fight for them. They will be safe only if they have superior power in action. The Lacedaemonians are more aware of this than anyone else; at least they have no confidence in their own forces, and therefore take many allies along with them when they attack a neighbor. So while we are masters of the sea, you cannot reasonably expect them to cross over to an island.

[110] Melians: Yes, but they may have others to send. The Sea of Crete is wide; it is harder for its masters to seize ships there, than it is for people who want to escape to slip through. And if the Lacedaemonians failed in this, they would turn their arms against your own land or the lands of your allies that have still not been invaded by Brasidas. And then you will be troubled about your own land, and that of your allies, and no longer about a country that does not concern you.

[111] Athenians: With your experience of what might happen, you are surely not unaware that Athens has never given up a single siege through fear of anyone else. We are struck by the fact that though you said you would confer about your survival, in all this discussion you have never mentioned a single thing that people could rely on and expect to survive. Your strongest points are mere hopes for the future, and your actual resources are too small for your survival in view of the forces arrayed against you. Your planning will be utterly irrational, unless (after letting us withdraw from the meeting) you decide on a more sensible policy. Do not be distracted by a sense of honor; this destroys people all too often, when dishonor and death stand before their eyes. Many have been so overcome by the power of this seductive word, “honor,” that even when they foresee the dangers to which it carries them, they are drawn by a mere word into an

190. Brasidas was the Spartan general who persuaded Acanthus and other cities to rebel from Athens in 424 and in 422 defeated an Athenian army at Amphilochis, where he was fatally wounded.

191. This was quite true at the time, and is borne out by the histories of Mytilene and Potidae, both of which were taken after long sieges while Lacedaemonian forces were harassing Attica. The point foreshadows the siege of Syracuse, however, which the Athenians will be forced to abandon.
action that is an irreparable disaster; and so, intentionally, they fall into a dishonor that is more shameful than mere misfortune, since it is due to their own foolishness.

You must guard against this if you are to deliberate wisely, and you must not think it unseemly for you to submit to a city of such great power, which offers such reasonable conditions—to be our allies, and to enjoy your own property under tribute to us. You are being given a choice between war and survival: do not make the wrong decision out of a passion for victory. Remember what is usually the best course: do not give way to equals, but have the right attitude towards your superiors and use moderation towards your inferiors. So think about this when we withdraw from the meeting, and keep this often in your mind: you are considering what to do for your country—your only country—and this one discussion will determine whether it meets success or failure.

[112] So the Athenians withdrew from the conference, and the Melians, left to themselves, decided on much the same position as they had taken in the debate. Then the Melians answered as follows:

Melians: Athenians, our resolution is no different from what it was before: we will not, in a short time, give up the liberty in which our city has remained for the seven hundred years since its foundation. We will trust in the fortune of the gods, which has preserved it up to now, and in the help of men—the Lacedaemonians—and we will do our best to maintain our liberty. We offer this, however: we will be your friends; we will be enemies to neither side; and you will depart from our land, after making whatever treaty we both think fit.

[113] That was the answer of the Melians. As they broke off the conference, the Athenians said:

Athenians: It seems to us, on the basis of this discussion, that you are the only men who think you know the future more clearly than what is before your eyes, and who, through wishful thinking, see doubtful events as if they had already come to pass. You have staked everything on your trust in hope, good fortune, and the Lacedaemonians; and you will be ruined in everything.

[114] Then the Athenian ambassadors went back to their camp. When the generals saw that the Melians would not submit, they turned immedi-

ately to war and surrounded the Melian city with a wall, after dividing up the work with their allies. After that, the Athenians left a contingent of Athenian and allied troops there to guard the city by land and sea, and went home with the greater part of their army. The rest stayed behind to besiege the place.

[115] (About the same time, the Argives invaded the country around Phlius, where they were ambushed by Phlians and exiles from Argos, losing about eighty men. Meanwhile, the Athenians at Pylos brought in a great deal of plunder from the Lacedaemonians. The Lacedaemonians did not go to war over this, because that would have broken the treaty. Instead they proclaimed that any of their people could plunder the Athenians in return. The Corinthians were at war with the Athenians, but this was over certain disputes of their own, and the rest of the Peloponnesus kept quiet.)

The Melians, in a night attack, captured part of the Athenian wall opposite the market place, killed the men there, and brought in grain and as many supplies as they could. Then they went back and kept quiet. After that the Athenians maintained a better watch.

And so the summer ended.

[116] (The following winter, the Lacedaemonians were about to march into the land of Argos, but they returned when they found that the sacrifices for the border crossing were not favorable. The Argives suspected some of their own people of being involved in the Lacedaemonian plan; they captured some of them, and the rest escaped.)

About the same time, the Melians took another part of the Athenian wall, because there were not many men to guard it. After that another army came from Athens under the command of Philocrates. Now that the city was besieged in force, there was some treachery, and the Melians on their own initiative surrendered to the Athenians, to be dealt with as the Athenians decided: they killed all the men of military age and made slaves of the women and children. Later, they settled the place themselves, sending five hundred colonists.