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HIST 501 Classical Greece and Rome

Week 3, Discussion 1

Discussion Prompts:

1. What led to the stalemate and the Peace of Nicias in 421? Based on the narrative that Thucydides has offered you so far, do you have a sense of the relative strengths and weaknesses of either side (military, but also political, economic, etc...)?
2. What thoughts do you have about the Melian Dialogue and the Athenians' perspective?

The Melian Dialogue, whether a purely speculative work by Thucydides or not, seems to illustrate a few key ideas. First, that hostility and tension still exist between Sparta and Athens and that Athens has become emboldened by the first several years of the Peace of Nicias.

It is clear that while the Peace of Nicias is in effect, that Sparta and Athens are still nervous of each others ambitions and that a tremendous amount of suspicion exists from each side. The capture of the 300 pro-Athenian citizens (Thucydides, 5:84) illustrates Athenian fears of the spectre of Spartan aggression and potential expansion. Their siege and subjugation of Melos, for their wealth (Thucydides, 5:93) and military advantage, goes further to show that they are aware perhaps, even if it is a diminishing one, of the Spartan threat.

One thing that strikes me as remarkable in this passage is its tone. It is unlike any other in the text, to my current knowledge of Thucydides. The boldness that the Athenians are painted with is a dramatic departure from the Thucydides portrayal of Athens. While there are some bold Athenian figures who appear in the text, like Cleon, but this passage exudes hubris and a Machiavellian tone of impressive magnitude. Could this be a commentary on the personality of Alcibiades? Bold, self assured and arrogant? Is this a larger commentary from a political exile on the leadership of the demagogues of Athens and the how far they've come from the rule of Pericles? Regardless, the passage also seems to be a philosophical exploration of the nature of power and justice. While the Melians take a reasoned approach, including practical threats to Athens' security if they persist in their plans (Thucydides, 5:98-100), and also describe that a valid contract or just treaty cannot be made under duress (Thucydides, 5:86), the Athenians persist with their insistence on an expedient and practical resolution to the Melians, submit or be destroyed, "might makes right". They seem have no fear of backlash in their promise to destroy the Melians, instead, revel in it "whereas your hatred is evidence of our power," (Thucydides, 5:95). It seems a dramatic shift in the Athenian disposition during the negotiation for the Peace of Nicias where Athens and Sparta were exhausted from a decade of warfare and growing instability in each of their empires.