

Thucydides. “The Melian Debate” in *The Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Rex Warner. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books Inc., 1959.

Thucydides (455-400 B.C.), as a young man, fought in the early stages of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.). He was afflicted by, but survived, the plague, after which he was appointed general. He arrived too late with a fleet to save Amphipolis from the Spartans, and was, as a result, sent into exile for twenty years. He likely wrote *The Peloponnesian War* during the years of exile, from which he returned only four years before his death.

Book Five, Chapter 7: Sixteenth Year of War. The Melian Debate.

The fleet of Athens dispatched thirty ships and support troops to the island of Melos, which had been settled by Spartans and was loosely aligned with them. Melos had remained neutral in the Peloponnesian War to this time. The Athenian generals sent a delegation to the Melians to demand their surrender. The Melians would not permit the Athenians to speak with the Melian population, but only to chosen men.

The Athenian delegation asks for an ordered discussion, to which the Melians agree. The Melians object that open discussion is inconsistent with Athens’ intent to war on Melos, should talks fail. The Athenians respond that justice leans on the power to compel; the strong do as they wish, and the weak do as they must. The Melians object that to so argue abandons justice altogether. Fairness and good faith are concerns for all. Today’s victors are tomorrow’s vanquished, themselves seeking justice. The Athenians respond that Melos need not trouble itself with Athens’ well-being. Athens speaks today to peaceably bring Melos into the empire. To fight is expensive for Athens and risks utter destruction for Melos. Better to make an arrangement.

The Melians offer their neutrality. The Athenians reject Melos’ offer because other will think Athens weak if she tolerates Melian ambivalence. The strong compel submission, and where they fail to do so, they are deemed to fear to do so. Such rumors make an empire insecure. The Melians argue that in conquering weak little Melos, Athens will nurture rebellion in all its small neighbors, who will know their time too shall come. The Melians argue that to destroy Melos is shameful, and to resist enslavement honorable. The Athenians respond that hope comforts those in peril, clouding their judgment of peril. The Melians assert that gods may intervene to balance power between Melos and Athens. The Athenians reply that Athens acts as do gods; where one can rule, he does so. The Melians assert that Sparta may defend them. The Athenians reply that Spartans think what they like is honorable and what serves them is just. Spartans are not risk-takers when it comes to living honorably or finding justice. Sparta always looks for powerful allies. Melos is not such. The honor and sense of justice the Melians vaunt may well bring utter destruction to Melos. Abandon pride and survive. The Athenians state their terms: ally with Athens and pay annual tribute; then Melos can otherwise enjoy her property and usual occupations.

The Athenian delegation withdraws, asking the Melians to reconsider their position. Melians, after deliberation, respond with another offer of neutrality. Athenians respond that Melos deludes herself in thinking that Melian hopes are more potent than Athens’ army.

Athens erected a siege wall around the perimeter of Melos. Ultimately, Athens killed the fighting men of Melos and sold her women and children into slavery. Melos was repopulated with a colony from Athens.