

The Peloponnesian War (part 2 of 2)

Tragic Patterning?

1. Melian Dialogue (5.84-116): Athens threatens and oppresses a neutral place (Melos)
2. Launching of the Sicilian Expedition by Athens (6.30-31): Athens in peak position
3. Sicilian Expedition and Disaster (7.71-8.1): Athens depicted as akin to a tragic figure, one who cannot see hubris of actions

Peripeteia (“reversal”)

“Reversal is a change (*metabolê*) to the opposite direction of events ... in accord, as we insist, with probability or necessity.”

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a, ch. 11

The Melian Dialogue (416 BCE), Thuc. 5.84-116



The Melian Dialogue (416 BCE)

- Told in dramatic form, without narration, presenting only the speakers as though actors on a stage
- Form of dialogue reminds us of tragedy, and the tense back-and-forth exchanges between central characters, such as those between Antigone and Creon (stichomythia)
- There is also a correspondence between the moral starkness of the dialogue's content and the radically pared-down form
- Thucydides the narrator disappears, heightening the intensity of the exchange by isolating the two groups in a debate over life or death
- Likely a scenario in which Thucydides tries to capture the “gist” of exchange

The Melian Dialogue (Thuc. 5.84-116)

Athenians: “We would like to rule over you without trouble, and preserve you for our mutual **advantage**.”

Melians: “But how could it be as much to our **advantage** to serve, as it is yours to rule?”

Realpolitik in the Melian Dialogue

Emphasis on political 'realism' or pragmatism rather than justice or moral principles.

5.89: "In human considerations [*en tô anthropeiô logô*] justice is decided when equal forces are opposed, while possibilities [*dunata*] are what superiors impose and the weak acquiesce to." (Lattimore)

5.89: "[You understand that] ... in the human sphere judgments about justice are relevant only **between those with an equal power to enforce it** [*lit. "from equal necessity"*], and that the possibilities are defined by what the strong do and the weak accept [*lit. "give way to"*]." (Mynott)

Athenian Advantage

Athenians: “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” (5.105).

Accuracy? → Thucydides does not present a flattering portrait of Athens

Utility? → Dangers of empire

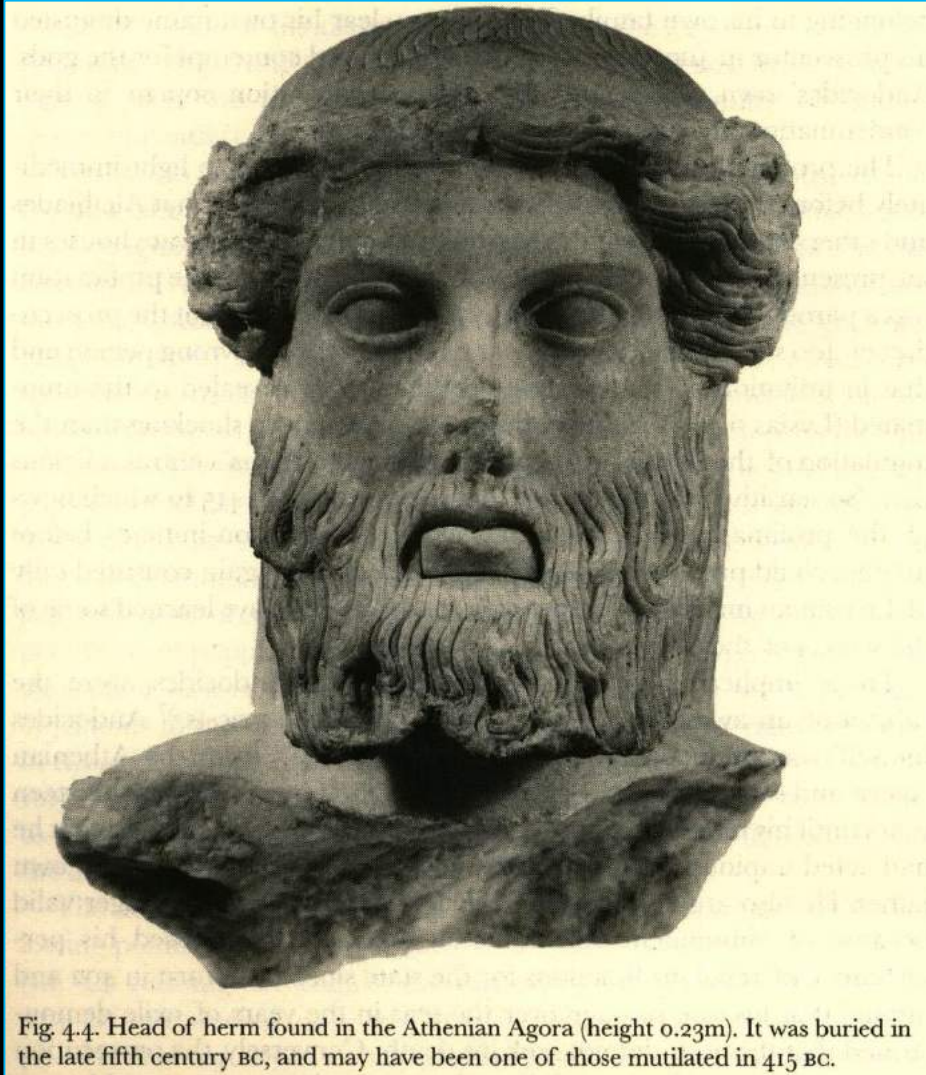
The Sicilian Expedition (415-413 BCE)



Nicias v. Alcibiades: Should we fight or not?



The Mutilation of the Herms



Head of Herm from
Athenian Agora
Buried in late 5th-C
BCE.
Probably mutilated in
415 BCE.

Fig. 4.4. Head of herm found in the Athenian Agora (height 0.23m). It was buried in the late fifth century BC, and may have been one of those mutilated in 415 BC.



Herm from Siphnos
Marble
2 ft.
ca. 520
Athens

Hope and Desire

“The difficulty of equipping the expedition did not wipe out the Athenians’ desire to make it; rather, **it inflamed them all the more ... Now everyone alike fell in love with the enterprise: old men hoped to subdue the place they went to ... The young men were longing to see and study a far-off country and were confident they would be brought back safely** ... The result of this vehement desire of the majority was that anyone who did not favor the expedition kept quiet out of fear that if he held up his hand in opposition he would be thought to harbor ill will against the city.” (Thuc. 6.24)

The Expedition Launched



The Superlative Spectacle of War

Taken as a force launched from a single city from the might of Greece, this was indeed the first to be **more costly and splendid than any up that time**. ... What resulted was something resembling **an exhibition of might and wealth, so far as the rest of Greece was concerned, rather than an army directed against enemies** ... The expedition became no less celebrated for the **wonder of its daring and for its splendor to look upon than for its military superiority over those in its path**, and because it was the **longest** voyage from home ever attempted, with the **highest** hopes for the future compared with the actual circumstances.

(Thucydides 6.31)

Plutarch, *On the Glory of the Athenians*

“The most effective historian is he who, by a **vivid** representation of emotions and characters, makes his narration like a painting. **Assuredly Thucydides is always striving for this vividness in his writing, since it is his desire to make the reader a spectator, as it were, and to produce vividly in the minds of those who peruse his narrative the emotions of amazement and consternation which were experienced by those who beheld them.**”

(347A, trans. Babbitt)

At the Limits of his Art: Vividness in Battle

“The Athenians were thrown into great perplexity and confusion, which it was not easy to sort out by asking both sides how the particular events fit together. Battles are easier to understand in daylight, **but even then soldiers who are present scarcely know more than their own particular experiences**. So in a night battle ... how could anyone know anything for certain? ... The final result of all of this was that men from various parts of the army kept running into each other, once they were in total confusion – friends against friends and citizens against fellow citizens.” (Thuc. 7.44, trans. Woodruff)

The Disaster of the Sicilian Expedition



Aftermath

“When the news was told in Athens, even though the messengers were actual soldiers who had fled from the scene itself, and gave a clear report, people refused for a long time to believe that the loss had been so utterly complete. When they did realize the truth, they were furious with the orators who had joined in promoting the expedition (as if they had not voted for it themselves!). They were also angry with the prophets and soothsayers and all those who had claimed to give them assurances from the gods that they would take Sicily.” (Thuc. 8.1, trans. Woodruff)

Thucydides' Pronouncement on Disaster

“This was the greatest action of the war – in my opinion, the greatest in all Greek history – **the most glorious victory for the winners, and the worst calamity for the losers**. The Athenians were utterly vanquished on all points, and none of their losses was small. It was ‘total destruction,’ (*panôlethria*) as the saying goes, for the army and navy alike. There was nothing that was not lost, and few returned home. That is what happened on Sicily.” (7.87, trans. Woodruff, adapted)

Athenian Blindness Comes Full Circle

“The Athenians were ... furious at the oracle-mongers, seers, and anyone whose divinations had made them hope that they would capture Sicily.” (Thucycides Book 8, ch. 1)

Athens to Melians (Thucydides, Book 5, ch. 103): “Do not turn to intangible hopes, to prophecy, oracles, and whatever else of this sort combines with hope to bring ruin.”

Four Statements about Thucydides' Account

1. Accuracy is not the same as the *representation* of accuracy. Speeches could be considered accurate, for instance, by ancient audiences.
2. Not telling “romanticized” stories and presenting an “unpleasant” work does not mean excluding stories of strong emotion, especially those that convey the greatness of Athenian failure in the war.

Four Statements (*continued*)

3. Certain notions of objectivity (such as presenting opposed speeches, for instance, or “both sides”) differ from modern-day notions of objectivity (accuracy of numbers, fact-checking, etc.).

4. Thucydides can issue universalizing statements about power (as in the Melian Dialogue) and then show them working out (or failing to work out) *within* his work, making good on his promise of writing a useful text: readers can “apply” his text to the text, as it were.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1st C BCE) on Thucydides

“Thucydides writes a single war, one that is neither noble nor fortunate: indeed, a war which ought not to have occurred, and, short of that, **one that ought to have been committed to silence and oblivion and ignored by successive generations.**”

Letter to Gnaeus Pompey 3.3

