

MELOS DOWN UNDER

‘The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.’¹ These words of the Athenian delegation in Thucydides’ Melian Dialogue left no room for negotiation. Athens had invaded Melos and her delegates made a simple offer: surrender or suffer. They chose the latter, resulting in death, enslavement and subjugation². Melos fell because in the face of an expanding, increasingly aggressive superpower she had failed to understand the importance of a navy. She paid the price. A similar situation, and the same pitfalls, confront Australia today. This allows Melos to serve as a model for what Australia and the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) should do under such circumstances. Melos shows that a strong navy versatile enough to project military, diplomatic and cultural power is crucial for Australia’s survival and success. By learning from Melos’ mistakes, the RAN can navigate a successful course in the choppy waters ahead to ensure that Australia is not on the wrong side of a negotiation.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Athens emerged from the victory over Persia (480 BC) like a phoenix from the ashes. Her city had been destroyed and her coffers were depleted. Nevertheless, she was perceived as the leader of the Greek resistance to the Persian invasion and, after the Persians abandoned Greece, set up the Delian League (named after the island of Delos where the treasury was based) as its hegemon. This alliance would pool together navies and resources to take the fight to the Persians. Members swore to have the same friends and enemies and dropped iron into the sea as a symbol of their enduring partnership³. Sparta and her Peloponnesian League refused to be a part of this. Athens’ new alliance was born.

Over time, the hegemony evolved into an empire. In the years that followed, Athens experienced unrivalled growth in population, trade and wealth⁴ (boosted by the silver mines at Laurion). Prodigious shipbuilding followed on top of the already significant navy Athens possessed from the Persian Wars⁵. Her supreme dominance over the League was soon obvious. Two events made clear the change from alliance to empire. The first occurred in 465 BC when Athens established the colony of Amphipolis. Thasos, a member of the League, worried that her own silver mines were threatened. She abandoned the alliance. In response, Athens besieged Thasos. After Thasos surrendered, walls were torn down, taxes were imposed, and ships were confiscated⁶. No mercy was given to an ‘ally’. The second was the decision to move the treasury from Delos to Athens in 454 BC. Not only symbolically important, this gave Athens full access to the vast wealth of the League. It would be this wealth that would fund the extraordinary building projects under Pericles and the relentless expansion of the Athenian navy. In time, Athens replaced the contribution of ships with taxes alone, confiscating the navies of her subjects and adding them to her own, while also imposing cleruchies (colonies) of Athenian citizens across her Empire to tighten her grip. Any ally that sought to leave the League was quickly brought back in line. By the mid-5th century, the League had transformed into the Athenian Empire.

Sparta grew nervous. During the Persian Wars, Athens and Sparta were uneasy partners. After the conflict’s conclusion, they were clear rivals. Athens’ rapid expansion, and Sparta’s fear of it, were the reasons why the Peloponnesian War began: ‘The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made the war inevitable’⁷. After a conflict with Corinth in which Athens flexed her muscles and violated peace agreements between the two states, Sparta could tolerate her rival’s expansion no more. War was declared in 431 BC.

¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.89.1

² Thucydides, 5.116

³ Thucydides, 1.96

⁴ Akrigg, *Population and Economy in Classical Athens*, Cambridge University Press, 2019

⁵ Daley, *Archaeologists Uncover Massive Naval Bases of the Ancient Athenians*, The Smithsonian, 17 June 2016

⁶ Thucydides, 1.101

⁷ Thucydides, 1.23

MELOS AND ATHENS

Melos is a small island not far from the Greek mainland. Dorians (the same ethnic group that inhabited Sparta) settled there in around the 10th century BC. Consequently, she had cultural and ethnic links to Sparta as well as economic: one inscription shows that during the Peloponnesian War Melos made contributions of silver to the Spartan war effort⁸. However, Melos retained independence by pursuing a rather vague foreign policy. She neither entered the Peloponnesian League nor declared war on Athens. She was a prosperous island: she struck her own coinage⁹, had her own script and exported terracotta reliefs. In short, the 5th century had been kind to Melos.

The outbreak of the war changed all that. In 416 BC, Athens invaded Melos. Athens had already ravaged her land in 426 BC, though the island managed to avoid subjugation. Why did Athens invade again? By 416 BC, Melos was the last island in the Aegean not under Athens' control. Full dominance of the sea would have been attractive to the Athenian leadership, and Melos' proximity to Sparta offered military advantages. Her wealth and resources were much needed at this stage in the war, especially as Athens geared up for the impending Sicilian Expedition. Moreover, the contributions made by Melos to Sparta would have aggravated Athens. So it was that in the summer of 416 BC Athens landed with 3420 men transported by a fleet of 38 ships.¹⁰ After the rejection of the ultimatum of the Athenian delegation, the island's city was besieged. Eventually, Melos succumbed through betrayal. The aftermath was brutal: men in their military prime were deported, the women and children were sold into slavery, and an Athenian garrison was established. Melos lost her freedom and prosperity at a single stroke.

Several factors may be attributed to Melos' downfall, but the most important was her failure to build a strong navy. Thucydides sets out the results of such myopia. He states: 'The Athenians made an expedition against the island of Melos with... ships of their own' and then moves straight on to 'the generals, encamping in their territory... sent envoys to negotiate¹¹'. The message is clear: at sea the Melians put up no resistance. They had neglected to defend their own shores. There was no navy to engage the Athenian fleet; if there was, Thucydides did not wish to waste ink over it. This allowed the Athenians to land and set up position on Melos unhindered. What's worse, the Melians had not even learnt from their own mistakes. After Athens ravaged their land in 426 BC, for the next decade they failed to take any action. Moreover, it is important to remember that Melos was a strong trading island. Safe passage for her ships would have been critical for her prosperity, and it is shocking that she put her trade at risk by neglecting to provide maritime protection for her trading vessels. But at no time is this more important than when under siege. At such a point it is vital that supplies continue to enter the city. Otherwise, capitulation is inevitable. Thucydides, however, provides no mention of the Melians being able to secure any food or water by sea – how could they without a navy? The only provisions they did get hold of were through risky sorties. With no supplies getting in by boat, surrender was a question of when, not if. Melos had lost before the Athenians had even landed.

However, Melos' failure to construct an adequate navy has other ramifications. It would have been clear that this invasion was forthcoming. We have seen how Athens relentlessly grew in stature in the Aegean, shifting from leader of an alliance to head of an empire. Melos would have witnessed this over the past 60 years. Indeed, she is closely situated to the island of Naxos, the first member of the alliance to rebel against Athens in 471 BC, a rebellion that was swiftly and brutally crushed. She would also no doubt have been aware of the revolt of Thasos and the Samian War (440-439 BC, when the island of Samos broke away from the empire). At the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, the gravity of the situation would have been obvious. Yet Melos clearly failed to read this and to understand the consequences. As such, she could not see the importance of using a navy as a diplomatic tool, able to forge naval alliances to counterbalance the Athenian hegemony. Strength is

⁸ Inscription IG V 1, 1, 'The Melians gave to the Lacedaemonians [Spartans] 20 minas of silver.'

⁹ Renfrew & Wagstaff (ed.), 'An Island Polity: The Archaeology of Exploitation in Melos', Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 230

¹⁰ Thucydides, 5.84.1

¹¹ Thucydides, 5.84.1-3

found in numbers: Melos' navy may not have been able to have resisted the might of Athens alone, but it can certainly be argued that, united with Athens' enemies, it might have stood a chance. Indeed, this may be the reason why Thucydides had the Athenian delegation emphasise that any hope the Melians might have had in Spartan assistance was in vain. The failure of Sparta, Melos and other allies to build a presence at sea made it impossible for Sparta to come to Melos' aid.¹² Athens had been allowed to take control of the Aegean and this put Melos at their mercy.

Melos' botched foreign policy contributed to her downfall, but its failure is due to her naval policy. It is likely Melos was trying to avoid direct conflict with either side in order to maintain her safety and independence. On the one hand she helped her Spartan cousins by providing monetary aid, hoping to maintain any relationship and possible understanding of protection she might have had, while on the other she remained officially 'neutral' in order not to antagonise Athens¹³. However, with no navy Melos did not have the strength to successfully navigate between the two warring powers. She could not deter aggression from Athens or engage in dialogue with the city as a respectable power, nor could she encourage Sparta or her allies to participate collectively in a naval protective alliance. Only after 426 BC did Melos become 'openly hostile' to Athens, as Thucydides puts it, and abandon her neutral stance¹⁴. But by then it was too late. She had failed to secure the Spartan protection she needed and left herself open to invasion. With no bite, any foreign policy that tries to get the best of both worlds is doomed to fail. One must have teeth.

Finally, we must understand why Melos was betrayed by a few of her own citizens: 'some treachery taking place inside, the Melians surrendered¹⁵.' It is notable that when the Athenian delegation arrived, the Council of Melos refused to allow them to speak in the presence of the demos (common people). The historian de Ste Croix argues that this is evidence of the Peloponnesian War's conflict of ideas: Athens supported democracy (rule of the demos), Sparta oligarchy (rule of the few)¹⁶. Thus, the rulers of Melos did not want to give the Athenians any opportunity to rile up support among the demos. However, the Melian leaders failed in the end to preserve popular support; the people wanted democracy, not the Council. The government of Melos lost not just the siege, but the hearts of its citizens. This is explained by the absence of a navy. For any island state, a navy was more than just a means of defence. It was a part of your identity, independence and manhood¹⁷. Athens took away the navies of her subject states not just so that she became the only power at sea, but also to crush any sense of individuality. In Classical Greece, a navy was a cultural weapon as well as a defensive one. With no navy, Melos contributed to her own downfall. She lost the ideological war.

We must now juxtapose this historical example with the current geo-political situation. By linking the two, we can move on to understand the insights Melos provides for the future of the RAN.

FROM MELOS TO AUSTRALIA

A growing population, a rapidly expanding economy, an insatiable desire for resources: not 5th century BC Athens, but 21st century China. The statistics are alarming, and like Athens this growth is reflected in the Chinese navy. In 2015, the U.S Office of Naval Intelligence released a report on the development of China's navy, stating 'in the next decade, China will complete its transition from a coastal navy to a navy capable of conducting multiple missions around the world¹⁸'. The report

¹² Thucydides, 5.109.1, the Athenians ask: '*is it likely that now we are masters of the sea they [the Spartans] will cross over to an island?*'

¹³ Thucydides, 5.84.2

¹⁴ Thucydides, *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Thucydides, 5.116.3

¹⁶ de Ste Croix, '*The Character of the Athenian Empire*', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 3, H. 1, 1954, pp 1-41

¹⁷ Pseudo-Xenophon, '*Constitution of the Athenians*', 1.2

¹⁸ US Office of Naval Intelligence 2015 Report, '*The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century*', 2015

showed the expansion of numerous aspects, from submarines to aircraft carriers. China knows that a strong navy is central to the foundation of a hegemony.

This hegemony is already taking root, and the navy is a central part of it. China is beginning to assert herself abroad as a way of advancing security interests. Instead of the cleruchies of Athens stretched across the Aegean, we get military bases across the southern hemisphere, with one in Djibouti and several others in the pipeline¹⁹. But like cleruchies, there are millions of Chinese people settled and working all over the globe. China has asserted that she will step in to protect these expatriates when necessary. In China's immediate neighbourhood, her actions in the South China Sea have her neighbours permanently on edge, and she regularly flouts the rule of law for her own interests²⁰. Finally, China's growing reach into the Pacific, Australia's backyard, gives cause for concern and shows no signs of stopping. The methods used may seem new: providing loans which plunge islands into debt (like Tonga) or supporting rogue regimes (like Fiji), but they are not far removed from Athens' subtle transition from jointly contributing tribute and ships with her allies as part of the Delian League, to imposing taxation and the confiscation of their navies under the Empire. Athens was able to do this because of her navy. China is demonstrating that the fundamentals of international relations have not changed.

Observers often point to the similarities between Sparta's fear of Athens' growth and America's fear of China's²¹. Melos tried to navigate between the two and failed. Australia faces the same conundrum. Australia and China continue to grow as trading partners and their cultural ties intensify. Yet, getting too close presents risks. The alliance between Australia and the USA remains paramount. Melos' links to Sparta went back aeons, to the foundation of the island itself - so Australia's ties with the USA are born out of bonds historical and cultural as well as military and economic. However, relying on past ties in an uncertain political world is reckless. Australia is between a rock and a hard place. She will need to do a better job than Melos did.

Finally, Australia's independence faces challenges from within. The report commissioned by Mr Turnbull under his premiership and subsequent laws he proposed exposed Chinese interference in Australia, from buying off politicians to influencing education establishments. China is trying to achieve her political ends by other means and to shape Australians' view of the People's Republic. Australia may not be under a military siege like Melos, but she is under a cultural one. In this battle of ideas, Australia cannot afford to take for granted popular support for her liberties and values. The leaders of Melos learnt what it means to lose their people's backing the hard way.

The situations faced by Melos and Australia have much in common. Thus, the former can serve as a model for the latter. It will be clear that the importance of the navy for Australia today is no less than it was for Melos then, and that an understanding of what Melos got wrong can help to illuminate what the RAN should get right. What was at stake in 416 BC is the same today: security, freedom and survival.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE RAN

Firstly, the RAN must be capable of performing its primary function: defending Australia's shores. Melos was incapable of this as a result of her failure to build a navy, or at least an adequate one. Fortunately, Australia already has a sophisticated navy and it is promising that new ships will enter service in the years to come. However, it is not enough. Athens invaded Melos with a substantial force. They took no chances. It's safe to say that if Australia faced a similar threat, her enemy would not pull any punches. The RAN must get the basics right. That means building more frigates, destroyers, patrol vessels, submarines and maritime aircraft on top of those already in the pipeline. It means getting those ships manned, primed and out on the water as soon as possible – waiting until the

¹⁹ Annual Report to Congress, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 2017

²⁰ *Philippines v China*, PCA Case Number 2013-2019

²¹ Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides' Trap?*, Scribe, 2018

2050s for the submarine development programme to finish is not good enough²². It means stepping up recruitment to run this fleet, both regular and reserve. The current personnel figure of 16,000 is too low. Finally, it means expanding the RAN's cyber capabilities and intelligence operations to deal with the challenges of modern warfare. The RAN needs to make sure that no force can get away with what Athens achieved: landing unopposed.

Australia heavily relies on international trade for the servicing of her economy. Melos played a risky game in failing to take steps to defend the trade so critical for her survival, and she paid the price under siege. Australia cannot make the same gamble. This means the RAN will have to continue to be active throughout the Pacific and further afield, defending international law and asserting freedom of navigation in coalition with allies such as the US and the UK. Indeed, the RAN must now become one of the leading players in defending trade on the world's seas. By acting now, the RAN can develop expertise and relationships that will serve Australia in the future. If it is left too late, Australia could find herself under the thumb like Melos.

Thirdly, Australia must use the RAN to form or strengthen alliances with nations equally nervous of China's expansion. Even with increased defence spending, Australia, like Melos, is comparatively small. However, unlike Melos, Australia must use her navy to ensure that she is not the last one standing in the Pacific, left to take on her enemies alone. The RAN must be a diplomatic as well as a military force. Large scale exercises such Talisman Sabre must continue, and the recent announcement of a new Pacific Force shows Australia is heading in the right direction. But the RAN needs to go further. It should seek to form formal coalitions with Pacific navies, leading the way in Australia's conduct in her sphere of influence. It should also be at the forefront of a push to forge and reinforce relationships further afield that are based on common values and shared interests. This will contribute to the RAN's military potency, but it will also prevent one nation from ruling the seas like Athens. In this way, the RAN must be more than just a projection of hard power; it must also be a vital tool of soft power.

This ties in with the RAN's future role in Australia's foreign policy. Melos did not get this right. No navy meant she was not taken seriously on the world stage by the major players and could not react to the shifting situation. As Australia seeks to develop her relations with China while preserving her key alliance with the USA, a strong RAN will be critical in ensuring Australia is treated with respect by both sides. But this does not just mean having numerous ships. It also means the RAN's personnel should be expert in China and US relations, it is central in the shaping of Australian foreign policy, and it is fully integrated in the key decision-making bodies of the Australian foreign office. To achieve this, the RAN must focus on recruiting the brightest graduates and provide unparalleled, modern training to its sailors. The navy should be more than just an arm of war; it should inform and help to direct Australia's foreign policy objectives. This, alongside the need for the RAN to act as a tool of diplomacy, reveal that in the future the navy will need brainpower as well as firepower.

Finally, the RAN must get stuck into the war of ideas. Having no navy meant that Melos was susceptible to treachery; a critical part of her identity was missing. While the modern navy may not hold such an important cultural position today, that does not mean it cannot play its part. The RAN defends not just Australia's territory, but the values and liberties that lie behind that territory. To further this objective, it must be present and active in the lives of those it protects: it should speak up for such values in schools, universities, the media and online; integrate into the Australian public sphere by expanding the cadet forces, offering educational programmes and providing insight days on bases and ships; and provide support for institutions that find themselves facing Chinese subterfuge. Ultimately, it must cement itself in the minds of ordinary Australians to show what it does and why it does it. This will be new territory for the RAN, but Melos teaches us that we cannot take the support of the population for granted. As Australian society is besieged, the RAN's fight will not just be at sea, but at home.

²² Department of Defence, Australian Government, 2016 Defence White Paper

Thucydides wrote of his history ‘if it be judged useful by those who want an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if not reflect it, I shall be content²³’. From his account we learn of the disastrous mistakes Melos made when faced with the threat of an expansionist and aggressive Athens. We have seen that Australia faces a situation that resembles if not reflects. Melos’ failure to provide an adequate navy provides a pertinent lesson in the importance of maritime defence. This has not changed. The RAN must grow and adapt to ensure that it has the capability to defend Australia’s shores, to protect her trade, to forge and strengthen alliances based on shared interests, to help direct a successful foreign policy, and to stand up for the values it shields at home and abroad. It must be a navy of brain and brawn. In the end, it will be the RAN and its future that will determine whether Australia suffers what she must.

²³ Thucydides, 1.22.4