

Primary and Secondary Sources Activity

The logo for 'networks' features the word in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font. A stylized graphic of intersecting lines forms a starburst or network pattern behind the letter 'o'.

The Ancient Greeks

The Peloponnesian War

Background

Historians divide the Peloponnesian War into two periods (431–421 B.C. and 415 B.C.–405 B.C.) separated by a brief truce. At the beginning of the war, Pericles pursued a defensive strategy. His successors, influenced by the effects of the plague on morale, dissension among factions within Athens, and their own less than noble ambitions, pursued an aggressive, offensive strategy. During the truce, both sides engaged in sporadic military operations to win support from other Greek states. The renewed open conflict of the second period began with an Athenian attack on Sicily, a battle the Athenians lost, and it was a loss from which they never fully recovered. For the remainder of the war the two sides traded victories, but political turmoil in Athens and the eventual destruction of the Athenian navy led finally to the collapse of the Athenian empire.

The ancient Greek historian Thucydides lived at the time of the Peloponnesian War. In his *History* of the war he recorded events he witnessed both directly and indirectly—the causes, the major battles, the strategies, and the personalities of participants. He cast his account in terms of the contrasting ideologies that divided the sides: the new, innovative democracy of Athens versus the old, conservative oligarchy of Sparta. Perhaps more importantly, he also documented the contrast between Pericles' enlightened democracy and the corrupt democracies of his successors, which contributed to the eventual collapse of Athens.

The first selection is taken from Thucydides' account of Pericles' Funeral Oration early in the war. During the so-called truce, Athenian troops invaded Melos, an island state that was sympathetic to Sparta. Before taking over the island, the Athenians met with Melian leaders for the purpose of demanding their surrender. The second selection recounts some of the exchange that took place during that meeting. Ultimately, the Melians decided not to surrender. In response, the Athenians besieged their city, killed all men of military age, and enslaved the women and children.

Directions: Read the selections. Then answer the questions.

We cultivate refinement without extravagance and knowledge without effeminacy; wealth we employ more for use than for show, and place the real disgrace of poverty not in owning to the fact but in declining the struggle against it. Our public men have, besides politics, their private affairs to attend to, and our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters. . . . in our enterprises we present the singular spectacle of daring and deliberation, each carried to its highest point, and both united in the same persons. . . .

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In generosity we are equally singular, acquiring our friends by conferring not by receiving favours. . . . And it is only the Athenians who, fearless of consequences, confer their benefits not from calculations of expediency, but in the confidence of liberality.

In short, I say that as a city we are the school of Hellas [Greece]; while I doubt if the world can produce a man, who where he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies, and graced by so happy a versatility as the Athenian. . . . For Athens alone of her contemporaries is found when tested to be greater than her reputation, and alone gives no occasion to her assailants to blush at the antagonist by whom they have been worsted, or to her subjects to question her title by merit to rule. Rather, the admiration of the present and succeeding ages will be ours, since we have not left our power without witness, but have shown it by mighty proofs. . . . Such is the Athens for which these men, in the assertion of their resolve not to lose her, nobly fought and died; and well may every one of their survivors be ready to suffer in her cause.

—Thucydides, from the Funeral Oration of Pericles,
History of the Peloponnesian War, fifth century B.C.

Athenians. We do not look forward with dismay to the fall of our empire, if it should ever come. The danger is not from Sparta—ruling states are not harsh to the vanquished—but from our own subjects who may rise and overpower their masters. But you may leave that danger to us. We will now point out that, while we are here in the interest of our own empire, our present words are designed to save your city. We want to add you to our empire with the least trouble, and it is for the interests of us both that you should be preserved. . . .

Melians. It may be your interest to rule, but how can it be ours to be enslaved?

Athenians. Because by submission you will avert the worst of fates; while we shall profit by not destroying you.

Melians. But will you not allow us to remain neutral and be friends instead of enemies?

Athenians. No, your enmity is not half so mischievous to us as your friendship; to our subjects, your hate is an argument of our power, your friendship of our weakness.

Melians. But are your subjects blind to the difference between neutrals and revolted allies?

Athenians. Why, both, in their opinion, have no lack of justification; but they think that we are afraid to touch you. Thus, besides adding to our empire, we shall gain in security. As masters of the sea, we cannot afford to let islanders, and weak ones too, escape us.

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Melians. But does security lie in the opposite course? For, to leave justice aside, as you direct, and speak only of expediency, will you not turn all who are now neutral into enemies?

Athenians. We are not afraid of the mainland peoples, who are free and can take precautions against us at their leisure, but of islanders like you, who are outside our empire, and of those who are already within it and chafing at constraint. They are the most likely in their recklessness to bring themselves and us into a danger which we foresee.

—Thucydides, from the Melian Dialogue,
History of the Peloponnesian War, fifth century B.C.

1. **Summarizing** Summarize the qualities that Pericles attributed to the people and government of Athens in his Funeral Oration.

2. **Interpreting Significance** Explain the significance of his declaration “we are the school of Hellas.” What was Pericles implying? How did he apply this significance to potential assailants (enemies) as well as to subjects of Athenian rule?

3. **Determining Advantages** In the Melian Dialogue, what reasons did the Athenians give for imposing themselves on the Melian people? In what ways would adding the island state of Melos to their empire have been advantageous for the Athenians, both militarily and commercially?

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4. **Drawing Conclusions** During the meeting, Melian leaders expressed a desire to remain independent of Athenian control and neutral toward the conflict between Athens and Sparta. What reasons did the Athenians give for rejecting this option? What do these reasons suggest about the political sentiments that prevailed in Athens at this time?

5. **Drawing Inferences** When the Melians ask how it can be in their interest to be enslaved, the Athenians reply that “by submission you will avert the worst of fates.” What threat did this statement imply and in what way did it prove prophetic?

6. **Contrasting** In what sense did the conquest of Melos represent a negation of the Athenian ideals that Pericles praised in his Funeral Oration?
