

“Thucydides on Regretting Yesterday”

Context:

In the summer of 427 BCE, in the fifth year of the Atheno-Peloponnesian War, the *polis* (city-state) of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos revolted from the Athenian empire, with the encouragement of the Spartans. Thucydides describes how the Athenians swiftly crushed the revolt and how they voted to punish Mytilene for the revolt brutally by executing all its men and enslaving the women and children. After passing this resolution they regretted it and held another assembly meeting (the so-called “Mytilene debate”) to reconsider what action to take. In this second assembly meeting they voted to overturn the initial decision and the Athenians then had to rush to prevent their initial decree from being carried out. My talk will analyze Thucydides’ description of the Athenians’ regret and reversal of policy as a case study in the temporal sequence of yesterday-today-tomorrow and why we need to keep reading Thucydides.

Please read the brief passage below (how Thucydides frames the Mytilene debate) in preparation:

Thucydides *History* 3.35-36, and 3.49-50 (translated by Jeremy Mynott)

3.35 When Paches got back to Mytilene he forced Pyrrha and Eresus to come to terms, and having caught Salaethus, the Spartan, hiding in the city sent him back to Athens along with the Mytilenaeans he had put on Tenedos and anyone else who seemed to him implicated in the revolt. He also sent back most of his army, and staying behind with the rest he proceeded to manage the situation in Mytilene and the rest of Lesbos as he saw fit.

3.36 When Salaethus and the other men arrived, the Athenians immediately executed Salaethus himself, though he was offering among other things to bring about the withdrawal of the Peloponnesians from Plataea (which they were still besieging). They debated what to do about the other men and in their anger decided to kill not only the ones there in Athens but also the whole adult male population of Mytilene, and to enslave the women and children. They particularly condemned the revolt because the Mytilenaeans had staged it despite not being subjects like others, and what made the Athenians really furious was the fact that Peloponnesian ships had dared to venture into Ionia to support them; that, in their view, made it look as though the revolt was not the result of a sudden decision. They therefore sent a trireme to convey the news of this decision to Paches, with orders to finish off the Mytilenaeans without delay.

The very next day there was an immediate change of mind, and they began to reconsider the savage and extreme decision to destroy an entire city rather than just

those entirely responsible. When the Mytilenaeen delegation present and their Athenian sympathizers became aware of this they got the authorities to reopen the question. They were not difficult to persuade, because it was obvious to them that most of the citizens wanted someone to give them the opportunity of discussing the matter again. An assembly was immediately convened and various opinions were expressed. One of the speakers was Cleon of Cleainetus, the man who had carried the motion at the previous assembly to impose the death sentence. he was in general the most aggressive member of the citizen body and the one who was the most influential with the people at that time.

[Cleon's speech 3.37-40; followed by a speech from Diodotus 3.41-48.]

3.49 Such was Diodotus' speech. These contrary arguments were quite evenly matched, but the Athenians had to decide between them and though on a show of hands voting was very close the view of Diodotus nonetheless prevailed. A second trireme was immediately dispatched with all speed, lest the first one, which had about a day and a night's start, should beat them to it and they should find the city destroyed. The Mytilenaeen delegates provided them with barley and wine and promised them great rewards if they arrived in time; and they were so spurred on for the voyage that they ate their meals of barley mixed with oil and wine while carrying on rowing and they took turns at rowing and sleeping. By luck there were no contrary winds, and since the first ship was not hurrying on its unwelcome mission while the second was pressing on urgently, as described, the first ship only got there far enough ahead for Paches to have time to read out the decree and prepare to execute the order before the second ship put in after it and prevented the massacre. So close did Mytilene come to disaster.

3.50 The other men whom Paches had sent back as being chiefly responsible for the revolution were killed by the Athenians on a motion by Cleon (and there were slightly more than a thousand of these). The Athenians also demolished the walls of the Mytilenaeans and took over their ships. Later on, instead of imposing tribute on the Lesbians they divided up all the land (excepting that at Methymna) into 3,000 plots, designated 300 of these sacred to the gods and they sent out cleruchs to take over the rest. The Lesbians arranged to pay them a rent of two mnas a year for each plot and to work the ground themselves. The Athenians also took over all the towns on the mainland that the Mytilenaeans had controlled, and later made them Athenian subjects.

Such was the course of events at Mytilene.