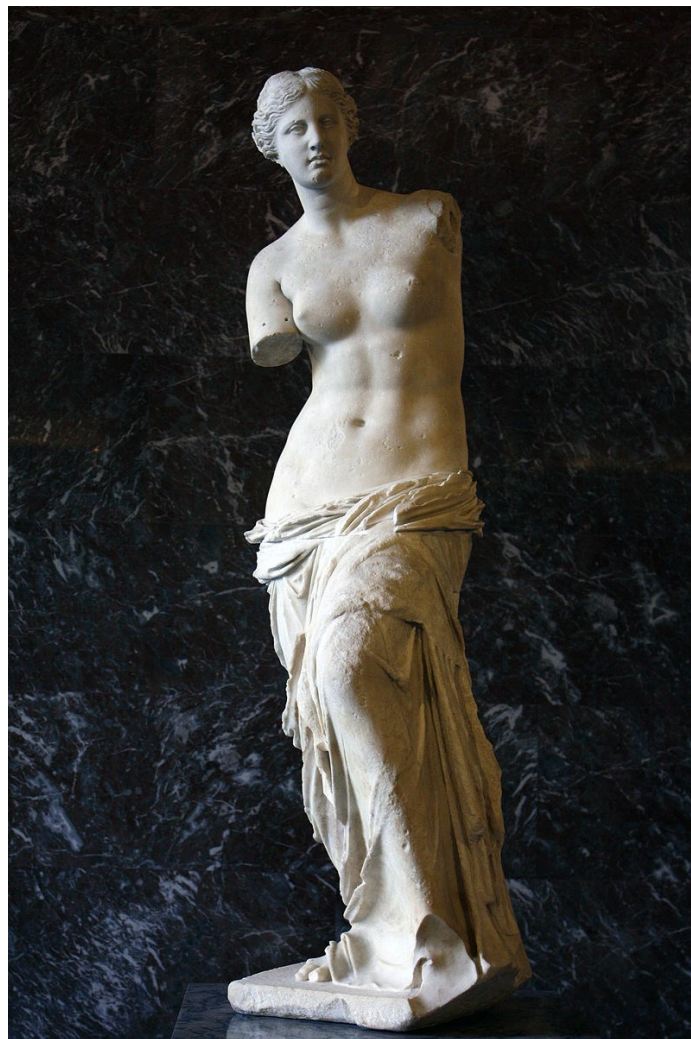




**‘MIGHT’ IS RIGHT VERSUS NEUTRALITY
PUTIN, UKRAINE, AND THUCYDIDES**

Frederick Lauritzen

22nd March 2024



Ukraine is the new Melos. The Melian dialogue (Thucydides 5.86-111) is a disturbingly similar depiction of the relation between Putin and Ukraine since 2022. It describes an Athenian embassy sent to subdue the only Aegean Island not under the control of the Athenian Empire: Melos. (416-415 BC). The local notables argued with the envoys and the dialogue was recorded in the Histories of Thucydides. One may summarize the main points:



- The Athenians claim that “The superior do what is possible, and the weak yield” (Thuc. 5.89).
- The Melians answer underline their neutrality. The Athenians then point out that if they left them alone their allies would think they are weak. (Thuc. 5.94-97)
- The Melians say that Athens is making enemies of all neutral states. The answer is if other states have not done anything yet, they won't know. Athens argues that a new conquest will dissuade rebellions of subject states (5.98-99).
- The Melians say it is cowardly to attack a weaker country. The Athenians recommend they surrender or face annihilation. (5.100-101)
- The Melians say that even if Athens is stronger, there is a chance they could win. The answer is surrender or annihilation. (5.102-103)
- The Melians claim their founding city will come to their aid out of religious piety. The Athenians claim they won't bother (5.104-105)
- The Melians claim they will be helped for geopolitical reasons. Athens claims they won't bother. (5.106-111).

If one replaces the name Athens with Russia, and Melos with Ukraine, the picture is startling. The exact same arguments have defined political discussions in the last two years. This is how they would appear in a summary:

- Russia has invaded Ukraine because it can. Ukraine has advocated Neutrality. Russian defeat would make their allies think they are weak.
- Ukraine says such an attack will turn all neutral states into enemies. Russia says no.
- Ukraine says it is cowardly to invade a neighbouring country. Russia proposes surrender or annihilation to Ukraine.
- Ukraine says it must fight because there is a chance it might win. Russia says they are not realistic.



- Ukraine says those who are morally disturbed by the invasion will help them. Russia says they won't bother.

- Ukraine says the international community will help. Russia thinks it won't bother.

The Athenians attacked Melos. They starved it. When the Athenians won, they killed all the men and enslaved the women and children. (Thuc. 5.116.4). That was in 415 BC.

Plato felt that such arguments were unjust. One of the arguments he tries to refute in his Republic was that "justice is the advantage of the stronger" (*φημι γὰρ ἐγὼ εἶναι τὸ δίκαιον οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον*. Plato Republic 338c). The thesis is remarkably like that of the Athenians against the Melians.

When Athens tried the same behaviour in Sicily in 414, it failed. Most allies rebelled. Athens lost the war.

The Melian dialogue describes two weaknesses of Russian foreign policy: the risk of internal rebellion and the judgement of other countries. These two elements cast a dark outlook for Russia. The most desirable policy would probably have been: zero problems with neighbors. The Melian dialogue should have taught Russia that the onlooking countries will take full advantage of any failing of Russia in Ukraine. The countries which will gain the most are probably China, India, and the United States.

Russia should be more Byzantine and focus on diplomacy rather than a self-destructive war.