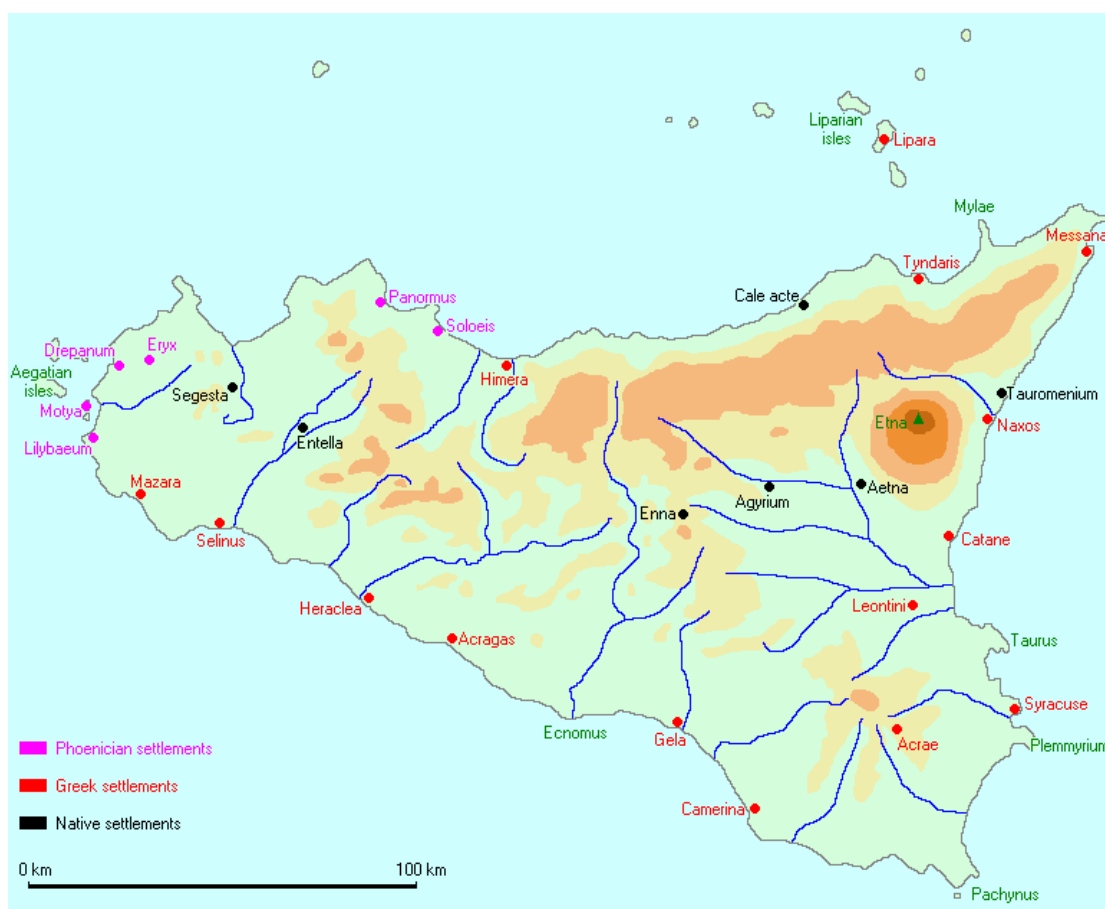


## Hybris: Athenians' Arrogance



Thucydides in the History of the Peloponnesian War (VI, 6, 1) started his narration regarding Athens' Sicilian expedition as follows: *These were the nations, Greeks and barbarians, that inhabited Sicily. And though it were thus great, yet the Athenians longed very much to send an army against it, out of a **desire** to bring it all under their **subjection**, which was the true motive, but as having withal this fair pretext of aiding their kindred and new confederates.*

In *Il Gattopardo* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Don Fabrizio, the main hero, says to his visitor: *For at least twenty five centuries we have been bearing on our backs the weight of magnificent heterogeneous civilizations, all of them came from abroad already complete and perfect, (...) for two thousand five hundred years we have been a colony.*

There has been a long time since the ancient historian mentioned Sicily as a place desirable to be conquered by one of the major states of his time, his own father land (*patris*). Before that, he had described the various *nations* that invaded or made a peaceful disembarking on Sicily. Many centuries later a *vero Siciliano* acknowledges that his home land has always been a colony. The reason is plausible: Sicily's geographical site in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Every nation trying to expand their sovereignty from East to West finds Sicily on their nautical way. Apart from that: *For the compass of Sicily is little less than eight days' sail for a ship; and though so great, is yet divided with no more than twenty furlongs, sea measure, from continent* (Thuc. VI, 1, 2)



During the second half of the 5th century B. C., Athens was involved in a destructive war with Sparta, which started in 431 B. C. Both parts had their allies from various places of the Greek world. In Sicily, the Athenians had established an alliance with (S)Egesta, that had problems with their neighbouring city, Selinous. So, they started a war about some territorial claims and some marriage issues between the two parts. In this war Egesta asked (*prayed*) Athens *to send a fleet thither in their aid* (Thuc. VI, 6, 2). On the other hand, Selinous asked Syracuse for help, a city founded by Corinthian settlers, Sparta's ally. Both parts, Athens and Syracuse, accepted the challenge, which led the former to an incredible disaster.

Athens entered an adventure with unpredictable outcomes, although one of the three generals, Nikias, had made it clear that the dangers were major than the possible profits, simply because: *As far as we understand by report, we set out against great cities, not subject one to another, nor needing innovation, (...) nor such as are likely to prefer our government before their own liberty.* (Thuc. VI, 20). He suggested that they should leave the Egesteans *that as without the Athenians they had begun the war against the Selinuntians, so they should without them likewise end it* (Thuc. VI, 13). The other two generals were Alcibiades and Lamachus. The former was notorious for his character and his life, but he could easily fascinate the Athenians and drag them to decisions like that one: to respond positively to Egesta's request and set out a naval expedition to Sicily. His reasoning was the following: 1. *they would increase their power at home* and 2. *they might cast down the haughty conceit of the Peloponnesians and show them the contempt* (Thuc. VI, 18, 4). Although Nikias in his second speech tried to change the climate in the assembly underlining the difficulties of the preparations, *the Athenians gave not over the **desire** they had of the voyage for the difficulty of the preparation, but were the more **inflamed** thereby to have it proceed. (...) And every one alike fell in **love** with the enterprise: the old men, upon **hope** to **subdue** the place they went to, or that at least so great a power could not miscarry; and the young men, upon **desire** to see a foreign country and to gaze, making little doubt but to return with safety. As for the common sort and the soldiers, they made account to gain by it not only their wages for the time, but also so to amplify the state in power as that their **stipend** should endure forever.* The worst of all, if there were people *that liked it not, for **fear** if they held up their hands against it to be thought **evil-affected** to the state, were content to let it pass* (Thuc. VI, 24). So, they decided to send a fleet of 60 triremes.

With this decision the Athenians had committed a serious mistake because they had not taken into account their ignorance regarding Sicily: they were informed *by report* on the situation in Sicily by their ambassadors on *persuasive but untrue allegations*. They actually had not an accurate perception of the political and military data in Sicily. They rather had a distorted image of the place mainly because of the false expectations about land and wealth they could enjoy after their success. They had also disregarded Syracuse, which was a major power in the island.

Such was their arrogance that they could not imagine the tragic outcomes of that expedition: they were totally defeated by their enemies. The river Assinaros was full of bodies. But the tragedy had not reached its end, it should continue: *As for all the other prisoners of the Athenians and their confederates, they put them into the quarries as the safest custody.* (Thuc. VII, 86)

Thucydides described the tortures that the Athenians were undergone in Suracusa in his simple though touching style. The lack of respect to the human life, to the human dignity reflects a cruel perception of human rights: that time the victors were the Syracusans, some other time might be others. *As for those in the quarries, the Syracusians handled them at first but ungently. For in this hollow place, first the sun and suffocating air (being without roof) annoyed them one way; and on the other side, the nights coming upon that heat, autumnal and cold, put them, by reason of the alteration, into strange diseases; [2] especially doing all things, for want of room, in one and the same place, and the carcasses of such as died of their wounds or change [of air] or other like accident lying together there on heaps. Also the smell was intolerable; besides that they were afflicted with hunger and thirst. For eight months together, they allowed no more but to every man a cotyle<sup>1</sup> of water by the day and two cotyles of corn. And whatsoever misery is probable that men in such a place may suffer, they suffered.* (Thuc. VII, 87)

That was the end of the **Hybris**<sup>2</sup> committed by the Athenians: they considered themselves as unbeatable - only Gods could be - being blinded by **Ate**<sup>3</sup>. So, they received by **Nemesis**<sup>4</sup> their **Tisis**<sup>5</sup>. Already from Homer's time, that was the scheme which no human being could escape when committed an act of arrogance that tended to overcome human limits.

Let us close with Thucydides: *And this was the greatest action that happened in all this war, or at all, that we have heard of amongst the Grecians, being to the victors most glorious and most calamitous to the vanquished.* (Thuc. VII, 87)

Electronic sources

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>

[http://www.livius.org/a/1/maps/sicily\\_map.gif](http://www.livius.org/a/1/maps/sicily_map.gif)

[http://trireme.gr/gr/trireme\\_gal.html](http://trireme.gr/gr/trireme_gal.html)

---

<sup>1</sup> cup

<sup>2</sup> arrogance

<sup>3</sup> blindness of mind

<sup>4</sup> retribution

<sup>5</sup> payment, punishment