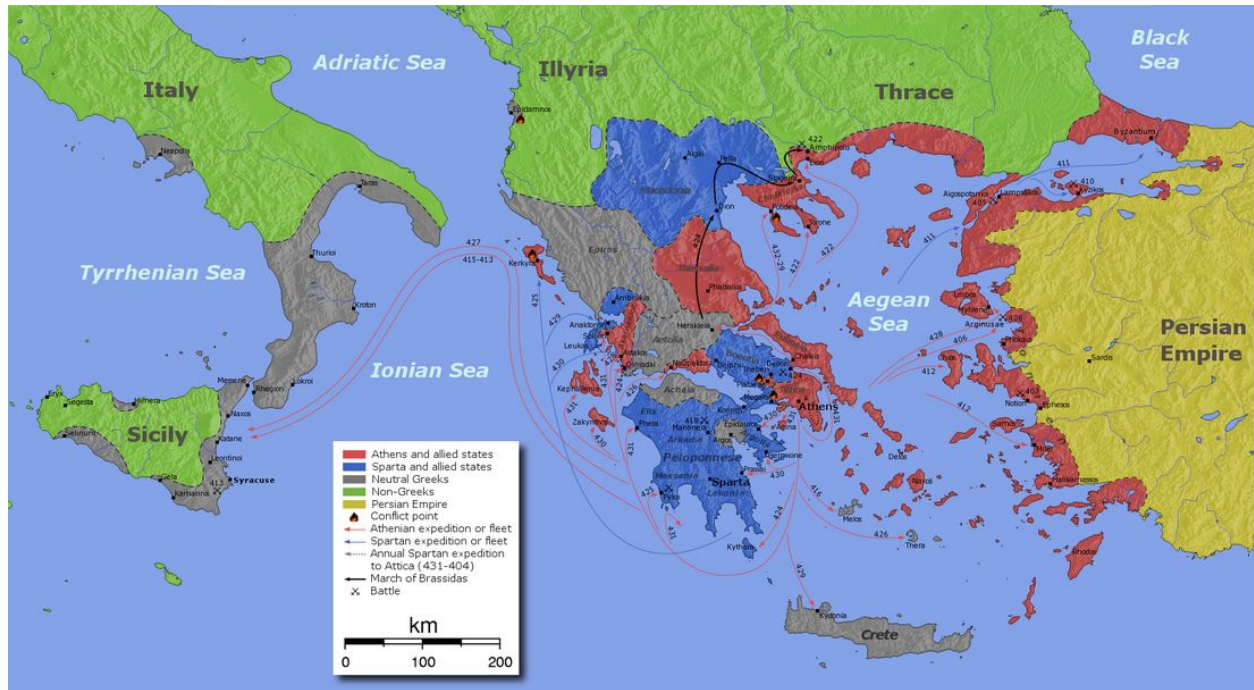


The Delian League

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INTRODUCTION: REASONS FOR A LEAGUE

In 479 BCE the Persians had been beaten, for the most part. Plataea had driven them from the Greek mainland, and Mycale had caused a large part of the fleet to fall victim to the Greeks. While the Greek mainland was safe for the time being from future Persian invasion, some statesmen believed that there might be a third invasion (just as a second had followed the first). More obviously, what was to be done about the Greek poleis in the Aegean and on Asia Minor, within spitting distance of the Persians? How would these Greek populations protect themselves from future Persian reprisals?

One solution proposed by the Spartans was that these (for the most part) Ionian Greeks be transported to the Greek mainland where they would be given the territory of Greek poleis that had surrendered to the Persians. Athens (in particular, Themistocles) resisted this proposal. Instead the seeds for a defensive league were sown.

The Persian Wars had brought about an unusual awareness on the part of separate Greek city states that their common Hellenic identity amounted to something. Therefore the creation of a league that

would safeguard Greek communities over in Ionia was a responsibility that mainland Greeks couldn't simply ignore. At the same time, the creation of such a league would lead to opportunities of expansion for ambitious parties.

THE DELIAN LEAGUE: ORIGINS

The league took shape in 477. It was a league that poleis could voluntarily join. By paying an appropriate tribute – one in proportion to the wealth of one's state, as assessed by officials known as Hellenotamiai – each member would be granted the protection of the combined forces of the league as a whole. Members would share both friends and enemies in common. Tribute could be paid in the form of ships, manpower or money. The latter was the favourite option of most small states and some larger ones. The headquarters of this league was the island of Delos. This was a wise choice for at least two reasons. It was situated between the Greek mainland and Ionia – it was something of a halfway point. It was also sacred to Apollo and therefore of cultural/religious significance to all Greeks. The league's treasury was situated here and this is where important meetings were held. Because of the centrality of Delos, the league came to be known as the Delian League.

Who would lead the league? Sparta and Athens were the obvious candidates. Unfortunately Sparta's Pausanias (responsible for the victory at Plataea) had proven corrupt when, after Plataea, he had sailed to Asia Minor and conducted further operations against the Persians. At the same time Sparta's interest in affairs over in Asia Minor was somewhat limited. Constrained by their conservative policies, which always had to be coordinated with control of the Messenians, the Spartans weren't prepared to involve themselves for a long period of time in an area that was far removed from Sparta. It didn't help either that Sparta was primarily a land force and the Delian league would clearly involve many operations at sea.

That left Athens. Unlike Sparta, Athens was happy to meddle in affairs far from home. At the same time, Athens had transformed itself into a major sea power and was therefore in a position to spearhead the league's initiatives. Its leader Themistocles was (in 477 at least) immensely popular with a wide variety of Greeks. Finally, the purpose of the league wasn't entirely defensive. There was an element of revenge as well; that is, certain poleis that had been ravaged by Persia were interested in payback. Athens had been torched by the Persians and its inhabitants were definitely interested in hurting Persia and its allies in return. In the end, the league fell under the control of the Athenians.

That being said, the league was intended to be democratic. Each member state would meet in an assembly and be allowed one vote when it came to determining the league's combined course of action. Athens was, in principle, just another face in the crowd.

Furthering this notion of fairness, the assessments for member states were scrupulously honest. Under Aristides (an Athenian) and the Hellenotamiai, each state was treated with due consideration.

THEMISTOCLES AND CIMON

A word about the Athenian fleet. Themistocles must have understood that Athenian influence would trouble other Greek parties, notably the Spartans. To prevent the city from being attacked – its sea power would not serve it well if it were attacked by land – Themistocles had heavy walls thrown up about the city. This was done secretly – the Spartans might have interfered if they had caught wind of this project – and very quickly. The Spartans were presented with a fait accompli. At the same time Themistocles had the Piraeus (the Athenian port) fortified.

Themistocles' influence was without challengers, however. Cimon (son of Miltiades, the general responsible for the victory at Marathon) was very soon challenging his control of government. Cimon was a highly successful general. At the same time his power base wasn't the demos or common people (as was the case with Themistocles) but the aristocracy. Whereas Themistocles was more than willing to challenge the Spartans and rub them the wrong way, Cimon was a great admirer of Sparta and anxious to establish good relations with them. Around 471 the tension between these two figures reached a breaking point and Themistocles (through machinations on Cimon's part) was ostracized. He wound up (of all places) in Persia.

FROM LEAGUE TO ATHENIAN EMPIRE

Despite the fact the League fulfilled its mandate and prevented Persia from interfering with the Ionian city-states, it quickly presented difficulties of its own. The problem was partially due to the responsibilities of power and partially due to temptation. Athens was faced with some very hard decisions and at times acted with due expedience. The city was also seriously tempted: money and ships were pouring into the league and, more often than not, members were looking to Athens for guidance. Over time the Athenians figured the contributions were theirs to spend as they pleased, that the members were obliged to continue their role in the league whether they wanted to or not, and that Athens should use the power of the league as they so saw fit.

CARYSTUS

The first difficulty arose with the city of Carystus. Carystus had been subdued by the Persians in 490 and, having learned its lesson, joined the Persians in 480. It refused to join the league and was attacked by the Athenians and forced to join. On the one hand Carystus was only looking after its own interests: circumstances (geography mainly as its location made it vulnerable to Persian attacks)

had forced Carystus to support the Persians. As a former Persian ally, they did not feel they were at risk from being harmed by Persia and therefore wished to save itself the annual fee they would have to pay if they were to join the league.

The Athenian perspective is understandable but a very bad precedent. Carystus is located on the southern point of Euboea. It is on the sea-route that connects Athens to the Hellespont and so to the Black Sea region where a great deal of grain originated for Athenian consumption. Athens couldn't afford to let this city remain neutral. At the same time, Athens was thinking that many city-states would refuse to join the league, if Carystus were allowed to remain aloof, on the grounds of 'herd immunity'. With so many city-states formally protected by the league, the Aegean would be safe for all city-states and therefore these non-members could enjoy protection without paying any dues. This was unacceptable. Therefore Carystus was attacked and forced to join –a violation of the voluntary nature of the league.

NAXOS

The second difficulty arose over Naxos. Unlike Carystus, Naxos was an early member of the league but, by 468/7 or thereabouts, decided membership was no longer necessary. The league had succeeded in beating back the Persians, was a large expense for the city, therefore Naxos wanted out. The Athenians said no, claiming membership in the league would last until all member states agreed together to disband it. They laid siege to the city, finally took it after a while, destroyed its walls, confiscated its fleet and barred it from the Delian League assembly. The message was clear. No state could leave the league without Athens' express permission. This was a dangerous precedent in that Athens could now keep the league going for as long as it wanted. On the other hand, it was possible the league still had a role to play and premature departures (like that of Naxos) could jeopardize the collective security of everyone.

THASOS

The third difficulty arose with the island of Thasos. On the adjoining strip of mainland, Thasos discovered a lucrative gold-mine. The Athenians swooped in and claimed this for themselves. Thasos protested and was put under siege for three years – a very expensive operation.. It finally surrendered. Surrender was an acknowledgement that the Athenians could do whatever they wanted and violate the sovereignty of their fellow league members.

EURYMEDON

In 469 (or 466) Cimon scored a huge victory against the Persians at Eurymedon (in Asia Minor). Here the Greeks not only defeated the Persians at sea, but defeated the beached navy on land and

destroyed 200 ships. This was a terrible setback for the Persians. There were further exchanges of hostilities with the Persians and their allies – notably in Egypt and Cyprus – but most Greek territories were no longer threatened to the same degree as in the past. Indeed, the Peace of Callias would take effect in 450 BCE and end (temporarily) overt hostilities between Persia and Greece.

ATHENIAN ARROGANCE

Even before the Peace of Callias, Athens decided to remove the treasury at Delos over to Athens (454/53 BCE). By now the Athenians were pretty much calling the shots for the league and its politicians decided there was no longer any need to maintain the charade of multilateral rule. Historians date the birth of the Athenian Empire from this date.

In the wake of the Peace of Callias, moreover, the purpose of the league (a defensive and offensive front against the Persians) was no longer tenable. The purpose of the league became, more and more, the maintenance of Athenian power. Member states were forced to contribute cash (instead of ships or men) and they saw their wealth spent on rebuilding Athenian public buildings (which were destroyed during the second Persian War). Democracies were imposed on member states that were traditionally more oligarchic. Some trials had to be heard in Athens. Athens no longer bothered with league assemblies in which member states were consulted on their wishes. Finally, cleruchies were established. These were plots of land seized from difficult member states and given over to Athenians to colonize. The Athenians who set up shop in the foreign enclaves served as garrisons to keep the member states in order.

FIRST PELOPONNESIAN WAR

As Athenian influence expanded, Sparta grew both jealous and fearful. Athenian aggression against some of its member states – notably Thasos – provoked Spartan anger. Indeed, Sparta was going to invade Attica at the time of the siege of Thasos except that it found itself in dire need.

In 464 an earthquake devastated Sparta and killed several thousand (some historians set the figure at 20,000 but this is an exaggeration). The helots took the opportunity to revolt, and a weakened Sparta was forced to call upon its allies for help. Among the parties it appealed was Athens. Cimon (who was influential but at odds with another candidate Ephialtes) insisted that Athens help out. He himself was pro-Spartan and had strong ties with the city. Persuaded by him, the city agreed (with a little reluctance) to send 4000 hoplites to help out against the Messenians. When these soldiers arrived in Sparta, however, they appear to have alarmed or perhaps insulted the Spartans. Of all the allies, they were the only ones who were told their help wasn't needed. The Athenians took offense and Cimon was ostracized. (This left the path open for a politician named Ephialtes who pushed

through some democratic reforms. He was assassinated in 461 and Pericles took his place. He would be a chief architect of Athenian policy over the next 30 years).

In 460 work was started on the Athenian long walls. These were walls which, when finished, would connect the city to the Piraeus (the Athenian port). This would render the city impregnable. The Spartans were suspicious and urged the Athenians to abandon work on the walls – to no avail. At the same time several allies of Sparta went to war with Athens. Sparta was drawn into the fray and the 1st Peloponnesian War broke out.

Both parties had successes and failures in this war – we won't go into any detail.

In 451 Cimon (back from exile) negotiated a 5 year truce with Sparta. This was replaced (on its expiry) with a Thirty Year Peace between Athens and Sparta, the essential stipulation of which was Sparta would leave Athens and all allies alone, while Athens would do the same for Sparta and its allies. The peace that ensued was a cold one at best.

THUCYDIDES

Before we proceed any further with the Peloponnesian War, we should say a word about our chief historian for this conflict. Thucydides was an Athenian citizen who served as a general in the war. He was put in charge of the campaign for Amphipolis (an important city in the north) yet, through no fault of his own, the city was acquired by the Spartans. The Athenians blamed Thucydides for this defeat and sent him into exile for twenty years.

In exile, Thucydides was able to travel to various Peloponnesian states and see for himself how they were conducting the war. It was in exile, too, that he composed his famous History of the Peloponnesian War.

Thucydides is known and highly regarded for his careful chronology and caution in using multiple sources. He himself had been influenced by the Sophists and this comes out in the multiple perspectives he always provides – through the course of his writing, we come to understand the Spartan motivation as much as we do the Athenian one.

Thucydides was also interested in power – what it leads people to do and how it shapes city policies. He presents a view that was influential at the time – that might is right. He presents instances of this throughout his writings. He is interested in psychology, how men react in adversity, what they will do to retain power, how the Athenian democracy got out of hand, how traditional morality rests uncomfortably with pragmatics. He is the father of political science and realpolitik.