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## The Delian League: A Prelude to Empire and War

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During the classical period of Greece, the rise of the Delian League was a major factor that led to the Peloponnesian War. What changed over time that transformed the league into an empire? In order to repel a possible third invasion by Persia, Greek city-states met on the island of Delos to form a confederation, or league. In their quest to repel invasion, Athens, which was the foremost city-state in the league, grew in prominence and power, eventually turning the Delian League into the Athenian Empire. Thus, the formation of the Delian League was a prelude to empire and war.

The wheels of war were set in motion as far back as 546 BC, when Persian King Cyrus conquered the Lydian kingdom of Greeks on Anatolia.<sup>1</sup> The Persian kings were very interested in gaining territory in Europe. Interestingly, it was the ousted Athenian tyrant, Hippias, who piqued Persian interest in the rest of Greece. Hippias had fled to Sardis, which was a Persian satrapy. The satrap, Artaphrenes, after hearing the complaints of an Athenian delegation against Hippias, decided to support Hippias.<sup>2</sup> This action led to a Persian attack on Sardis and the Ionian revolt against Persia. Fights and battles occurred all over Anatolia during the years that followed 499 BC.<sup>3</sup> The Persians attacked and destroyed Miletus, which further angered the Greeks.<sup>4</sup> The mainland Greeks had always considered the Ionians as Greeks, as Greek settlers had colonized the region in ancient times. The Greeks considered the subjugation of Ionia as a direct threat to Greece. Fueled by his interest in Greece, as well as the burning of Sardis in 498 BC, Darius set out to conquer Greece.

Darius sent his son, Mardonios, with an army and fleet to cross the Hellespont. He was successful in gaining territory in Thrace and Macedonia, thereby bringing areas of Europe under Persian control.<sup>5</sup> Many smaller islands gave in to Darius's demands for submission to his kingship. However, his main targets were Athens and then Sparta. A Spartan delegation had previously warned the Persians not to harm any Greeks; however, it was mere rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> Emboldened, the Persians went forward with their plans.

Hippias, still hoping to regain power in Athens, accompanied the Persian

fleet and possibly suggested Marathon as the landing place for the Persians.<sup>7</sup> Persians considered Marathon an intriguing landing spot, as it would draw the Athenian army out away from the city. Hippias believed he still had allies in Athens and hoped that once the anti-Persian force left Athens, his allies would assume control of the city. The Athenians were successful in blocking the two exits from the plain of Marathon. Herodotus noted the Persians probably thought the Athenians were crazy as they rushed the Persian line to attack.<sup>8</sup> However, the Athenians wanted to launch their attack while the Persian cavalry was out of the camp. The ensuing battle was disastrous for the Persian forces. Some seven thousand Persians perished while reports indicated that only 192 Athenians were lost.<sup>9</sup> After the Battle of Marathon, the Athenians returned home to face the Persian naval forces that had left the area of Marathon in an attempt to gain a victory over Athens.

The Persians planned to conquer the city while the army was fighting at Marathon. The Athenians returned to lower Attica in time to confront the Persians, which resulted in a Persian withdrawal. Hippias would never again rule in Athens. Hippias's dream to reclaim what he believed was his rightful rule of Athens drifted away with the Persian navy.

Darius I died from an illness in 486 BC and his son, Xerxes I succeeded him.<sup>10</sup> Xerxes's intentions should have been clear to the Greeks. He spent the years of 484 BC to 481 BC making numerous preparations to attack Greece. Noted Greek historian Terry Buckley tells of Xerxes's massive construction projects, such as a canal through the isthmus of Mt. Athos, which was the site of a tragedy in 492 BC for a previous Persian fleet. He also built a boat bridge across the Hellespont and arranged food depots, roads, and outposts along the route. Xerxes was keenly interested in paving roads into Greece.<sup>11</sup> His forethought, planning, and monumental building projects in preparation for his invasion of Greece belie the frequently held notion of the man as a foolish and headstrong leader prone to rash decisions. Xerxes moved his land and naval forces in conjunction with each other during 480 BC. Moving through Thrace and Macedonia, he made his way through Thessaly virtually unaccosted.<sup>12</sup> Xerxes moved south to Thermopylae.

Here, Xerxes faced approximately seven thousand men from Sparta and Phocis.<sup>13</sup> The recent Hollywood movie, *300*, immortalized this part of Greek history for a new generation. The Spartan King, Leonidas, defied Xerxes long enough to send away a major portion of the forces under him and gave the other

Greeks time to gather in an effort to defend Greece from a Persian conquest. Once finishing off Leonidas and his Spartans, Xerxes marched to Athens, which its citizens had vacated. Xerxes, perhaps in retribution for the burning of Sardis, sacked Athens and burned the Acropolis.<sup>14</sup> Xerxes moved his fleet in connection with his land forces.

Watching from his throne, Xerxes could see the battle of Salamis in 480 BC. Themistocles had engaged in a subterfuge, which tricked the Persians into attacking the Greek fleet in the straits around Salamis. After the naval defeat, Xerxes placed the blame on his Phoenician captains and executed them; something



Figure 1 *Battle of Salamis (Die Seeschlacht bei Salamis)*. Oil on canvas by Wilhelm von Kaulbach, c. 1868.

it seems he did often. Xerxes went back to his empire in Asia Minor and left a force under the command of Mardonios in Greece. Mardonios died the following year, 479 BC, in the battle of Plataea.<sup>15</sup> That battle concluded Persian aggression in Greece, whether on the islands or the mainland.

Sparta left the Hellenic League in 477 BC, a couple of years after the final defeat of the Persians on the Greek mainland. Before leaving the Hellenic League, the Spartans took over Cyprus and Byzantion.<sup>16</sup> With the loss of Sparta, there was much discussion amongst the remaining members over which city-state should be in charge of the league. The members determined to form a new league,

with new goals and ideals. The new league, composed of as many as one hundred and fifty city-states, met on the island of Delos.<sup>17</sup> Athens was, of course, the primary city-state in the league, which historians later named the Delian League. Each league assessed each polis 460 talents, payable in either specie or ships put towards the league fleet. The member city-states meant the league to be a permanent one. The members swore an oath and sunk lumps of iron into the sea to seal the oath; they intended the league to remain intact until the lumps of iron rose back to the top of the sea.<sup>18</sup>

The league's aim was to have vengeance upon Persia and extract compensation for past aggressions; a very attractive goal for the poleis, as Persia was a rich empire. The Greeks were still well aware of the burning of Miletus by the Persians as well as the burning of the Persepolis and the sacking of Athens. Persia would pay for its insolence and insults. The Greeks on the mainland of Anatolia also wanted to remain free from Persian rule. Buckley pointed to one literary source that noted the league had a unicameral legislature, but this is in dispute.<sup>19</sup>

The league located its treasury at Delos, which was of some religious significance to the Greeks. Leaders of the league assigned Aristides of Athens to examine the various islands and city-states and assign appropriate contributions from them towards the league.<sup>20</sup> Annual contributions of money and ships poured in, which made Athens richer and more powerful as time progressed. The league pushed the Persians out of Europe and back from Ionia. Each victory emboldened the Athenians into presenting themselves as the premier polis in the league.

The league's navy consisted of triremes. The trireme was the most formidable tool of the navy at the time. Approximately nine times longer than wide, the trireme was about 120' by 15' and accommodated 170 oarsmen.<sup>21</sup> The navy built them for ramming, as could be discerned from the front of all triremes. With these potent ships, the league's navy could enforce the will of the league—and increasingly Athens—on the lesser polis and islands.

Soon, the league, mainly Athens, began forcing other islands to join the alliance. One case in point was the island of Naxos. Naxos had decided to leave the alliance, and as a result, the league's navy responded. They had already forced Carystus, located on the southern part of Euboea, to submit to league demands and join. At Naxos, the league's navy confiscated the Naxians' triremes and demanded future payments to the league be in specie rather than military contributions.<sup>22</sup>

Many in the league were becoming distrustful of Athens, as she held sway over the league and its treasury. The culmination of the league's goals came at the Battle of Eurymedon in 467 BC. The league dramatically defeated the Persians at the Eurymedon River. Not only did the league defeat the Persian navy, but also they landed and defeated the army as well.<sup>23</sup> With the decisive defeat of the Persians at Eurymedon, what would follow for the league?

For some, the league had accomplished its purpose, and therefore, it was no longer necessary. As was already pointed out, Athens had begun to bully other city-states and islands into doing what the Athenian leaders wanted. The victory Cimon brought for Athens and the league was a double-edged sword. Victory over Persia ensured there would be no further Persian aggression. It also would bring about the demise of Athenian supremacy, at least in theory. Athens was not willing to lose its control over the league, which, it reminded others, was supposed to be of an indefinite period.

The winds of change were brewing. The previously referred to attack on Carystus was an attack on fellow Greeks—not to drive out Persians—but to ensure submission to Athens. The Euboeans on the southern part of the island were enjoying all the benefits of the league but not contributing towards its expense. More to the point, Carystus was an important port on the corn trade routes, meaning Athens needed to control Carystus to govern the food route.<sup>24</sup> Afterwards the island state of Thasos decided to abandon the league.

A major consideration was the silver mines close by, in Thrace. It took Athens two years of fighting to conquer Thasos. Afterwards, Athens also claimed the silver mines and exacted Thasos' payments to the league from the point forward in specie only, rather than in vessels.<sup>25</sup> The years that followed saw more revolts and led to political intrigue in Athens. Athens eventually forced out Themistocles, who ended up in Persia, the very nation he had fought so hard to defeat.<sup>26</sup>

In Athens, through Cimon's fall from grace and through the reforms of Ephialtes, the Athenian Empire, as the league was becoming, still prosecuted fellow Greeks who failed to live up to the conditions of the league charter. Things took a turn for the worse after the assassination of Ephialtes, and Pericles took the reins of government. The fact that Pericles was able to remain the leading figure in Athenian government from approximately 461 BC until his death from the plague in 429 BC shows he was either a master of political intrigue, or extremely loved; or

perhaps it was a little of both. The league began fighting the Peloponnesian League as well as other nations, such as Egypt.

Athens was so concerned with maintaining control over the league, now their empire, that Athenian leaders were willing to fight anyone at any time. The ensuing years brought about battles with the Peloponnesian League, headed by Sparta. One of the sparks that ignited the hostilities between the two leagues occurred in Megara, which had decided to leave the Peloponnesian League and join Athens. This pitted her against Corinth, who was very afraid of Athenian expansionism. The battle proved disastrous for Sparta and her league because it drew Athens into the politics of the Boeotia region and by 456 BC, the Athenians controlled the region, minus Thebes.<sup>27</sup>

In 454 BC, the Delian League faced a bitter defeat in Egypt, which caused even more rifts and strife in the league.<sup>28</sup> They had to crush more revolts, and Athens tightened its grip on the league members. Historians have questioned the scope of the impact outlined by Thucydides' account of the period; however, Pomeroy states the fighting against Artaxerxes in Egypt was indeed disastrous for Greece.<sup>29</sup> That defeat was not the only calamitous occurrence in 454 BC. The Athenians also moved the league treasury from Delos to Athens, claiming that Delos was now vulnerable to pirates and Persians alike.

At this point, the Delian League essentially ceased to exist and became a de facto empire, the Athenian Empire. This empire became embroiled in battles termed the Peloponnesian Wars. Though not a world war as defined by modern day historians, the Peloponnesian Wars were a great regional conflict that caused the death of thousands of people. The misnamed Thirty Years' Peace interrupted the wars, with Athens signing peace treaties with one state after another.<sup>30</sup> That peace would not last thirty years, but rather approximately fifteen years.

Pericles and the Athenians were once again at war with Sparta and the Peloponnesian League; a conflict termed the Archidamian War. This war would end the rule of Pericles as in 429 BC, with Spartan soldiers laying siege to Athens, a plague spread through the city, killing Pericles and many of the citizens and soldiers of Athens.<sup>31</sup> The war would soon conclude and with its end, Athens's power base disappeared.

The Greeks formed the Delian League as a way to counter any further Persian aggression into Greece. Persian kings had twice entered Greece, sacked, and burned Athens and the Acropolis, and caused great suffering and death to the

people of Greece. While the league began with noble intentions, Athens later used it as a tool of aggression— not only towards Persia, but also towards fellow Greeks who failed to comply with Athenian demands. The Delian League was indeed a prelude to wars that would devastate the mainland of Greece almost as much as the Persian wars.

## Notes

1. Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 202.
2. Robert Morkot, *Historical Atlas of Ancient Greece* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 66.
3. Victor Ehrenberg, *From Solon to Socrates: Greek History and Civilization during the 6th and 5th Centuries BC* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 99.
4. Pomeroy, *Ancient Greece*, 207
5. Morkot, *Historical Atlas*, 66; Pomeroy, *Ancient Greece*, 207.
6. P. J. Rhodes, *A History of the Classical Greek World: 478-323 BC*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 121.
7. Morkot, 66-67. Map on p. 75 shows the first campaign of Darius.
8. A. D. Godley, *Herodotus*, with an English translation (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), Hdt. 6.112.2
9. Morkot, *Historical Atlas*, 74.
10. Pomeroy, 215, 216.
11. Terry Buckley, *Aspects of Greek History: 750-323 BC: a source-based approach* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 122.
12. Morkot, *Historical Atlas*, 77. This map shows the route Xerxes forces took to enter Greece.
13. Pomeroy, *Ancient Greece*, 219
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 220.
16. Ehrenberg, *From Solon to Socrates*, 155.
17. Pomeroy, *Ancient Greece*, 229.
18. Buckley, *Aspects of Greek History*, 142.
19. Ibid., 143, 144.

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