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

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 offensive. 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 expediency. 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.
REASONS FOR STUDYING THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

Why are historians so interested in the Peloponnesian War? There are a number of reasons. To begin with, this is the biggest war the Greeks ever fought amongst themselves. The Greeks were always fighting, but this time a huge number of poleis were involved – all of Athens’ allies and Sparta’s allies. The war was unusually long. Most wars in ancient Greece were determined within a matter of days and a battle or two. Think of the Persians Wars and the very few battles they involved. The PW was different in that it lasted 27 years (from 431-404 BCE), admittedly with a period of truce (more).

The war is also interesting because it will mark the decline of the polis. Athens will fight to the point of exhaustion. Sparta’s victory will be something of a Pyrrhic one. Within sixty years of the PW, the main poleis of Greece will face a very different challenger – Macedonia. Phillip and Alexander (as we’ll see) will prevail against the mainland Greeks in part because, three generations after the PW, they still haven’t recovered.

Finally, the PW is interesting because it pits one type of society against another. Athens was an open society (for the most part) and Sparta was a closed one. Which sort of system would prevail against the other? In some very general ways, the PW seems to parallel the struggle of the west against the communists (before the collapse of the Berlin Wall).

CAUSES OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

There are several disputes in the 430s that Thucydides insists were instrumental in leading Athens and Sparta to break the 30 Year Peace and go to war. The mechanics of these hostilities should be familiar to anyone who has studied a history of WWI.

Corcyra, Epidamnus and Corinth

Corcyra was an island off the NW coast of Greece. It was a colony of Corinth (a sea power and ally of Sparta). Epidamnus, a mainland polis N of Corcyra, was a joint colony of Corinth and Corcyra. In 435, the democratic faction within Epidamnus wished to expel the oligarchs. The approached Corcyra for help and were rebuffed (Corcyra was in favour of oligarchic rule). They then approached Corinth and received a friendly hearing. Indeed, Corinth sent fresh settlers to Epidamnus, to turn the political tide against the oligarchs. Angered, Corcyra laid siege to the city. It defeated the Corinthians in a sea battle (Corcyra was a naval power as well) and Epidamnus surrendered to it.

Corcyra and Corinth wished to continue their hostilities, but wanted to do so with support from another strong sea power, Athens. Both approached the Athenians, and asked them to intervene on its side. In the end Athens (who was always interested in furthering its influence) opted to make a defensive treaty with Corcyra. If the latter were attacked, Athens would come to its defense. This was not a violation of the 30 Years Peace: this
treaty stipulated that Athens could not meddle in the affairs of Sparta’s allies, but in fact Corcyra was not an ally of Sparta.

In 433 Corinth and Corcyra fought the (naval) battle of Sybota. The Corinthians were getting the upper hand when Athenians ships intervened and caused the Corinthians to withdraw. Corinth complained bitterly to (its ally) Sparta, but Sparta wasn’t yet prepared to go to war.

Potidaea

The second dispute involved Potidaea (in the northern part of the Aegean). Potidaea was a member of the Delain League (and therefore paid tribute to Athens) but it was also a colony of Corinth. Athens had its doubts about the reliability of Potidaea and ordered the city to demolish part of its walls (therefore making it much easier to control). Potidaea refused and rebelled (in 432). The Athenians besieged Potidaea, which received some help from Corinth (who was itching to pay the Athenians back). This too provoked tensions between Athens and Sparta.

Megara

The third dispute involved Megara (not to far from Attica). Megara was a member of the Peloponnesian League and a Spartan ally. It had helped the Corinthians at Potidaea and, generally speaking, had proven a small thorn in the side of the Athenians. Its economic well-being depended on trade. This was a weakness which the Athenians decided to exploit.

The Megaran Decrees were published. In effect, these prohibited Megara from trading with Athens or any of its allies. In other words, Athens subjected Megara to an economic blockade. This was possibly a violation of the 30 Years Peace and most certainly caused the Spartans worry. Without having to lift a shield or spear, the Athenians were able to bring Megara to its knees. Economic warfare was not a weapon in Sparta’s arsenal and the effects of the Megaran Decrees were therefore alarming.

Heated talks ensued (in 431) between Sparta and Athens. Neither side was prepared to compromise – although King Archidamus of Sparta was reluctant to engage the Athenians in hostilities. When Thebes (an ally of Sparta) attacked Plataea (an ally of Athens), Athens decided the 30 Year Peace had been violated and both sides prepared for war.

RESOURCES

The Athenians had 30,000 land troops – some young, some not. They had 300 triremes which would require 60,000 rowers (some of these hired). Most important, they had money. Money would allow them to hire mercenaries, to buy food from abroad (therefore freeing their manpower to fight), to pay their rowers, and to rebuild ships that were destroyed.
The Spartans had the most powerful land army in Greece (their own small but highly effective army was supplemented by the Perioikoi as well as many troops from the Peloponnesian League). They suffered from a desperate shortage of cash, and had few ships to speak of. Their own way of engaging the enemy would be the traditional one of invasion, rapid battles, and the burning of crops.

COURSE OF THE WAR

Archidamian War (431-421)

The first stage of the war is known as the Archidamian war (named after the Spartan king Archidamus). It consisted of certain segments and strategies. Let’s examine some of these briefly.

Sparta’s initial action was to invade Attica with an allied army of 30,000 hoplites. Their plan was to burn farms and fields and so provoke the Athenians to march out against them. Battle would ensue and the Spartans were (rightly) confident that they would defeat their enemy.

Pericles was in charge of the city – he had been elected strategos again again. His strategy was unusual. In the face of Spartan provocation, he urged the population NOT to meet the enemy in battle. Instead, all inhabitants of Attica would gather their belongings and assemble in Athens itself. They would take refuge behind its impregnable walls – siege warfare was primitive at this time and very expensive; there was no way the Spartans could break into the city. The walls not only protected the city. They connected it to the Piraeus. The fleet could bring in purchased food from abroad – the Black Sea area was the source of grain for Athenians – and so the population would be safe and comfortable, even if the Spartans made havoc of their fields. The strategy, while a little unpopular, was reasonably successful. The Spartans did their worst then retreated in frustration. In the meantime the Athenian fleet was landing troops into the Peloponnese and launching lightning attacks on various Spartan allies.

At the end of the first year, Pericles gave a speech over the fallen soldiers (this was a tradition in Athens). Thucydides reports this speech – it is called Pericles’ Funeral Oration – and it is very famous (see handout).

In the following year, however, Athens wasn’t so lucky. A plague broke out and killed thousands of Athenians who for the second time took refuge in the city, to escape the Spartans’ second invasion of Attica.

Pericles himself succumbed to the plague. Before dying, he delivered a final speech, in which he addressed those citizens whose interest in war was beginning to flag. It is interesting for the point it tries to make. (see handout)
Cleon

Once Pericles was gone, other politicians stepped into the breach. One example was Cleon. A tradesman (a tanner by profession), he championed the democratic faction in the city, and not so much the oligarchic/aristocratic one that Pericles had favoured. Cleon was rough and liked playing to the crowd, forming policies (according to Thucydides at least) that would stroke his followers the right way. Athens started to send more expeditions against the Peloponnese. The general Demosthenes met with some success in these ventures. In particular, they tried to stir the helots to rebel against their Spartan masters.

Because the Athenians still wouldn’t meet them in open battle in Attica, the Spartans (even as they continued their invasions) developed a different strategy: they now tried to get Athenian allies to leave the Delian League. There was a lot of resentment of the Athenians, and the Spartans and their allies were anxious to exploit it.

Mytilene and the Mytilenean Debate

One such example of a city that was encouraged to revolt was Mytilene (in 428). Mytilene was a powerful polis on the island of Lesbos. It was promised Spartan help but, for the most part, this failed to materialize. After a year of struggle, Mytilence was finally captured by Athenian forces. The question arose how the population was to be punished. Thucydides reports a series of speeches. In one of these, Cleon proposed that that all the men should be killed and the women and children sold into slavery – a very harsh punishment by ancient Greek standards. The assembly voted on this proposal and it was passed. A ship was dispatched to give the order of execution to the Athenian commander. The next day, another speaker arose, Diodotus. His speech is very interesting because it reflects the ‘rationalism’ and ‘realpolitik’ climate of the day. (see handout). Diodotus’ proposal was accepted and a second ship was dispatched to countermand the order carried by the first one.

Pylos and Sphacteria

In 425 Demosthenes (the Athenian general) initiated operation in Pylos. This is in the southern Peloponnese and adjoins Messenia. The purpose was to incite the helots to rebel, once the Athenians managed to build fortifications in the area. At one point Demosthenes managed to trap 420 Spartan troops in battle. He hesitated attacking them and Cleon criticized him back in Athens, claiming if he were leader he would finish these troops off. The public got tired of his boasting and appointed him commander. Much to everyone’s surprise, Cleon DID managed to bring this campaign to a successful and shocking conclusion. 292 of the Spartans surrendered to him (120 of them full citizens). This was unheard of. Spartans were supposed to fight to the death and here they were surrendering to the enemy.

These men were held as hostages and taken to Athens. Their capture was traumatizing for Sparta. First and foremost, the city could not afford to lose this manpower. This is why
they negotiated with the Athenians, offering to end the war and return to the status quo ante. Cleon refused. At the very least Sparta temporarily suspended operations in Attica.

Amphipolis

Hostilities continued in a different theater of war. Brasidas, a Spartan commander, had been waging operations in Thrace for some time, his objective being to wrest various allies from the Athenians. In 422, he was conducting operations in the area of Amphipolis – this was a city that the Athenians had founded to consolidate their position in Thrace. Cleon got word of Brasidas’ activities. He led an Athenian force against, there was battle and both leaders died. With the death of these two leaders, both Athens and Sparta lost their martial proponents and were ready to make peace.

In 421 Nicias (an Athenian moderate with aristocratic connections) proposed another 30 Year Peace that would return both parties to the status quo ante. The Spartans agreed (especially when their captured soldiers were returned) and this treaty – known as the Peace of Nicias – was struck.

Peace of Nicias

Even though overt hostilities had ended, it was just a matter of time before the war resumed. Certain agents were willing to hurry this along.

We should note that not all Athenians were happy that peace had been struck. The democratic contingent within Athens was particularly unhappy. This faction consisted primarily of thetes who had been manning the Athenian fleet and been handsomely paid in return. It was in their interest that the war continued and they were responsive to any politician who was prepared to rock the boat.

Alcibiades

This leads us to Alcibiades. He was an ambitious aristocrat who realized reputations are easier to make in times of trouble (i.e. war). Checked in by the Peace of Nicias he tried to continue operations in a way that wouldn’t be too flagrant violation of the treaty. His first initiative involved inciting Argos to attack Sparta. This came to nothing so he dreamed up a more ambitious (and nuttier) scheme.

He turned his eyes to Sicily. At this time Sicily consisted of numerous wealthy Greek cities. While they were not affiliated with either Athens or Sparta, some of these cities were Dorian in origin and therefore instinctively more drawn to Sparta.

One city, Egesta, was at war with another, Selinus. Whereas the latter gained the support of Sicily’s most powerful polis, Syracuse, Egesta approached Athens (in 415), notably Alcibiades. He championed their cause and argued before the crowd that if Sicily were defeated by the Athenians, the city would win itself a huge new source of revenue and would be in a position of fantastic strength when the war with Sparta was renewed. He
won the assembly over, but only after two other leaders were chosen to lead this expedition, alongside Alcibiades himself. Nicias was one candidate, Lamarchus (a very competent soldier) another. 60 triremes were to be dispatched and some 15,000 men. This was a huge expedition.

Just before the departure date, herms were mutilated in Athens. These were religious statues and their mutilation was a cause for public concern. Rumour had it that Alcibiades was responsible. There was a trail, he was deemed non-culpable and allowed to sail with the expedition.

In his absence, another trial was held. This time he was found guilty. A ship was dispatched to bring him home but (through agents who were friendly to him) he managed to escape to Sparta. As a way of winning the enemy over, he gave them useful advice: give him a fleet and he would cause Athens’ allies to leave the alliance. He also advised the Spartans to keep a permanent invasionary force in Athens, in the fortress of Decelea.

Affairs in Sicily went badly. Egesta had no money to pay the Athenians. Realizing they had to do something to justify an expedition of this size, the leaders decided to place Syracuse under siege, the idea being if this city collapsed, the island as a whole would be theirs to control.

Over the next year and a half the Athenians wore themselves out. They tried to hem in Syracuse with a siege wall, but at the last moment (under the guidance of the Spartan leader Gylippus) the Syracusans managed to break part of this wall. Lamarchus was killed in a daring night raid. Nicias, for his part, was weak. He advised the Athenians back home that failure was inevitable due to a lack of forces. The Athenians sent more forces over, making a bad situation that much worse. The Syracusans defeated the Athenians in a large naval battle. The Athenians could have retreated but an eclipse broke out and Nicias hesitated. The fleet was hemmed in. the Athenians tried marching across land but virtually the entire force was either killed or captured. The campaign severely weakened the city and encouraged the Spartan to restart the war.

Final stage

I will post these notes next week