

City-States and Alliances in Ancient Greece.

Underlying Reasons of Their Existence and Their Consequences

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Introduction

The ancient Greek world was much troubled and influenced by politics. While other peoples settled to a single form of government, the Greeks were struggling between monarchy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny; and while other peoples were forming empires, the Greek cities usually preferred independence, in the form of a *polis*, a city-state, and other times preferred to (or were forced to) join some alliances, *symmachies*. Apart from the several differences that the several cities had, which was one of the reasons why they might wish to stay independent, a number of other reasons did not favor the formation of alliances, leagues, confederacies or empires. On the other hand, Greek cities shared a lot in common, and many other factors did favor the formation of alliances.

After a short review of the Greek cities and alliances formed from the Trojan war to the years of Alexander the Great, we explore the reasons why a Greek city would like to join a coalition or would prefer to stay independent. Finally, we present some of the consequences of the two different levels of authority, and present a connection between the ancient *poleis* with modern nations, and between ancient coalitions with modern ones.

City-states and alliances in Ancient Greece

Before the Trojan War, there is little account for Greek alliances; as Thucydides mentions [Thu, 1.III]: "... Before the Trojan war there is no indication of any common action in Hellas, nor indeed of the universal prevalence of the name; ... It was not till Hellen and his sons grew strong in Phthiotis, and were invited as allies into the other cities, that one by one they gradually acquired from the connection the name of Hellenes; though a long time elapsed before that name could fasten itself upon all. "

Homer provides us with the earliest accounts for the various city-states of mainland Greece in the Iliad. Book 2 lists the composition of the Greek army in Troy, with over 200 cities, all independent and ruled by their *basileis*. The expedition to Troy, however, also constitutes an early example of an alliance formed by *poleis*, with the participating armies recognizing Agamemnon, ruler of Argos, as their leader [?, ?].

Moving on to later years and away from an expedition whose reasons and even existence several commentators have questioned, an important, as it proved for the future of Greeks, alliance was formed towards the 5th century BC, the "Hellenic League". Originating from the Peloponnesian League but also including Athens and other Greek cities, the Hellenic League successfully repelled the Persians from mainland Greece. Herodotus lists the cities that participated in the league both in the battle of Salamis and in that of Plataea. Another alliance was also present in these battles, however: At the battle of Plataea, Thebes, Boeotia, Thessalia, Macedonia and Thessaly fought on the Persian side [Her20, 8,9].

After the success against the Persians, Sparta withdrew from the Hellenic League and reformed the Peloponnesian League. Athens took advantage of its contribution to the success of the Persian wars and of its naval dominance, and given the still existent barbarian danger led a *symmachia*, which soon turned out to be an empire, the Delian League. As Thucydides describes, several cities voluntarily joined Athens which decided how many ships and how much money each city would contribute against the barbarian danger [Thu, 1.XCVI].

Soon the two alliances confronted each other. In the Peloponnesian War, the greatest war until then, according to Thucydides, [Thu, 1.I], Sparta, with most of Peloponnesians, Megarians, Locrians, Boeotians, Phocians, Ambraciots, Leucadians, and Anactorians, faced Athens, with the Chians, Lesbians, Plateans, the Messenians in Naupactus, most of the Acarnanians, the Corcyraeans, Zacynthians and some others as well [Thu, 2.IX].

After the fall of Athens in 404 B.C. , Sparta began expanding to “all four points of the compass” [Hor02, p.212], leading to the creation of a second Athenian confederacy. Thebes was the one who stopped Sparta’s dominance this time, with the battle at Leuctra[?, ?].

Philip’s rise in Macedonia led to another alliance among Thebes, Sparta, Athens and other cities that resisted the idea of Philip’s expansion to the south. The battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C. marks the end of the Greek city-state, with the exception of some cities such as Athens that survived until later. Without traditional city-states, the leagues created from then on were no longer the same either. Greek cities were merged in the Macedonian empire, and in other empires that followed the death of Alexander.

Reasons for independent city-states

The most obvious reason why city-states chose to remain independent is the differences that the various city-states had. In terms of form of government, Athens and a number of cities that imitated her were democratic [Her20, 2.XXXVII], while most of the other cities had either an oligarchy, tyranny or aristocracy. Social class was also a point of difference among *poleis*. Sparta, for example, had a unique classification with Helots, Perioikoi and Spartiates sharing different citizen privileges, while in democratic cities the citizens usually shared equal privileges. Education was mostly about philosophy and arts in Athens, and solely military in Sparta. Some cities had restrictions in trading with other cities, while others were economically dependent mostly on trading. The position of women, although generally unacceptable, was also different among *poleis*. All these differences made the existence of independent *poleis* reasonable.

Aside from the obvious differences among the city-states, for several cities, especially for powerful ones, joining an alliance might mean losing their dominance. In many cases, for example, disputes arose as to who should lead the alliance and take decisions, and whether the others should obey someone who they might consider inferior or at least not superior. Homer begins the Iliad with such a dispute, among Achilles and Agamemnon [?, 1.?]. Later on, during the Persian Wars, the Peloponnesians and the Athenians disputed about the location of the league's naval fight with the Persians. The former were proposing the Isthmus of Corinth, while the Athenians led by Themistocles insisted on Salamis, which would prevent the Persians from reaching Athens [Her20, 1.?]. City-specific or even personal interests, therefore, several times acted as barriers in creating alliances.

Another fact that kept *poleis* from joining alliances was that often a single member of the alliance would act imperialistically and abuse the resources of the other members. There are plenty examples of such actions throughout the ancient Greek history. The earliest example is probably in the Iliad, where Agamemnon took Achilles' girl because he had to return his own to her father [?, 1.?]. Athens, centuries later, treated their allies as subjects and not as equals; as Thucydides mentions, "Athens, on the contrary, had by degrees deprived hers of their ships, and imposed instead contributions in money on all except Chios and Lesbos. Both found their resources for this war separately to exceed the sum of their strength when the alliance flourished intact" [Thu, 1.XIX]. Similar behavior was engaged by Philip and Alexander. The "allies" had to contribute in terms of men and arms, or else pay a heavy fine [Fer01, p.18]. Thus, imperialistic behavior, which was not infrequent in the ancient Greek history, acted as another barrier in joining alliances.

Moreover, the possibility of losing the city's distinctive identity, and the unwillingness to share a city's history and pride constitute some more reasons to why a *polis* might rather stay out of an alliance. Sparta, for example, by constitution did not allow the mingling with other Greeks, in fear of its people questioning whether their constitution and way of living was the best they could have. Athens made an effort to unite the various city-states in the era of its empire. These efforts, however, did not include political rights (citizenship) to men of other cities. Athenians, on the one hand, did not wish to share the advantages of being Athenian, and the other cities

feared of “at least partial loss of identity”[Fer01, p.19]. At this point we could also mention that Sparta, which, being special (in the sense of completely different) had another reason against forming an alliance, namely the Helots. An alliance usually meant expeditions, but Sparta could not afford them in fear of the Helot population’s revolting. The loss of identity, therefore, the unwillingness to share political rights and the dependency of some cities on slaves constituted some further reasons against the formation of alliances.

A final reason why city-states remained mostly independent was the existence of tyranny in many of the Greek cities. As Thucydides reports, “ wherever there were tyrants, their habit of providing simply for themselves, of looking solely to their personal comfort and family aggrandizement, made safety the great aim of their policy, and prevented anything great proceeding from them” [Thu, 1.XVII]. History provides many examples of tyrants, most of which remained monarchs for a relatively small period of time, were usually detested by their people and rarely, if ever, did their descendants inherit their power. Osborne explains how the tradition of the “bad tyrant” evolved, and how most of the tyrants were busy eliminating the members of the elite that opposed them [Osb96, pp.192-6]. Even in cases where the tyrants were considered “good”, this might have been due to their efforts to show some public work which turned the people’s attention away from politics, as in the case of the Peisistratids [Osb96, p. 285]. No matter what the people’s opinion about the tyrants was, therefore, their existence most of the times proved another obstacle in any effort to unity.

Reasons for alliances

On the other hand, as we have seen in page 2, alliances between the Greek city-states were not at all infrequent. A number of reasons that motivated the formation of such alliances can be traced throughout the History, the most obvious one being the common elements that the Greek cities shared. What distinguished Greeks from non-Greeks was their language, which was common among Greek city-states in most parts, maybe in several dialects. Greek tradition was also common for the cities, and Greek mythology was usually shared among them. Religion and moral beliefs were also very similar, given the belief to the Olympian Gods and

the frequent visits to their representatives at Delphi, for example. Archaeological evidence enriches our list with architecture and art; Greek cities were influenced by each other's patterns. Finally, many of the *poleis* were founded by others and therefore felt "blood bonds" with their founding cities[?]. All these common elements, therefore, that distinguished Greeks from non-Greeks, were a significant motive for the formation of alliances.

A second cause for alliances was the defense against the Persian danger. The formation of the Hellenic League when the Persians started moving towards mainland Greece was an early example; with the league consisting of many Greek city-states defending themselves in Marathon, Salamis and Plataea. As soon as the Persian threat was miles away from mainland Greece, the league broke up, thus making clear the reasons of its formation. The Delian League, formed soon after was also formed for this reason. Thucydides states "The Athenians ... fixed which cities were to contribute money against the barbarian, which ships; their professed object being to retaliate for their sufferings by ravaging the [Persian] king's country." [Thu, 1.XCVI]. Thus, even though as it turned out in the end, the Athenians turned the alliance into an empire, the barbarian danger was a significant cause for the formation of alliances.

A further reason to the formation of an alliance was to defend from, or attack to, another existing alliance. There were two examples of such a behavior. First, Herodotus informs us about the fears of Sparta: "If the Athenians are not our friends, but league themselves with the barbarians, however strong our wall across the Isthmus may be, there will be doors enough, and wide enough open too, by which the Persian may gain entrance to the Peloponnese" [Her, 9.IX]. These fears contributed to Sparta's decision to join the other forces against the Persians. The second example is Thucydides' view of the true reasons of the Peloponnesian War. According to the Greek historian, the real cause for the war was the growing power of Athens and its alliance (or empire), and the "alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon" [Thu, 1.XXII]. Sparta's action was then to (re)form the Peloponnesian League and after some events (the "immediate causes") declare war with Athens. The existence of alliances, therefore, which might gain power and threaten other city-states, was another cause for the creation of even more alliances.

Another reason for joining an alliance was the inability to stay independent, especially in the case of existing and powerful alliances or empires were having a war with each other. During the Persian Wars, for example, as Herodotus writes, almost all the city-states were forced to join one alliance (the Persian one) or the other (the Hellenic League); and those who chose the Persian one were not few, since it was certainly more powerful and its success was more probable. The case where a city-state might want to exit an alliance was similar. To do so, they usually had to ask for the help of another alliance. During the Peloponnesian War, Mytilene attempted to revolt and asked from Sparta and its allies their help [Thu, 3.IX]. Thucydides provides the Mytilenean justification for their revolt: “How then could we put our trust in such friendship or freedom as we had here? We accepted each other against our inclination; fear made them court us in war, and us them in peace; sympathy, the ordinary basis of confidence, had its place supplied by terror, fear having more share than friendship in detaining us in the alliance” [Thu, 3.XII]. Either with the Greco-Persian War, therefore, or with the Peloponnesian war, Greek *poleis* had to choose between one alliance or another.

Consequences of independent city-states

The existence of city-states in Greece that were autonomous and independent had a number of consequences for the subsequent history of the Greek world and the world in general. The first positive consequence is the rise of democracy in Athens. The constitution of Athens, as developed by Solon and later improved by Cleisthenes and Pericles [Plu48, p. 449-59], included many elements considered democratic today; the major difference being that it only applied to male citizens. Without autonomy and independence, under an empire or a kingdom, for example, it is hard to imagine that a city-state could develop a democratic constitution. First, the emperor(s)/king would not like the idea at all, and second, it would be infeasible to apply. Given the lack of technological advances of modern society, implemented a nation-wide democracy would be very hard, given the “absolute” character of it, i.e. all the people deciding in public gatherings. The rise of Athenian democracy, therefore, is an important consequence of the *polis*.

The independence of every city also gave rise to a Greek “war machine”, Sparta. Sparta’s distinctive identity in education, constitution, way of life and war is evident from many accounts as well as archaeological findings [Osb96, p.180]. Once again, it is hard to believe that many other cities could have adopted the Lykourgan constitution; especially given their lack of some kind of Helot population, that was present in Sparta and supported the existence of the whole Spartan system. This system, however, proved essential in the battles of the Hellenic League against the Persians. As Herodotus’ account shows [Her20, 1.LXV], the effectiveness of Sparta in war was directly related to Lycourgos’ constitution and regulations. The city-state system, therefore, gave the opportunity to “specialization” of a whole city in the art of war and the successful confrontation of the Persian empire.

Finally, we can trace another important consequence of the *polis* system, the rich flowering of the arts and sciences in Ancient Greece. A brief sampling of this development would start from the monumental temples of the 5th century B.C. Athens but of almost every Greek city as well. Furthermore, we can trace architectural sculpture, cult statues, pottery, as well as the Doric and the Ionic forms [Osb96, pp. 259-71]. Other forms of art including the tragedy and the comedy, philosophy, poetry and history itself are some further examples of the Greek cultural inheritance. It should be recognized that such a cultural activity might also be possible even if the city-states were not independent, however, the *polis* system did favor this development, given the competition among the cities, the democratic government of some of them, etc.

On the other hand, however, there was at least one very important negative consequence of the city-state system, and that was the collection of wars between the various city-states themselves. With the Peloponnesian War being the longest and the most devastating, examining the effects of this war is enough to see the degree of this consequence. The political changes Sparta imposed on Athens and basically all Greek *poleis* led to local hostilities, *staseis* [Thu, 3.LXXXII]. The economy of Athens declined dangerously, and her population dropped dramatically [Hor02, pp.201-5]. All these demonstrate the adverse effects of the existence of independent city-states and the competition that arose between them.

Consequences of alliances

What were the effects of alliances, however, whenever they formed? Once again, both positive and negative consequences can be traced by the formation of alliances. The most important positive effect is probably the success against the Persians.

- The economic rise of fifth century Athens and the rise of a strong navy. (as a result of the Delian League)

Negative consequences:

- Imperialistic behavior (Athens' expedition to Sicily, Sparta's expedition to Asia Minor as soon as the Peloponnesian War ended, Alexander's expedition to the South and the East)

Conclusions - Connection with present

The correspondence between

(a) City-state \longleftrightarrow Modern nations

(b) Ancient Greek alliances \longleftrightarrow Modern international alliances (e.g, EU)

in terms of having similar reasons for and against alliances.

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