

THE WAR OF HEGEMONY: POWER AGAINST FREEDOM

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Abstract: *The war of hegemony, known in historical sources as the **Peloponnesian War** represented not only a generalized military conflict of the entire Greek world since Antiquity, but also an entirely new war until then. Its novelty was manifested in the fact that they were not only military confrontations, but also genuine battles between ideologies, between interests, between ideas, between camps, between political systems. The **League of Delos** controlled by Athena, a veritable thalassocracy, faced the **League of Peloponnesus**, controlled by Sparta, the ancient state that had the best army in the world at that time. That's why, the war of hegemony was more than a classic battlefield conflict, it was a war to maintain reputations. Athena represented civil democracy, but also thalassocracy (power of the seas), therefore it had to maintain its status as the great power of the world in that area, even forgetting its status of the polis of democracy, and Sparta, the military democracy that wanted to preserve freedom and all democratic ideals, although its policy was war. The war of hegemony, the ancient world's first confrontation for influence and status, was the struggle between power and freedom, understood as independence/sovereignty, from which emerged victorious freedom defended by the most prepared army in the world at that time, the army of Sparta. Sparta, having won the war, named it after the **Peloponnesian League**, the alliance it controlled. The polis of Ares defended with arms the freedom, independence and sovereignty of the Greeks polises, defeating Athena, then a great economic power, demonstrating to the world that the money cannot defend or buy freedom.*

Keywords: political alliances, war for fame, economic interests, freedom, polises

1. Introduction

The war of hegemony, also known in historical sources as the **Peloponnesian War**, was the first regional war to establish control over spheres of influence, either mainly economic (for Athena) or with strategic potential (for Sparta), areas considered essential for each belligerent. It is not wrong to say that it was the first clash for a new world order (even if it was the Greek world), established by the power of arms, not diplomacy. It was more than just a war between two hegemonies of the Greek world, it was a first among the wars of the entire world until then, being at the same time a war of image of each hegemon, a

war for an idea (sovereignty, understood as freedom and autonomy), a war for the establishment of a regional leader. Through this war of hegemony, the ancient Greeks established that a change in the order of a region (in their case, the region was the world of the Greeks with all their polis and colonies, thus internationalizing the conflict) would be done only through war, a principle validated by the great conflagrations of humanity that followed. The war of hegemony was made possible by the existence of leagues in which the two belligerents were engaged: Athena with its **League of Delos** and Sparta with its **League of Peloponnesus**. A major conflict

between the coordinators of the two leagues was foreseeable, as the purposes of forming these alliances were totally different. Thus, the **League of Delos** was first constituted as an association with an economic purpose, meant to provide Athena with a platform to transform itself from a polis into a hegemon, turning its alliance into a tool to help it build and then maintain its thalassocracy.

The **League of Delos** was controlled by Athena, who called herself the protector of all constituent polises, even founding a League treasury, which was supplied by all allies, who were obliged to pay a *phoros* a mandatory monetary contribution. The treasury was managed by Athena for the “welfare of the whole league” [1]. But according to the proverb: “He who seeks protectors finds masters”, so it was with the polis of the **League of Delos**, which would be treated by Athena as subordinates and not as allies with equal rights, the treasury of the league being used by Athena at her personal discretion, without any account to the allies of the destination of the funds. With them Athena built her thalassocracy, transforming the Sea of the polis of the **League of Delos** into a closed sea, where only she had a monopoly of trade [2].

The **League of Peloponnesus**, founded by Sparta, was totally different from the **League of Delos** of Athens, the former being even an alliance in the true sense of the word, which is why this alliance was called “Sparta and its allies”, because Sparta had concluded a bilateral alliance with each polis of the League [3]. Therefore, the **League of Peloponnesus** was a manner of Sparta's foreign diplomacy, an instrument for maintaining international relations, through this alliance, Sparta made foreign policy in the region of the Greek archipelago [4]. Foreign policy was handled by Sparta's most representative leaders, the Ephors, [5] who thus sought to ensure Sparta's tranquility in the Peloponnesus.

The two leagues had different interests and

treated their actors differently. On the one hand, Athena, who behaved with her allies like a gendarme, who for protection (against Sparta) demanded a budget, having no bilateral alliance with any component pole, she followed the coastline available to each component polis and not the needs of the polis (because she wanted control of the sea for her foreign policy ambitions), and on the other hand, Sparta, which did not have many allies and friends, wanted through the **League of Peloponnesus** to counter its demonization by Athena, who considered her main enemy, due to her militarism. Sparta had war and victory as its policy, but always relied on its own strength, which its allies knew, as well as knowing that only Sparta was capable of coping with the expansion of Athena, ensuring the balance and autonomy of the polis of the Greek archipelago.

With such conflicting interests, it was only a matter of time confronting the two blocs, but also of provocations and pretexts, which is what happens because of Athena.

2. Peloponnesian War

The two leagues come into conflict, thanks to Athena who has always challenged Sparta and its allies in order to eliminate her opponent from the archipelago of the Greek world. Athena was not satisfied that she had a competitor to the hegemony of the polis, Sparta, who was able, even on her own, to keep her in check.

Thus, breaks out the **Peloponnesian War** described by Thucydides, of Athens, himself being a witness, writing from its very outbreak, intuiting that it will be a major conflict, which will go beyond the borders of a simple war. “... *He began writing right from the outbreak of war, because he assumed it would be a great war and the greatest of all that had been fought before*” [6]. It was truly a new kind of war, waged for new reasons.

Athena began hostilities against Sparta, which she wanted to take out of the Greek power game, feeling that it endangered her

status as a thalassocracy. Athena's first move and provocation of war was to dismantle the **League of Peloponnesus**, drawing Sparta's allies to its side, precisely to weaken the strength of the alliance dominated by Sparta [7]. After this provocation, Athena proceeded to naval invasion of the Peloponnesus, being a plundering expedition, Athena thus beginning a conflict of 27 years, this war of a new type being conducted with truces, called peaces, between 431-404 a. Chr. [8]. As Thucydides correctly assumed, the war of hegemony would be the greatest ever fought among the Greeks, Athena did not arrogantly intuit that a war too big for her had begun, even though it was a thalassocracy. Moreover, through the **League of Delos**, Athena involved all the Greek archipelago in the war, but not only, but all who had commercial ties with the Greeks, as the great Greek historian describes: *"This war constituted the strongest shaking, both for the Hellenes and for a part of the barbarians, and it might be said, even for a very large part of mankind"* [9].

The causes were complex and multiple, but one was generative, namely Athena's ambition to control the entire Greek archipelago, even if it meant removing Sparta from the balance of power. Athena wanted a Greek world without Sparta, which she was convinced that her great economic power and the **League of Delos** could isolate and take out of the power game. Athena did not want allies in the Greek archipelago, she wanted subjects, which was unacceptable for many polises, but especially for Sparta. The Greek world could not be a **League of Athens** in which democracy would be suspended, which Sparta could not accept, fearing long-term consequences, especially since the Persians were still very close to the Greeks. Thucydides remarks on the same cause: *"I reckon that the only true cause, but not shown by word, was that the Athenians had become powerful, and inspiring fear in the Lacedaemonians, compelled them to wage*

war" [10].

Athena relied not only on her fleet, but on the fleet of the entire **League at Delos**, believing that she would crush Sparta, but especially that through the fleet she would procure everything she needed for the maintenance of the war, trying to blockade Sparta, especially at sea [11]. Sparta did not have a fleet, but some of its allies in the **League of Peloponnesus** did, one similar to Athena's. Sparta was also famous for having the best infantry in the Greek world, based mostly on hoplites [12] (heavily armed, however, highly mobile infantry). Such an army could not be easily eliminated from the region, no matter how many fleets Athena had. It was the fatal error of Athena, who considered that only with the fleet would she eliminate Sparta. He needed to secure an infantry force, at least similar to Sparta's, to which he would add the fleet, in order to have some chance of winning.

So the forces were similar in combat power, only the weapon was different, Athena had a navy considered invincible, while Sparta had an accomplished infantry. War has its own laws and always its own chance, only the most conceited believe they can control it completely. The same happened with Athena, Sparta proving to her that it was not by chance a militaristic state, which knew war in all aspects, but especially that it could intuit its most hidden springs.

From the beginning, the confrontation was atypical in this war of a new type, so each side developed its own battle strategy, Sparta to fight on land, but also to destroy the Athenian fleet, while Athena set as a strategy to avoid by all means a face-to-face confrontation, on the ground, with the Spartans. We could say a tactic of harassment with the fleet across and across Sparta [13]. It was a strategy that was not valid for the long term, but for a limited term. It was precisely this strategy that led to the loss, Athena.

Sparta relied on itself and its fighting capacity, but especially on adapting to the

unfolding situation of the conflict, as the great Greek historian beautifully describes: *"We are warriors and think because of our good order, warriors, because the feeling of honor is very happily intertwined with wisdom, and courage with shame, considered because we have been brought up utterly unskilled to despise laws and too wisely constrained to disobey them. We always prepare ourselves with the deed, as against enemies who have considered well, and we must not build hope on the basis of their possible faults, but on the fact that we ourselves will take precautions"* [14].

The first 10 years of the war between 431-421 BC battles do not bring a clear winner, but rather a draw. But the disaster of the Athenian fleet and the death of Pericles from the plague, which had devastated the whole of Athens, greatly demoralized the belligerents of the **League of Delos** [15].

Sparta takes these "precautions" and because the "wound of war" [16] was made throughout the Greek archipelago, Corinth is attracted to Sparta for its fleet, quite good and even competing with that of Athena, balancing the situation in the theater of operations [17]. Having a fleet to carry its extraordinary infantrymen, Sparta destroys the Athenian forces in Sicily and then lands in Attica, where it organizes a land base in the coast of Athena, after Athena, full of arrogance as a master, had imposed a veritable economic blockade around Sparta, which irritated the entire Greek world, not just Sparta. Furthermore, Sparta proposed negotiations with Athena, but Athena refused to negotiate, relying on its fleet considered invincible. It is precisely this invincible fleet that is crushed in Sicily by Spartan infantry, carried by ships of the Greek polis, who wanted freedom and autonomy [18].

And in Attica, Sparta defeated Athena, also by sea, at the Dardanelles, even exerting a siege on Athena, after destroying their haughty fleet [19]. Sparta blamed the entire **League of Delos** for the war, which it thus dismantled, since all its component polis

voluntarily placed themselves at the service of Athena as subjects, not as allies with agreeable rights. The decay of democracy is considered a vulnerability for the Greek archipelago by Sparta, which, through its struggle, manages to keep the democratic spirit alive: *"Of all this you are guilty, first, because, after the medical wars, you let them strengthen their city and later to erect walls, second, because until now you have deprived you of freedom... your own allies"* [20].

After consecutive defeats and assaults on Sparta, Athena surrendered to Lysander in 404 BC. Chr. [21]. He also accepted the peace imposed by Sparta, which allowed him to own only a fleet of 12 ships [22]. So much was left of Athena's thalassocracy, the haughty polis, who had forgotten the laws of democracy she invented, who had turned her allies into subordinates, and for whom economic interest and power were more important than freedom and sovereignty.

The consequences of the war of hegemony were first of all the restoration of the balance of power between the two exemplary polises: Athena and Sparta, and especially the restoration of the strength of Greek democracies, based on freedom and autonomy.

3. Conclusions

The war of hegemony was the first conflict remembered in world history, in which two sides faced each other for spheres of influence, even though each of the main belligerents had different motives. This war also ushers in a new kind of confrontation, one that is about each belligerent's reputation and strengthening. Thus Athena, the polis of civic democracy, considered "the protector of all Greece" wished to maintain its maritime power at all costs, even at the cost of oppressing its allies, whom it considered tools for its enlargement and expansion; Sparta, the polis of military democracy, which wanted to preserve its reputation as a defender of the freedom, sovereignty and non-hanging of Greeks in the face of any enemy, even Greek.

It defeated Sparta's reputation because it was a society built for war, which despised the power of money over Athena, for whom the most important power was that of money, derived from trade, regardless of cost.

We believe that Sparta proved through this war that it was not only the most warlike of the states of the world, but also the fairest of them, which fought for freedom, against power, which is why it won this war. Sparta

also had the best army in the world, because it proved through this war that its soldiers can win with any weapon existing at that time, being also the most adaptable military force of all time.

In all the wars of hegemony that followed, power defeated freedom because it was no longer a Sparta to truly fight for its freedom and that of its allies.

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