

During the years from 490-479 B.C. the Greek world was in conflict with a rapacious Persian Empire which aimed at nothing less than total domination of Greece. Under the leadership of Athens, the Greeks, against overwhelming odds, managed to throw back this Persian threat. Yet even after the Persian retreat in 479 B.C., Athens feared that the barbarian enemy would march once more against the Greeks, and so, in 478 B.C., the Athenians founded the Delian League.

The Delian League was supposed to be a defensive union of Greek states, especially those which had maritime interests in the Aegean. Each member state was expected to contribute either manned ships or money, to be used to create a common naval force strong enough to counter any future invasion. Since most of the member states found it difficult to supply warships complete with crews, it became common for money to be sent to the headquarters of the League on the sacred island of Delos. This money was then to be employed by Athens for the mutual defense of all members in the League. Delos was also to be the site of regular assemblies of the member states. Eventually some 200 Greek city-states agreed to join this League.

In theory the Delian League provided mutual benefits to all its member states; in practice it was the state of Athens which came to reap the greatest benefits. As money poured into Delos, Athens built up her fleet, and, ironically, began to use that fleet to exercise more and more control over her so-called "allies" in the League. It soon became obvious that Athens controlled the League to her liking, and, as various members grew increasingly unhappy with this state of affairs, Athens started to act as a tyrant. Secession from the League was forbidden: when Naxos (471 B.C.) and Thasos (465 B.C.) tried to withdraw, Athens sent troops to force them into remaining "allies". In 454 B.C. the Athenians went so far as to move the treasury of the League from neutral Delos to Athens itself: now Athens exercised total control over all funds, and within a few years the defensive "tribute" came to be used, not only for ships, but also for the beautification of the city of Athens. Even League assemblies, originally intended to give all members a voice in the conduct of the League's affairs, ceased to be called.

To add insult to these injuries, Athens developed the concept of the cleruchy, that is, a colony of Athenian citizens sent to restless allied states to serve as garrisons (and spies) for Athens. Land for these Athenians was simply taken from the local inhabitants, who of course resented these enclaves most bitterly, and now looked upon themselves as "occupied" states. Not surprisingly, revolts continued taking place: Euboea (446 B.C.) and Samos (440 B.C.) tried to assert themselves, but were forced into submission by Athenian troops.

What had begun as a logical defensive alliance against a barbarian power had in fact become an Athenian Empire. As the years passed, the heavy hand of Athens grew even more brutal: a revolt against Athenian domination on the island of Lesbos in 428 B.C. led to an Athenian resolution to kill all male inhabitants and enslave all women and children. Only a last minute reconsideration of the matter prevented this atrocity. It is no wonder, then, that many modern historians believe that Athens, while a democracy at home, treated her allies as a tyrant.