

From European union – to empire

The Athens-dominated Delian League offers piquant parallels to today's EU, says Christian Tyler

Once there was a European union. It was a voluntary union, put together by a number of leading states for their own protection after a desperate and bloody war.

To begin with, all went well. The two foremost powers buried their differences. Each member state took an oath of loyalty and enjoyed the same voting rights. The central bank was situated in neutral territory.

But soon the union proved not quite such a voluntary affair. So much so that one member, a large island state, went into revolt, complaining that her economic interests were being interfered with. After three years she was forced to surrender and made to pay stiff penalties.

Things got worse. One of the founding states, the strongest of the confederation, started deciding the budget, imposing a single currency and insisting on certain political and social norms. Finally, she moved the central bank to her own capital

"for safety". What started as an alliance had become an empire.

These events, the Eurosceptics' nightmare, occurred 2,500 years ago. The European union in question was called the Delian League. Comprising most of the cities of what we would now call the Aegean Rim, it was set up in 478BC after the Greeks had repulsed the Persians.

Its leading lights were Sparta and Athens, but it was Athens which, because of its control of the sea through a fast fleet of triremes, was able to grab the political initiative and reduce the island state with the sovereignty grievance was Thasos, which lies just off the coast of modern Thrace.

One obvious difference between the Delian League and today's European Union consists

in the reason for its creation. The league was a buttress against an external enemy. The EU was an attempt to put an end, once and for all, to internal conflict: specifically, Franco-German wars. (Some leading German social democrats still see it as a way of saving an expansionist Germany from itself.)

So the league was more like Nato: it was Ato, the "Aegean Treaty Organisation", as one academic wag put it. Yet there are piquant parallels.

Once the Persian threat was removed, the Athenian Pericles invited all the Greeks to a congress in his city to discuss a common architectural policy (CAP) – how to rebuild the temples destroyed in the war. Sparta, its nose out of joint, organised a mass abstention, so allowing Athens to go ahead and

establish a hegemony.

So about this time, 450BC, Athens decreed that all local mints must be closed. The only silver coinage allowed to circulate was the Attic.

The decree read: "Everyone is authorised to hand in the foreign currency in his possession and exchange it on the same terms whenever he wishes and the city will give him Attic currency in exchange. Each shall bring his own currency to Athens and deposit it at the mint." States were permitted to go on using the amber-coloured electrum coinage, an alloy of gold and silver.

"It was a political move, not just an economic one," said Paul Cartledge, Reader in Ancient History at Cambridge, this week.

It was designed to impress the allies how dependent they had become on Athens. The penalty for opposition was death.

Weights and measures were likewise harmonised. Athens also decreed that every member – there were about 200 at the peak – must be a democracy, and local laws changed accordingly. It did not impose its own model, however. Criminal offences carrying the death penalty had to be heard in Athens, and the cult of the goddess Athene was enforced on land confiscated for the purpose.

To begin with, the central bank was kept in the temple of Apollo on the sacred island of Delos. The lowest budgetary contribution was one trireme. Most member states, either out of poverty or laziness, fell into the trap of paying money instead and letting

the Athenians build the triremes themselves. One sixtieth of the cash was devoted to the goddess; some of the rest was used to repair the Athenian temples.

In 454BC, when the Persians seemed to be threatening again, the treasury was moved to Athens. Pericles declared he felt no obligation to account to the "allies" for the budget, provided the money was spent on keeping the barbarians (the Persians) at bay.

Referring to the member states, he said: "They give us not a single horse, not a ship, not a hoplite. They supply only money. That belongs not to the givers but to the receivers, as long as they give in return that for which they collect it. It is fair to use the money to beautify the city."

Protests were firmly

suppressed. As early as 472BC Carystus in Euboea was forced to join the league. Naxos was bullied into submission two years later. Thasos was brought to heel in 463, as were Miletus and Erythrae in later uprisings.

Conflict with Sparta, the rival regional superpower, was inevitable, wrote the historian J.C. Stobart in *The Glory That Was Greece*.

Sparta must have regretted not taking a more active part in the league's foreign policy when, 17 years after its formation, Athens used the budget to finance campaigns against Spartan allies on the mainland. The Peloponnesian war between the rivals, described by Thucydides, finally broke out in 431.

Athens was defeated in 405 and the Delian League was formally wound up a year later. Eventually, of course, an empire more formidable than either – more formidable even than Persia – came to dominate Europe, and the known world. Its name was Macedon.