Archidamian War

Vase painting of a hoplite (KMKG, Brussel)

Archidamian War: name of the first part of the Peloponnesian War (431-404), the great conflict between Athens and Sparta. It is called after the Spartan king Archidamus II. This war started in 431 and ended in 421 with something that came close to an Athenian victory and a Spartan defeat. However, Athenian diplomatic mistakes, Spartan intransigence, and a catastrophic Athenian attempt to conquer the island of Sicily were enough to change the balance of power, so that Sparta got a second chance: the Decelean or Ionian War.

The Archidamian War did not start without serious disturbances in the Greek balance of power. In 433, Athens had concluded an alliance with Corcyra (modern Corfu; more...), and had started to besiege Potidaea. This threatened to reduce Corinth, until then an important city, to a third-rank power. To Sparta, this was dangerous: it needed the Corinthian navy.

Chronology

Pericles (British Museum, London)

The Spartans started to fear that Athens was becoming too powerful but still tried to prevent war. Peace was possible, they said, when Athens would revoke an economical decree againstMegara, a Spartan ally. The Athenian leader Pericles refused this, because Sparta and Athens had once agreed that conflicts would be solved by arbitration. If the Athenians would yield to Sparta's request to revoke the Megarian Decree, they would in fact allow Sparta to give orders to Athens. This was unacceptable, and war broke out between two regional empires: Athens and its Delian League, and Sparta and its Peloponnesian League.

When Sparta declared war, it announced that it did so to liberate Greece from Athenian oppression. And with some justification, because Athens had converted the Delian League, which had once been meant as a defensive alliance against the Persian Empire, into an Athenian empire.

The "Long Walls" of Athens

To achieve victory, Sparta had to force Athens into some kind of surrender; on the other hand, Athens simply had to survive the attacks. Pericles' strategy was to evacuate the countryside, leave it to the Spartans, and concentrate everyone in the city itself, which could receive supplies from across the sea. Cattle, for example, could be kept on the isle of Euboea. As long as the "Long walls" connected the city to its port Piraeus, as long as Athens ruled the waves, and as long as Athens was free to strike from the sea against Sparta's coastal allies, it could create great tensions within the Spartan alliance.

So, the Athenian position was better than that of their enemies, and it comes as no surprise that the Spartans immediately asked for help in Persia. This is only recorded by Diodorus, who mentions that the Spartans did not just declare war, but decided to declare war and ask for help in Persia (World History, 12.41.1). Thucydides also admits, much later, that the Spartans sent an embassy to the east. They failed to achieve their aim, because they were captured by the Athenians (text).
Plataea

War broke out when the Thebans, without declaration of war, attempted to capture Plataea during a nightly attack (text). If it had succeeded, Theban armies could easier move to the Peloponnese, and Peloponnesian armies would have been capable of marching to Boeotia. However, the operation was a failure, and Plataea was to be a major bone of contention for some time.

In 431 and 430, the Spartan king Archidamus II invaded Attica (the countryside of Athens) and laid waste large parts of it. The Athenian admiral Phormio retaliated with attacks on the Spartan navy (text). However, it soon became apparent that Pericles' strategy was too expensive (more...), and the Athenian leader was deposed. Worse was to come, because in 429, a terrible plague (probably typhoid fever) took away about a third of the Athenian citizens, including Pericles. At the same time, the Spartans laid siege to Plataea (text), which fell in 427.

Spear butt from Lesbos, dedicated in Athens to the Dioscuri (Agora Museum, Athens)

Believing that Athens was about to collapse, the island of Lesbos revolted and Archidamus invaded Attica again. However, the Athenians were not defeated at all. They suppressed the revolt (427) and at the same time embarked upon a more aggressive policy, invading western Greece and launching a small expedition to Sicily to gain support from the far west. At the same time, general Nicias seized the small island Minoa, which controlled the port of Megara. In the following year, the same Nicias pillaged the isle of Melos, and the countryside of Tanagra and Locris; at the same time, the Athenian commander Demosthenes wanted to attack central Greece from the west, but he failed.

Sphacteria (left), seen from the southeast, and the Pylos peninsula (right).

The Athenian statesman Cleon was able to triple the tribute that the Athenians received, enabling the Athenian commanders to undertake more daring actions.

In 425, Demosthenes and Cleon captured 292 Spartan soldiers on the island Sphacteria (text). The Athenians also built a fortress at Pylos, where they could receive runaway slaves and helots. This did great damage to the Spartan economy.

Fragment of the Athenian Tribute List, 425-424 BCE (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

For the Spartans, invading Attica was no longer an option (the POWs would be executed), but they had in the meantime captured Plataea, which controlled the way to Thebes and beyond. Proceeding along this road, the Spartans reached Thessaly and Macedonia and started to attack Athenian possessions in the northern Aegean.

The Spartan Brasidas provoked rebellions in this area and captured the strategically important Athenian colony of Amphipolis (text). The Athenian commander Thucydides, who was too late to save this town, was punished with exile and became this war’s historian.

Bronze head of Nike (Victory), dedicated in 420-415 (Agora Museum, Athens)
Another disaster that befell the Athenians was a defeat by the hands of the Thebans at Delium. Not much later, an armistice of a year was signed (423-422). When it had expired and the Athenian war leader Cleon and the Spartan general Brasidas were both killed in action during an Athenian attempt to recover Amphipolis, both sides were ready for peace: the Peace of Nicias, which had already been satirized by the comedian Aristophanes before it had been signed (text).

Athens had survived and won the Archidamian War. However, Sparta had not been decisively defeated and was -although it regretted that it had attacked Athens- still very strong. And this humiliated superpower was looking for an opportunity to show that it was still a power to be reckoned with. It did not have to wait very long.