

# Rethinking the Greco-Persian Wars

**Directions:** Read the documents and answer the questions

“After the Persian Wars, dozens of Greek city-states banded together to defend one another and to punish Persia for the invasion. In theory, this alliance was a league of equals; but as the largest and richest of its members, Athens actually controlled the entire alliance. Because the alliance’s treasury was kept on the islands of Delos, the alliance became known as the **Delian League**. Many cities were interested in league membership, so the league grew wealthier and more powerful. As its leader, Athens gained more influence in Greece. Originally, all the city-states contributed ships to be used to defend Greece from future attacks by Persia, but as the Delian League’s leader, Athens suggested a different arrangement. If the other city-states would simply send money to Athens, the Athenians would take care of all the shipbuilding. While this may have been easier for the other members, it also meant that Athens now controlled all the ships and all the money. Eventually, some league members began to resent Athenian dominance, but Athens would not allow these unhappy members to quit. Any league members who rebelled were attacked by the league fleet, led by Athens, and forced back into the alliance. Before long, the league, in effect, turned into an **Athenian Empire**.”

Source: “Golden Age of Athens,” Susan Ramirez, et al., World History: Human Legacy, Holt (adapted)

1. Why was the Delian League formed?
2. How was Athens able to turn an alliance into an Empire for itself?

“So even if you weren’t Persian, the Persian Empire was pretty dreamy. For one thing, the Persians ruled with a light touch: Like, conquered kingdoms were allowed to keep their kings and their elites as long as they pledged allegiance to the Persian King and paid taxes, which is why the Persian king was known as The King of Kings. Plus, taxes weren’t too high, and the Persians improved infrastructure with better roads and they had this pony express-like mail service of which Herodotus said: “... they are stayed neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed.” And the Persians embraced freedom of religion. Like they were Zoroastrian, which has a claim to being the world’s first monotheistic religion. It was really Zoroastrianism that introduced to the good/evil dualism we all know so well. You know: god and Satan, or Harry and Voldemort... But the Persians weren’t very concerned about converting people of the empire to their faith. Plus, Zoroastrianism forbid slavery, and so slavery was almost unheard of in the Persian Empire.”

Source: “The Persians & Greeks,” John Green, Crash Course World History

3. What were three reasons that life may have been better in the Persian Empire than in Greece?

“...Persian emperors Darius and Xerxes both invaded Greece, and were both ultimately defeated. But, remarkably, Greeks flocked to the Persian court. The most notable was Themistocles, who fought against Darius's invading army at Marathon and masterminded the Athenian victory against Xerxes at Salamis. Falling foul of (clashing with) Athenian politics, he fled to the Persian Empire and eventually found employment at the Persian Court (working for the Emperor) and was made a provincial governor (satrap), where he lived out the rest of his life.”

Source: “History Through Persian Eyes,” Professor Ali Ansari, Institute of Iranian Studies, St. Andrews University

4. Why do you think so many Greeks wanted to leave Greece and move to the Persian Empire?

“So here’s a non-rhetorical question: Did the right side win the Persian wars?”

Most classicists and defenders of the Western Tradition will tell you that of course we should be glad the Greeks won. After all, winning the Persian war set off the cultural flourishing that gave us the Classical Age. And plus, if the Persians had won with their monarchy that might have strangled democracy in its crib and given us more one-man rule. And that’s possible, but as a counter that argument, let’s consider three things:

First, it’s worth remembering that life under the Persians was pretty good, and if you look at the last five thousand years of human history, you’ll find a lot more successful and stable empires than you will democracies. Second, life under the Athenians wasn’t so awesome, particularly if you were a woman or a slave, and their government was notoriously corrupt. And ultimately the Athenian government derived its power not from its citizens, but from the imperialist belief that Might Makes Right. It’s true that Athens gave us Socrates, but let me remind you, they also killed him. Well, I mean they forced him to commit suicide. Whatever, Herodotus, you’re not the only one here who can engage in historical bias. And lastly, under Persian rule the Greeks might have avoided the Peloponnesian War, which ended up weakening the Greek city-states so much that Alexander “Coming Soon” the Great’s father was able to conquer all of them, and then there were a bunch of bloody wars with the Persians and all kinds of horrible things, and Greece wouldn’t glimpse democracy again for two millennia. All of which might have been avoided if they’d just let themselves get beaten by the Persians. All of which forces us to return to the core question of human history: What’s the point of being alive? I’ve got good news for you, guy. You’re only going to have to worry about it for about 8 more seconds. Should we try to ensure the longest, healthiest, and most productive lives for humans? If so, it’s easy to argue that Greece should have lost the Persian Wars. But perhaps lives are to be lived in pursuit of some great ideal worth sacrificing endlessly for. And if so, maybe the glory of Athens still shines, however dimly.”

Source: “The Persians & Greeks,” John Green, Crash Course World History

5. Would the world have been better off if the Persians won the Greco-Persian Wars? Explain in detail.