

Imperial Arrogance: Sparta and the Corinthian War, 404-386 BCE

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ABSTRACT

In 404 BCE, the Spartans razed the Long Walls between Athens and the port of Piraeus “to the music of flute girls.” Sparta had won an unexpected and total victory over the Athenians, ending the 27-year Peloponnesian War. The Greek world saw the rigid, militaristic Peloponnesians as liberators from the brutal oppression of the world’s first democracy. Unfortunately, this was not to be: the Classical World’s most insular, conservative state abandoned her ancestral values, treated her allies with contempt, and pursued an arrogant, erratic path of aggressive imperialism that her limited resources could not possibly support. In less than ten years, Sparta would be at war again with Athens and, far more significantly, her most powerful former Peloponnesian War allies, Corinth and Thebes. Sparta’s actions preceding and during the Corinthian War squandered the goodwill of the Greek world, weakened the state irreparably, and sowed the seeds of her ensuing collapse as a great Mediterranean power.

Keywords: imperialism, Sparta, Spartan Hegemony, Athens, Thebes, Corinth, Corinthian War, Agesilaus II, Peloponnesian War, Achaemenid Persia, Classical Greece

Arrogancia imperial: Esparta y la guerra de Corinto, 404-386 a. C.

RESUMEN

En 404 a. C., los espartanos arrasaron los Muros Largos entre Atenas y el puerto del Pireo “al son de la música de las flautistas”. Esparta había obtenido una victoria inesperada y total sobre los atenienses, poniendo fin a la Guerra del Peloponeso de 27 años. El mundo griego vio a los rígidos y militaristas peloponesios como liberadores de la brutal opresión de la primera democracia del mundo. Desafortunadamente, esto no fue así: el estado conservador más insular del mundo clásico abandonó sus valores ancestrales, trató a

sus aliados con desprecio y siguió un camino arrogante y errático de imperialismo agresivo que sus limitados recursos posiblemente no podrían soportar. En menos de diez años, Esparta estaría de nuevo en guerra con Atenas y, mucho más significativamente, con sus aliados más poderosos de la antigua Guerra del Peloponeso, Corinto y Tebas. Las acciones de Esparta que precedieron y durante la Guerra de Corinto desperdiciaron la buena voluntad del mundo griego, debilitaron irremediabilmente al estado y sembraron las semillas de su posterior colapso como una gran potencia mediterránea.

Palabras clave: imperialismo, Esparta, Hegemonía espartana, Atenas, Tebas, Corinto, Guerra de Corinto, Agesilao II, Guerra del Peloponeso, Persia aqueménida, Grecia clásica

帝国的傲慢：公元前404-公元前386年的斯巴达和科林斯战争

摘要

公元前404年，伴随“长笛女孩的音乐”，斯巴达人摧毁了雅典和比雷埃夫斯港之间的长城。在此之前，斯巴达出乎意料地彻底战胜了雅典人，结束了长达27年的伯罗奔尼撒战争。希腊世界将顽固的、实行军国主义的伯罗奔尼撒人视为从世界第一个民主国家的残酷压迫中解放出来的人。不幸的是，事实并非如此：这个在古希腊世界中只关心本国利益的、最保守的国家抛弃了她祖先的价值观，蔑视她的盟友，走上了其有限的资源不可能支持的傲慢且反复无常的侵略性帝国主义道路。在不到十年的时间里，斯巴达将再次与雅典交战，更重要的是，她将与她最强大的前伯罗奔尼撒战争盟友科林斯和底比斯交战。斯巴达在科林斯战争之前和期间的行动挥霍了希腊世界的善意，无可挽回地削弱了城邦，并播下了她作为地中海大国随后崩溃的种子。

关键词：帝国主义，斯巴达，斯巴达霸权，雅典，底比斯，科林斯，科林斯战争，阿格西劳斯二世，伯罗奔尼撒战争，阿契美尼德波斯帝国，古典希腊

In 404 BCE, the Spartans razed the formidable Long Walls between Athens and the port of Piraeus “to the music of flute girls.”¹ Sparta had won an unexpected and total victory over the Athenians, bringing to an end 27 years of bitter conflict. Imperial Athens’ former allies and colonies, indeed most of the Greek world, looked upon the grim, scarlet cloaked hoplites from the Peloponnese as saviors, liberators from the brutal oppression of the world’s first democracy: “It was thought that this day was the beginning of freedom for Greece.”² Unfortunately, this was not to be: the Classical World’s most insular, conservative state abandoned her traditional values, treated her allies with contempt, and pursued an arrogant, erratic path of aggressive imperialism that her limited resources could not support. In less than ten years, Sparta would be at war again with Athens and, far more significantly, her most powerful former Peloponnesian War allies, Corinth and Thebes. Sparta’s actions preceding and during the Corinthian War squandered the goodwill of the Greek world, weakened the state irreparably, and sowed the seeds of her ensuing collapse as a great Mediterranean power.

The Corinthian War did not actually begin until the Battle of Haliartus in 395,³ but the causes of the conflict amassed during the intervening nine years. Sparta immediately outraged her allies by ignoring their wishes, disdain- ing their interests and, in the case of Persia, directly interfering with them militarily. Thebes and Corinth, mem- bers of the Peloponnesian League, had been Sparta’s most powerful mainland

Greek allies during the Peloponnesian War and their enthusiasm for Spartan leadership began to sour with the Athe- nian peace settlement itself. Both states called for the destruction of Athens and enslavement of her population. Sparta refused on the premise that, “...they would not enslave a Greek city which had done such great things for Greece at the time of her supreme danger”⁴ (the Persian invasions of 490 and 480). This may have been partly true, but Sparta’s mercy was not entirely altruistic. She feared the growing power of Thebes and suspected that her ally aimed to expand her territory into Attica. An Athens under control of Sparta would provide a valuable deterrent.⁵ Regardless, Sparta dictated the terms of the peace unilaterally despite the objections of her allies. To add further insult, the victorious commander, Lysander (c. 454–395), absconded to Sparta with the hard-won spoils of war, repeating the outrage of Spartan Regent Pausanias after Plataea in 479. This move particularly rankled the Corinthians who had provided the bulk of the allied naval forces and had suffered a tremendous loss of com- merce during the war.⁶ The offended city-states immediately began sending messages of their displeasure to Sparta through acts of passive defiance as will be shown below.

Sparta did even worse disservice to Persia by not repaying loans⁷ and militarily supporting a pretender to the throne. The Spartans then broke treat- ies and attacked sovereign territories in Asia Minor. The Persians had footed the bill for Lysander’s mighty fleet at the end of the Peloponnesian War and, without

the ships themselves and the pay for the mercenary crews who manned them, Sparta could not have triumphed. Following the death of Great King Darius II (r. 423–404), Cyrus the Younger (c. 423–401)—close ally and friend of Lysander and instrumental in providing financial support for the recent Spartan war effort—challenged his brother Artaxerxes II (c. 445–358) for their father’s crown. When Cyrus asked the Spartans for assistance, “the ephors regarded this as a perfectly fair request and sent orders to Samius, who was then in command of their fleet, telling him to help Cyrus in any way that was required.”⁸ This decision to “bite the hand that fed them” shows the ever-growing influence of the Spartan imperialist factions (and Lysander) on foreign policy. They would have done better to stay out of the affair—Cyrus rode to a reckless death at the Battle of Cunaxa in 401 and Sparta earned the enmity of Artaxerxes.

The trail to imperialism was blazed during the Peloponnesian War by a new breed of Spartan warrior-statesmen. Brasidas (d. 422), with a few Spartiates and a band of *neodamodeis* (emancipated helots), wreaked havoc on Athenian interests in Thrace and Chalcidice in the 420s, ultimately capturing the prized port city of Amphipolis. Gylipus (lived mid-5th to early 4th Century) whipped the Syracusans into fighting form and led them to inflict a crushing defeat on the Athenians in 413. The most renowned and notorious of these new Spartans was Lysander. The complicated web of internal Spartan politics and foreign policy between 404 and 395 was largely woven

by his tremendous influence. Lysander was the closest thing to a Lacedaemonian demagogue; a brilliantly successful military commander and ruthless statesman—the “prototype of a Hellenistic prince.”⁹ While he lived like an archetypical Spartan—brave, austere and uninterested in wealth—he thirsted for personal glory, prestige and power.¹⁰ His great victories over Athens made him tremendously popular at home and his doctrine of extreme imperialism attracted large numbers of followers. He worked relentlessly to push his agenda and make permanent the vast authority he had wielded as *navarch* (annually elected office of admiral).

With Athens’ defeat, Sparta found herself perched atop a vast empire in the Aegean and Asia Minor. Lysander had replaced existing governments in many of the vanquished and liberated states with *decarchies*, oligarchic councils of ten that answered to Spartan *harmosts* (governors). This presented a serious dilemma and internal leadership factions maneuvered to dictate policy. Sparta was traditionally isolationist, reluctant to send her forces far from home unless facing a dire, imminent threat. Before 431, she had been relatively content with keeping her helots in line and managing affairs in the Peloponnese. Her society held an innate mistrust of foreigners and their decadent influences: individual Spartans tended to forget their Lycurgan principles of austerity and restraint while serving abroad, and were notoriously corruptible.¹¹ During the Peloponnesian War, isolationism gave way to the geopolitical interventionist policies necessary to defeat Athens. Fear of future



LYSANDER HAS THE WALLS OF ATHENS DEMOLISHED.

The Long Walls of Athens are demolished by the Spartans in 404 BCE. Public Domain, via Wiki Commons. “Lysander has the walls of Athens demolished” from *The Illustrated History of the World*, Ward, Lock & Co., New York: 1881. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lysander_has_the_walls_of_Athens_demolished.jpg

external threats to security fueled an increasingly imperialist foreign policy.

Cartledge and Hamilton propose that the Spartans had three options in 404: one, relinquish their command, withdraw to the Peloponnese and return to their traditional, isolationist position. Two, remain involved in the ordering of the Greek world at the head of an expanded, Peloponnesian League-style system of alliances. Three, take the reins of imperialism from Athens and rule the Greeks as hegemon.¹² To

the chagrin of allies and enemies alike, Sparta chose the latter course. Hamilton presents a credible theory that, despite internal debate, it was easier for the Spartans to take over the Athenian empire than figure out how to deal with dismantling the extensive system of garrisons, *harmosts*, and puppet regimes.¹³ This conveniently served the agenda of Lysander and the imperialists.

The *harmosts* and *decarchies* owed their positions to Lysander, and their states were essentially his per-

sonal empire. The cruelty, corruption, and misrule of these juntas fomented a widespread and lingering resentment of Sparta that would haunt her throughout the Corinthian War and beyond. Cartledge states that, “the most striking (in more than one sense) aspect of these harmosts’ rule was their unbridled savagery towards democracy or democrats, a trait they shared with their spiritual mentor Lysander.”¹⁴ The oligarchy in Athens, named “The Thirty” for its thirty-man ruling council, was especially bloodthirsty. Democrats and moderates rebelled and The Thirty requested assistance from Lysander who quickly obliged. In a confusing series of events described by the historian Xenophon (c.430–355/54), Lysander took a blow to his prestige when King Pausanias (r. 445–426, 408–395) also led a force to Athens ostensibly to assist The Thirty; Corinth and Thebes portentously refused to contribute their required troop contingents.¹⁵ After some initial fighting with the rebels, Pausanias resolved the matter peacefully by resettling the ruling council in Eleusis and allowing the rebels to re-establish their democracy.

Both Spartan kings, the Eurypontid Agis (d. 399) and the Agiad Pausanias (who strongly favored a return to his state’s traditional mores and boundaries), along with most of the ephors and *Geurosia* were alarmed by Lysander’s unprecedented rise to power and humbled him in 403.¹⁶ He was recalled from his post abroad and the ephors “proclaimed that all cities should return to their traditional constitutions.”¹⁷ The *decarchies* began to disappear, but the

harmosts and garrisons remained. Pausanias was put on trial for misconduct and acquitted for the Athenian affair, while Lysander, rebuffed but not beaten, stepped back from the forefront for a few years and plotted new strategies.¹⁸

Three other major events before 395 illustrate how Sparta’s imperialism served to increase the suspicions and hostility of Thebes and Corinth: the Elean War, the accession of King Agesilaus, and his subsequent expedition to Asia Minor in 396/395. The Elean War began sometime in 401/400 when King Agis led a punitive expedition against the Arcadian polis of Elis. Sparta demanded that Elis immediately grant independence to its *perioikoi* (“dwellers about,” a term used to describe nearby subject disenfranchised communities); the Eleans predictably refused. The outrageous demand was merely a pretext for settling old scores: Elis had deserted the Peloponnesian League during the Peloponnesian War and had then humiliatingly refused to allow Spartans to participate in the Olympics of 418 or allow Agis to sacrifice there. When Agis’ call went out to League members for troops for the Elean expedition, Thebes and Corinth again refused.¹⁹ After a year of skirmishing and ravaging of her territory by Spartan forces, Elis capitulated and rejoined the Peloponnesian League. Thebes and Corinth were given a demonstration of Sparta’s willingness to interfere militarily with a mainland Greek state and former ally.²⁰ The lesson was not lost on them.

Lysander returned to prominence in Spartan politics when he engi-

neered the accession of King Agesilaus (c. 446–358) after Agis' death (in 399 or 398). Agesilaus, the younger brother of Agis, challenged Agis' son, Leotychidas' claim to the Eurypontid throne on the grounds that he was illegitimate, not the son of Agis but that of the rogue Athenian, Alcibiades. Plutarch tells us that in response, supporters of Leotychidas produced an oracle that warned Sparta to beware a lame king—and interpreted it as a clear warning against Agesilaus who was lame in one leg:

Though *you* are sound of limb,
proud Sparta, look to your ruler,
Lest from your stock a disabled
prince should succeed the
kingdom.

For then unlooked for ordeals and
numberless trials shall oppress you
And the stormy billows of man-
killing war shall roll down upon
you.²¹

But Lysander offered another explanation: the oracle was an analogy to Leotychidas' illegitimacy, in truth meaning that having a son of Alcibiades on the throne would cripple the Spartan kingship. The ephors ruled in favor of Agesilaus and Leotychidas was exiled.²² Lysander had been Agesilaus' mentor during the prince's matriculation in the *agoge*, and the Greeks assumed that Agesilaus would be a puppet, a sanctioned stooge who would usher in a return to the Lysandrian system of imperialism.²³ It appears that Lysander may have believed this as well, but in Agesilaus he met his match. The new king, not considered to be the heir-apparent when he

was young, had successfully completed the *agoge* and excelled despite his handicap.²⁴ He was the most Spartan of Spartan kings in every way: humble, respectful, austere, and intrepid. Plutarch states, "He was by general consent at once the most powerful and the most famous man of his time, as Theopompus has noted, but he took more pride in his virtues than in his position."²⁵ He enjoyed his own band of admirers at home and Lysander soon discovered that Agesilaus was every bit as adept at using people as tools for political gain as he (Lysander).

Agesilaus was unquestionably imperialist, but in the early part of his reign he was more interested in a grand Greek crusade against Persia than ruling the Spartan empire in the fashion of either Agis or Lysander. Modern historians question his Pan-Hellenic sincerity and condemn it as "sentimental folly"²⁶ because of the chronic contentiousness of the Greek *polis* system and the widespread discontent with Sparta during the period. Sometime in 397, word came to Sparta that the Persians were amassing a huge fleet and army for an invasion of Greece. The Spartans decided to preempt the enemy, and Lysander convinced the ephors to appoint Agesilaus to lead an expedition into Asia Minor.²⁷ Thebes and Corinth once again refused to contribute troops or resources and, significantly, so did Athens. The king attempted to launch the expedition with a symbolic sacrifice at Aulis in Boeotia (without first seeking permission from the Boeotians), an act meant to foster support by recalling Agamemnon's muster of the Achae-



Map showing Agesilaus' return route from Asia Minor to Greece in 394. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons by T8612 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, filename, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=105862720>

an ships before the war against Troy. The Thebans were not impressed, and a group of officials humiliatingly disrupted the ceremony and ordered Agesilaus to leave Boeotian territory. This blatantly provocative act should have convinced the Spartans that war with Thebes was inevitable, but the infuriated Agesilaus simply “called on the gods to witness their behavior,”²⁸ left the affront unpunished, and continued on his way. Perhaps he truly believed that he could muster support in Greece with a few victories in Persian territory; un-

fortunately, the campaign created the opposite reaction.

Spartan propaganda in support of the endeavor trumpeted freedom for the Ionian Greek states and retribution against the barbarians for meddling in Greek affairs. Agesilaus romped through Asia Minor, sacking, capturing, or winning over cities through diplomacy. He defeated Persian forces on several occasions and proved himself to be a shrewd and capable military commander. He also made it clear that he was no mere tool of Lysander's. Agesi-

laus undermined Lysander's credibility by refusing to follow his advice or grant requests to his friends. When Lysander protested, the king further humiliated him by demoting him to the position of "meat carver," then sent him away.²⁹

For Corinth, Thebes and Athens, Agesilaus' successes were the last straw in their opinions of Spartan intentions. They feared that, despite Lysander's dismissal, the Spartans were reintroducing a Lysandrean system of imperialism and that the strengthening of Spartan dominance in the Aegean and Asia Minor would inevitably lead to direct interference in their affairs.³⁰

The Athenians had refused to supply troops to Agesilaus, a violation of their requirements from the peace of 404. Since 397, they had covertly supported their exiled admiral Conon's efforts to build a large fleet in cooperation with the Persian satrap, Pharnabazus. While Agesilaus was marching through the interior in 396, this fleet had successfully captured the important Spartan naval base at Rhodes.³¹ Athens now determined to openly oppose Sparta and, noting this, the Thebans were quick to seek their cooperation in the form of an alliance. Persia wanted Agesilaus out of their territory and hoped that a war on the Greek mainland would get rid of him. They sent envoys bearing gifts of gold to Corinth, Thebes, Athens, and Argos with the promise of more along with military assistance if the states would attack Sparta. Xenophon may have oversimplified when he stated that Persian bribery was the main cause of the coalition against Sparta, but the gold

certainly proved to be a deciding factor in the triumph of anti-Spartan factions over their pro-Spartan opponents in the four major states.³²

During and immediately after the Peloponnesian War, the Spartans abandoned many of their fundamental ancestral values or let them fade away. They chose a path of imperialism out of concern for security, but the very notion of an empire was grandiose beyond anything the state's founders could have imagined. Once tasted, the appetite for empire (like that for wealth) was insatiable. The introduction of wealth in the form of coined currency into the society fostered greed and refocused the attention of many Spartans from service to the state to personal gain and luxury.³³ Some extreme measures were taken to cleanse the state of the corrupting power of money, but its influence and assimilation were inevitable. The cult of personality that grew around the likes of Brasidas, Lysander, and even Agesilaus was also very un-Spartan. These men, Lysander in particular, cultivated networks of admirers and used them to attain personal power and glory rather than further the interests of the state.

Between 404 and 395, Sparta's blatant disregard for the legitimate grievances of her allies, her increasingly aggressive imperialism, growing resentment of her harsh rule, and the promise of Persian involvement caused the Corinthian War. The perceived threat of future Spartan interference in their internal affairs was too much for the Greeks to tolerate. In her arrogance, Sparta failed to recognize or

heed the numerous warning signs that the Greeks were vehemently dissatisfied with her hegemony.

By 395, the Thebans were actively seeking war with Sparta and found a way to spark an incident. They supported the Locrians militarily in a conflict with Sparta's Phocian allies. The Phocians requested assistance from Sparta and Lysander was sent to the area with an advance force of *neodamodeis* (freed helots) and mercenaries. Pausanias followed with a Lacedemonian army and the Peloponnesian allies; Corinth, not yet openly at war with Sparta, declined to participate. Faced with invasion, the Boeotian Federation formed a defensive alliance with Athens. Lysander and Pausanias were supposed to join forces for an assault on Haliartus, but Lysander brashly began the attack without the king. His forces were routed and he was killed—an ignominious end to an illustrious life and career, not to mention a grave loss for his state. Pausanias arrived after the fight as did Thebes' Athenian reinforcements. The Spartan king decided not to fight, asking for a truce to recover the dead and conceding the field to the enemy.³⁴ The Spartan government was outraged and indicted Pausanias on charges of cowardice and treason. He fled to Tegea, and with him went the last influential anti-imperialist voice in Sparta.³⁵

The Theban victory at Haliartus was important because it convinced Corinth and Argos that they could check Spartan aggression through military means, that a victory by arms would be easy if the strongest mainland Greek states cooperated. A congress

was held at Corinth in the summer of 395, and Thebes, Corinth, Athens, and Argos formalized an anti-Spartan alliance.³⁶ Sparta mobilized for war and recalled Agesilaus from Asia Minor.

Three major battles, two on land and one at sea occurred in 394. The new allies sought to take the war to Sparta's home territory in the spring but were crushed at the Battle of Nemea. Agesilaus, marching through Beotia in August won another major—though indecisive—engagement at Coronea. Sparta's chivalrous, though rather “old-fashioned,” custom of refraining from pursuing and slaughtering fleeing enemies during the retreat phase of hoplite battles probably deprived them of a chance to force their enemies to sue for peace.³⁷ At Coronea, Agesilaus confronted the fleeing Thebans head-on rather than allowing them to pass by and attack their unshielded right flank and rear. After a vicious fight, some of the Thebans broke through and Agesilaus called off the pursuit.³⁸ These examples show how Sparta clung to the archaic military philosophy of ritualized hoplite warfare. It seems that she failed to regard the hard lessons of evolving tactics, strategy and diplomacy learned during the Peloponnesian War.

Sometime between the dates of the two land battles, Sparta lost her fleet at the Battle of Cnidus near Asia Minor to the combined forces of Conon (c. 443–358) and the Persian satrap of Phrygia, Pharnabazus (d. 370). Spartan naval hegemony and her control of the Aegean were lost forever. Conon subsequently sailed the seas unmo- lested, ousting Spartan garrisons and



FUNERAL RITES AFTER THE BATTLE OF CORONEIA.

Funeral Rites after the Battle of Coroneia, 394 BCE. “Funeral Rites after the Battle of Coroneia” from *The Illustrated History of the World*, Ward, Lock & Co., New York: 1881. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Funeral_rites_after_the_Battle_of_Coroneia.jpg

unfriendly oligarchies throughout the empire. A favorite tactic used by both sides during the Peloponnesian War had been fomenting revolution and regime change in target states in order to garner allies, the Spartans supporting oligarchies, the Athenians democracies. This practice resumed unabated during the Corinthian War. Conon also raided the Peloponnesian coast and installed an allied garrison complete with harbor on the strategic island of Kythera

which commanded the entrance to Sparta’s port of Gytheion.³⁹

Sparta’s military focus had always been on land, specifically with the hoplite phalanx. All other arms, especially naval, were lacking throughout her history. Gone was the Persian support that had financed Lysander’s fleet at the end of the Peloponnesian War. The state’s unsophisticated economic institutions were ill-suited for maintaining an effective navy, and indigenous commanders

with expertise and experience at sea were rare. All Spartiates were trained in the *agoge* which emphasized hoplite warfare; other modes of fighting were considered unmanly. The bottom line in 394 was that without a strong navy, Sparta was incapable of sustaining an empire and holding the hegemony of the Aegean Greek world.⁴⁰

The first year of the Corinthian War had witnessed two major hoplite engagements in less than six months, equaling the total and dwarfing the size of the major land battles during 27 years of the Peloponnesian War. The single naval action at Cnidus rivaled the epic struggles in the last decade before Athens' defeat and decisively settled the conflict at sea. The rest of the war was fairly anticlimactic. Most of the fighting on land took place near Corinth with the Spartans dominating. Yet Xenophon reports two incidents in 390 that illustrate Spartan arrogance and her failure to evolve her military doctrine. The first involved a group of Theban envoys who attempted to speak with Agesilaus about ending the war. The king "...pretended not to notice their existence. He merely sat down...and contemplated the quantities of booty which were being brought out."⁴¹ Agesilaus had an opportunity to end the war on favorable terms, but contemptuously refused to treat with his enemies.

The second incident showed that arrogance seeped even into the highly disciplined ranks of Spartan hoplites: the day after the king had ignored the enemy emissaries, word came of a military disaster near Lechaeum. After performing escort duty, a regiment of hop-

lites was marching past enemy-held Corinth toward their base at Lechaeum. The formation had no light infantry attached and had moved ahead without waiting for the return of the cavalry squadron they had set out with. Xenophon says that "They were quite aware that there were great numbers both of peltasts and hoplites in Corinth, but because of their previous successes they discounted any danger of any attack from that quarter."⁴² The Athenian general, Iphicrates (c. 418–353), attacked with a large force of peltasts (light, unarmored infantry), who enfiladed the exposed, unshielded right-hand sides of the Spartans with javelins. When the armored hoplites tried to give chase, they could not catch the peltasts, and a formation of Athenian hoplites moved up to support Iphicrates. The end result was a slaughter, with some 250 precious Spartiates killed. Needless to say, the gloating Theban envoys left Agesilaus without further mention of peace.⁴³

Lechaeum was a mere skirmish compared to Nemea and Coronea, but its significance outweighed that of the two major engagements. Allied morale was raised by the fact that a formation of "invincible" Spartan hoplites had been annihilated by light infantry and the coalition determined to fight on. Xenophon, normally a strong admirer and supporter of Sparta, even admits that the survivors "broke and ran,"⁴⁴ rather than fight to the death as was their wont. After the incident, the Spartan garrison stayed behind the walls of Lechaeum and Agesilaus marched the rest of the army home. While the Spartan military obviously understood the



Athenian cavalryman and peltast attacking a fallen Peloponnesian hoplite, c. 390s BCE. Athenian funerary stele of the Corinthian War, Athens National Archaeology Museum No.2744. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Athenian_funerary_stele_of_the_Corinthian_War,_Athens_National_Archaeology_Museum_No.2744.jpg

notion of combined arms, Lechaeum illustrates that they did not take the doctrine seriously. One cannot discount the significance of the loss of so many citizens for Sparta, whose population had been in serious decline for decades. In 421, Sparta had agreed to the Peace of Nicias in order to recover the 120 full Spartiates captured on Sphacteria; her total citizen population at the time was around 5,000. In 390, it cannot have been much more than 3,500 and the loss of 250 in a senseless skirmish caused by a very un-Spartan lapse in discipline bordered on catastrophic.⁴⁵

The War finally ended in 386 when the belligerent parties agreed to a peace settlement negotiated by the

Spartan Antalcidas (died c. 367) with Artaxerxes of Persia. Alternately named the Peace of Antalcidas and the King's Peace, the settlement ended the fighting but did little to solve the lingering problems of resentment and rivalry between the Greeks, especially Sparta and Thebes. Sparta shed her cloak of Pan-Hellenism by agreeing to return rule of the Greek states of Asia Minor to Persia as a key part of the settlement. Hamilton sums up the entire conflict in his narrative of the events of 395, "Thus the war so many had desired for so long and others had feared and opposed had finally begun, and it was to drag on for eight years to a barren and inglorious conclusion."⁴⁶

Spartan institutions and infrastructure were incapable of sustaining the level of imperialism the state endeavored. Her rigid, austere society of citizen-warriors purportedly based on honor, self-sacrifice, humility, and *eunomia* (good order) had, in earlier times, made her the most powerful state in Greece. These mores could not be imposed on vanquished subjects, nor could they withstand prolonged exposure to the corrupting influences of the greater world. The principles crumbled throughout the period of Spartan hegemony and the result was a state, citizen body, and military of decreasing “quality.” The severe population decline made it impossible to replace Spartiates killed in constant campaigning and forced the Spartan military to rely too heavily on freed helots, allies and mercenaries for cavalry, light infantry, missile troops, and even hoplites. When allies defected and money ran out, the vaunted Lacedaemonian army became all too ordinary. Funding for maintenance of the empire was never sufficient. Aristotle summed up the Spartans’ economic naivety in his “Criticism of the Spartan Constitution” thus: “Public finance is another thing that is badly managed by the Spartiatae. They are obliged to undertake large wars, but there is never any money in the public

treasury.”⁴⁷ Gone were the days of the short, decisive land campaign when hoplite armies could forage in enemy territory for their sustenance. Garrisons and armies operating in allied territory needed to be supplied directly by the state. In addition, the only way to hold the vast Aegean empire was through a large and expensive fleet.

Sparta resumed its aggressive imperialism after the King’s Peace and was back at war within a few years. Agesilaus, obsessed with the insult at Aulis and the interruption of his great Persian expedition, relentlessly drove the Spartans to punish Thebes. In 371, a Spartan army under the command of King Cleombrotus (d. 371) was shattered by the Thebans at Leuctra and the surviving Spartiates fled from the battlefield. Sparta subsequently lost her empire, most of her allies, and a large part of her home territory. Sparta would never again recapture her place as a major power. Her arrogance and short-sightedness ultimately doomed her to insignificance. Diodorus (1st Century BCE) fittingly states that, “The Lacedaemonians, after winning for themselves the undisputed sovereignty of Greece, were shorn of it from the moment they sought to carry out unjust projects at the expense of their allies.”⁴⁸

About the Author

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Endnotes

- 1 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, trans. Rex Warner, Middlesex (England: Penguin Books, 1966), 108.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 This date is debated by modern scholars. Some assert that the War didn't begin until after the full anti-Spartan alliance was established several months after Haliartus in the summer of 395. See Charles D. Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories: Politics and Diplomacy in the Corinthian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 211. Haliartus is used as the starting point in this work because it was the first direct military confrontation between Sparta and her former mainland Greek allies.
- 4 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 107.
- 5 Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 51.
- 6 Ibid., 261.
- 7 Paul Cartledge, *Agesilaos and the Crisis of Sparta* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 89. Note the alternate spelling of "Agesilaos" used by Cartledge; the standard spelling, used in this work, is "Agesilaus."
- 8 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 139.
- 9 Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 69.
- 10 Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1960), 287–288.
- 11 See Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece*

(New York: The Overlook Press, 2002), 41–42, and Victor Davis Hanson, *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans fought the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Random House, 2005), 24. Herodotus', Thucydides', and Xenophon's works offer numerous examples.

12 Cartledge, *Agesilaos and the Crisis of Sparta*, 86 and Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 41–42. Hamilton suggests another possibility that would have been preferable to the future king, Agesilaos: create a Pan-Hellenic coalition with Sparta as its leader.

13 Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 67.

14 Cartledge, *Agesilaos and the Crisis of Sparta*, 93.

15 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 103–135, cf. Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1960), 307.

16 Hamilton puts Pausanias at the head of the anti-imperialist traditionalists, one of three major factions in Sparta. See *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 82–85.

17 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 165.

18 Cartledge, *Agesilaos*, 94.

19 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 155.

20 See S. Perlman, "The Causes and the Outbreak of the Corinthian War," *Classical Quarterly*, 14, 1964, 74–75 for a solid assertion that Sparta's war actions did not constitute interference in the internal affairs of Elis. But on the contrary, though Sparta left the democracy intact, stripping Elis of her *perioikoi* certainly did interfere with her internal affairs.

21 Plutarch, *The Age of Alexander*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 27.

22 Ibid., 26–28.

23 Hamilton, *Agesilaos and the Failure of Spartan Hegemony* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 28.

24 Heirs-apparent were not required to complete the grueling, regimented education.

25 Plutarch, *The Age of Alexander*, 35.

26 G. L. Cawkwell, "Agesilaos and Sparta," *Classical Quarterly*, 26, 1976, 65; this view is shared by Cartledge in *Agesilaos*, 200. Cf. Hamilton, *Agesilaos*, 30–31, 89, 96 where the case is made for the king's genuine Pan-Hellenism.

27 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 164–165.

28 Ibid.

29 Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, 309–310.

- 30 Perlman, "Causes and Outbreak of the Corinthian War," 77–78.
- 31 Ibid., 79.
- 32 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 174–181, Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, 313–317.
- 33 Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 55–56.
- 34 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 174–181, Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, 313–317.
- 35 Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 207.
- 36 Diodorus Siculus, *Histories, Books XIV–XV.19*, trans. C. H. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1954), 235.
- 37 See J.K. Anderson, *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 149–150, Peter Connolly, *Greece and Rome at War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1998), 48; John Warry, *Warfare in the Classical World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 58–60; and Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 39, 171–184.
- 38 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 205, *Hiero the Tyrant and other Treatises*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1997), 42–43, and Plutarch, *The Age of Alexander*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert, New York: Penguin Books, 1985, 43.
- 39 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 229–241.
- 40 Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 228–229, *Agesilaus*, 109.
- 41 Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, 217.
- 42 Ibid., 219.
- 43 Ibid., 219–221.
- 44 Ibid., 221.
- 45 The decline of Sparta's population is well documented in both ancient and modern sources. This work follows the excellent Excursus in W. G. Forrest, *A History of Sparta, 950–192 BC* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1968), 131–137.
- 46 Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 207.
- 47 Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 149.
- 48 Diodorus, *Histories*, 13.