

## SPARTA AND THE ELEAN WAR, CA 401/400 B.C.: REVENGE OR IMPERIALISM?

C. FALKNER

IN CONSIDERING SPARTA'S REASONS for invading Elis, ca 401,<sup>1</sup> scholars have accepted the statements of the major sources, Xenophon, Diodorus, and Pausanias, that Sparta wanted revenge on Elis for its actions after the Peace of Nicias.<sup>2</sup> More recently, interest has centred on which group or groups at Sparta may have been responsible for the apparent fluctuations in Spartan policy following the Peloponnesian war; the invasion of Elis is associated with the desire of one such group, led by king Agis, to recreate Sparta's traditional power base in the Peloponnese.<sup>3</sup> In this paper it will be argued that, although revenge or a desire to control the Peloponnese cannot be discounted as motives, these explanations may not wholly account for the nature of Sparta's immediate pre-war demands on Elis, for the timing of its invasion, and for its actions immediately following its success. Other evidence, though largely circumstantial, suggests that, in addition to satisfying a need for vengeance, the conquest of Elis gave Sparta control of the coastline of the north-west Peloponnese and access to the Adriatic and the routes to the west. It is worth considering whether Sparta had demonstrated any appreciation for the advantageous position of the Elean coastline before this time.

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<sup>1</sup>The date and chronology of the Elean War form a well-known crux in Classical Greek history; the war's outbreak has been dated to any time from 403 to 399 with much accompanying controversy over the possibility of conducting a war in 400, an Olympic year. See Hamilton 1979: 109–111, and Cook 1983: 65–68 and 530, although she is wrong to state that Pausanias refers to an Elean port at Lepreum. De Ste Croix (1972: 345) and Cartledge (1979: 271) propose the dates 402–400. Beloch (1922: 17) and Cawkwell (1976: 63, n. 8) suggest 403–401. The argument of Unz (1986: 29–42) supports the chronology and details recorded by Xenophon. In placing the start of the war in ca 401/400, I have followed the majority opinion.

<sup>2</sup>These sources are Xen. *Hell.* 3.2.21–31; Diod. 14.17.4–12, 34.1; and Paus. 3.8.3–6. Scholars who have accepted Sparta's claim of revenge as its motive include Grote (1904: 391), Beloch (1922: 17), Junes (1967: 97), Forrest (1968: 122), Bury and Meiggs (1975: 338), and Cartledge (1979: 271).

<sup>3</sup>Hamilton (1979: 80–85), Cartledge (1987: 285), and David (1981: 10–11) suggest the somewhat schematic explanation that three factions were in control of policy at Sparta at different times after the war. These factions were those who supported an Aegean empire for Sparta (Lysander), those who wished to extend Spartan hegemony in Greece (Agis), and those who were concerned with Sparta's reputation (Pausanias). Unfortunately, the evidence for this period of Spartan history is sparse, and the picture is further confused by the presence of Lysander in Sicily, perhaps at about this time (Hamilton 1979: 96 and n. 100). On the available evidence it is difficult to assign a particular policy to any individual or group in post-war Sparta.

## SPARTA AND ELIS BEFORE THE ELEAN WAR

The coastline of Elis, which faces north-west, extended in classical times from Cape Araxus to the Cyparissian Gulf. It possesses few sheltered anchorages and much of it is exposed to prevailing south-easterly winds (Denham 1982: 73–75). It was, however, ideally placed for contact with north-west Greece and, ultimately, with the west.

Two Elean harbours are mentioned by ancient sources: Cyllene and Pheia. Cyllene, which appears to have been the principal harbour of Elis by the time of the Peloponnesian War, was situated somewhere between Capes Araxus and Chelonata (Strabo 8.3.4; Paus. 6.26.4). Its exact site is still unknown.<sup>4</sup> It was noted later for its good anchorage and its position on the route to the west (Paus. 6.26.3). Pheia, which lay further south around Cape Ixthus and faced the Gulf of Cyparissia, is mentioned less frequently; its importance may have been mainly as the port of entry for Olympia, although, according to Thucydides, it also accepted some merchant shipping (7.31.1).

Cyllene would have increased in importance as a port during the Archaic period when Elean colonies were established in southern Epirus.<sup>5</sup> It was during this period also that Elis established relations with the important maritime state of Corinth, the major settler of the area (Strabo 10.2.8).

At the end of the sixth century Elis had perhaps acknowledged the leading position of Sparta in the Peloponnese (Hdt. 1.69.1). Elis, however, seems to have maintained an independent policy.<sup>6</sup> In the early fifth century the Eleans gave refuge to the Spartan king Damaratus when he fled from Sparta to Zacynthus, perhaps via Cyllene, *en route* to the north and the Persian court (Hdt. 6.69).<sup>7</sup> Later, Elis was a member of the Spartan-led Greek resistance to Persia. It provided manpower for the building of the wall at the Isthmus, although its contingent arrived too late to take part in the battle at Plataea. Such failure to arrive may indicate some hesitation over the outcome on Elis' part (Hdt. 8.72, 9.77).

By the time of the Peloponnesian War in 432 Elis was a member of the Spartan alliance (Thuc. 2.9.3). Spartan ships may even have used Elean ports before this

<sup>4</sup> Baladie (1980: 64) places Cyllene at Cape Chelonata (near modern Chlemoutsi). An alternative site is at Kounoupeli, nearer Araxos. It seems more likely that ancient Cyllene would be in the relatively sheltered position on the east coast of Cape Chelonata at modern Killeni. Its advantages were also appreciated by the Venetians, who built a castle there.

<sup>5</sup> Nothing is known from the sources of the date of the foundation of these sites, but their position and resources in fish, pastureland, and timber made the coast of Epirus suitable for settlement and for maritime commerce. For Elean colonies in Epirus, see Hammond 1967: 427–429.

<sup>6</sup> Epigraphical evidence for a treaty of ca 500 between Elis and the Heraeans of Arcadia suggests the equality and independence of its signatories. See Meiggs and Lewis 1979: no. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Sparta's relations with Elis at this time may have been strained. See Cartledge 1979: 215 for democracy at Elis, perhaps encouraged by Themistocles after 479.

on the way to Sicily and South Italy, where Sparta had contacts among the Dorian cities (Thuc. 2.7.2).<sup>8</sup>

With its commercial interests tied to those of Corinth, Elis would have been well aware of the dangers of an Athenian presence in western waters when Naupactus was captured and retained by the Athenians, and when both Pericles and Phormio asserted Athenian interests in Acarnania (Thuc. 1.111.3; 2.68.7). It is not unlikely that Sparta would have been aware of the threat this Athenian activity presented.

In the quarrel between Corcyra, Epidamnus, and Corinth, ca 435, Elis sided with Corinth (Thuc. 1.27–28, 30; 2.46.1).<sup>9</sup> Sparta was, as yet, not directly involved, but was working behind the scenes to defuse the crisis. Elis provided money and empty hulls for Corinth's expedition to Epidamnus, but its base at Cyllene was vulnerable; after their victory over Corinth and its allies the Corcyreans asserted their naval supremacy in the west by attacking Leucas and by burning Cyllene. At this time the Eleans may not have had much of a war fleet to resist such an attack.

Two years later, Elis provided ten ships in support of Corinth against Corcyra at Sybota. Elis may also have begun fortifying Cyllene in case of further hostilities, especially in view of the alliance between Athens and Corcyra. Although Thucydides depicts Corinth as the principal advocate at Sparta of war with Athens, Elis must have strongly supported its arguments, since it would have shared the same concerns.

The strategic importance of the Elean coast for the Spartan war effort became clear during the Archidamian War. To neutralise possible Peloponnesian naval activity in the north-west, the Athenians made a *periplous* of the Peloponnese in the summer of 431. They ensured a safe harbour off the west coast for future operations by confirming their alliances with Zacynthus and Cephallenia (Thuc. 2.7.3, 17.4, 30.2). Both Sparta and Elis expected Athenian attacks since they both had mobile contingents ready to respond. An Athenian fleet anchored near Pheia, presumably on a deserted stretch of exposed coastline, and ravaged the local territory, and Pheia itself was briefly held by the troops left on shore when the fleet had to leave because of bad weather (Thuc. 2.25.2; Diod. 12.43).

There is no record of any Athenian attack on Cyllene during the war; it may have been too well fortified by this time. While Athenian and Peloponnesian attention was directed towards Corcyra and the west and while Athens held Naupactus, Zacynthus, Cephallenia, and the coast of Acarnania, Cyllene was vital for Peloponnesian contact by sea with its allies in the area.

<sup>8</sup> For the probability of such Spartan relations with the west, see the recent remarks of Hornblower 1991: 244.

<sup>9</sup> Elean interests in Cassopiea in Epirus were probably affected by Corcyra's control of the mainland. See Hammond 1967: 498.

In 430 the Spartans sent out a fleet of one hundred ships to attack Zacynthus, undoubtedly to eliminate its use by Athens as a staging-post to the north-west (Thuc. 2.66.1).<sup>10</sup> The capture of Zacynthus would also have meant the end of further attacks on the coast of the Peloponnese. Cyllene was probably used as the departure point for this fleet: it was close, in allied territory, and had an established harbour.

The occupation of Naupactus by an Athenian naval squadron in 430/29 must have increased the importance of Cyllene as the Peloponnesians' western naval base, since Corinthian shipping in the Gulf of Corinth now had to sail close to the southern coast of the Gulf to avoid Naupactus. Ships leaving Cyllene for the north-west, however, could avoid the Athenian patrol; thus, Cyllene was probably the port from which in 429 Cnemus, the Spartan navarch, and a force of one thousand hoplites escaped the attention of the Athenians at Naupactus and sailed to Acarnania (Thuc. 2.80.4).

The importance of the naval facilities and strategic position of Cyllene were shown again in 429 when it became the base for the gathering, refitting, and repairing of a Peloponnesian fleet of up to seventy-seven ships (Thuc. 2.84–85). In 427 and probably again in 425 Cyllene was the base for the Peloponnesian fleets ordered into action at Corcyra, first under Alcidas and then under Thrasybulus (Thuc. 3.69.1, 4.8.1). Without access to Cyllene the Spartan war effort in the north-west would have been seriously restricted.

From 421, however, Elis was hostile to Spartan interests. The economic effects of the war may have been the reason: commercial traffic at Cyllene must have been affected, especially as those Athenian and allied ships which in peacetime would have called at Cyllene probably now sailed via Zacynthus and Cephallenia. In addition, from the start of the war it had been Spartan policy to capture and destroy as much of this shipping as possible (Thuc. 2.67.4). Elis, then, may have had good reason to join Corinth in Peloponnesian dissatisfaction with the terms of the peace of Nicias in 422/1 (Thuc. 5.17.1). Pheia had been attacked, Cyllene consistently employed as a Peloponnesian naval base of crucial importance, Elean trade perhaps affected, and little or nothing gained. Furthermore, in its concern for the safety of its own hoplites at Pylos, Sparta had lost the fleet to which the Eleans had contributed from the start of the war (Thuc. 4.23.1).

Elis defected from the Spartan alliance after 422/1, and its later actions, confirmed by Thucydides (5.31, 34.1, 49–50), only exacerbated Spartan anger; it refused to pay its share of the costs of the war and allied with Athens, Argos, and Mantinea against Sparta; in addition, Elis banned Sparta from participating in the Olympic Games of 420 because of a quarrel with Sparta over the border town of Lepreum, and insulted the distinguished Spartan, Lichas, who, despite the ban, attempted to claim victory in a chariot race in the games. In 418 Eleans took part in the preliminary skirmishes that led to the battle of Mantinea (Thuc. 5.51.1,

<sup>10</sup>The point is made by Salmon 1984: 308.

52.1). Yet there is no indication that Sparta took any large-scale retaliatory action against Elis immediately after these events. It might have done so after Mantinea when it regained some of the prestige it had lost by its acceptance of peace with Athens after the negotiations over Pylos (Thuc. 5.66–74).

Thus, in the period between the Archidamian and Ionian Wars relations between Elis and Sparta worsened, while Corinth gradually returned to the Spartan camp (Thuc. 5.50.1–5; Diod. 12.77). The Athenian, Alcibiades, who led an expedition to Patrae and Rhium at the mouth of the Gulf of Corinth, seems to have been well aware of the importance of controlling the entrance to the Gulf (Thuc. 5.47.1–12). He may also have had influence at Elis: he sailed there from Thurii on a merchant ship to escape arrest and trial for impiety at Athens in 415 (Thuc. 6.88.9).

As a result of Athens' renewed interest in the west in 415, Spartan attention also turned westward. At this time the Spartans used Taenarum as a base for transporting reinforcements to Sicily (Thuc. 7.19.4), and summoned Corinthian ships to Asine in the Peloponnese to pick up hoplite reinforcements for the west (Thuc. 6.93.3).<sup>11</sup> The Spartans then debated the best way of getting them there: such a consideration suggests that they did not have the use of Cyllene, their former base for northern and western operations. It would have been the most convenient point for Corinthian vessels from the Gulf to pick up Peloponnesian forces for a voyage west.

The Spartan commander, Gylippus, and some Corinthian ships eventually left for Tarentum from Leucas in north-west Greece (Thuc. 6.104.1). Evidently, the greater part of the Peloponnesian reinforcements was meant to reach the west via the Gulf. They were to return along the same route in 412 (Thuc. 8.13.1). Thus, its good relationship with Corinth was crucial for any Spartan assistance to Sicily at this time.

Later in the campaign, hoplites on a Corinthian merchant ship destined for Sicily were caught by Demosthenes at Pheia (Thuc. 7.31.1). The presence in their country of a single Corinthian ship seems to have been acceptable to the Eleans: Corinth and Elis seem to have remained on good terms.

After the defeat of the Athenians in Sicily, Sparta was drawn further into Aegean affairs, while Elis had no reason to be reconciled with its former hegemon. Sparta maintained contact with the western states of Sicily and South Italy, since these states sent assistance for the naval war against Athens. Some of the ships from the west sailed first to the southern Peloponnese; they are recorded at Las (Thuc. 8.26.1, 35.1, 91.2).

Towards the end of the Ionian War Spartan interest in Sicily again increased, perhaps as the result of Athens' friendship with Carthage.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Sparta

<sup>11</sup> Asine was a suitable anchorage before rounding Cape Acritas. It is mentioned by Thucydides as a Spartan timber depot during the action at Pylos (4.13.1).

<sup>12</sup> Meiggs and Lewis 1969: no. 92. See also Caven 1990: 84.

received an appeal in 404, as did Corinth, from those Syracusans opposed to the actions of Dionysius (Diod. 14.8.1–2). The Spartan position is somewhat ambiguous if so, since, on the basis of a story in Polyaeus (5.8.2), Dionysius sent his brother Leptines to the Peloponnese to hire mercenaries and to confer with the Spartans.

During the same year Corinth quarrelled with Sparta over the treatment to be meted out to Athens (Xen. *Hell.* 2.4.30). A later source (Justin 5.10.12–13) adds that both Corinth and Thebes wanted a share of the war booty but that Sparta refused. Whatever the reason, both states became hostile to Sparta. When the Spartiate, Aretas, went to help consolidate Dionysius' position in Syracuse in 403, and when Lysander visited the city in a diplomatic capacity, perhaps about the same time, (Plut. *Lys.* 13–21), they must have sailed directly from the southern Peloponnese, without access to the ports of Elis. The post-war allegiance of Zacynthus is unknown.<sup>13</sup> Spartan-Corinthian hostility also extended to events in Sicily, where Sparta supported the tyranny of Dionysius against a faction aided by Corinth, the metropolis of Syracuse (Diod. 14.10.3–4). The need for a western port to enable Sparta to send further assistance to Dionysius and, at the same time, to impede Corinth's access to Sicily must have become more obvious.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE ELEAN WAR

Although Xenophon's account of the preliminaries to the Elean war and its campaigns is the fullest, Diodorus includes the additional observation that the Spartan claim to be avenging the past was only a pretext (14.17.6). Thus, if Diodorus is using Ephorus here, Sparta's claim of revenge as its sole motive may have been suspected from the fourth century.

Both Xenophon and Diodorus record other information which suggests that revenge and control of long-disputed border territory were not Sparta's only objectives in the war of 401. Xenophon states that when the Eleans decided to offer terms to Sparta to end the war, their offer began with the provision that the walls of Elis' two ports were to be destroyed (*Hell.* 3.2.30); Diodorus adds that the Elean fleet was to be surrendered (14.34.1). Demolition of the walls of a possible defector or a defeated opponent was a common demand by Greek states.<sup>15</sup> Such action against an opponent was both pragmatic and symbolic. Future resistance without a fortified and defensible position was rendered difficult,

<sup>13</sup> This alternative route was used by Demosthenes on his way to Syracuse from Athens in 413. He sailed from Athens via Zacynthus, Cephallenia, Acarnania, Corcyra, the Ionian Sea, to South Italy (Thuc. 7.31.1).

<sup>14</sup> Sanders (1987: 159, n. 11) suggests that Dionysius was increasing his power between 405 and 403.

<sup>15</sup> Athens demanded that Chios remove its walls in 425/4 (Thuc. 4.51.1), Thebes demolished the walls of Thespiis in 423 (Thuc. 4.133.1), Sparta pulled down the walls of Argos in 418/17 (Thuc. 5.83.1), and demanded that the Athenians tear down their walls in 404 (Xen. *Hell.* 2.2.22).

and the destruction of existing walls symbolised the powerlessness of the state concerned. Yet the special mention by Xenophon of the Elean ports together with Diodorus' reference to the Elean fleet and the fact that both sources place these items first in their record of the Elean peace offer to Sparta, suggest that Sparta's aims in this war may not have been exclusively land-locked. Diodorus adds that once it had won the war Sparta showed no further interest in the future of the border towns, but turned its attention to the west and north (14.34.2).

A recent study of diplomacy in Greek interstate relations has suggested that diplomatic offers made in wartime, such as those made by Elis to Sparta, were probably the responsibility of ambassadors plenipotentiary who had the power to conclude terms; they are, in fact, an acknowledgement of acceptance by a defeated state of the ultimatum delivered by the victor before hostilities began (Missiou-Ladi 1987: 336–337). If this was the case, then Sparta demanded the demolition of the fortifications of the walls of the two ports and the surrender of Elis' fleet before the start of the war, perhaps as a first move. In any event, the Eleans must have felt that the Spartans would find such terms attractive.

Thus, in forcing war on Elis when it did, Sparta may also have wanted control of the coast of Elis. This control would enable Sparta to block Corinth's interests in the west and, perhaps, to replace them with its own; possession of Elean harbours would give the Spartans easy access to the route to the west, especially to Sicily, where Sparta was interested in the growing power of Dionysius. Perhaps, too, Sparta saw South Italy and Sicily as sources of mercenaries and timber (Diod. 14.42.4); the need for both may have been of growing importance to Sparta in its new role as a maritime power. Sparta's naval hegemony would thus extend to the west as well as to the east.

Diodorus states that after it defeated Elis Sparta campaigned against Cephallenia, Naupactus, and Heraclea, all of which are easily accessible from Elis (14.34.2–3). These campaigns were probably aimed, at least in part, at both Corinth and Thebes, neither of whom had been reconciled to Sparta (Xen. *Hell.* 2.2.19–20); control of Cephallenia and Naupactus affected Corinth's access to the west via the Gulf, while Sparta's possession of Heraclea threatened Boeotian interests. Thus, Sparta's actions following the war also suggest that it fully appreciated its strategic advantage in having access to the harbours of Elis.

Elis appealed to both Corinth and Boeotia when Sparta declared war; their response was limited to not sending troops to the Spartan campaign; they were not yet prepared to risk open hostility to Sparta. For Sparta's western policy, war against Elis was a more attractive and achievable objective than confrontation with a hostile Corinth or Boeotia. The Spartans may even have calculated that neither Corinth nor Boeotia would actively interfere on the side of Elis. In addition, the subsequent destruction and dismemberment of much Elean territory, together with the surrender of its fleet and ports, might have been meant, at least partly, as a salutary warning to the Corinthians of the effects on a maritime state of

incurring Spartan anger.<sup>16</sup> If so, the demonstration had a limited effect: ca 399 the Corinthian port of Cenchreae was used by a Spartan force as a departure point for Asia Minor (Xen. *Hell.* 3.1.4–7), but by 395 Corinth was at war with Sparta.

Easier access to assistance from Sparta through the ports of the north-western Peloponnese may also have helped encourage Dionysius' resistance to Carthage. About 399, the tyrant began his preparations for the Great War between himself and Carthage (Diod. 14.41.3–6, 42.1–2, 45.1). These preparations included hiring shipbuilders and weapon-makers from mainland Greece to assist in his re-armament of Sicily. Carthage was aware of this build-up of power, and even expected fleets to come from Greece to help the tyrant in the event of war (Diod. 14.56.1). Any such fleets would have been sent with Spartan knowledge and permission; Sparta was still the greatest naval power in Greece and was to continue to be so until 394 (Xen. *Hell.* 3.4.29; Diod. 14.82.4–7). Sparta itself sent ships and a navarch to assist the tyrant.<sup>17</sup> Access for its forces to Elean ports on the way to Sicily would have been essential for any effective response from Sparta.

Thus, Sparta's war against Elis had a number of aims: it was motivated partly by Sparta's wish to avenge the past and partly by the desire to acquire territory that had long been the subject of dispute between Elis and itself. These claims, however, were of long standing, and could have been made at any time. Sparta's attempt, ca 401, to justify its invasion and the terms it demanded from Elis suggest that it had more in mind than revenge and control of disputed perioecic territory. Since the time of the Archidamian War at the latest Sparta had had every reason to appreciate the strategic advantages of control of the Elean coastline. Its subsequent attacks on Cephallenia and Naupactus and its involvement with events in Sicily indicate that acquisition of the coast of Elis was also an essential first step to Sparta's attempt both to threaten Corinth's western route from the Gulf and to expedite its own military and, possibly, commercial involvement with the west.

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS  
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY  
KINGSTON, ONTARIO  
K7L 3N6

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<sup>16</sup> Plut. *Lys.* 22.5 refers to Lysander's presence at Corinth, but the timing of the event is not clear.

<sup>17</sup> Under the command of Pharacidas, perhaps the navarch Pharax as suggested by Beloch 1979: 124. The career of Pharax, perhaps the son of the Spartan commander at Pylos (Thuc. 4.38.1), spanned the sphere of Spartan naval activity after the Peloponnesian War from Asia Minor to Sicily. He fought at Aegospotami in 405 (Paus. 6.3.15), was navarch in Asia Minor in 397/6 (Xen. *Hell.* 3.2.12; Diod. 14.79), and represented Sparta with Dionysius against Carthage in 396/5 (Diod. 14.63, 70).



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