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Heroic cults at Sparta between mythological past and supranational relations

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Λέξεις κλειδιά: Σπάρτη, ήρωες, μυθολογία, αχαιϊκή παράδοση, Μενέλαος.

Abstract:

This paper examines the development of heroic cults in Sparta and the establishment of a communal identity reached through a policy of expansion. The general spread of hero-cults followed steps, rituals and cults that are common to the whole Greek world; nonetheless, the Spartan “appropriation” of some specific Pan-Hellenic entities resulted in the formation of a peculiar system of heroic cults established on the creation of a mythical ancestry of founders, trying to relate Sparta’s recent history to a more ancient mythical past.

Η παρούσα εργασία εξετάζει την ανάπτυξη των ηρωικών λατρειών στη Σπάρτη και τη δημιουργία μιας κοινοτικής ταυτότητας που επιτεύχθηκε μέσω μιας πολιτικής επέκτασης. Η γενική εξάπλωση των ηρωικών τελετών ακολούθησε βήματα, τελετουργίες και τελετές που είναι κοινές σε ολόκληρο τον ελληνικό κόσμο- παρ’ όλα αυτά, η σπαρτιατική «οικειοποίηση» κάποιων συγκεκριμένων πανελλήνιων οντοτήτων είχε ως αποτέλεσμα τη διαμόρφωση ενός ιδιότυπου συστήματος ηρωικών λατρειών που εδράζεται στη δημιουργία μιας μυθικής καταγωγής ιδρυτών, προσπαθώντας να συνδέσει την πρόσφατη ιστορία της Σπάρτης με ένα αρχαιότερο μυθικό παρελθόν.

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Spartan heroes: an overview

Heroes' cults in Sparta had a long institution from the late 8th or early 7th cent. BC until Roman period.¹ These supernatural entities – mythological and epic characters, historical people, warriors, political leaders, city founders and healers – were both worshipped in monumental sanctuaries in Sparta's *chora*, or in lesser-monumentalized shrines located within the borders of the *polis*, creating a multifaceted scenario that results in a sort of "Spartan religion", under many respects different from the Hellenic one.

The spread of hero-cults involved the whole Hellenic world since the 8th cent. BC; despite the lack of a univocal opinion, it has been pointed out that this phenomenon may have arisen from a series of joined factors such as the gradual birth of the first Greek *poleis*² – that needed founders, mythological ancestors and a recent history – occurred after the end of the Dark Ages;³ the spread of Homeric works and the transmission of epic poetry in written form;⁴ the continuous veneration of Bronze Age ancestors and tombs between the 9th and 8th cent. BC, sometimes substituted and reused for new cults by the local inhabitants.⁵

The development of heroic cults was also accompanied by the growth of ritual practices and the belief in the power of heroic relics, whose possession was thought to grant prosperity and protection to the *poleis* from external attacks. Nonetheless, the ownership of hero bones often resulted in a constant competition among the cities and in attempts to discover the secret places where the sacred relics were preserved.⁶

¹ Recent studies on the topic: Greco 2014, pp. 50-58; Ekroth 2007, pp. 100-114; Ekroth 2002; Ekroth 1999, pp. 145-158; Hall 2007, pp. 331-354; Antonaccio 2005; Antonaccio 1999; Antonaccio 1995; Antonaccio 1994a; Antonaccio 1994b; Nagy 1999; Hall 1997; Hägg 1996; De Polignac 1995; Scullion 1994, pp. 75-119; Snodgrass 1988, pp. 19-26; Malkin 1987; Burkert 1985, pp. 136-139, 190-215; Burkert 1983.

² Whitley 1988; Antonaccio 1995; Ekroth 2002.

³ Snodgrass 1971.

⁴ Ratinand-Lackar 1999.

⁵ Whitley 1988; Ekroth 2002. C.M. Antonaccio provides a thorough analysis of the phenomenon that particularly affected Argolid, Messenia, Laconia, Boeotia and Crete; Antonaccio 1995, pp. 11-197.

⁶ Larson 2007, p. 200.

The way in which these supernatural entities were perceived in the Greek world varied according to geographical regions and societal values; therefore, a characteristic of heroes and hero-cults is their heterogeneity, both in relation to the nature of the heroes themselves, the organization of their sacred places and, to a lesser extent, the cult practices.⁷

As previously stated, the worshipping of this category of super-human beings developed in Sparta peculiar features:⁸ by way of example, the Spartans sacralized and established shrines destined to some abstract concepts and bodily passions, called *pathemata* (namely Fear, Modesty, Sleep, Death, Laughter, Love and Hunger);⁹ according to Plutarch the cult statues of the gods were armed,¹⁰ stressing the military aspect of the *polis*; finally, some important historical personalities, who obtained a sort of posthumous heroization, received cults, such as the mythical lawgiver Lycurgos,¹¹ the Spartan kings¹² – especially Leonidas – and the war-dead (fig. 1),¹³ in particular the deceased at Thermopylae.¹⁴

⁷ Ekroth 2007, p. 110; Ekroth 2002, p. 21.

⁸ If heroic cults may be intended as local phenomena, it is possible to formalize a Spartan *polis*-centric approach through which these cults can be discussed in their peculiarities. See Richer 2012; Richer 2004; Flower 2009.

⁹ Richer 2012, pp. 45-129.

¹⁰ Plu. *Mor.* 239a. See also Hodkinson 2000, pp. 37-50.

¹¹ Parker 1989, p. 148; Flower 2009, p. 193.

¹² X. *Lac.* 15, 9. R. Parker argues that the passage of Xenophon is only meaningful of the great rites reserved to the Spartan kings; Parker 1989, pp. 9-10. *Contra* P. Cartledge agrees with the literary translation meaning that kings were effectively honored as heroes; Cartledge 1987, pp. 339-343.

¹³ Tyrtaios and Simonides attest a sort of celebration of the war-dead, respectively during the Second Messenian War and the Persian Wars (Tyr. fr. 12 West; fr. 531 Page, *PMG*). These verses have led some scholars to interpret the poems as evidences of heroic cult to this special category of deceased, nonetheless it is important to take into account that both Tyrtaios and Simonides' poetry derive from Homeric use of praising and elevating someone's status through metaphorical use of words. See Boedeker 1998, pp. 234-242; Stehle 2001, pp. 117-118. *Contra* Pritchett 1985, p. 246; J.N. Bremmer have interpreted their composition as metaphorical allusions and no facts; Bremmer 2006, pp. 21-22.

¹⁴ Paus. 3, 14, 1. Differently from other *poleis'* behaviors, Spartan war-dead were buried at the battlefield since the Battle of the Champions (c. 550 BC); the deceased at Thermopylae, whose name were incised on a stele located near the temple of *Athena Chalkioikos* on the acropolis – and probably buried there – represent an exception. See Nafissi 1991, pp. 277-341; Hodkinson 2000, pp. 237-270; Lupi 2017, pp. 149-155.



Fig. 1. Grave marks of war-dead (© Archaeological Museum of Sparta; photo by the author).

Between the 7th and 5th cent. BC, Sparta's social system turned into a more organized community; this is also reflected in a general monumentalization of some of the main early heroic cult places, such as the *Menelaion*, located in the ancient region of Therapne; the sanctuary of Agamemnon and Alexandra/Kassandra and the *Amyklaion*, both at Amyklai; the tombs of Orestes and Tisamenos in the Spartan *agora*, erected during the 6th cent. BC. These sacred places all acquired a special importance to the Spartan community, for both their religious and social significance, because they were representative of the whole Spartan population, with no distinction of social classes and gender.

Nevertheless, the shortage of archaeological remains prevents an overall reconstruction of the Laconian heroic sites, not only from an architectural point of view, but also in the survey of the ritual aspects related to the cult of the heroes.¹⁵ Therefore, a consistent part in analyzing the dynamics of the phenomenon relies on the investigation

¹⁵ During the last century, the British School at Athens brought to light many of the archaeological discoveries in the Acropolis' area and the Sanctuary of Artemis *Orthia*; in the 80's further excavations in ancient Sparta and her surroundings have been carried out in the scope of the *Laconia Survey*. For the results of the British School in Laconia see Catling 1998 and for those of *Laconia Survey* see Cavanagh et alii 1996.

of literary *testimonia*,¹⁶ epigraphical and iconographical sources,¹⁷ besides the exam of other material data.

In this regard, the information that can be elicited from the authors of the 7th-6th cent. BC, noticeably Tyrtaios¹⁸ and Alkman¹⁹ (although their Spartan identity is matter of dispute), proved crucial for the recognition of the particular significance of some local heroic cults.²⁰

More than a century later, the Spartans committed to another poet, Simonides, the celebration of Spartan deeds during the Persian war. Finally, additional information on Spartans' religious beliefs was provided by the historians of the classical period, namely Herodotos²¹ and Thucydides,²² and other following authors, such as Xenophon,²³ Plutarch²⁴ and especially Pausanias.²⁵

Mythological tradition

Sparta's origins are embedded in myth. Archaeological evidences attested that the acropolis was difficulty inhabited before the 10th cent. BC,²⁶ when the urban community was born throughout the synoecism of a series of villages or *komas*²⁷ (Limnai, Cynosoura, Mesoia, Pitane) that continued to retain their separated identities, to which Amyklai was later annexed in the 8th cent. BC – by the Aigeidai (or king Telekos).²⁸ This ongoing “independence” of the five villages resulted in the diarchy

¹⁶ A brief overview of the literary *testimonia* is in Lupi 2017, pp. 32-38.

¹⁷ Few epigraphical sources pertain to archaic and classical period, while the most consistent *corpus* is related to Roman period.

¹⁸ Meier 1998, pp. 229-234.

¹⁹ Calame 1977.

²⁰ Lupi 2017, p. 32.

²¹ Herdotos' work basically covers the period between the last quarter of the 6th cent. BC and the 478 BC, particularly focusing on the events of the Persian wars.

²² Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian war covers in detail the years between 431-411 BC, with few digressions related to the previous period.

²³ Xenophon's *Hellenica* describes Spartan history between 411 – which means the end of Thucydides' account – and 362 BC – the Battle of Mantinea.

²⁴ Plu. *Lyc.*; Plu. *Moralia* 208a-242d.

²⁵ Paus. 3, 1-13.

²⁶ Nafissi 2009, pp. 117-118; Kennel 2010, p. 30.

²⁷ Cartledge 2002, p. 80. Thucydides (1, 10, 2) describes Sparta as a *polis* settled in five villages located around the citadel. On the organization of Sparta *kata komas* and the related historiography see Lupi 2014, pp. 103-108.

²⁸ Paus. 3, 2, 6.

of Agiad and Eurypontid families, according to myth both descendant of Herakles and hence equal in authority.²⁹ The demigod had a special relevance in Spartan pantheon,³⁰ because he restituted Sparta to king Tyndareus – previously overthrown by Hippocoon, killed by Herakles – so that the *polis* was in turn passed down to his heirs.³¹ Therefore, this Achaean Sparta was the prelude and the justification to Dorian Sparta.

Indeed, as stated in ancient legends, the Spartans were descendants of the Dorians, a community who invaded Greece and acquired dominion over the previous local inhabitants.³² Several of these Dorians, named Herakleidai,³³ shared a mythical lineage with Herakles and supposedly rushed at the Peloponnese from north, conquered at least a part of Laconia, deposed its previous rulers and founded the city of Sparta at the northern edge of the Eurotas plain, on the western bank of the river.³⁴ This conquest was supposed to have taken place around the 12th cent. BC.³⁵

Nevertheless, this Herakleid-Dorian myth may be interpreted as a story that aims to explain various populations' movements in the Peloponnese³⁶ and should legitimize not only the kingship, but also the acquisition of lands and especially the Spartan domination of Messenia.³⁷

²⁹ Cartledge 2002, p. 106.

³⁰ Herakles' labours were represented in the major temple of Athena *Chalkioiokos* on Spartan acropolis, as stated by Paus. 3, 17, 3. Other references on Herakles' role in Sparta are discussed in Rita Sassu's contribute.

³¹ Lupi 2017, pp. 21-23.

³² The legend of the Dorian invasion varies according to ancient authors. The most detailed accounts are provided by Diod. 4, 57-88; Apollod. 2, 8, 1-5, who rework some version of the myth dated back to the 4th cent. BC.

³³ The earliest reference to the Herakleidai comes from Tyrt. fr. 2 West and other references to the story are attested in Hdt. 9, 26, 2-27, 2; Th. 1, 9, 2; Diod. 4, 57-58. Herodotos in particular stresses the physical connection to the myth of Herakles and traces the lineage of the Spartan kings continuous back to him. The topic is thorough discussed in Hall 1997, pp. 55-67.

³⁴ The most compact account of the Dorian invasion of Lakedaimon is given by Ephor. *FGrHist* F 117, 118, 16; Hdt. 4, 145-149; Paus. 3, 1-2; 7, 1-4, although their accounts diverge. For a detailed discussion of the traditions concerning Spartan conquests, see Kōiv 2003, pp. 69-140.

³⁵ Kōiv 2015, p. 26.

³⁶ Lupi 2017, p. 23; Malkin 1994, pp. 34-43.

³⁷ Malkin 1994, pp. 34-35.

Foreign politics and myths appropriation

In this regard, the first Messenian war marked a first attempt of Spartan expansion at the middle of the 8th cent. BC, enduring for three centuries and resulting in the complete conquest of Laconia region.³⁸ Therefore, from the 8th cent. onwards, Sparta started a foreign politics of subjugation, which included the colonization of new territories oversea³⁹ and a new expansion outside Laconia, northwards in Argolis and Arcadia, aiming to conquer the whole Peloponnese.

Among these military campaigns, it is particularly interesting the conquest of Tegea, in Arcadia, occurred in the middle of the 6th cent. BC.⁴⁰ The wars against Tegea were supported by the religious order of the oracle of Delphi, on whose behalf Orestes' bones were finally stolen by the Spartans in order to obtain the conquest of the *polis*,⁴¹ after the previous humiliation in the "Battle of the fetters".⁴² Orestes' relics were then translated and re-buried in the Spartan *agora*, likewise the bones of Theseus in Athens, a location generally dedicated to the founder of the *polis*.⁴³

Nevertheless Orestes, differently from Theseus, was not the founder of Sparta; in addition, Strabo⁴⁴ argues that the first founders were Eurysthenes and Procles, although they never gained the title of *archegetes*; finally, the "national" Spartan hero remained Lycurgos.

It is noteworthy that Orestes, son of Agamemnon, was not the first Atreid to be included in Spartan genealogy. His insertion was the

³⁸ On Messenian wars: Paus. 4, 4-23; Tyrt. Fr. 5 West; Funke-Luraghi 2009, pp. 110-134; Luraghi 2008; Cartledge 2001. The annexation of Messenia determined the favorable socio-economical conditions that allowed the hegemony of Sparta in the Peloponnese and in the Greek world. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Sparta's downfall during the 4th cent. BC coincided with the loss of the control over Messenia.

³⁹ Malkin 1987; Malkin 1994.

⁴⁰ Hdt. 1, 66-68.

⁴¹ A thorough account of the prediction of Delphic oracle is in Nafissi 2014.

⁴² Hdt. 1, 67-68. Spartan army was defeated in the "Battle of the Fetters", after which they were enchained with their own wooden fetters, reduced to slavery and forced to measure the entire plain of Tegea. These fetters were then exposed by Tegeans in their temple of Athena Alea, visited by Herodotos.

⁴³ Fragkaki 2016, pp. 285-302. As previously stated, the possession of some heroic relics clearly gave power to the *polis* in which the hero was allegedly buried, so communities tried to acquire bones in order to strengthen their political position over the neighborhoods. See also Ekroth 2002, p. 125.

⁴⁴ Str. 8, 5, 5.

peak of a sort of research of an Achaean past that had started at least a century before, with the creation of the Spartan cult of Agamemnon; moreover, Agamemnon's brother, Menelaos, had already a Spartan tradition since the late 8th cent. BC.

The reason may be searched in the ancient ethnic tradition of Laconia: the Achaeans were the first inhabitants of the Peloponnese before the arrival of the Dorians; thus, the Dorians probably tried to recover the continuity with the past in order to legitimize the right of the Spartan kings to proclaim themselves as descendants of the (epic) Achaeans too.⁴⁵ This could have suggested the idea of adding new Achaean/Homeric heroes to the "proper" Spartan heroes:⁴⁶ Agamemnon, Orestes, Tisamenos and Menelaos.

The Achaean tradition: the *Menelaion*

Menelaos is mentioned as king of Sparta by Homer, therefore among the earliest⁴⁷ heroic cult places in Sparta's *chora* there is the *Menelaion*.

The sanctuary is located in the ancient region of Therapne,⁴⁸ on a narrow plateau c. 5 km south-east of the modern city; its institution comes back to the 7th cent. BC, although a Mycenaean settlement,⁴⁹ regarded as the Palace of Menealos, was already present.

Stratigraphic analyses of the *Menelaion* attested three main architectural stages.⁵⁰ The first phase included the foundation of the sacred *peribolos* and the altar between the end of the 8th-early 7th cent. BC. The second phase is dated back to the archaic period and it is linked to a general monumentalization of the entire area. At this stage, the shrine known as the "Old *Menelaion*" consisted in a small cella

⁴⁵ Lupi 2017, pp. 89-90.

⁴⁶ Greco 2014, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁷ Bravo 2009, p. 13; Antonaccio 1995, pp. 155-166; Antonaccio 2005, p. 102; Catling 1976, p. 34.

⁴⁸ Paus. 3, 9; Plb. 5, 14, 21.

⁴⁹ Catling 1992, pp. 429-431; Catling 1976, p. 34. Because of the Mycenaean settlement in the area surrounding the *Menelaion*, this shrine was probably deliberately established in an area of Mycenaean worship, which can be dated from the 14th to 12th cent. BC. Furthermore, H.W. Catling also identified a gap in the finds of c. 500 years, which ranges from the end of the Mycenaean activity on the hill, up to the founding of later cult.

⁵⁰ Catling 1976; Catling 1977a; Catling 1977b.

made of porous rectangular stones and was provided with a pediment, a roof with terracotta tiles and akroteria; at the same time the so-called Great Pit,⁵¹ where the majority of the votive offerings was recovered, was cut few meters north-east of the temple. Its nature and function are unknown, nonetheless the pit was supposed to provide access to Helen and Menelaos as heroes-chthonic beings and it was probably regarded as a sort of door into the world of Helen's brothers, the Dioskouroi, who were said to have lived under the earth at Therapne.

The edifice was in use up until the 5th cent. BC, when it was demolished in order to be substituted by another one, whose remains are still visible today. This Classical period *Menelaion*, also renamed "New *Menelaion*" was provided with a large crepidoma, a monumental altar, statues or a *naiskos*.⁵² This suggests that honors were dedicated to the patrons of the shrine.

The "New *Menelaion*" was one of the largest monumental buildings in Laconia; not long after the classical shrine's initial construction, a buttressing conglomerate terrace in ashlar was built on the east and south sides of the retaining wall, with the aim of increasing the structure's ground plan, which reached the measure of 25.5 x 19.5 meters, providing additional space for major dedications. The cutting of a cistern near the north wall of the shrine dates back to this period; its fill contained many of the extant structural fragments of the "Old *Menelaion*", as well as an inscribed dedication to Menelaos found during 1970's excavations.⁵³

The earliest mention related to the cult's recipients of the *Menelaion* comes from the 7th cent. BC author Alkman;⁵⁴ another reference is given by Herodotos⁵⁵ and the history of the deformed girl who was turned

⁵¹ Its nature and function are unknown, but the pit may have probably served as a door into the world of Helen's brothers the Dioskouroi, who were said to live in the *Phoibaion* underneath the shrine (Paus. 3, 20, 2; Pind. 11, 61-2; Plb. 5, 18, 21).

⁵² Catling 1976, p. 24. During this phase the shrine was rebuilt on the top of a rectangular earthen mound, surrounded by a retaining wall of ashlar blocks, with a ramp that led to the monument, while a buttressing wall was constructed in order to improve the stability of the edifice, mined by the erosion phenomenon. Catling 1976, p. 42 has indeed plausibly suggested that the Classical shrine was built in the aftermath of the Persian Wars (499-479 BC); alternatively, the shrine may have been built in the aftermath of the earthquake of 464 BC (Dawkins et alii 1908-1909, p. 112).

⁵³ Catling, Cavanagh 1976.

⁵⁴ *PMG* fr. 14.

⁵⁵ Hdt. 6, 58-61.

into the most beautiful girl of Sparta by Helen herself, after her nurse brought her at the “temple of Helen” at Therapne, located above the *Phoibaion*.

It is noteworthy that, although the name refers to the male character of the couple, under many respects here Helen was the main recipient of cult, as attested by the Spartan *Heleneia* and other rituals and festival in her honor.⁵⁶

In this regard, the votive deposit recovered at the site restituted a great quantity of offerings dedicated to the couple, particularly to Helen, i.e. a bronze *aryballos* with incised a boustrophedon inscription reciting «Deinis offered to Helen, wife of Menelaos»; a bronze *harpax* dated to 570 BC, with the name of the worshipped heroine, “Helen”. During the excavations, both expensive votives in refined materials – items in gold, silver or gilt silver, ivory and bones,⁵⁷ bronze rings,⁵⁸ pins,⁵⁹ miniature vases,⁶⁰ a female statuette,⁶¹ fibulae,⁶² bronze vessels⁶³ – and cheap lead figurines (figs. 2-3) were recovered. Furthermore, the dedications include sundry paste dedications, like beads and several pierced scarabs, as well as iron implements, including two ploughshares and fragments of assorted weaponry.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Parker 2016, p. 1. The presence of a festival in her honour seems supported by literary evidence, since Helen led a chorus of young girls in *E. Hel.* 1465-78 and in *Ar. Lys.* (1296), a manifesto of Helen’s association with young girls. Literary evidence may also provide some information regarding the performance of festivals at the site. Besides the processions and festival mentioned by Theokritos’ *Epithalamion of Helen*, Hesychios reports that maidens were carried to Helen’s place in *kannathra*, wicker carriages, sometimes decorated with representations of deer and vultures. *Kannathra* are previously mentioned by *X. Ages.* 8, 7 as carriages used for festivals in Sparta to transport maidens to Amyklai on the occasion of the *Hyakinthia*. But also *Plu. Ages.* 19 references *kannathra* and specifies that young girls ride in them during processions. Furthermore, he explicitly mentions the Laconian festival *Heleneia*, probably connected with the urban sanctuary and performed at springtime at Sparta, during which the maidens anointed the plane tree with olive oil. See Calame 2017, pp. 177-201; Pomeroy 2002, p. 145; Zweig 1999, p. 163.

⁵⁷ Dawkins et alii 1908-1909, pp. 142-144.

⁵⁸ Dawkins et alii 1908-1909, pp. 144, 146, 148.

⁵⁹ Dawkins et alii 1908-1909, pp. 144, 146, 148.

⁶⁰ Dawkins et alii 1908-1909, p. 146.

⁶¹ Dawkins et alii 1908-1909, p. 146.

⁶² Dawkins et alii 1908-1909, p. 147.

⁶³ Dawkins et alii 1908-1909; Catling 1976, p. 38; Catling 1986, p. 211.

⁶⁴ Catling 2009, pp. 265-266.



(above) Fig. 2. Lead figurines representing lions and sphinxes (© BSA; Wace et alii 1909).

(on the left) Fig. 3. Lead figurines representing warriors and horses (© BSA; Wace et alii 1909).

Besides the abovementioned votive objects, hundreds of terracotta figurines (fig. 4) representing lions, female figurines, horse and rider, *protomai*, and others, were discovered during the excavation carried out at the beginning of the last century;⁶⁵ the archaeologists also brought to light a large quantity of pottery⁶⁶ which includes samples dating from

⁶⁵ Dawkins et alii 1908-1909, pp. 116-126. One of the most remarkable terracotta items is the fragmentary house model with a porch *in antis*, recovered in the Mycenaean area of the site, which could provide a reconstruction of the houses present in the settlement during the Late Bronze Age. See Catling 2009, pp. 276-278.

⁶⁶ On Laconian pottery see, Lane 1934, pp. 99-189; Stibbe 1998, pp. 64-74; Pipili 2018,



Fig. 4. Terracotta figurines from the *Menelaion* (© BSA; Wace et alii 1909).

the early 7th cent. onwards, such as *lakainai*, kraters, *kantharoi*, *skyphoi*, mugs, tripods cooking pots,⁶⁷ fragments of panathenaic amphorae.⁶⁸ Instead, the discovery of thousands of lead figurines deserve a separate discussion: widespread since the 7th cent. BC. and similar to those found at the sanctuary of Orthia,⁶⁹ mainly representing animals, mythical creatures, flautists, dancers, warriors and horses, they may validate the hypothesis of some sort of rituals performed at the site.⁷⁰

All these votives reflect the whole Spartan community, with no distinction of social classes and gender. The site was primarily used by the people of Sparta and the inhabitants of the adjoining neighbourhoods; the variety of votives found at the site suggests that

pp. 124-153.

⁶⁷ Dawkins et alii 1908-1909, pp. 150-157; Catling 1976, pp. 38-41.

⁶⁸ Dawkins et alii 1908-1909, p. 114; Catling 1976, p. 41.

⁶⁹ Dawkins 1929; Pomeroy 2002, p. 115.

⁷⁰ For the complete analysis of the lead figurines recovered during 1970's excavations see Cavanagh, Laxton 1984, pp. 23-36.

it was used by men and women indistinctively, differently from the severe separation of gender activities of Spartan society.

The huge quantity of votive offerings, the elaborate architectural program attested by reconstructive analyses,⁷¹ the longevity of the site's activity, reveal that the *Menelaion* was one of the most important religious centres in Sparta, together with the sanctuary of Orthia and the *Amyklaion*, which share similar kinds of votives.

Helen and Menelaos were considered heroes elsewhere, but material, epigraphical and literary evidences show that their cult in Sparta was expressed in a similar manner as those cults that belonged to supernatural beings, receiving a kind of adoration that is somewhat distinct from that dedicated to "common" heroes. They were known for their mythological past, focused on Helen's abduction by the Trojan prince Paris and her recovery by her husband Menelaos, but neither of their cult site at Sparta refers to this incident; Helen and Menelaos of Therapne have completely abandoned Troy and their past, and they are celebrated as new entities with supernatural features. This doesn't mean that Helen and Menelaos were not regarded as heroes in Sparta, since Pausanias states that they were allegedly buried at the *Menelaion*; on the contrary, their cult demonstrates how flexible Greek religion was and how the boundaries of heroic/divine could be crossed.

Therefore, it seems that the role of the *Menelaion* was that of a ritual temple or monument, that may have been one of the most important sites in Spartan society due to its size and position overlooking Sparta, a place where all the inhabitants could express their devotion and perform ritual practices regardless their social status.

The *Menelaion* ceased to function around the 4th cent. BC, together with the gradual decline of Sparta, although its fame and remains lasted so long that Pausanias could gather information about it.

The cult of Agamemnon

An important complex, especially in Archaic period, is the sanctuary of Agamemnon and Alexandra, which was the local name of Cassandra, the daughter of king Priam of Troy.⁷²

⁷¹ Catling 2009.

⁷² Farnell 1921, p. 321. Alexandra was identified by the locals as the daughter of Trojan king Priam, thus she was undoubtedly the Trojan princess Cassandra; because

The site of the sanctuary in which the heroic couple was worshipped is located in modern Amyklai, about 6 km south of Sparta, in the middle of the Eurotas plain. While Xenophon⁷³ and Polybios⁷⁴ provide information about the location of the village of Amyklai, the position of the shrine dedicated to Agamemnon and Alexandra is noticed by Pausanias.⁷⁵ More specifically, he quotes a temple dedicated to Cassandra, an alleged grave of Agamemnon in the nearby and also a statue of Klytaimnestra.⁷⁶

According to archaeological evidences,⁷⁷ the heroic cult was practiced since at least the early 7th cent. BC, although the sanctuary itself has not yet been excavated; thus, the cult's age could be even earlier,⁷⁸ and may have developed together with the other hero-cults in Laconia, and more generally, in Greece.

she was the sister of Paris, also called Alexander, the shift of her name seems quite natural, because as Alexandra, she was the sister of Alexander.

⁷³ X. 6, 5, 27-30.

⁷⁴ Plb. 5, 19, 2.

⁷⁵ Paus. 3, 19, 6.

⁷⁶ Pausanias mentions an *agalma* of Alexandra in her *hieron* at Amyklai. According to G. Nagy, Klytaimnestra's image might have functioned as a reminder of the couple's violent and unfair death. Nonetheless, this was presumably a sculptural work of a different kind from the statue of Alexandra, with no cultic function. It might have been erected to facilitate the impression that Amyklai had been the seat of Agamemnon, disputed also by Mycenae; but, on the other side, her representation could have been part of a sculptural group depicting the murder of Agamemnon and Cassandra, according to myth; moreover, there are no evidences of ritual practices or cults performed in honour of Klytaimnestra, nor at Amyklai, nor anywhere in Lakonia; Nagy 1999, p. 21. See also Salapata 2002a; Pirenne-Delforge 2008, pp. 275-278.

⁷⁷ In 1955, the discovery of a great number of terracotta objects led to the investigation of an area located north of the church of Agia Paraskevi, in the southern part of the village. The then *ephor* of antiquities, C. Christou, carried out the excavations between 1956 and 1961. A large deposit was discovered and inside it thousands of objects were retrieved, dating from the early 7th to the 4th cent. BC; among these items, a dedicatory inscription on a 5th cent. BC vase disclosed the names of the recipients of cult, Agamemnon and Alexandra, establishing that such a deposit consisted of votive offerings related to a specific place for their cult. Moreover, a second deposit, similar to the first, was discovered in 1998 excavation. According to these archaeological evidences, the period of greatest activity has to be placed between the 7th and 6th cent. BC, but the shrine continued to be in use also afterward. See Hope Simpson 2009, p. 320.

⁷⁸ Antonaccio 1994b, p. 104; Salapata 2011, p. 52; Salapata 2014. In particular Phillips 2003, p. 314: «the memory of Agamemnon as an Achaian king could have been maintained through the Dark Ages with a local cult practiced there by the Amyklaians, newcomers to the polis, in order to counteract their new status and assert their antiquity and legitimacy». *Contra* an earliest dating is, for example,



Fig. 5. Hellenistic honorary decree (© Archaeological Museum of Sparta; photo by the author).

As noticed by Pausanias, Cassandra was here celebrated as the main owner of the sanctuary, probably for the violent death she suffered, murdered with Agamemnon by his wife Klytaimnestra and her lover Aegisthus. Indeed, Greeks had special fear of those who suffered a violent and unavenged death and worshipped these special deceased with unique ceremonies.⁷⁹

The importance acquired by Cassandra is formally stated by a Hellenistic decree (fig. 5) and a marble throne that explicitly mention a “temple of Alexandra”, besides the large quantity of votives to the heroic couple. These offerings, mainly terracotta plaques locally produced – probably in or near Sparta – could be dedicated

Finglass 2007, p. 103, who argues for an original cult at Amyklai dedicated to Agamemnon, worshipped as Zeus, and Alexandra, subsequently transformed in the cult of Agamemnon and Alexandra. This hypothesis would also legitimate the correspondence with the cult of Zeus/Agamemnon cited by Lycophron (*Alexandra*), although this was probably a pure invention of the poet (Salapata 2011). On the contrary, other scholars suggest that Agamemnon was a Laconian character, only in a later time “exported” into the Argive myths; Hall 1997, pp. 89-93, and Malkin 1999, pp. 41-50.

⁷⁹ Larson 1995, p. 132.



(above, on the left) Fig. 6. Terracotta plaque with snake and seated man holding *kantharos* (© Archaeological Museum of Sparta; photo by the author).

(above, on the right) Fig. 7. Terracotta plaque with seated man, snake and attendant (© Archaeological Museum of Sparta; photo by the author).



(on the left) Fig. 8. Terracotta plaque with seated man holding *kantharos*, attendant and snake (© Archaeological Museum of Sparta; photo by the author).

to Kassandra alone or to Agamemnon (fig. 6) and show the typical iconography of the Laconian hero-relief, i.e. the seated couple⁸⁰ (figs. 7-8), which is particularly spread around the 6th cent. BC.⁸¹

The figure of Amyklaian Agamemnon is also enigmatic. It is noteworthy that throughout the “appropriation” of an Achaean hero such as Agamemnon, who was traditionally buried at Mycenae,⁸² the

⁸⁰ From the early 5th cent. BC, an evolution of this iconographical typology led to the gradual disappearance of the female figure, leaving the scene to the alone seated male. The male-seated figure is often holding a cup of wine, sometimes accompanied by a female figure seated by the male or standing before him. A snake, sometimes bearded, may be also present, together with tiny worshippers in the act of approaching the heroic couple.

⁸¹ Salapata 1993; Salapata 2011; Salapata 2014; Salapata 2015.

⁸² Homer generally situates Agamemnon at Mycenae, but a passage from *Od.* 4, 512-47 describes him as running into a storm off Cape Malea (the peninsula located on the

Spartans tried, on one side, to relate their recent history to a pre-Dorian past, since Achaeans were the inhabitants of Peloponnesians before Dorian invasion; on the other side, this could be viewed as an attempt to the construction of a communal identity in order to strengthen the Spartan hegemony over the Peloponnesians and also outside Laconia.⁸³ Furthermore, the Spartans probably tried to establish a cultural and political continuity between Achaean and Doric tradition and the Spartan diarchy; in particular, this may justify the presence of a shared kingship between Agamemnon and his brother Menelaos.⁸⁴

This association would have involved the manipulation of traditions and myths, attempting to create legendary connections with the surroundings through heroic ancestors,⁸⁵ creating a sort of new “Achaean policy” founded on the common mythical descendant, particularly promoted during the 6th cent. BC by Chilon.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, it is also possible that the Laconian cult of Agamemnon arose and spread aside from strictly political motivations; likewise, the Spartans may have adapted a pre-existing local tradition associating it with a new cult.⁸⁷

The different reports on the location of the graves of Agamemnon and Cassandra may depend in part to early variations in the literary tradition concerning the place in which they were killed. The tragedians Sophocles⁸⁸ and Aeschylus⁸⁹ locate their death in Argolid, respectively

southern shore of Laconian region), suggesting the existence of an alternative early tradition whereby, on his return from Troy, Agamemnon landed not to Argolid but to Laconia. Therefore, the Atreides received cult in two Peloponnesian towns, Mycenae and Amyklai, equally claiming for being the site of his tomb. As Salapata 2011, p. 39 argues, these claims reflect the local character of the hero-cult and, at the same time, they show the political importance of the heroes’ relics.

⁸³ Hall 2007.

⁸⁴ Pucci 2015, p. 36. L. Sbardella underlines the similarity between the military diarchy led by Agamemnon and Menelaos, and the military and religious Spartan diarchy institution; Sbardella 2005, pp. 101-102. This is also supported by the diffusion of the Laconian version of the history of Agamemnon and Orestes since the 7th cent. BC.

⁸⁵ Salapata 2014.

⁸⁶ On Chilon’s ideology see Stibbe 1985, pp. 11-16.

⁸⁷ Salapata 2002b; Salapata 2014. This thesis is also supported by J.M. Hall who places the Laconian tradition of Agamemnon before the Argolid one, thus confirming that there were not political reasons for the introduction the Laconian version; Hall 1997, pp. 90-93.

⁸⁸ *S. El.*, beginning of the 5th cent. BC.

⁸⁹ *A. Ag.* written between the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 5th cent. BC.

at Mycenae and Argos,⁹⁰ while Euripides⁹¹ varies on both these *poleis*; on the contrary, Stesichoros and Simonides,⁹² in their respectively *Oresteia* place the death of the heroes in Laconia. In addition, Pindar,⁹³ at the middle of the 5th cent. BC, specifically mentions Amyklai as the place of the murder,⁹⁴ a narrative that may confirm the formalization of the Laconian version at that time,⁹⁵ probably promoted by the Spartans themselves for their aspiration of becoming the sovereigns of Peloponnese.⁹⁶

In this regard, it is worthy to mention an event described by Herodotos.⁹⁷ Immediately prior to the Persian invasion of Greece, the Spartans sent an embassy to Gelon, the tyrant of Syracuse, requesting assistance. Gelon accepted, but only on the condition that he would assume the supreme command of the Greek defence; nevertheless, the Spartan Syagros, delegate at Syracuse, claimed that «the Pelopid Agamemnon would wail greatly if he learned that the Spartans had been robbed of hegemony by Gelon and the Syracusans», attesting the great importance acquired by Agamemnon in Spartan tradition of 5th cent. BC.⁹⁸

In any case, the Atreid heroes would have played an important function as symbols of local history and identity,⁹⁹ therefore their propagandistic use by the Spartan community may have served to counteract the recent historical events happened in the territory, going

⁹⁰ Hall 1997, pp. 92-93. Mycenae generally benefited from the Homeric promotion of Agamemnon, though his importance never supplanted that of Perseus: while the latter was the recipient of a hero cult by at least the third quarter of the 6th cent. BC, Agamemnon had to wait until the resettlement of Mycenae in the Hellenistic period.

⁹¹ Euripides's *Iphigenia Taurica*, end of the 5th cent. BC.

⁹² Fr. 276 Page.

⁹³ Pi. P. 11, 31-33.

⁹⁴ D.D. Phillips argues that this Laconian version spread parallel to the expansion of the Peloponnesian League. See Phillips 2003, pp. 314-315.

⁹⁵ Prag 1985, pp. 78-79

⁹⁶ Hall 2007. J.M. Hall promotes the hypothesis concerning an earlier tradition related to Agamemnon and Alexandra at Amyklai, instead of Mycenae, because according with the author the local Mycenaean tradition would have favored Perseus lineage, rather than the Atreides' one.

⁹⁷ Hdt. 7, 159.

⁹⁸ Translation of Salapata 2002b; see also Salapata 2014.

⁹⁹ *Contra* the propagandistic use of Menelaos and Agamemnon's cult see Malkin 1994, pp. 31-33.

back to an ancient heroic past.¹⁰⁰ Sparta needed a tradition founded on solid mythical/historical bases, and Agamemnon was the leader of a Panhellenic army, therefore he could be used as mythical model of Spartan leadership in the Peloponnese.¹⁰¹

Orestes and Tisamenos

Besides Agamemnon and Menelaos, other members of Agamemnon's family were worshipped in Sparta. Nonetheless, no archaeological remains, nor votives, are associated to the heroic cult places in the Spartan *agora* dedicated to Orestes and his son Tisamenos; indeed, the evidences are represented by the accounts provided by Pausanias¹⁰² and Herodotos,¹⁰³ and a *corpus* of tragedies written by Stesichoros, Simonides, and later authors which testify the general prominence of the cult in honor of the Achaean heroes in Laconia.

In this regard, ancient authors' description of the incident of Orestes' bones and their translation to Sparta may provide a clarification about the importance acquired by Agamemnon's son in the *polis*. According to Herodotos, slightly before the middle of the 6th cent. BC, the Spartans had defeated in war each enemy, excluding the Arcadian Tegeans.¹⁰⁴ Spartan army had collected humiliating defeats over the Tegeans, thus they enquired the oracle of Delphi to receive divine protection in order to beat the enemies. The god finally replied that the Spartans would win, but he would grant them only Tegea and not the entire Arcadia region.

Moreover, the Pythia enigmatically explained that, in order to succeed, they would have to bring to Sparta the bones of Orestes, without specifying where to find his remains. At this point of the history, Herodotos argues that this "repatriation" of Orestes' bones seemed compensate for a sort of lack of honor towards the hero, who has not been adequately worshipped by the Spartans: accordingly,

¹⁰⁰ Antonaccio 1999, p. 117; Malkin 1994, pp. 32-33.

¹⁰¹ Salapata 2014.

¹⁰² Paus. 3, 11, 8.

¹⁰³ Hdt. 1, 67-68.

¹⁰⁴ Spartans probably intended to helotise Tegea as they did in Messenia. See on the topic Phillips 2003, p. 301; Cartledge 1972, p. 137.

they attributed the previous defeat to the anger of some supernatural beings.¹⁰⁵

Few years later, probably around 560 BC, Sparta launched a Second Tegean War under kings Anaxandridas and Ariston. The Spartans felt still unable to discover Orestes' tomb, therefore they newly asked to the oracle of Delphi where to find it, finally receiving the astonishing news that the bones of the hero were somewhere in Tegea.¹⁰⁶

The Spartan Lichas discovered by chance the remains of the Atreides, thanks to the naïve advisory of a Tegean blacksmith, and used trickery to steal the bones from the Arcadian *polis*. Moreover, with the recognition of Orestes' relics, Sparta finally defeated Tegea.¹⁰⁷

Following Herodotos' account, the bones were then re-buried in a grave in the Spartan *agora*, thus creating a hero-cult place in the focal administrative and political area of the city.¹⁰⁸ This sacred place was preserved as late as the 2nd cent. AD, when Pausanias could still see the grave.¹⁰⁹

By gaining Orestes' bones, Sparta had taken possession of an important artefact, whose supernatural power was highlighted by the huge size of the hero's bones.¹¹⁰ On the contrary, the Tegeans, who had left their power, did not merely accept the superiority of their enemies,

¹⁰⁵ Hdt. 1, 67-68; Nafissi 2016, p. 633; Nafissi 2014, pp. 299-301; Camassa 2011, pp. 24-25.

¹⁰⁶ M. Fragkaki suggests taking into account that other poleis ignored Sparta's supposed political or hegemonic claims based on Orestes; nonetheless, a local Tegean cult of Orestes could exist at that time; Fragkaki 2018, p. 288. In addition, G. Camassa argues that it could be possible that a Spartan cult of Orestes could have been invented *a posteriori*. The interpretation and analysis of an eventual Tegean cult of Orestes is in Camassa 2011, pp. 27-33; Pucci 2015, pp. 40-41.

¹⁰⁷ Hdt. 1, 65 provides as a probable dating for the end of this second war against the Tegeans the year 546 BC. In Herodotos, the account of the conflicts between Spartans and Tegeans and of the foundation of Orestes' cult, it's the peak of a retrospective excursus linked to the drafting of the alliance with king Cresus, under the reign of kings Anaxandridas and Ariston. Indeed when Cresus, king of Lydia, sent an embassy to Sparta requesting alliance in that year, Sparta had already subjugated the greater part of the Peloponnese, as stated at the beginning of the account (Hdt. 1, 68). Therefore, the topic of this excursus is the growth of Sparta, and the recovery of the bones of Orestes are viewed only as a practical measure in order to reach the goal. Reference in Phillips 2003.

¹⁰⁸ As G. Salapata notes, since Orestes, as husband of Helen's daughter Hermione (Paus. 1, 33, 8), succeeded Menelaos on the throne of Lakedaimon, the recovery of his bones and their reburial in Spartan soil would have seemed legitimate. See Salapata 2014; Phillips 2003, pp. 311-312.

¹⁰⁹ Paus. 3, 11, 8.

¹¹⁰ Huxley 1979, pp. 145-148.

but rose up against them for the sacrilege perpetrated, being newly defeated.¹¹¹

While the affair of Orestes' bones has been described such in detail by ancient authors, the recognition of the relics of his son Tisamenos has attracted less attention. The evidence, in this case, is provided by Pausanias,¹¹² who gives an explanation of Tisamenos' history in the section concerning the description of Achaia. Following his account, Tisamenos had been buried by the Achaeans in Helike,¹¹³ but afterwards the Spartans, at the request of the Delphic oracle, relocated his bones to Sparta. As for his father, his grave was still visible during the 2nd cent. AD, in a place near the Spartan *agora* where the Lacedaemonians took the common dinner called *Pheiditia*.¹¹⁴

This large number of cult places consecrated to Agamemnon (and Alexandra), Menelaos (and Helen), Orestes and Tisamenos, and the important value associated to these locations by the Spartan community, may suggest, on the whole, that the Spartans tried to establish a cultural and political continuity between Achaean and Doric tradition and the Spartan diarchy, formally justified by the presence of a shared kingship between the two brothers Agamemnon and Menelaos.

Two interpretations could be provided in this respect: on one side, this geographical manipulation of traditions and myths should have improved the connection with the surroundings throughout their common ancestors, creating an Atreides' Laconian tradition; on the other side, the possibility that the Spartans adapted a pre-existing local tradition and associated it with a new cult should not be ruled out. In any case, the Atreid heroes may have played an important function as symbols of local history and identity, counteracting the Spartan recent history in the territory and going back to an ancient pre-Doric heroic past. Therefore, this sort of propagandistic use of the Spartan

¹¹¹ Fragkaki 2018, p. 295.

¹¹² Paus. 2, 18, 6-8; 3, 1, 5-6; 7, 1, 7-8.

¹¹³ The most common tradition is that with the return of the Herakleidai, Tisamenos led the Achaeans to Peloponnesian Achaia, leaving Laconia. There in Achaia, in the *polis* of Helike, he was defeated and finally killed by the Ionians. This tradition is particularly attested by Ephor. *FGrHist* F 18b-c., Plb. 2, 41, 4, Pausanias, Strab. 8, 7, 1, while Hdt. 1, 145 does not mention the hero but only the defeated Ionians refugee at Helike. Instead, according to Apollod. 12, 8, 3, Tisamenos was killed by the Herakleides while they were crossing the gulf of Corinth.

¹¹⁴ Paus. 7, 1, 8.

community, mainly formalized in the Archaic period, was finally strengthened by the “repatriation” of the bones of Orestes and his son Tisamenos in the period of the major Spartan expansion outside Laconia, also supported by a religious tradition that was at the base of the recovery of their supposed relics, aiming to justify the conquests.

Conclusion

The cult of Agamemnon could have been established to furnish a justification to political acts, in order to conciliate the Spartan recent history with a more ancient mythical past. The cult of Orestes strengthened this tradition and acts as a revenge for the death of his father Agamemnon, unfairly murdered. The bones of Tisamenos, besides creating relationships with the Achaeans or exhibiting their subjugation to the power of Sparta, were used to placate the anger of his father Orestes, accomplishing a second revenge for his murder. By founding a cult in honor of Tisamenos, his avenged father was also honored.

However, the shortage of information doesn't help in recognizing a precise moment for the translation of the heroes' relics to Sparta: while Orestes' bones recovery could have occurred around the middle of the 6th cent. BC, after the Second Tegean War, as noticed by Herodotos, the “repatriation” of Tisamenos' relics may have followed that of his father, most likely due to another oracular order.

Thus, it is possible that, after bringing Orestes' bones to Sparta, the Spartans aimed to strengthen their hegemony over the northern and southern Peloponnese, by “taking possession” of both his son Tisamenos and his father Agamemnon, giving them a special relevance during the 6th cent. BC. Furthermore, an ethnic significance has been also proposed¹¹⁵ for this political action performed in a warfare regime: by establishing a cult in honor of Orestes, who would had ruled not only at Mycenae, inherited by his father Agamemnon, but also at Sparta, an inheritance of his uncle Menelaos – obtained through the marriage with Hermione, Menelaos and Helen' daughter – he would have been able to reunify in his person the northern and southern Peloponnese hegemony of Sparta.

¹¹⁵ Phillips 2003.

At the middle of the 4th cent. BC this operation was finally completed, leading to a twofold interpretation of the appropriation of the Achaean myth: on one side there was the will of creating a relationship with the pre-Dorians, on the other side there was the wish of a continuation and expansion of an existing politics, thus completed throughout the assimilation of Agamemnon's family with Sparta.

Therefore, on the whole, it is possible to assume that Spartan heroic cults follow the general pattern of development and the overall chronological growth of the phenomenon elsewhere documented in the Greek world, with a significant evolution in the Archaic and Hellenistic period. Nevertheless, these hero-cults assume in Sparta a specific social and political connotation that distinguish and set them apart from the rest of the other Greek *poleis*, creating a unique local tradition which is attested in Sparta only.

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