

Alliance Policies in the Elean War (c.402-400): the Aetolian Case

Daniel Gómez-Castro¹

The War Against Elis

Of the wars which took place in the final years of the fifth century BC and the opening years of the fourth, the least documented is, as is well known, the Lacedaemonian campaign against Elis. For it we can rely only on the brief accounts given by Xenophon, Diodorus and the geographer Pausanias.² The causes of this conflict were complex; no single explanation exists.³ Modern historiography has advanced different reasons for the outbreak of hostilities between the two Peloponnesian powers, among them imperialism,⁴

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² X. *HG* 3.2.21-31; D.S. 14.17.4-12; 34.1-2; Paus. 3.8.3-5; 5.4.8, 5.20.4-5, 5.27.11; 6.2.2-3; 7.10.2. Although Pausanias is a minor source, as Tuplin points out (1993: 201), his account has the virtue of covering aspects of the war missing from that in Xenophon. Meanwhile, Schepens (2004: 25) notes the similarities between the contributions of Diodorus and Pausanias, and suggests that the main source for both authors were the *Hellenica of Oxyrhynchus* (2004: 30). Relying on the work of Accame (1978: 191), Sordi (1991: 36, n. 3) considers it more plausible that these authors' source was Ephorus, but, at the same time, that Ephorus' source was precisely the source of the *Oxyrhynchus* manuscripts, thus ruling out the hypothesis defended by Unz (1986: 29, n. 2) and Roy (2009: 80, n. 34). In the view of the latter, Pausanias followed Xenophon and not Diodorus Siculus, whose source would have been the *Oxyrhynchus Historian* (Unz, 1986: 32).

³ The historiographical discrepancies were discussed in the 90s. In this respect, it is not surprising that Unz (1986: 29-30) states: 'there is little dispute about the origins of the war', as revenge has traditionally been considered the undisputed *casus belli* in the war against Elis.

⁴ Thus, Sordi (1991: 37), who believes the war in Elis was a platform for a broader intervention in Central Greece aimed at expelling the Messenians from Naupactus (D.S. 14.34.2). This would have allowed Sparta to gain control over the Elean fleet (D.S.14.34.1), thus further weakening a democratic Athens which from 403 was outside the tight control of the more imperialistic Lacedaemonian factions (Hamilton, 1970: 304-305). Another version of the imperialist argument is offered by Falkner (1996: 17-25), who, more cautiously, suggests that the ultimate goal of the Lacedaemonians was to control the north-western coast of the Peloponnese in order to boost trade with Syracuse, a hypothesis backed by Roy (1997). However, as Tuplin (1993: 55) had already cautioned, these imperialist views are primarily based on Isocrates (8.99-100), who is problematic owing to the element of distortion characterising any rhetorical text. Schepens (2004: 87) also attributes the cause of the war to Spartan imperialism, but in his view the main interest of the Lacedaemonians was

revenge,⁵ political propaganda,⁶ control over the Sanctuary of Olympia,⁷ fear of a Helot insurrection,⁸ or a combination of all these factors.⁹

Whatever the ultimate motive, Alonso Troncoso (1987: 487), followed by Roy (2009b: 69, n. 4; 71, n. 10), is, in my opinion, correct to argue that the resolution of any dispute between Sparta and Elis would have been postponed until the end of the Peloponnesian War. Scholarly consensus is also lacking regarding the year when the war

not to bolster trade with the West, but to eliminate potential competition of a small Elean empire within the Peloponnese.

⁵ Elis left the Peloponnesian League in 421-420 and joined the alliance against Sparta formed by Mantinea, Argos and Athens (Th. 5.50; X. *HG* 3.2.21). Elis also refused to allow Agis to hold sacrifices in Olympia, arguing that ‘it was an established principle that Greeks should not consult the oracle about war with Greeks’ (X. *HG* 3.2.22; D.S. 14.17.4-5). However, as noted by Roy (2009: 68; 71), Thucydides (5.66-74) did not mention Elis among the members of the coalition which fought the Spartans in 418 at the Battle of Mantinea. Probably some kind of political consensus had therefore been reached, given that the city of Lepreum, which was the source of the enmity between Elis and Sparta (Th. 5.31.1-6), had already fallen under Elean control in 414. Until relatively recently, the *casus belli* most widely accepted by modern scholarship had been revenge (Unz, 1986: 29-30; Falkner, 1996: 17, n. 2) because, broadly speaking, it fits the explanation offered by Xenophon, who probably harboured some resentment against Elis for having forced him off his land in Elis after the battle of Leuctra (Tuplin 1993: 54).

⁶ Tuplin (1993: 54-55) points out that Sparta’s stated reason for declaring war on Elis was the same as that which launched its war against the Great King over control over the cities of Asia Minor, namely the right of Hellenic *poleis* to self-rule. Thus, Sparta’s call for the autonomy of the *perioeci* communities under Elean control (all in Triphylia) would be a form of political justification for its imperialism in the Aegean. It is worth noting the absence of anachronism in this explanation, as Tuplin (1993: 57, 202) and Krentz (1995: 171) point out that Xenophon’s account of the Elean War coincides with reference to Dercylidas’ 397 campaign in Asia (X. *HG* 3.2.21), with the clear intention of linking both conflicts and thus recasting Sparta as a defender of Hellenic freedom both in mainland Greece and in Asia Minor rather than as an imperialist power.

⁷ This is the interpretation advanced by Sordi (1984a: 20-30; 1984b: 143). Fornis (2008: 47) relies on Sordi’s work and also sees clear Olympian implications in the conflict, which, despite not being historiographically considered a “Sacred War”, in Fornis’s opinion was probably waged for a greater control over the Panhellenic sanctuary in Olympia.

⁸ Pascual (1995: 205, n. 42), who accepts the chronology advanced by Hamilton (1970: 313) and Unz (1986: 38, 41-42), links the war to the unrest in Lacedaemonia after the Conspiracy of Cinadon. Thus, the perception that the state was threatened by potential insurrection increased the aggressiveness of the Spartans, who acted more forcefully than usual when faced with circumstances that could fuel a Helot uprising: as, for instance, the hostility of the Messenians of Naupactus or the territorial expansion into Messenia of Elis, a state which had displayed little loyalty to Sparta in the past.

⁹ This last option was posited by Roy (2009b: 71 ff), for whom the war did not have a single cause, but rather was the culmination of escalating tensions between the two Peloponnesian states after Laconia supported the independence of Lepreum in 421 (Th. 5.31.1-4). On the independence of Lepreum, see Roy (1998: 360-368) and Paradiso & Roy (2008: 27-35).

began. Most interpretations, however, give a date falling between 403 and 399 BC.¹⁰ These differences stem from discrepancies between the accounts of Xenophon and Diodorus Siculus. It was Xenophon's chronological inaccuracy which fuelled the debate, given that, despite being a contemporary source and a witness to the events, the latter placed the timeframe of the Elean War in the middle of the Spartan-Persian War, that is, between 399-397 BC (Tuplin 1993: 202). However, the Eurypontid dyarch Agis was already deceased by that time so that the whole framework of his chronology does not seem to work.¹¹ In addition, the narrative advanced by Diodorus seems more complete than Xenophon's, which did not mention the campaign led by the dyarch Pausanias.¹² The latter was so plainly different from Agis, that this omission could indicate the greater historical reliability of Diodorus Siculus' source.

Sparta's conduct in Elis certainly echoes its behaviour after the King's Peace when Sparta avenged Mantinea (385). If Roy's exposition of the causes of the Elean War is correct, that Arcadian city had displayed the same disloyalty towards Sparta as Elis had done during both the Peloponnesian War and the Corinthian War. This, no doubt, could have escalated the tension. In this respect, as Fornis posits (2008: 317-319), the Spartans were pushed to snuff out democracy in the city following Mantinea's alliance with Elis, Argos and Athens in 418, its contempt towards Agesilaus after the loss of the Spartan *mora* in Lechaem in 390 (X. *HG* 4.5.18), and its willingness to sell grain to Argos (X. *HG* 5.2.2)¹³. They, thus imposed *διοικισμος* immediately following the Corinthian War (X. *HG* 5.2.1-8; D.S. 15.5.12). As in the case of Mantinea, the punishment of Elis by Sparta would have no doubt come soon after a definite end of the Peloponnesian War and after the fall of the Thirty in Athens (403). It would be have been absurd and against reason for Sparta to have waited several years to neutralize a potential threat in the

¹⁰ On this point, the historiographical debate is almost limitless and therefore a comprehensive overview cannot be provided here. However, a detailed analysis of the issue can be found in Tuplin (1993: 202-204), Schepens (2004: 73-85) and, more recently, Fornis (2008: 46, n. 68).

¹¹ Unz (1986: 37-38), however, considers it possible because Pausanias led the 397 campaign precisely because Agis had already died. This chronology raises serious doubts because, as Unz himself apparently acknowledged but did not fully accept, its validation would require the modification of information provided by many sources (including Xenophon, Plutarch or the Babylonian astronomical diaries in fundamental and well-documented matters, such as the death of Agis, Agesilaus's accession to the throne, his campaign in Egypt, and the battle of Leuctra. In all these cases, the accounts dates Agesilaus's rise to the throne as the year 401/400. For all of the above reasons, I do not consider a 399-397 chronology for the Elean war as plausible.

¹² Regarding this question, Tuplin (1993: 201), Krentz (1995: 171) and Roy (2009: 81) consider it an error to eliminate Pausanias' campaign from the historical narrative, since the differences between this campaign and Agis', as recounted by Xenophon, preclude a simple mistake by Diodorus in the recording of the name of the dyarch who led the army in that "contested" year of the war (Unz, 1986: 32-33, 36; Tuplin, 1993: 204). On the matter of corruption in the recording of the dyarch's name in Diodorus' narrative, see Schepens (2004: 18, n. 28).

¹³ Curiously, a failed attempt to overthrow democracy also took place during the war against Elis, and probably ended up being carried out successfully after the King's Peace (X. *HG* 7.4.15).

Peloponnese with the ability to do so without delay. This last suggestion presumes that the Elean War must have taken place between the fall of the Thirty and Agesilaus' rise to power in the year 400. Therefore, the chronology put forward by Diodorus appears sounder than the one advanced by Xenophon. According to the former, the campaign would have started in 402 and ended in 400.

Aetolian Soldiers

Diodorus claimed that a thousand elite Aetolian soldiers aided the Eleans in defending their territorial boundaries (D.S. 14.17.9).¹⁴ Xenophon, however, made no reference to these Aetolian soldiers. According to Xenophon, during the first invasion of Elis, led by Agis, there was an earthquake which Agis took as a bad omen, prompting him to disband the army and retreat to Lacedaemonia. The Eleans, for their part, appear to have used the earthquake to gain political leverage, sending requests for aid to all the *poleis* rivals of Laconia.¹⁵

Combining information from both these sources can help elucidate the reasons behind this group of soldiers being compelled to travel to Elis and take up arms against Sparta, then the uncontested hegemonic power in Hellas. However, two main lines of interpretation suggest themselves.

1. Political Interpretation: External Meddling in Aetolia.

One political interpretation of the events maintains that the Aetolian soldiers in question were willing to take part in the war against Sparta as a backlash to its meddling in Central Greece, particularly regarding the handover of Naupactus and Calydon to the Achaeans (X. *HG* 4.6.1; D.S. 11.84.7; 14.34.2-3). Calydon had once belonged to Aetolia in the past (X. *HG* 4.6.1)¹⁶ and remained in Aetolian territory, though not under the

¹⁴ Ἡλεῖοι δὲ μικρὸν ἔμπροσθεν ἦσαν παρ' Αἰτωλῶν εἰληφότες συμμάχους ἐπιλέκτους ἄνδρας χιλίους, οἷς τὸν περὶ τὸ γυμνάσιον τόπον δεδώκεισαν φυλάττειν. On the Aetolian elite soldiers, see Rzepka (2009: 18 ff.). Unz (1986: 33, n.11, 35) is the only author who identifies this group as “mercenaries”. It is improbable, though possible at least from a theoretical viewpoint, that the term συμμάχους did not refer to “ally” in Diodorus’ text, and that these contingents may be considered as mercenaries. Unfortunately, Unz did not offer any information on the terminological question, and therefore we do not know how he came to regard this group as mercenaries.

¹⁵ ...ὅσας ἤδεσαν δυσμενεῖς τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις οὔσας. (X. *HG* 3.2.24). Funke (1980: 50-51) and Schepens (2004:10) believe that, in this particular case, Xenophon was referring primarily to Corinth and Boeotia. However, these two cities were formally still members of the Peloponnesian League and therefore reluctant allies of Sparta, but in no event could they be considered openly hostile (δυσμενεῖς) towards the Lacedaemonians at this point.

¹⁶ Xenophon did not provide any concrete dates, but Calydon is identified as an Aetolian city in the ‘Catalogue of Ships’ in the *Iliad* (2.635-640). Therefore, it can be easily surmised that this city had been under Aetolian control from the beginning of the Archaic period. On the other hand, there is proof of a Messenian victory over Aetolians from Calydon, as much epigraphic (*SEG* 32.550; *IG IX I*² 3, 656) as archaeological (Hölscher, 1974: 70-111). Therefore, everything seems to indicate that this city ceased to be Aetolian at some point

political, economic or legislative control of any specific Aetolian power. Calydon therefore likely deplored transfer into Achaean hands. An example of this animosity may be found in the later experience of the Acarnanians, who in 389 declared war on Achaea over control of Naupactus and Calydon during the second phase of the Corinthian War. This prompted Sparta to intervene in that same year, launching a military campaign in the region led by Agesilaus. This event demonstrates the value that the Lacedaemonians placed on their alliance with the Achaeans.

Undoubtedly, the strategic location of Calydon and Naupactus allowed Sparta to exert control over Corinth and its western trade routes via the Achaean League. This context brings to mind the events of some years earlier, when Athens engaged in a policy of systematic interference in the region. During the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides (3.94.3) noted that the Aetolians were clearly hostile towards Naupactus. Thucydides did not specify the reasons for this enmity, but the settlement in Aetolian territory of Messenian refugees from the Third Messenian War probably was seen as an act of foreign aggression against some particular group of Aetolians — if not a conjectured *koinon*.¹⁷ Judging by the ensuing cession of Naupactus to the Aetolian League by Philip of Macedon, it is feasible that the Aetolians claimed Naupactus as part of their territory even then (Str. 9.4.7).

By themselves, Naupactus and Calydon did not offer any great strategic advantage for the Aetolians, but in Achaean hands, they enabled Sparta to control both Corinth and Thebes.¹⁸ Sparta could not, therefore, afford to lose them. However, the special status of these *poleis* was a political liability for Sparta in the region, because the various autochthonous populations — including those of the Aetolians and the Acarnanians — considered it an example of Spartan imperialism.

relatively close to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war. For a recent analysis of this matter, see Luraghi (2008: 188-193; 340-343).

¹⁷ Grainger (1999: 39) goes a step further, saying that ‘it would be this same *koinon* which would have organized the envoys sent to Sparta in 426, and the thousand soldiers sent to Elis in 402’. On the possible “unjust” comment made by Thucydides regarding the Aetolians and the hypothetical existence of an Aetolian confederation between the fourth and fifth centuries, see Kelly (1978: 133 ff); Bommeljé (1988: 297-316); Antonetti (1990: 71-74); Hornblower (1991: 24; 508 ff); Beck (1997: 46-54); Stylianou (1998: 411); and Grainger (1999: 34, n. 25). In any event, the hatred Aetolians professed against Naupactus only grew when Aetolia entered into an alliance with the Lacedaemonians to organize a joint attack on the city in 426 (Th. 3.100.1-2).

¹⁸ The element of the army led by Lysander which in 395 was charged with dismantling the Boeotian Confederacy invaded confederate territory from Aetolian territory (as Demosthenes did in 426: Th.3.95.2-3) with the intent of recruiting the greatest possible number of soldiers for its cause (Fornis, 2008: 80 ff).

2. *Cultural/Historical Interpretation: the Link between Elis and Aetolia.*

Many sources¹⁹ imply a deep historical and cultural bond between Elis and Aetolia, the evidence suggesting that Elis had originally been an Aetolian settlement. Documented historical facts (Taita, 2000: 163) — as well as the dictates of logic — suggest that the different phases of occupation resulting from the Dark Age migrations into Greece began in the north and progressed to the south so that, as previously suggested, it is less risky to conclude that Elis was founded by Aetolian settlements in the Peloponnese by way of the Gulf of Patras than to assume the contrary as Elean propaganda had once maintained (Antonetti, 1990: 60-61; Taita, 2000: 163-164; Gehrke, 2003: 16).

We may, accordingly, conclude that the Aetolians would perhaps have accepted some degree of responsibility for the fate of a polis, that had been, as evidence suggests, a former colony. An intervention of this sort, resulting from a sense of allegiance between *mētropoleis* and their former colonies, were not uncommon. Several cases could be cited as historical precedents. For example, during the conflict in Corcyra that triggered the Peloponnesian War, Corinth sent a contingent of soldiers and volunteers to help its former colony shake off Athens' hold (Th. 1.60). The involvement of volunteers in military missions such as this denotes a strong sense of political responsibility toward colonial outposts. In any event, even without establishing a speculative metropolis-colony relationship between the Aetolians and Elis, evidence points to the existence of strong historical links between the two communities. This fact alone should provide a reasonable explanation for Aetolian participation in the war against Sparta.

Conclusions

The above analysis allows us to draw some conclusions concerning the historical background. Primarily, it must be noted that the conflict discussed was a local war — that is, between two Peloponnesian states — pitting Greek against Greek. At the time, it was possibly perceived as one of the many territorial struggles among those that afflicted the Greek world during the Classical period. Therefore, it would have been of limited interest in terms of its implications for interstate Greek affairs during this period. Moreover, the political context of the Hellenic world went against Elean interests because the existence of an unquestionable hegemonic power (Sparta) acted as a deterrent for lesser powers who were merely seen as engaged in warfare against Sparta when directly affected by its policies. This was the case in the war between Sparta and Persia, the Lacedaemonian invasion of Boeotia (395), and the subsequent onset of the Corinthian War. In this respect, Elis' control — or lack of control — of some cities at the edge of their territory had little impact on the interests of the rest of Greek world. As would also prove the case with Mantinea, none of them risked opposing Sparta even politically.

¹⁹ Examples of literary sources include Bacchylides (8.28.29), Pindarus (*O.* 3.9-13) Herodotus (8.73.2), Ephorus (*FGrHist* 70 F 115); Strabo (8.3.30; 9.3.12; 10.3.2-3). A comprehensive analysis of relevant literary, archaeological and epigraphic sources can be found in Antonetti (1990: 69-121), Taita (2000: 163-168), Gehrke (2003: 5-22) and, more recently, Wolff (2010: 84-85).

All of these factors must be taken into account in order to understand the reasons why, when Elis rallied Sparta's rival cities to form an alliance, only the Aetolians stepped forward, according to Xenophon. Aside from the fact that Aetolia opposed Sparta's heavy-handed policies in Central Greece and suffered their effects both politically and economically, Sparta's war against Elis would have also been felt by the Aetolians. In my view, a complex combination of political, historical and even cultural reasons helps us explain why some Aetolians decided to confront Sparta against the odds in 402.

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