Athens-Sparta
Contributions to the Research on the
History and Archaeology of the Two City-States

Proceedings of the International Conference
in conjunction with the exhibition "Athens-Sparta"
organized in collaboration with
the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and the
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Relief with an Athenian Triereme (detail.) Late 5th century B.C. Pentelic Marble.
From the Acropolis of Athens, excavated near the Erechtheion, 1852. Acropolis Museum, Athens, 1339.

Frontispiece:
Fragment of an Attic Red-Figure Loutrophoros (detail.) Ca. 430 B.C. Clay. Provenance unknown.
National Archaeological Museum, Athens, 1700.

Illustration on page 6:

Illustration on pages 8–9:
Stele with Accounts of Expenses of Athenian Naval Operations in Corcyra (detail), 433 B.C. Pentelic marble.
From the Acropolis of Athens. Epigraphical Museum, Athens, EM6777.

CONTENTS

Foreword
Anthony S. Papadimitriou
President
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Introduction
Dr. Nikolaos Kaltsas, Director, National Archaeological Museum, Greece, and curator of the exhibition "Athens-Sparta"

11 CHAPTER 1
The Amyklaion Revisited: New Observations on a Laconian Sanctuary of Apollo
Dr. Stavros Vlizos, Archaeologist, Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece

24 CHAPTER 2
An Archaic Head in the Archaeological Museum of Sparta
Dr. Georgia Kokkorou-Alevras, Professor of Classical Archaeology, University of Athens, Greece

32 CHAPTER 3
Spartan Self-Presentation in the Panhellenic Sanctuaries of Delphi and Olympia in the Classical Period
Dr. Olga Palagia, Professor of Classical Archaeology, University of Athens, Greece

41 CHAPTER 4
Disiecta Membra: Early Terracotta Images on the Athenian Acropolis
Dr. Aliki Moustaka, Professor of Classical Archaeology, University of Thessaloniki, Greece

51 CHAPTER 5
‘Thalassa, Thalassa!’ The Spartans and the Sea?
Dr. Paul Cartledge, Professor of Greek History, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom

55 CHAPTER 6
Early Hellenistic Sparta: Changing Modes of Interaction with the Wider World?
Dr. Graham Shipley, Professor of Ancient History, University of Leicester, United Kingdom

61 CHAPTER 7
Plutarch’s Sparta: Lieux de mémoire, trous de mémoire
Dr. Richard Talbert, Kenan Professor of History and Classics, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, United States of America

66 CHAPTER 8
Democracy, Knowledge, and Public Action in Classical Athens
Dr. Josiah Ober, Professor of Classics and Political Science; Constantinos Mitsotakis Chair, School of Humanities and Sciences, Stanford University, California, United States of America

74 CHAPTER 9
The Early Greek Polis: From Homer to “Lycurcan” Sparta and “Solonian” Athens
Dr. Kurt A. Raaflaub, David Herlihy University Professor and Professor of Classics and History; Chair, Program in Ancient Studies; Brown University, Rhode Island, United States of America

84 BIBLIOGRAPHY
Given the emphasis placed by modern and indeed ancient writers on the Spartan defeat at Leuktra in 371 B.C. and its immediate consequences, one might be tempted to suppose that, in the years and decades that followed, the news would have been, almost without exception, bad for Sparta and good for the rest of the Peloponnesos. A more nuanced picture must take account of Sparta’s internal dynamics, of its external interactions, and also—perhaps less obvious to some scholars—of changing relationships within Laconia: that is, between Sparta and its immediate neighbors, the “other Lakedaimonians.” Among questions to be addressed are the following: How absolute was Sparta’s loss of hegemonic power in the mid-fourth century? How weak was Sparta as a military force at the end of the Classical period and in early Hellenistic times? To the extent that it was weak, was this reflected in cultural, social, or economic changes within Sparta and within Laconia as a whole?

Before proceeding further, it is worth recalling some of the ways in which our understanding of the Spartan state and Spartan society has been affected by recent research and discoveries. First, it is now clear that Spartans were not equal in wealth but ranged along a spectrum from rich to poor, like the population of any other Greek state.\(^2\) Second, the role of the perioikoi—the Lakedaimonian, but non-Spartan, “circumhabitants”—has been brought into sharper focus.\(^3\) It seems clear that they cannot be compared in any way to Sparta’s helots (heliotai), the serflike class that worked the farms of Messenia and parts of Laconia.\(^4\) The perioikoi were partners rather than subjects of the Spartans, fellow members of the Lakedaimonian state. Their individual poleis (city-states) were “dependent” upon Sparta—that is, dominated and not independent—and, though mostly very small, they are still correctly to be seen as city-states.\(^5\) Probably each one had a defined territory distinct from those of all its peers, including Sparta itself in the case of poleis adjoining its territory. Third, we have a wealth of new data from archaeological projects; these include the Laconia Survey of the British School at Athens;\(^6\) Greek and earlier British work in Sparta, synthesized by Kourinou in her study of the city’s topography;\(^7\) and the current Dutch excavations at Geraki, the ancient perioikic polis of Geronthrai.\(^8\)

Together, these advances in knowledge have enhanced our knowledge and understanding both of urban landscapes in Laconia, both Spartan and perioikic, and of their rural counterparts, and thus of all Laconian societies.

### Sparta in the Mid-Fourth Century B.C.

After the Peloponnesian war, the Euryponid king Agesilaos II (r. 400–360) tried to maintain the hegemony over Greece that victory over Athens appeared to have brought. At one stage, he was able to impose oligarchies on other Peloponnesian cities; at another juncture, he helped to impose the king of Persia’s peace terms upon the Greeks. Eventually, however, all he could do was lead Sparta to defeat at the hands of the Thebans in 371.

The calamity at Boiotian Leuktra entailed the loss of part of Messenia with its helot labor force, although Sparta retained the coastal towns of Messenia until 338.\(^9\) Leuktra, and the Boiotian invasions that followed in the 360s, put an end to the system of one-sided alliances between Sparta and other states that we misleadingly call the “Peloponnesian league.”\(^10\) It also led to the creation of a ring of fortresses in adjoining regions—Messene to the west, Megalopolis to the northwest, and Mantinea to the north—which were presumably intended to prevent Spartan armies from gaining access to the key strategic routes to other parts of the Peloponnesos and beyond. Nevertheless, in the 360s, the Spartans under Agesilaos managed to create new alliances and defended Laconia more or less successfully against several Theban invasions.

Aristotle (Pol. 2.9.1270a34) famously identifies oliganthropia (lack of manpower)—that is, falling numbers of full Spartiate citizens—as a factor in the defeat at Leuktra and in Sparta’s failure to regain its former dominant position. Most likely the depletion of the citizen body was the result of socioeconomic behavior, of the willingness of some Spartans to let others be demoted from the full citizen body when their resources fell below the necessary qualification for membership. Although the Lakedaimonians fought in greatly reduced numbers in 362, at the battle of Mantinea in eastern Arcadia, they were once again fighting alongside Athenians and Arcadians, just as they had against Xerxes in Sparta’s glory days, nearly 120 years earlier. Oliganthropia could be offset by diplomacy.
There were other weaknesses. As Cartledge has said, Agesilaos' very personal style of rule "dissipated [the] moral assets by which alone Sparta might have maintained her Greek hegemony."11 His Agiad colleague Cleomenes II, despite ruling for sixty-one years (370–309), is unknown to history, which might seem to imply that he, or Sparta, stood aside from international entanglements. Yet under one of Cleomenes' co-kings, Agesilaos' son Archidamos III (r. 360–338), Sparta again took an active role in Greek affairs, although it may have been enabled to do so only by relying on foreign mercenaries.

Unfortunately for the Spartans, when Archidamos, following the example of his famous father, took Spartan soldiers abroad to earn income for the state by serving as mercenaries, the venture turned to calamity when he died in Italy in 338. In that same year, Philip II of Macedonia defeated the southern Greeks at Chaironeia. Although the Spartans had been friendly toward him, to please his other allies he deprived them of the parts of Messenia that they still possessed; worse still, he removed their perioikic dependencies in northern Laconia and gave them to the Tegeans, Megalopolitans, and Messenians.12 All the same, Sparta retained its extensive and fertile core territory in the Eurotas valley, most of the Laconian perioikoi, and some Laconian helots.

With these resources Agesilaos' grandson Agis III (338–331) was able to undertake renewed resistance to the Macedonians by making common cause with Elis, Tegea, and the Achaian poleis. Once more, however, Sparta came up against a superior power, suffering a decisive defeat at Corinthus in 331.13 Agis himself was killed, along with 5,300 other Spartans, perioikoi, and allies.

The picture of Sparta in the years after Leuktra is a mixed one: the active capacity for involvement in wider struggles, some notable failures, and some successes. At any rate, Sparta was neither isolated nor passive, though neither its successes nor its failures were as grand as before. It no longer controlled a major alliance; Spartiate numbers, which had declined before 371, continued to drop; and the city could no longer call on large numbers of Messenian helots for military aid. The Spartans had also lost some of their perioikoi. Yet the polls was not thereby reduced to insignificance. It remained a major player in Greek affairs, matched in power only by Athens and a few other southern states. It remained influential by virtue of its reputation and its ability to wield diplomatic influence, negotiate foreign aid, acquire allies, and recruit mercenaries. Only when juxtaposed with its overwhelming power in the fifth and early fourth centuries does the Sparta of this period seem weak.

In fact, the Spartans—together with the other Lakedaimonians (an important qualification)—still exercised considerable military power and leadership. The citizens of a small polis in, say, Arcadia would no doubt still fear them—or value their friendship and protection.

Early Hellenistic Sparta: An Assessment of Change
What, then, of the early Hellenistic period, the end of the fourth and the third century, after the conquests of Philip II and Alexander the Great and the latter's early death in 323? Is it true, as Bosworth claims, that Agis' failure "left Sparta enfeebled beyond redemption?"14

"Weakness"
Once enrolled in Alexander's League of Corinth, the Lakedaimonians seem to have avoided external commitments for several decades. They even stood aside from the Greek revolt against Macedonia in 322–321. We know almost nothing about the two Spartan kings at this time, the long-lived Agiad Cleomenes II (whom we met earlier), now approaching his half-century on the throne, and the Euryponid Eudamidas I (r. 331–ca. 305), brother of the late Agis III. Since we are otherwise well informed about late fourth-century history, this lack of information genuinely suggests a period of disengagement by the Spartans. We are told by the late author Justin (14.5.4–7) that in 317, in the face of a threatened invasion by Kassandros, the regent of Macedonia, they built a palisade and ditch around their city, compromising their ancient ideal of living without fortifications.15 If true, this could be represented as the abandonment of traditional values; alternatively, it is a sign of collective determination and the continued ability to mobilize resources on a large scale.

In the next 130 years, Laconia suffered at least ten invasions at increasingly short intervals, confirming that its military resources or its reputation, though both considerable, no longer sufficed to repel or deter attackers: (1) in 317 by the Macedonian dynasty Kassandros;16 (2) in the late 290s by Demetrios I of Macedonia;17 (3) in 272 by Pyrrhos of Epeiros, in support of the expatriate Cleonymos, uncle of king Areus I and a claimant of
the Agiad throne; \(^{(4)}\) in the late 240s by the Aitolians; \(^{(5)}\) in 222 or 221 after Sparta's disastrous (though not final) defeat by a Macedonian–Achaian alliance at Sellasia in northern Laconia; \(^{(6)}\) in 219 by Philip V of Macedonia; \(^{(7)}\) in 200 by the Achaians under Philopoimen; \(^{(8)}\) in 195 by the Roman general Flamininus; \(^{(9)}\) in 193 by Philopoimen again. \(^{(24)}\) Several of the actual invasions, however, affected only the periöikic margins of Laconia, though here the short-term effects could be severe, including ravaging of the land and the enslavement of inhabitants. The city of Sparta itself was not captured until after Sellasia. Its final capture, in 192, after King Nabis was assassinated by his Aitolian allies, was achieved without an invasion: Philopoimen simply took control of the city and enrolled it in the Achaian league. \(^{(24)}\) Even after that, however, Sparta remained a thorn in the side of the league for half a century and a major source of military anxiety for the rest of the Peloponnese until the final defeat of the league by Rome.\(^{(26)}\)

Other setbacks attended Sparta's biggest external adventure in the first half of the third century: the Chremonidean war of the 260s, when the southern Greeks, led by King Areus I of Sparta, attacked the Macedonians. \(^{(22)}\) The war lasted several years, ending in defeat, heavy casualties, and the death of yet one more Spartan king.

"Strength"

So much for the bad news. To set against that, there are positives, such as the fact that the Lakedaimonians, admittedly with funding from King Ptolemy II of Egypt, gave a lead to the Greeks in the Chremonidean war. The size of the Greek alliance was probably the result of both Sparta's special relationship with the Ptolemies and the personal power of Areus I. A few years later, Areus' successor, Acrotatos (if we believe the sources), attacked Megalopolis. \(^{(28)}\) Although he was repulsed, the attack is a sign of military confidence, at odds with the sources' picture of social and military breakdown in the mid-third century.

The fortified area of the city was enlarged during the third century and gained a permanent stone circuit wall probably under Cleomenes III in the 230s or 220s. \(^{(24)}\) This coincides with Sparta's greatest period of success since Leuktra, when Cleomenes took control of much of the northeastern Peloponnese including the old enemy, Argos. \(^{(30)}\) Again the city relied on Ptolemaic subsidies, but that does not mean it was itself completely powerless. By the late 220s its principal opponent, the Achaian league, was in desperate straits and only its appeal to Macedonia tipped the scales against Sparta.

So we have a mixed picture, as in the fourth century. Sparta, though not always secure or successful, continued to play a leading role in Greek affairs, for good or ill. It remained a major player by virtue of its combined Lakedaimonian manpower, its ability to negotiate foreign subsidies and pay mercenaries, and its reputation.

Geography also played a part. Laconia's position on the sea route from Alexandria via Crete to the Greek west was useful both politically (vis-à-vis the Ptolemies) and perhaps economically. Its relative remoteness probably helped. Macedonian control of the Peloponnese was, for the most part, quite hands-off. The Peloponnese was of marginal interest to the Macedonian kings as long as it did not threaten the stability of the Aegean. \(^{(31)}\) Sparta had reasonable freedom to act independently, and took full advantage.

Cultural Contacts

Increasingly in the third century, Sparta was involved in cultural developments spanning the Greek world. \(^{(32)}\) One possible sign of the relaxation of cultural isolation may be that about 270 B.C. a Spartan actor, Nikon son of Eumathidas, took part in games at Delphi. \(^{(33)}\) The mid-third century saw the career of the first known Spartan historian, Sosibios, \(^{(4)}\) who was active in Alexandrian literary circles. Later a Spartan named Sosylos \(^{(45)}\) accompanied Hannibal and wrote a history of his invasion of Italy. No doubt these writers are the tip of the iceberg, representatives of a larger number of literate, and literary, Spartans.

King Areus I, in his long reign in the first half of the third century, adopted the paraphernalia of Hellenistic royalty. He minted Sparta's first coins, which bore his name rather than the city's. \(^{(36)}\) Olga Palagia has shown that Spartan kings exploited developments in royal iconography within the Macedonian kingdoms in Asia and Egypt and specifically promoted the image of the Peloponnesian hero Herakles rather than the Laconian Dioskouroi. This may mirror the trend toward sole kingship that is visible, in effect if not in name, in the behavior of Areus and even more strongly in his successors, and that perhaps harks back to Agesilaos II.
Rightly or wrongly, Areus and Akrotatos are blamed by the contemporary historian Phylarchos, sympathetic to Sparta in the person of Cleomenes III, for introducing indulgent customs that accompanied, or followed, the demise of the traditional education, the agōgē. Whatever lies behind his claims, do we see these changes as signs of surrender, weakness, and disorganization? Of the withdrawal of the elite from commitment to the civic body? Surely we must set aside the moralizing attitude of the sources. It may be that the agōgē was no longer serving any purpose. Sparta was not the only Greek state in which the power and wealth of the elite increased in this period, or the only state to rely on mercenaries rather than citizen soldiers.

Diplomatic exchanges between Sparta and the faraway Jews are recorded in the biblical books of the Maccabees. Although the claimed kinship of the two peoples was a Jewish fiction, the relationship indicates a changed perception of Sparta, no longer the isolationist state. Were changes of this sort a last-ditch survival strategy in the face of dwindling power, or is there a more normal explanation?

**Economic Change**

Evidence of increased urbanization indicates a relative shift of population from country to town, possibly accompanied by economic growth. Kourinou has shown that in the third century the gaps between the four principal constituent villages of the city began to be filled in with new residential areas. The Laconia Survey has identified a possible northern suburb of Sparta at Geladāri, which began to expand in the same period. At periōlik Gerákí (ancient Geronthrai), the Dutch excavators have found third-century houses on a hilltop unoccupied since the Bronze Age, again suggesting an expanding town.

Involvement with the outside world extended to the economic sphere. In recent reports on Laconian pottery one can find clear evidence of the adoption of external fashions. At Gerákí the excavators have unearthed mold-made bowls showing foreign influence, while one class of black-glazed ware points to Laconian involvement in trade between Alexandria, Crete, and southern Italy. In Sparta itself, early Hellenistic tomb finds reveal contact with Asia Minor, Crete, Athens, Mytilene, and possibly Boiotia and Macedonia. These tantalizing glimpses indicate the importance of research into the material culture of Hellenistic Sparta, and of the Peloponnese in general.

**Social Change**

The radical reforms of Agis IV in the 240s and Cleomenes III in the 220s are said to have been motivated by severe socioeconomic problems. By the 240s, Sparta was a plutocracy. In Plutarch’s life of Agis (5.6) we read that there were not more than seven hundred full citizens, of whom about one hundred controlled most of the land. Presumably the other six hundred tended to own small parcels and/or generally less good land. If we take Plutarch literally, we may assume that many of those hundred-odd citizens were brothers, fathers, sons, and other relatives from a limited number of families, perhaps no more than thirty or forty. This does not mean that landholding was even more tightly concentrated than Plutarch implies, since the same calculation could be applied to the six hundred, who may have come from only about one hundred fifty to two hundred families. A situation in which most of the land is owned by about 14 per cent of citizens, incidentally, is not so different from that of classical Attica. In view of these observations, we cannot view this state of affairs simply as a reflection of external weakness. It may, however, have fomented internal weakness.

Oliganthropy began to bite before Leuktra, and can be seen as a result of social exclusivity. When, in two stages during the mid-fourth century, Messenian farmland vanished as a source of income for Spartiates, the number of men unable to qualify as full citizens will have gone up. The elite appear to have taken no steps to mitigate the resulting increase in inequality but seized the opportunity to increase their agricultural holdings, probably exploiting marriage strategies and sheer economic clout to exclude poor families from good land. Demotion of poor citizens to the status of “inferior” was probably allowed to continue unchecked, or not adequately reined in.

Yet Laconia is a large and fertile place, not easily subdued for long. The pressure of population necessitated that cultivable land be farmed. A little-noticed passage of Aristotle’s *Politics* implies that in the late fourth century the Spartans could no longer enforce the traditional ban on citizens taking part directly in agriculture. He is discussing Plato’s stipulation that the guardians of the ideal polis should not be involved in
the labor of farming, "which even now the Lakedaimonians are attempting to do" (2.5.1264 a 10–11). The phrasing is ambiguous, but whichever way one reads it, it implies public discussion at Sparta of the issue of citizen involvement in agricultural work. Field data from the Laconia Survey point to the reoccupation, in the late fourth or early third century, of low-grade hill country east and north of Sparta that had been abandoned a few generations before. Together, these pieces of information may reflect increasing pressure on agricultural resources as a result of social divisions that had existed earlier but were exacerbated by the loss of Messenia. I have argued elsewhere that the new, small farms outside Sparta belonged either to some of Plutarch's six hundred poorer citizens (perhaps sponsored by richer patrons) or to former citizens, now inferiors, living as dependants of rich men—or indeed, the rich women who we know existed by the mid-third century.

Despite the social upheavals that excited the moral indignation of the sources, and despite military setbacks and casualties in the third century, Sparta was not a weak polis. Agis IV and Cleomenes III were not content with leading an average state: they wanted to reclaim the Peloponnesian hegemony lost over a century earlier. The fact that they believed it possible, and that it was proven to be possible under Cleomenes, confirms that Sparta was not now, and indeed never had been, a negligible power. Increased external involvement, greater cultural interaction with the wider world, growing trade, and urbanization all point to the normalization of Laconia, not its decline.

Power within Laconia
It is worth considering briefly relations within Laconia, between Sparta and the perioikoi.

Agis IV's abortive reforms in the 240s, later rebranded by Cleomenes III, included a redistribution of land, which was to put poor citizens on a firmer footing, re-enfranchise inferiors, and replenish the citizen body. Plutarch puts it in terms of a redivision of Laconia as a whole, telling us that Agis assigned 4,500 plots to Spartans out of "the land from the ravine at Pellana toward Taygetos, Malea and Sellasia," while the area designated for the 15,000 perioikic plots was "that outside" (τὴν Εἰκό). The choice of place-names is puzzling at first sight, but I have suggested elsewhere that "Malea" means neither the former perioikic polis of that name on the Arcadian border, nor Cape Malea (or Maleas), but the Parnon range as a whole. It signifies the eastern boundary of Sparta's own polis territory. In other words, the area marked out for Spartan farms was the existing territory of the city. Agis and Cleomenes did not envisage increasing Sparta's territory at the expense of neighboring perioikoi, or redrawing the borders of any polis' territory.

Indeed, Agis and Cleomenes were in no position to redraw the map of Laconia. The perioikoi were much more powerful, relative to Sparta, than in earlier times. The Spartans relied on them increasingly for military backup (as well as on hired foreign troops). Both Spartiates and perioikoi were more actively engaged with the wider world than before, and the region was apparently enjoying economic growth. We cannot exclude the possibility that Sparta's economy benefited directly or indirectly from perioikic success. Certainly the partnership between perioikoi and Spartans seems to have remained strong.

Conclusion
The disaster of 371 caused an immediate reduction in the economic base of Sparta, but the effect on its military power, though real, was not catastrophic in the long term. Despite defeats, invasions, and reduced territory, the Lakedaimonian state remained extremely powerful in comparison to most Greek communities. It retained its leading position down to the second century, despite repeated setbacks and regime changes. There were, to be sure, social upheavals on at least two occasions, but these were partly the working out of processes that had been under way before Leuktra. There is also evidence of change in both Sparta and the rest of Laconia that can to some extent be represented as positive development.

For the future, it is incumbent upon historians and archaeologists to explore further the relationship of Sparta to its perioikoi after the fourth century, and to test the hypothesis that a change in the balance of power within Laconia helped Sparta interact more positively with the outside world, and thus sustain a relatively powerful position among Greek states.
Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation for the invitation to contribute to this project. He regrets that he was unable to participate in the conference owing to a family emergency.

Notes
1. This phrase is from Herodotus 7.204.
2. See, e.g., Hodkinson 2000.
4. This despite the damning assessment by Isokrates, Oration 12 (Panegyrikos), 177–81. His savage indictment of Spartan treatment of the perioikoi is at odds with all the other ancient evidence, and he appears to be wilfully equating their position to that of the helots.
8. Preliminary reports in Pharos 3 (1995) and later volumes.
15. Kourinou 2000, p. 59 (although she notes the lack of archaeological confirmation of the sources).
17. Plutarch Dem. 35.1; Polyain. 4.7.9.
19. Polybios 4.34.9; Plutarch Kleom. 18 (39). 3.
20. Polybios 2.70; Plutarch Kleom. 30 (51). 1.
23. Livy 34.28–29; lost in Polybios 19.
26. On these events, see Gruen 1984, chaps. 13–14.
27. See the decree proposed by Chremonides: SVA 476 = Austin 48; SyI² 434–5; IG ii² 687.
28. Dated 260 by Tarn 1913, see Walbank 1933, p. 36; Walbank 1984, p. 231, suggests ca. 255.
31. Shipley 2005a; Shipley 2008. These are preparatory papers for a book (in progress) on Macedonian power in the Peloponnese, for which I am grateful to the British Academy for their support in the form of a Senior Research Fellowship for 2004–2005.
32. See generally Cartledge–Spawforth 2002.
33. SGDL 2565; Bradford 1977, p. 312.
34. FGrHist 595.
35. FGrHist 176.
37. Palagia 2006b.
38. Phylarchos, FGH 81, fr. 44 = Athenaeus, iv. 141f–142c. On the date at which the Spartiate training ceased to be enforced, see K.enelli 1995, pp. 12–13 (ca. 255 B.C. at the very latest, probably earlier).
42. Pret 2002.
43. Langridge-Notl 2009. I am grateful to Elizabeth Langridge-Notl for an advance proof of the paper.
45. This is precisely the kind of research to which the Sparta Study Centre, planned by the British School at Athens, will give a boost. The BSA has received a gift of land from Dr. Stratis Stratigis and Miss Despina Stratigi for this purpose and is raising funds to build a research center for scholars and students of all nationalities and for the people of Laconia.
47. Shipley 2002.
49. Shipley 2005b.
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Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Archäologischer Anzeiger</td>
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<td>AD</td>
<td>Αρχαιολογικόν Δελτίον</td>
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<td>AM</td>
<td>Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts: Athenische Abteilung</td>
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<td>BABesch</td>
<td>Bulletin van de Vereeniging tot Bevordering des Kennis van de Antieke Beschaving</td>
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<td>Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique</td>
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<td>BSA</td>
<td>Annual of the British School at Athens</td>
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<td>BWBr</td>
<td>Marburger Winckelmann-Programm</td>
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<td>IG</td>
<td>Inscriptiones Graecae</td>
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<td>JbKuSammBad</td>
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<td>OpAth</td>
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<td>La parola del passato</td>
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<td>RE</td>
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<td>Studi Classici ed Orientali</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BIBLIOGRAPHY 95