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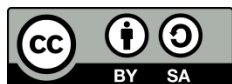
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Spartan King Agesilaus and the Case of Sphodrias

Larisa PECHATNOVA¹

Abstract. *The article explores the tradition about the unsuccessful attempt of the Spartan harmost Sphodrias to capture Piraeus in 378 BC. Since Sphodrias acted without an order, in Sparta he was brought to trial as a state offender. He owed his acquittal solely to king Agesilaus. The analysis of the tradition of Sphodrias' trial leads the author to the conclusion that Agesilaus controlled the entire administration of Sparta, including the judicial panel. In Sphodrias' trial the opinion of one person – Agesilaus – decided the outcome of the vote. The acquittal of Sphodrias initiated by Agesilaus is a weighty testimony to the great authority which this king possessed in the first decades of the 4th century BC (before the battle of Leuctra).*

Rezumat. *Articolul explorează tradiția despre încercarea nereușită a spartanului Sphodrias de a captura Pireul în 370 a. Chr. Sphodria a acționat fără vreun ordin și a fost adus în Sparta pentru judecată în calitate de inamic public. Își datorează achitarea doar regelui Agesilaos. Autoarea ajunge la concluzia că Agesilaos controla întreaga administrație spartană, inclusiv cea judecătorească.*

Keywords: Agesilaus, Cleombrotus, Sphodrias, Phoebidas, Xenophon, Diodorus, Plutarch, Sparta, Thebes.

There is not so much extant information on war crimes committed by high-ranking Spartan officers and the reaction to these incidents among the Spartans. Therefore, the data on Sphodrias (Σφοδρίας), the Spartan *harmost* of Boeotian Thespieae, who at the beginning of 378 BC² decided to deploy a large force to attack Piraeus, the port of Athens, becomes all the more valuable. Regarding Sphodrias' instigators, the particulars of the campaign, the trial of the *harmost* and the role Agesilaus played in it, the extant tradition contains significant discrepancies.

By way of introduction, we would like to note that the first three decades of king Agesilaus' reign more or less coincide with the rise and fall of the Spartan Empire. At the time of Agesilaus' death Sparta already was a lesser state, having lost Messenia and even the position of the leader of the Peloponnesian League. And herein lies the paradox – how was it possible for Sparta to undergo that catastrophic a metamorphosis under the rule of such a talented politician and military leader as Agesilaus (as he is portrayed in the sources)? We will not take it upon ourselves to provide a comprehensive answer to this question here. Rather, we will try to examine one aspect of the problem – to what degree Agesilaus' priorities affected the

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² On the timeline of this offensive, see: CAWKWELL 1973, 56.

foreign policy of Sparta. As evidenced by all our sources, during his reign Agesilaus' politics was inseparable from that of Sparta³. The support that Agesilaus showed to Sphodrias, who was in fact a war criminal, seriously damaged Sparta's reputation and alienated its allies, which later resulted in the formation of an anti-Spartan coalition.

In this article we will endeavour to evaluate Agesilaus' role in the case of Sphodrias. In order to do so, we will examine the existing sources and attempt to collate them while bearing in mind our main purpose.

The most comprehensive account of all the issues regarding Sphodrias' intended attack on Piraeus is given by Xenophon. Apparently, Xenophon's mentioning Sphodrias' raid in his '*Hellenica*' may be explained by the historian's intention to once again portray Agesilaus as a paragon of virtue and loyalty to friends, and also to emphasize the immense authority he held in Sparta. Xenophon's detailed account of Sphodrias' exploits gives us a rare opportunity to gain at least a basic understanding of the power dynamics in Sparta and Agesilaus' social status in the *polis*.

We should now turn to Xenophon's actual account. The Athenian historian clearly connects Sphodrias with king Cleombrotus (380-371 BC). According to his account, Cleombrotus, returning home after the unsuccessful invasion of Boeotia at the beginning of 378 BC, left Sphodrias as the *harmost* of Thespieae with a body of troops and the rest of the money he had at his disposal (Hell. V. 4. 15). Such an appointment is likely to be a testimony to the high position Sphodrias held in the army and the trust the young king placed in him.

Next, Xenophon proceeds to recount the story of Sphodrias' raid itself. He claims that the idea to use Sphodrias for the provocation designed to drive a wedge between Athens and Sparta originated in Thebes. According to him, 'They (the Thebans - *L.P.*) persuaded Sphodrias, the Lacedaemonian governor at the Thespieae, - by giving him money, it was suspected, - to invade Attica, that so he might involve the Athenians in war with the Lacedaemonians' (Hell. V. 4. 20, hereinafter translated by C.L. Brownson). Although Xenophon does not sound absolutely certain talking about the bribe, mentioning that 'it was suspected', it should be noted that, being hostile to Thebes, Xenophon definitely holds the Thebans culpable for initiating Sphodrias' raid or at least wishes to impress this speculation on his readers. That is not surprising, taking into account his obvious animosity towards Thebes. This explains why, describing the Thebans' behaviour, Xenophon claims that they adopted 'the following expedient' (τοιόνδε μηχανήμα) persuading the greedy and narrow-minded Spartan to implement such a patently reckless scheme.

According to Xenophon, Sphodrias agreed to the Thebans' suggestion partly because the task did not seem difficult to him - the reconstruction of the Long Walls started by Conon apparently had not been completed and the harbour did not have the gates yet (Xen. Hell. IV.

³ RUZÉ 2018, 346.

8. 10; Diod. XIV. 85. 2–4)⁴. Sphodrias, planning to make a surprise attack, decided to set off at night⁵.

Xenophon mentions Sphodrias' abnormal behaviour during the march, namely the fact that 'he made no effort to escape observation' (Hell. V. 4. 21). Sphodrias did not attempt to conceal the movement of his troops either when entering the territory of Attica or when leaving it. On the contrary, Xenophon even claims that 'when he [Sphodrias] had turned about, [he] seized cattle and plundered houses' (Hell. V. 4. 21), i.e., openly looted from civilians. As a result, by the break of day Sphodrias was only able to reach the Thriasian plain east to Eleusis. By that time the Athenians already knew 'that a very large army was coming against them' (Hell. V. 4. 21). For a commander intent on keeping his plans secret from the enemy for as long as possible Sphodrias' behaviour seems inexplicable. He was either a bad strategist or had no intention to reach Piraeus in the first place. In any case, Xenophon portrays Sphodrias as a thoughtless and short-sighted person incapable of carefully devising and successfully executing his plans.

The abortive attempt to capture Piraeus led to disastrous consequences for the relationship between Athens and Sparta. The fragile peace was jeopardized. Xenophon writes about what became of the Spartan envoys⁶ who were in Athens at that time; they were staying at Callias', the Spartan *proxenos*. These envoys, according to Xenophon, just happened to be in Athens during Sphodrias' raid. Xenophon says nothing about their mission. On hearing about Sphodrias' foray, the Athenians immediately detained the envoys 'in the belief that they too were concerned in the plot' (Hell. V. 4. 22). However, Xenophon argues that this was not the case and 'that the Lacedaemonian state was not cognizant of this attempt'. That, naturally, was the official narrative, the one Sparta would continue to promote. The envoys assured the Athenians, sincerely, it would seem, that fitting punishment would be administered to Sphodrias as a war criminal (V. 4. 23). They managed to prove their innocence, so the Athenians set them free (V. 4. 24).

It cannot be ruled out that the Spartan envoys' visit to Athens at that time was not a mere coincidence, and neither was Sphodrias' raid. Shortly before these events, a problem

⁴ We believe that the explanation offered by G.L. Cawkwell for why there were no gates is the only plausible one. In his view, 'they had been forbidden, forbidden by the terms of the King's Peace... Athenian naval power was the real Greek threat to the King's interests in Asia; the King might well have demanded that the port be kept open to surveillance... In any case, how else is the oddity of the Piraeus being without gates in 378 to be explained?' : CAWKWELL 1973, 54. This opinion is shared by V. Parker (2007, 29). The hypothesis is also in line with what Xenophon writes about the acquittal of Sphodrias, after which 'the Athenians furnished Piraeus with gates' (Hell. V. 4. 34), since they deemed the King's Peace unequivocally broken by Spartans.

⁵ From the Boeotian border to Piraeus, the troops would have to cover about 50 km, which is too great a distance for a night march. Ch. Hamilton believes that Sphodrias miscalculated the time it would take to cover such a distance: HAMILTON 1991, 167.

⁶ One of the three envoys was Etymocles, a friend of Agesilaus (Hell. V. 4. 32)

arose that could negatively affect the relationship between Athens and Sparta – in the winter of 379/8 BC the Theban exiles, who had previously taken refuge in Athens, overthrew the pro-Spartan regime in Thebes. They received support from Athens; according to Xenophon, it was covert (Hell. V. 4. 9-10), while Diodorus writes that the aid was given openly (XV. 25. 4-26)⁷. In an attempt to reconcile these two theories P. Rhodes suggests that the Athenian troops were only sent to the border of Boeotia but entered its territory of their own accord⁸. That was probably the reason why the Athenians, taking into consideration the still existing Spartan threat, passed the death sentence on two of the three *stratego*i leading this army (Hell. V. 4. 19; Diod. XV. 27. 3). If so, the envoys could have arrived in Athens to voice a protest against the action in support of Thebes by the Athenians.

There is another possible reason for the Spartan envoys' visit to Athens. G. Cawkwell believes that the Spartan *ephors* reacted to the first steps Athens had taken to create the Second Athenian League. The envoys' goal was to protest against this development. In G. Cawkwell's opinion, later the Spartan government showed leniency toward Sphodrias, knowing that he had valid reasons for the radical action he had taken⁹.

After giving an account of the events related to the Spartan envoys, Xenophon proceeds to the last part of Sphodrias' story. As was often the case with transgressing *Spartiates* who were stationed abroad, Sphodrias received the *ephors*' order to return home immediately. In Sparta they 'brought out capital charges against him' (Hell. V. 4. 24). However, according to Xenophon, Sphodrias did not attend his hearing "out of fear", nevertheless, he was acquitted *in absentia*. In Sparta, it was fairly common for the accused facing a death sentence to fail to appear in court. It was done by many a nobleman, including kings; although it should be mentioned that none of them, apart from Sphodrias, was acquitted. One may say that Sphodrias' case is unique in its own way. Regarding this, P.

⁷ Diodorus directly states that 'the Thebans... dispatched envoys to Athens... to request the Athenians to come with all their forces and assist them in reducing Cadmeia before the arrival of the Lacedaemonians' (XV. 25. 4, hereinafter translated by C.H. Oldfather). In response to their plea Athenians passed a decree 'to dispatch as large a force as possible for the liberation of Thebes' (26. 1) and in the winter of 379/8 BC deployed a large detachment headed by Demophon to Thebes, which detachment participated in the siege of 1,500-strong Spartan garrison that had occupied Cadmeia since 382 BC (26. 2-4). Dinarchus, a 4th-century BC orator, also claims in his speech '*Against Demosthenes*' that the aid from Athens was official. He even names the originator of this *psephisma* – one Cephalus, 'who proposed the decree and who... moved that the Athenians should march out to help the exiles who had taken Thebes' (Dinarch. I. 39, translated by J. O. Burtt). In the scholia on Aeschines' speech '*On the Embassy*' (2. 117) it is stated unequivocally that it was the Athenians that ousted the Spartan garrison from Cadmeia (Scholia in Aeschin. Dilts, 85, 257).

⁸ RHODES 2006, 229.

⁹ CAWKWELL 1973, 55. The opinion that the core of the Second Athenian League had been formed before Sphodrias' raid can be found in the works by the following authors: RHODES 2006, 229-230; SEAGER 2008, 166; HORNBLLOWER 2011, 240. While not rejecting the hypothesis, Ch. Hamilton points out that this conjecture is mostly based on Diodorus' account; and the latter is known for frequent mistakes in his chronology (1991, 169). For theories explaining other possible reasons for the Spartan mission, see: PARKER 2007, 22, n. 34-35.

Cartledge notes that ‘in any other Greek city at almost any time Sphodrias’ failure to appear at his trial would have been enough by itself to condemn him’¹⁰.

Xenophon, who understood how highly irregular the situation was, felt compelled to give a detailed explanation of the reason for this seemingly inexplicable acquittal. To achieve that, Xenophon had to bring two new characters into the story, namely, Cleonymus, son of Sphodrias, and Archidamus, son of Agesilaus. Xenophon writes that they were lovers, and that Archidamus as the older one took his young friend under his wing¹¹. At the behest of Cleonymus Archidamus approached his father with a request to spare Sphodrias’s life. Agesilaus refused, stating that he could not acquit a person if, in order to amass wealth, he acted to the detriment of his motherland (Hell. V. 4. 30). Xenophon’s using this phrase indicates that there was no doubt in the king’s mind about Sphodrias’ guilt.

Still, Sphodrias’ trial ended in acquittal under pressure from Agesilaus. Xenophon felt compelled to explain the king’s motives to the reader. Agesilaus believed that Sphodrias deserved leniency and had to be acquitted on the grounds that in the past he had been a model *Spartiate*; ‘but that when, as child, boy, and young man, one has continually performed all the duties of a Spartan, it is a hard thing to put such a man to death; for Sparta has need of such soldiers’ (Hell. V. 4. 32). For Agesilaus, the main or rather, the sole argument in favour of Sphodrias’ acquittal was his exemplary behaviour in the past, which, in the king’s opinion, should have guaranteed his immense value to the state in the future.

It should be noted that, according to Plutarch, a year before Sphodrias’ raid Agesilaus used similar reasoning for openly defending Phoebidas. In the presence of his outraged compatriots Agesilaus stated ‘that they must consider whether the act itself was serviceable or not...’ (ὄτι δεῖ τὴν πράξιν αὐτήν, εἴ τι χρήσιμον ἔχει, σκοπεῖν) (Ages. 23.4, hereinafter translated by B. Perrin). The key phrase here is *τι χρήσιμον* (lit. ‘something useful’). It appears to have been Agesilaus’ credo – any war crime benefitting Sparta merits approval and justification even if it violates all the international norms and existing agreements.

But speaking out in defence of Sphodrias, Agesilaus could not even claim that the former’s crime was in any way beneficial to Sparta – for Sphodrias’ raid appeared an ill-advised and dangerous provocation, harmful to Sparta’s reputation and resulting in nothing but disgrace. Therefore, Agesilaus went no further than pointing out Sphodrias’ value *per se*. So, in this instance the main and, it would seem, the sole defence argument was the testimony that in the past Sphodrias had successfully completed all the stages of Spartan

¹⁰ CARTLEDGE 2000, 20.

¹¹ In I.E. Surikov’s opinion, it cannot be ruled out that the story narrated by Xenophon is an anecdote, originating fairly early on to be used as a reason why Agesilaus chose to protect a person that was not even one of his followers: SURIKOV 2015, 118.

upbringing¹². The defence method employed by Agesilaus seems to have been met with approval due to the following reason.

In Spartan society, an opinion of this or that *Spartiate* was subject to change during all the years he spent in the barracks and it was well-known to the authorities (Xen. Lac. Pol. 4. 6; Aelian. V. h. 14. 7). A citizen's conduct as a child and then a teenager had a profound impact on his further career. The duty of observation of younger generations was entrusted to numerous adult *Spartiates* who were either appointed as special supervisors (Lac. Pol. 2. 2)¹³ or did it as part of their responsibilities as Spartan citizens (2. 10; 3. 3). In all likelihood, Xenophon did not exaggerate the active role that citizens played in the upbringing of young people. Every young *Spartiate* was closely observed by the collective body of citizens and judgements were formed about him not only within a close-knit group of officials, but within the whole community *in corpore*. Taking into account the egalitarian trend existing within the Spartan community, one should note that even boys from noble families could not expect to succeed as a matter of course, they needed to make an effort themselves.

Apparently, Sphodrias' career progressed so well mainly due to the following two factors: his noble lineage and his spectacular achievements in the course of *agoge*. It was probably the result of these circumstances that he became part of an elite *sysstia* whose members could further his career advancement¹⁴ and was selected to join the *hippeis*¹⁵. The high probability of this scenario was pointed out by Ph. Davies, who wrote, 'However, admission to the *hippeis* is a further achievement which we might count among Sphodrias' *kala*¹⁶.

One can infer the approximate balance of power in the *polis* from Xenophon's account of Sphodrias' trial. Xenophon counts Sphodrias among the friends of king Cleombrotus, Agesilaus' co-ruler (Hell. V. 4. 25). Opposing them were Agesilaus' supporters; according to Xenophon, there were also those adopting a neutral attitude. Such an arrangement implies that Sphodrias' judges (presumably it was the *gerontes* and the *ephors*)¹⁷ split into three

¹² Xenophon lists specific terms denoting younger age groups in Sparta: παῖς, παιδίσκος, ἡβών. They reappear in his 'Lacedaemonian Politeia' (2. 2).

¹³ Ph. Davies calculates that 'by the age of twenty any given *Spartiate* youth might have been closely observed from such offices by more than fifty individuals': DAVIES 2018, 484.

¹⁴ According to Plutarch (Lyc. 12. 5-6), it was the messmates who decided whether or not to admit a youth to their 'dining club'. The new member of *sysstia* was likely to find himself among his relatives and elders. The latter became the newly-admitted members' mentors, backers and sexual partners. Consequently, at the age of twenty young people became part of a fairly exclusive club in which their mindset was shaped and social connections were forged.

¹⁵ On the *hippeis*, see: FIGUEIRA 2006, 57-84; DUCAT 2007, 327-40.

¹⁶ DAVIES 2018, 488.

¹⁷ According to *periegetes* Pausanias, 'the court that sat to try a Lacedaemonian king consisted of the senate, "old men" as they were called, twenty-eight in number, the members of the *ephorate*, and in addition the king of the other house' (III. 5. 2, translated by W.H.S. Jones et al.). At present, the consensus among scholars is that the most serious

factions – Agesilaus’ friends, Cleombrotus’ friends, and finally those who did not openly support either of the kings. But on this occasion all three factions unanimously agreed ‘that he (Sphodrias – *L.P.*) had done a dreadful deed’ (δεινὰ γὰρ ἔδόκει πεπονημέναι) (Hell. V. 4. 25). And since Sphodrias, as if adding insult to injury, failed to appear in court, a guilty verdict appeared to be a foregone conclusion. However, the judges’ attitude changed dramatically after Agesilaus expressed his stance on it.

It follows from Xenophon’s account that Agesilaus was disinclined to consider other people’s opinions, including his own son’s requests. Xenophon presents the king’s decision to aid Sphodrias as taken of his own free will. Neither does the historian offer comments on the way Agesilaus’ supporters changed their opinion completely since they were used to following their leader (Hell. V. 4. 32). One person’s point of view – that of king Agesilaus – outweighed other considerations and in their *archagetes*’ wake the judges voted to acquit Sphodrias.

Xenophon’s account of Sphodrias’ trial leaves a rather ambivalent impression. On the face of it, it appears comprehensive and detailed, but in reality this is not the case. An attentive reader will notice Xenophon’s attempts to gloss over the facts likely to damage Sparta’s reputation. For example, there is no information on Sphodrias’ actions once he received the *ephors*’ order to return to Sparta. Xenophon’s attitude to Sphodrias’ acquittal is not very clear either. It would seem that privately he shared the general opinion of the Spartans ‘that that the decision in this case was the most unjust ever known in Lacedaemon’ (V. 4. 24). However, he chose not to denounce Agesilaus’ position on Sphodrias’ case publicly¹⁸.

Apart from Xenophon’s account, the information on Sphodrias’ raid can be found in the writings of the later authors Diodorus and Plutarch. Diodorus presented a concise account of the events, most probably, by seriously abridging Ephorus. At the beginning of his narrative he evaluates Sphodrias’ moral character, calling the Spartan *harmost* thoughtless, greedy and imprudent. In Diodorus’ account the role of the instigator of the raid is played by king Cleombrotus, who, according to the historian, persuaded Sphodrias ‘without the consent of the *ephors* to occupy the Peiraeus’ (XV. 29. 5). Just this phrase is enough to portray Cleombrotus as a reckless opportunist putting his subordinate up to committing gross misconduct. But the king, who had just ascended the throne, would have hardly dared to take such a step. In all likelihood, Diodorus simply repeats the anecdote originating with king Agesilaus’ supporters, who were not averse to maligning the colleague and potential rival of

criminal cases were tried by the panel consisting of the *ephors* and the *gerontes*: RICHER 1998, 411–412; CARTLEDGE 2000, 18.

¹⁸ Sphodrias’ acquittal had far-reaching negative consequences for Sparta. Athens held Sparta accountable for breaking the peace treaty concluded earlier (Diod. XV. 29. 5–6). That resulted in an alliance between Athens and Thebes against Sparta, which was swiftly followed by the finalization of the Second Athenian League – in February or March of 377 BC (Diod. XV. 28. 4; IG II² 43 = Tod 123, 1–5).

their leader. It should be noted that Diodorus is the only one identifying Cleombrotus as Sphodrias' instigator. Unlike Xenophon, he also quotes a figure of more than 10,000 troops under Sphodrias' command (XV. 29. 6), which is probably a gross exaggeration¹⁹.

Sphodrias' trial and acquittal are described by Diodorus in a single sentence: 'He was then denounced before the council of the Spartans, but since he had the kings to support him, he got off by a miscarriage of justice' (XV. 29. 6). According to Diodorus, Sphodrias was wrongfully acquitted through the agency of both kings. In contrast to Xenophon, Diodorus does not single Agesilaus out as the main character responsible for determining Sphodrias' fate and concludes his account with the phrase: 'As a result the Athenians, much vexed at the occurrence, voted that the truce had been broken by the Lacedaemonians' (XV. 29. 7). Diodorus presents Sphodrias' raid as a reckless gamble, and not only from a military point of view. The Athenians deemed his invasion of the territory of Attica as unequivocal peace-breaking and later used his actions as *casus belli*.

Let us now turn to Plutarch, who touches upon our subject matter in two of his biographies – those of Agesilaus and Pelopidas. As a patriot of Boeotia, Plutarch focuses on the famous Theban politicians Pelopidas and Epaminondas, whereas Xenophon studiously avoids all mention of them. Researchers have long noticed this lacuna. Apparently, as V. Parker put it, 'Xenophon's general refusal to mention the two chief architects of the Theban hegemony bespeaks an extreme hostility which might have operated in this case as well'²⁰.

Let us start with 'Agesilaus'. Plutarch is very specific about Sphodrias' position regarding the distribution of political power, mentioning that he was among Agesilaus' opponents. In his typical ambivalent manner, Plutarch confers both virtues and vices on his character – on the one hand, Sphodrias is a brave and ambitious man, on the other hand, 'he always abounded in hopes rather than in good judgement' (24. 3, hereinafter translated by B. Perrin). Plutarch claims that even before any interference on the part of the Thebans Sphodrias already dreamed of seizing glory like Phoebidas who 'made himself famous far and near by his bold deed at Thebes...' (24. 3). This assertion led some researchers to believe that Sphodrias could have acted on his own authority, inspired by the example of Phoebidas. Among such researchers is Ph. Davies, who argues that Sphodrias might have tried to attack Piraeus hoping to impress the Spartan authorities with a bold venture and thus raise his standing at home²¹.

Following in Xenophon's footsteps, Plutarch identifies the direct instigators of Sphodrias' raid as the Thebans and even mentions their names. They were the *boeotarchs* Pelopidas and

¹⁹ UNDERHILL 1900, 205.

²⁰ PARKER 2007, 28.

²¹ DEVIES 2018, 495.

Melo²². Speaking about their ploy, Plutarch uses the same term as Xenophon – μηχανήμα (Ages. 24. 4). Plutarch claims that the agents, sent to the Spartan *harmost*, called themselves Laconian loyalists and in their dealings with Sphodrias relied solely on flattery. Plutarch terms Sphodrias' undertaking as 'lawless and unjust' (πρᾶξιν ἄδικον... και; παράνομον) (24. 4). The description of the raid itself, given by Plutarch, coincides with Xenophon's account. The only difference from the Athenian historian is that Plutarch's narrative contains more details to heighten dramatic effects and also more value judgements. Among those is the fear of sacred Eleusis the soldiers felt, their pillage and plunder, their ignominious and disgraceful retreat to Thespieae (24. 5).

Proceeding with his narrative, Plutarch strictly adheres to Xenophon's version while slightly abridging the latter's account: the description of the balance of power (Ages. 25. 1), the 'cast', the arguments that Agesilaus put forward are the same, to the extent of textual similarities. For instance, in Xenophon's account, Agesilaus concludes his speech in defence of Sphodrias with the phrase 'for Sparta has need of such soldiers' (τὴν γὰρ Σπάρτην τοιούτων δεῖσθαι στρατιωτῶν) (Hell. V. 4. 32), while according to Plutarch, the words are 'the city needed just such soldiers' (τὴν πόλιν... τοιούτων στρατιωτῶν δεομένην) (Ages. 25. 4).

In his '*Pelopidas*' Plutarch also mentions Sphodrias. However, there are discrepancies between this version and the narrative of '*Agesilaus*'. It would appear that at least some details, especially those concerning the Thebans, are more precise. The scheme to set Sparta and Athens at loggerheads was devised by the two *boeotarchs* Pelopidas and Gorgidas²³ (14. 1). Plutarch refers to Pelopidas as the mastermind behind the provocation. According to him, Pelopidas 'privately' (ιδίῳ) sent a merchant he was acquainted with to Sphodrias with a task to bribe the latter and incite him to attack Piraeus (14. 2). It should be noted that there is no mention of bribery in '*Agesilaus*'. On the whole, Plutarch's version does not differ significantly from Xenophon's account. Plutarch merely added some details that he must have learned from the Boeotian tradition.

In conclusion, our sources do not provide a definite answer to the question of who might have been behind Sphodrias' decision to attack Piraeus. Xenophon and Plutarch consider the Thebans as Sphodrias' instigators while Diodorus is of the opinion that it was king Cleombrotus. Let us first examine the version with the Thebans. There are scholars refuting this hypothesis, A. MacDonald among them. While he alleges that Xenophon fabricated events that had never happened and ascribed to the Thebans something, they had

²² In 379 BC the Theban exiles liberated Thebes, overthrowing the pro-Spartan 'tyrants' and ousting the Spartan garrison, and restored the former regime. Electing the *boeotarchs* presaged the restoration of the Boeotian Confederacy, which happened shortly afterwards.

²³ A close associate of Epaminondas and the one who formed the famous Sacred Band consisting of 300 warriors, apparently, in imitation of the Spartan *hippeis* (Plut. Pelop. 18-19).

never done²⁴, A. MacDonald does not produce any compelling evidence in support of this theory.

We believe it is counterproductive to reject this hypothesis as either false or Xenophon's fabrication simply on the grounds that he was extremely hostile to the Thebans and was willing to spread any scurrilous rumours about the Theban leaders. We share the much more balanced view expressed by R. Seager, the author of the chapter devoted to the King's Peace and the Second Athenian Confederacy in CAH (2nd ed.). In R. Seager's opinion, the Thebans were most probably the instigators behind Sphodrias' raid, for they were particularly interested in provoking a war between Sparta and Athens, thus 'the motive ascribed to the Thebans is rational and cogent'²⁵.

While expressing certain reservations, V. Parker, nevertheless, accepts this narrative as well. He believes it was the Thebans who incited Sphodrias to try to seize Piraeus, but casts doubt on Xenophon's assertion that Sphodrias was corrupt. In Parker's opinion, this detail is Xenophon's fabrication. He points out that the motif of resorting to bribery to influence military commanders is a *topos* frequently used by Greek historians²⁶. We would like to note, however, that Xenophon is unlikely to have fabricated this story, but he may well have spread the rumours floating around in Sparta. This is a possible interpretation of his comment 'it was suspected' (ὡς ὑπωπτεύετο) about the bribe offered to Sphodrias (Hell. V. 4. 20). Apparently, every time Spartan military leaders committed any dubious or questionable acts, rumours abounded that the said leaders had been bribed²⁷.

In the wake of Diodorus some researchers consider king Cleombrotus as a possible instigator behind the raid. Such assumptions are largely based on guesswork and inference – since Cleombrotus appointed Sphodrias as *harmost* of Thespieae, it logically follows that the latter belonged to the king's inner circle. For instance, A. MacDonald, the author of an article on Sphodrias' raid, suggests that Sphodrias received a secret order from Cleombrotus to invade Attica and capture Piraeus. MacDonald believes that it was impossible for Sphodrias to act on his own initiative and that there must have been one of the kings behind it. Since Agesilaus, according to MacDonald, became implicated in this case *post factum*, it leaves Cleombrotus as the only possible instigator of the attack on Piraeus. Apart from the above-mentioned conclusion, MacDonald does not present any compelling arguments in favour of this hypothesis²⁸.

²⁴ MACDONALD 1972, 38–39.

²⁵ SEAGER 2008, 167.

²⁶ PARKER 2007, 23, n. 38.

²⁷ In Sparta it was common practice for judges to convict even those whose guilt was not conclusively proved. For instance, that was the case with the kings Cleomenes (Hdt. VI. 82; 50; 64) and Agis II (Thuc. V. 63; Diod. XII. 78), and possibly with Pasippidas, the *nauparch* in 410/409 BC (Xen. Hell. I. 1. 32).

²⁸ MACDONALD 1972, 38–44. См. ТАКЖЕ CARTLEDGE 2000, 19.

However, other researchers tend to share Ed. Meyer's point of view and as a rule, consider it unlikely that it was king Cleombrotus who incited Sphodrias. According to these scholars, Cleombrotus, who had just become a king, was in the shadow of his much more powerful co-ruler king Agesilaus and would have never dared to give such a suicidal order. As for Diodorus, the conclusion he arrived at was based on Xenophon's reference to Sphodrias as a friend of Cleombrotus (Hell. V. 4. 25)²⁹.

In our view, the most reasonable explanation was proposed by Ch. Hamilton. According to him, there is a kernel of truth in both versions about Sphodrias' instigators that our sources provide. King Cleombrotus left Sphodrias in Boeotian Thespieae, and the instructions the latter received should have been general in nature rather than specific. The king probably ordered Sphodrias to prevent any anti-Spartan actions on the part of Athens, whereas the Theban *boeotarchs* sent their agents to Sphodrias to incite him to commit a rash act by reminding him about Phoebidas' 'remarkable feat' of capturing Cadmeia, which turned him into a hero in many of his compatriots' eyes³⁰.

Although none of our sources offers even a slight hint about Agesilaus' influence on Sphodrias, the former is frequently perceived as a manipulator using the latter as his puppet. Scholars probably reach this conclusion since it would conform to the image of Agesilaus as the central figure of Spartan history for several decades of the 4th century BC. The researchers viewing Agesilaus as the mastermind behind Sphodrias believe that it would not be possible to think of any significant foreign policy move that did not involve Agesilaus³¹. Despite that, they offer no explanation that would cover the total silence of our sources in this case. Sometimes researchers try to establish the connection between Sphodrias and Agesilaus through Phoebidas. As we know, in the summer of 382 BC Phoebidas and his troops seized Thebes and helped to install a pro-Spartan regime there. The act was absolutely unlawful since at that time the King's Peace still remained in force. It is speculated that the mastermind behind Phoebidas' actions was Agesilaus³² and, unlike the case of Sphodrias, evidence of this can be found in the sources.

For instance, Plutarch writes about persistent rumours circulating among the Greeks and Spartans, 'that while Phoebidas had done the deed, Agesilaus had counselled it' and adds later that 'his subsequent acts brought the charge into general belief' (Ages. 24. 1). Diodorus goes even further than this and attributes the capture of Cadmeia to a secret order allegedly given to all the Spartan military leaders, 'if ever they found an opportunity, to take

²⁹ MEYER 1902, 379; LUR'E 1935, 317.

³⁰ HAMILTON 1991, 169.

³¹ See: MEYER 1902, 205, 294.

³² SMITH 1954, 279; CAWKWELL 1976, 79; SEAGER 2008, 160.

possession of the Cadmeia' (XV. 20. 2). This assertion of Diodorus is, in all likelihood, a gross exaggeration³³.

Keeping his hero and patron's misdeeds secret, as was his wont, Xenophon does not state directly that Agesilaus instigated Phoebidas to seize Cadmeia. However, the Athenian historian broadly hints at Agesilaus' involvement in Phoebidas' case and his vested interest in the latter's acquittal. Agesilaus' defence proved effective and although the court found Phoebidas guilty of criminal wrongdoing and imposed a huge fine of 100,000 *drachmas* (approx. 17 *talents*) on him (Plut. Ages. 6. 1; Diod. XV. 20. 2), still, Cadmeia remained under Sparta's control³⁴. It implies that the Spartan authorities sanctioned the capture of Cadmeia, while Phoebidas' trial and fine were nothing but a fig leaf to cover up blatant aggression. In all probability, Agesilaus himself could have paid the fine for his protégé. It would be in keeping with his policy of supporting those demonstrating unswerving loyalty to him. Even after the trial Phoebidas remained part of Agesilaus' inner circle and enjoyed his full confidence (Hell. V. 4. 41).

But while there is extant information about Agesilaus' influence on Phoebidas, in the case of Sphodrias it is but guesswork and speculation. It is hardly surprising that when Lur'e wished to prove that the figure behind Sphodrias was also Agesilaus, he proposed a hypothesis that even he himself called 'somewhat fantastic'. He speculated that the *boeotarchs* Melo and Pelopidas, who incited Sphodrias to attack Piraeus (Ages. 24. 4), had been sent by Agesilaus³⁵; while the narrative of it being the Boeotian stratagem, which Xenophon promoted, appeared among the Spartan establishment *post factum* and its authorship should be attributed to Agesilaus. According to S. Lur'e, local Boeotian historians happily took up the anecdote while suitably embellishing it and it was this source that Plutarch later borrowed the information from³⁶.

The hypothesis suggested by Lur'e is speculative and implausible, for the existing tradition does not contain a shred of evidence of secret control Agesilaus might have exercised over Sphodrias. Xenophon makes it very clear that Sphodrias' backer was Cleombrotus and not Agesilaus. Regarding the king's unexpected decision to speak in Sphodrias' defence, the reason probably lies in Agesilaus' attitude to every *Spartiates* as being of value to the city. It is also possible that Agesilaus wished to demonstrate the level of control he had over the court to his younger co-ruler. This behaviour indicates that Agesilaus was skilled at political manipulation and knew how to create a favourable impression and secure the desired results.

³³ SEAGER 2008, 160.

³⁴ On Phoebidas' trial, see also: Polyb. IV. 27. 6; Nepot. Pelop. 1. 3.

³⁵ LUR'E 1935, 318.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Throughout his life Agesilaus took pains to appear a modest person temperate in all things (Xen. Ages. 8. 6–7; 11. 11); when circumstances warranted it, he would readily make a considerable financial sacrifice (Xen. Ages. 11. 3; 8; 11; Plut. Ages. 4. 1). His efforts bore fruit – he won numerous supporters in Sparta, forming his clientage in this way. It should be noted that Agesilaus did not limit himself to Sparta alone. He had a vast circle of guest-friends (*xenoi*) in many Greek cities including religious sites influential throughout the Greek world, such as the Delphic oracle³⁷. Some of these connections were inherited from his forefathers; some were forged by Agesilaus himself (Xen. Hell. V. 3. 13). As a result of his long-standing efforts to form a ‘cohort of friends’, a significant part of high-ranking magistrates, including the *ephors* and the *gerontes* (Ages. 4. 3), fell under Agesilaus’ sway, which gave him an opportunity to use their votes in court as he saw fit. As N. Birgalias put it, such powerful and long-reigning kings as Agesilaus definitely could have used the *gerousia* to pass off their own political ambitions as group decisions³⁸.

Xenophon admired this characteristic of Agesilaus – his dedication to helping and supporting his friends in any way, sparing no expense, nor effort. He called this peculiar trait of the king’s character ‘love for friends’ (φιλεταιρία). In P. Pontier’s words, Xenophon portrays Agesilaus as the embodiment of a military or political leader who prefers scattering wealth among friends to amassing it³⁹. In Xenophon’s wake Plutarch also elaborates on the theme of love for friends. According to the author, Agesilaus was willing to support his friends even if they had committed a crime, for he prioritized friendship over law – ‘Indeed, although in other matters he (Agesilaus. – *L.P.*) was exact and law-abiding, in matters of friendship he thought that rigid justice was a mere pretext’ (Ages. 13. 3).

Concerning Agesilaus’ intervention first on behalf of Phoebidas and later Sphodrias, it is very difficult to draw a line between the private and public interests. The line is blurry indeed. But this utmost care he took of forging and maintaining friendships, which both Xenophon and Plutarch view as a special virtue, occasionally incited the king to unfathomable actions, his defence of Sphodrias being one of them. Since the sources give no clear answer, a wide range of views concerning Agesilaus’ possible motives exists.

For instance, P. Cartledge believes that intervening on Sphodrias’ behalf, Agesilaus wanted to wrest a powerful supporter from his co-ruler Cleombrotus, since ‘Sphodrias once acquitted would now owe nothing less than his life to Agesilaos and might therefore be expected no longer to support his likely original patron, Agesilaos’ rival king

³⁷ Regarding Delphi, Agesilaus spared no expense. While waging war against the Persian king in Asia Minor, in the span of two years (396-395 BC) he donated a huge sum – more than a hundred *talents* – to the Delphic oracle (Xen. Hell. IV. 3. 21; Ages. 1. 34).

³⁸ BIRGALIAS 2007, 348.

³⁹ PONTIER 2016, 291.

Kleombrotos...⁴⁰. However, in our opinion, Cleombrotus was not that powerful a figure to make Agesilaus intervene in the trial solely to poach one of his friends.

Ch. Hamilton speculates that among the reasons why Agesilaus chose to support Sphodrias one was that ‘Agesilaus may have wished to reduce the degree of opposition to himself and his policies from Cleombrotus’ faction’⁴¹. This conclusion is in line with what Plutarch writes about Agesilaus’ objective to widen the circle of people indebted to him. To achieve this goal the king could have aided those potentially hostile to him in order to turn them into his friends (Ages. 20. 4).

Another possible explanation of Agesilaus’ goodwill towards Sphodrias is provided by R. Seager. In his view, Agesilaus felt confident about his *polis*’ power. He definitely overestimated Sparta’s resources and capabilities thinking that his state was able to fight on two fronts against both Thebes and Athens⁴². Therefore, Agesilaus was not overly concerned about Sphodrias’ offering the Athenians an opening to break the King’s Peace. We believe that R. Seager’s version has some plausibility to it. In the course of his long years as a ruler (399-360 BC) Agesilaus consolidated both political and military power in his hands (Xen. Ages. 1. 7; Diod. XIV. 79. 1; Plut. Lys. 23; Ages. 6). However, even experienced politicians are not immune to making mistakes. The king might have overestimated the Athenians’ tolerance and carelessly disregarded their demand that Sphodrias should be punished for invading Attica. As we see it, choosing to intervene on Sphodrias’ behalf, Agesilaus had a variety of reasons. Among them probably was the desire to save Sphodrias from execution by any means necessary and let him retain full civil rights. This is the conclusion reached by P. Cartledge, Ch. Hamilton and I.E. Surikov⁴³. They believe that another factor which could have affected Agesilaus’ position on Sphodrias was the need to keep alive each and every Spartan citizen, since the long-term process of *oliganthropia*⁴⁴ did not go unnoticed by the king. This concern might have arisen from the fact that the Spartan authorities had become acutely aware how severe the problem was with the falling numbers of *Spartiates* joining the army. Thus, as I.E. Surikov observes, ‘the king’s statements that it is not appropriate to squander valiant warriors, wrongdoers though they are, could have been made in a sincere and responsible manner’⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ CARTLEDGE 2000, 20.

⁴¹ HAMILTON 1991, 172.

⁴² SEAGER 2008, 168.

⁴³ CARTLEDGE 1987, 158; HAMILTON 1991, 172; SURIKOV 2015, 119.

⁴⁴ By the end of the 5th century BC the process of population decline – so-called *oliganthropia* (ὀλιγανθρωπία – lit. ‘fewness of persons’) – had reached catastrophic proportions. In his “*Lacedaemonian Politeia*” Xenophon calls Sparta one of the least populated cities in Greece (1.1). No other Greek *polis* suffered from such a phenomenon as *oliganthropia*. See: DORAN 2018, 1-106.

⁴⁵ SURIKOV 2015, 119.

Without Agesilaus' intervening in Sphodrias' trial the guilty verdict would have been a foregone conclusion, as evidenced by all our sources. There is no other such case in the history of Sparta when one person's opinion became a sufficient reason to acquit a known war criminal. Naturally, the kings attending a hearing in court along with the *gerontes* and the *ephors* did have a certain influence on some of the judges, but never before had this influence been as absolute as in Agesilaus' case. This indicates that, unlike all the previous Spartan kings, Agesilaus managed to concentrate real power in his hands, effectively sidelining his co-rulers. Judging by the outcome of Sphodrias' trial, Agesilaus had the majority of votes in the *gerousia* as well. Since the ruling class in Sparta was rather small in number, it was enough to win over several dozens of *Spartiates* from among the *gerontes*, the *ephors* and the generals. Apparently, Agesilaus succeeded admirably in it: he led a demonstratively simple life, showed proper deference to the magistrates (Plut. Ages. 19) and gave generously to the fellow citizens in distressed circumstances, all of which helped him to draw into his orbit quite a few supporters from the Spartan elite. During the long years of his reign Agesilaus managed to avoid conflict with the *ephors* and the *gerontes*, as a result he was never brought to trial. Very few kings both before and after him had such an achievement to their name. The example of Sphodrias' acquittal is enough to demonstrate that at the time Agesilaus had a powerful influence on the court. The king's power, which was bolstered by military achievements and personal prestige, turned Agesilaus into the most influential Spartan politician. But his cynical disregard of conventional moral norms, his unwillingness to reckon with the allies and his defiance of international law would sometimes produce the results he had never expected. For instance, his intervention in Sphodrias' trial led to disastrous consequences both for Sparta and for himself.

It should be noted that there is an obvious connection between Sphodrias' acquittal and the formation of the Second Athenian League. In this case Agesilaus proved to be a short-sighted politician incapable of foreseeing all the consequences of his decision to save Sphodrias by any means possible. This is a conclusion that Ch. Hamilton arrives at. According to him, 'Contemporaries of Xenophon must have recognized that the Athenian decision to go forward with the diplomatic efforts to establish a second maritime alliance was the result of Agesilaus' decision about Sphodrias, and thus it represented for him a foreign policy failure of great proportions'⁴⁶. From that moment on, Agesilaus' popularity started to decline both in Sparta and outside of it, for, as Plutarch puts it, '...he had opposed the course of justice in a trial and made the city accessory to great crimes against the Greeks' (Ages. 26. 1).

The too long time spent in office by the king who was ambitious and valued power above all else was not always in the best interests of Sparta. Agesilaus, being well-versed in manipulation and intrigue, succeeded in getting under his sway not only the weak and

⁴⁶ HAMILTON 1991, 173.

inexperienced kings from the Agiad dynasty but also a large portion of the ruling elite, although not all of it. The trials of Phoebidas and Sphodrias demonstrated that part of the leadership elite opposed the too aggressive and heavy-handed foreign policy implemented under Agesilaus⁴⁷. But Agesilaus, controlling the majority of votes in the *gerousia* and commanding the support of the *ephors*, was able to suppress criticism on the part of the opposition. Even when a known war criminal was put on trial, Agesilaus still managed to subjugate those doubters and force his opinion on them. Several clearly erroneous verdicts that were initiated by Agesilaus and forced on the *gerousia* had devastating consequences for Sparta. The situation connected with the case of Sphodrias that we explore in this article sheds light on the position Agesilaus occupied in Sparta and allows us to assess the extent of his responsibility for wrecking the Spartan Empire.

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⁴⁷ RUZ E 2018, 340.

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