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CONQUERORS, COLONIZERS AND ENSLAVERS: THE MANY ROOTS OF SPARTAN LACONIA

Gabriel Cabral Bernardo[1]

Abstract

In recent decades, the study of ancient Spartan history has advanced considerably, particularly through the contextualization of later elements attributed to its archaic past. However, this approach has not been widely applied to the histories of other parts of Laconia, which have often been treated as mere appendages to Spartan history. The aim of this article, therefore, is to examine the traditions concerning how various communities of the *perioikoi* in Laconia were historically intertwined with Sparta, and to identify the possible historical layers that constitute them. To this end, a diachronic reading is undertaken of Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman narratives describing how Dorians, Spartans, Achaeans, Argives, Arcadians, Ionians, and Athenians conquered, colonized, and enslaved Laconian communities in antiquity. It is argued that such narratives actually reflect a constant renegotiation of perioikic ties with archaic traditions (not only Spartan ones). This makes it possible to write local histories of the *perioikoi*, taking into account the extent to which these renegotiations influenced the archaic memory of both Sparta and Laconia.

Keywords

Laconia; perioikoi; Sparta; tradition; Heraclids; ethnos

[1] Adjunct Professor – Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Brazil. E-mail: gabriel.c.bernardo@ufsc.br.

Resumo

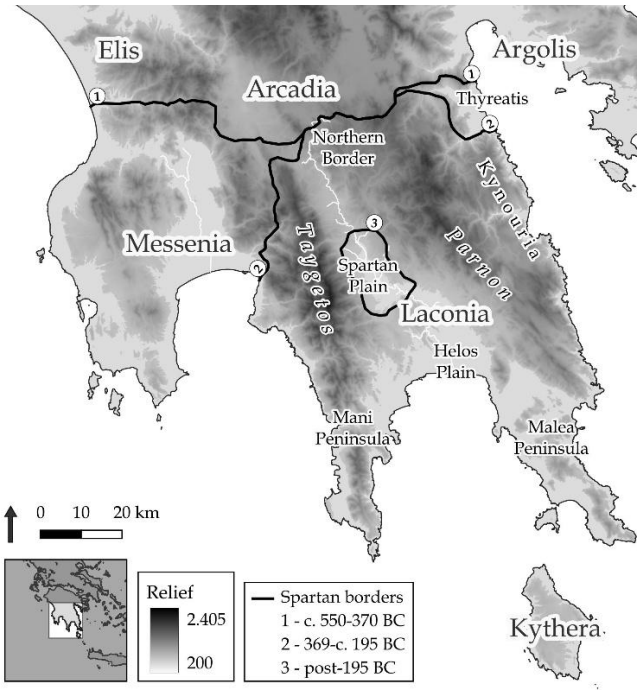
A história antiga de Esparta passou por um desenvolvimento significativo nas últimas décadas, principalmente pela contextualização de elementos tardios atribuídos a seu passado arcaico. Contudo, a mesma abordagem não foi amplamente aplicada à história de outras partes da Lacônia, dada sua posição comum como apêndice da história espartana. O objetivo deste artigo é, assim, examinar as tradições sobre como diversas comunidades periecas da Lacônia tiveram suas histórias entrelaçadas à de Esparta, bem como identificar as possíveis camadas históricas que as compuseram. Nesse sentido, será realizada uma leitura diacrônica das narrativas clássicas, helenísticas e romanas sobre como dórios, espartanos, aqueus, argivos, arcádios, jônios e atenienses conquistaram, colonizaram e escravizaram comunidades lacônias em passados remotos. Argumenta-se que tais narrativas parecem ser, na verdade, produtos de uma constante renegociação dos vínculos periecos com tradições arcaicas (não apenas espartanas). Podemos, assim, escrever histórias locais *periecas*, considerando o quanto essas renegociações influenciaram a memória arcaica de Esparta e da Lacônica.

Palavras-chave

Lacônia; periecos; Esparta; tradição; Heráclidas; ethnos.

Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that one of the pillars of historiography on Classical-period Sparta is the critical assessment of the (often anachronistic) information provided by later sources (e.g. Hodkinson, 2000, p. 19–60). However, until recently this critical work has been directed almost exclusively toward Sparta itself, while *Lakonikē*,[2] the broader region under Spartan influence, has remained relatively untouched in Sparta's shadow. Some scholars have recently begun to open new perspectives by considering both archaeological material from specific sites and the literary traditions preserved in ancient sources (e.g., Müller, 2023; Pavlides, 2025). One theme in particular, however, still appears to be relatively unexplored: the archaic pasts attributed to the many non-Spartan communities that inhabited *Lakonikē*.



Map 1 – Regions of the Southern Peloponnese and Laconia. Source: prepared by the author.

[2] *Lakoniké* is the term used by ancient sources to refer to the entire territory under the direct political influence of Sparta. *Lakoniké* therefore comprises the whole southern half of the Peloponnese, formed by the regions of Messenia and Laconia (to the west and east of the Taygetus mountain range, respectively) (see fig. 1). In other words, the reader must keep in mind the distinction between "*Lakoniké*" (the entire region under Spartan influence) and "Laconia" (the southeastern part of the Peloponnese, east of the Taygetus range).

Before proceeding, it is necessary to acknowledge that the ancient sources themselves say very little about the history of the many Messenian and Laconian communities, specially regarding their pre-Classical past. Even the archaic history of the larger communities, such as Sparta itself, was written later and, for that reason as well, must be approached with caution (cf. Starr, 1965; ver Clements, 2022). Archaeology, it is true, helps to somewhat mitigate this picture: several sanctuaries of the *perioikis*,[3] for instance, have produced significant collections of artifacts that, in various ways, allow us to question the extent to which the structures consolidated in the Classical period were already present or still in development before the fifth century.[4] The study by Florentia Fragkopoulou (2010) is one example of such possibilities, examining what the material culture of Laconian sanctuaries can tell us about the formation of collective identities between 1200 and 600. The author argues that traditional narratives, which combine heterogeneous details drawn from late, non-Laconian sources while disregarding the material evidence, have ultimately produced problematic arguments. One such argument concerns precisely the helots[5] and the *perioikoi*: the relative coherence of material culture across sanctuaries in Laconia and Sparta has been taken to support the idea of a Spartan dominance so pervasive as to leave no room for the expression of difference. The process by which the division between *perioikoi* and helots took shape, however, likely required a considerably longer period of development and may, in the end, have simply conditioned a relatively cohesive context in which ethnic differentiations (at least insofar as material culture is concerned) were not a pressing concern.[6]

The scarcity of literary references to the other inhabitants of the *Lakonikē* becomes less pronounced from the Classical period onward, as scattered accounts of specific communities in Laconia and Messenia begin to appear in

[3] *Perioikis* is the term used to refer to the territory occupied, within *Lakonike*, by the *perioikoi*, free inhabitants of towns and villages that were largely autonomous, yet politically dependent on Sparta. On the nature of the relationship between the *perioikoi* and Spartans, see Bernardo, 2022.

[4] All dates and centuries cited here are BC unless otherwise indicated.

[5] Helots was the collective designation used to refer to the enslaved population privately owned by the Spartans, responsible, among many other tasks, for cultivating Spartan estates in Laconia and Messenia. For a more precise definition of the helot system of enslavement, see Lewis, 2018: 125–146.

[6] Fragkopoulou, 2010: 232–235; see also Clements, 2021 for the process of territorialization of the *Lakonikē* by Sparta and Delahaye, 2022 on the coherence of the Laconian material culture.

a range of authors, from Herodotus to Pausanias in the Roman period. These accounts, mostly narratives of a remote past, have fueled debates about the origins of perioikic and helotic communities, in which such traditions (frequently mythological) are often treated as containing kernels of truth capable of offering glimpses into the archaic history of the *Lakonikē* (e.g. Koiv, 2003: 69–140). This article does not pursue this line of enquiry, namely that of providing a solid answer to the question of the origin of the perioikic communities in general, or of the enslavement and spatial distribution of the helots.[7] On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge, as Irad Malkin (1994: 3–6) has argued, that it would be mistaken to assume that narratives about the remote, at times mythological, past of historical communities lie outside of history, or that they possess no historical attitude whatsoever. On the other hand, such narratives (as I would argue) are best understood in the context in which they were told, in which they simultaneously reflect and/or propose narratives about the community they concern (cf. Dowden, 1992: 41–66). In this sense, this paper will not seek in the narratives considered here a past preserved like a fossil in amber. The primary aim will be to situate these traditions as firmly as possible within their historical context, identifying the possible events and conjunctures that may have influenced them, or that were in turn influenced by them, from the fifth century BCE onwards — when it is known with some certainty that Spartan hegemony over *Lakonikē* was already consolidated.

As the mythological narratives of interest are found primarily in literary sources, I will not address the material evidence from individual perioikic settlements in the *Lakonikē*. In addition, given the constraints of space, I will focus only on the perioikic communities of Laconia mentioned in the ancient sources, those most relevant to the present argument for having remained dependent on Sparta for a longer period.[8] An extensive catalogue of the

[7] Concerning the political and ethnic origins of the *perioikoi*, Cartledge (2002: 84–85) presents what is, from my perspective, the most plausible proposal (which is still largely speculative) given the available sources: the *perioikic* communities maintained different relations with Sparta and were thus submitted through different methods, but constituted a single status group by the late Archaic period (cf. Shipley, 1992: 214). For a cross-analysis of the traditions regarding the origins of the helots' status and the archaeological data from the region of Helos, in Laconia, see Bernardo, 2025: 344–353.

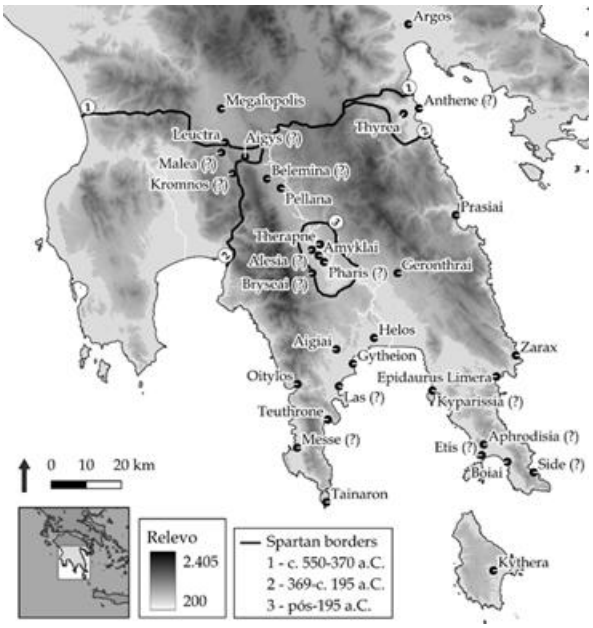
[8] The region of Messenia was largely freed from Spartan control, along with its inhabitants, in 369, when an army led by the Theban Epaminondas invaded the region and (re)founded Messene (see Kralli, 2017: 24–26). As for Laconia, most of it was placed under the protection of the Achaean League in 195, thus bringing its relationship of political dependence on Sparta to an end (see Shipley, 2000).

Laconian settlements mentioned in the ancient sources was compiled by Graham Shipley (2004), and the present study will draw primarily upon it. The analysis naturally takes Spartan traditions as its point of departure, as it would be surprising if these had not influenced at least some of the narratives associated with other Laconian communities. In this regard, the discussion begins with general mythological narratives concerning the impact of the Return of the Heracleidae on the *Lakonikē*, as these relate to the foundational myth that justified Spartan dominance over the rest of the region. Against this background, it will be possible to better understand what I take to be the three phases in the construction of mythic narratives about the histories of perioikic communities in Laconia, developed between the sixth century BC and the second century AD.

The Return of the Heracleidae and the Conquest of Laconia

Beginning with the earliest phase of Spartan Laconian history, we know that by Tyrtaeus' (fr. 2 West) time, in the second half of the seventh century, the narrative of the Return of the Heracleidae and their settlement in Sparta (in the *city*, as he uses the term πόλιν) was already established – the same occasion in which the city was also settled by the Dorians who accompanied them. Two centuries later, in one of Pindar's *Isthmian Odes* (7.12–15), two additions to this narrative appear: the conquest of the city of Amyklai with the help of the Aegeidae, members of a family of Theban origin who were nevertheless connected to the Heraclid royal lineages of Sparta (Hdt. 4.147.1–3, 149; cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 5.74–76). In the same fifth century, Herodotus (1.82) attributes the conquest of the entire eastern part of Laconia – from the Thyreatis, on the border with the Argolid, to the island of Kythera, including the entire Malea Peninsula – to the so-called Battle of the Champions, which he dates to the mid-sixth century. We thus find the construction of a narrative of a gradual Spartan conquest of Laconia: first the Spartan plain, with the settlement of Dorians and Thebans in Sparta and the conquest of Amyklai, and later the entire eastern coast of Laconia and the island of Kythera. This same tradition seems to be echoed by Isocrates (6.24) in the fourth century, who mentions *en passant* the recovery of Lakedaimon[9] by the Spartans/Dorians after defeating those who previously held it.

[9] "Lakedaimon" most often corresponds to Sparta, although the *perioikoi* were also referred to as "Lakedaimonians" (see Ducat, 2018: 608–612).



Map 2 – Laconian communities and other cities mentioned in the text. Source: prepared by the author.

Further additions appear in fragments attributed to Theopompus of Chios (*FGrH* 115 F 13, 122) and Hellanicus of Lesbos (*FGrH* 4 F 188), which narrate more specifically the process of conquest and enslavement of the helots – later repeated by Pausanias (3.20.6). According to this account, the helots were originally free, native inhabitants of the region of Helos in Laconia (ethnically Achaean, according to Theopompus), who were enslaved following the Spartan conquest of the area. Much later, in the first century CE, Plutarch (*Lyc.* 2.1) appears to further develop this tradition by attributing to Soos (king of one of the two royal houses that ruled Laconia after the Return of the Heracleidae) both the enslavement of the helots and the conquest of lands from the Arcadians, supposedly to the north of Sparta. This seems to be the tradition that Pausanias (3.12.9), in the second century CE, organizes according to his genealogies of the Spartan royal houses. In the course of this (re)organization, however, Pausanias places the conflicts over territories on the border with the Argolis – Kynouria (3.2.2–3; 3.7.2) and Thyreatis (3.7.5) – in a more remote past than that suggested by Herodotus. This is likely due, above all, to the popularization of the idea that Sparta and Argos had maintained a rivalry since time immemorial, such that a single, more recent battle, like the one narrated by Herodotus, would not suffice for his account (ver Kelly, 1970; Bernardo, 2025b: 121–129, 148–149). Pausanias (3.2.5–7) also attributes the conquest of Aigys, located in the frontier region north of Sparta, to the kings Archelaus and Charilaus, rather than to Soos, as Plutarch seems

to have done. It is worth noting that, up to this point, there is no mention of any area south of Helos, especially the Mani Peninsula, the southwestern part of Laconia.

Returning to the fourth century, a different account from that of gradual conquest is presented by Ephorus of Kyme (*FGrH* 70 F 117). According to this historian, following the arrival of the Heracleidae in Laconia, Eurysthenes and Procles, the first kings of the two Spartan royal houses, begin their dynasties ruling over the entire region between Aigys and Las, two of the six cities they are said to have founded, the others being Amyklai, Pharis, Helos and Sparta. The native Achaean inhabitants are expelled from the territory (cf. Strab. 8.5.5), with Ephorus adding, interestingly, that the region was subsequently resettled by anyone "of the foreigners who wished" to inhabit it.

Therefore, it is possible to argue that there were at least two traditions concerning the subjugation of Laconia by the Heracleidae or by the Spartans. The first, apparently developed between the seventh century BCE and the second century CE, narrates a gradual conquest of much of Laconia (Aigys, the Spartan plain, Helos, Kynouria, and Thyreatis). In this account, the only non-Dorian group to take part in the conquests, and thus in the reoccupation of the territory, are the Aegeidae, who had Theban ancestry. The second tradition, apparently dating to the fourth century BC, proposes an immediate conquest of most of central Laconia (from Aigys to Las), settled not only by Dorians but also by any foreigners willing to establish themselves there. This does not mean that, prior to the fourth century, Laconian populations that did not identify as Dorian were not recognized as such. Herodotus (8.73.2), for instance, writing in the fifth century, notes that the Kynourians claimed to be of Ionian stock, and we know that the Spartans settled Aeginetans in Thyreatis at the end of the fifth century, after they had been expelled from Aegina by the Athenians at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War (Thuc. 2.27.2; 4.56.2). Even so, despite awareness of such populations, the narrative of the gradual conquest of central Laconia appears to admit non-Dorian occupation only at a later stage, whereas Ephorus' account of immediate conquest asserts the presence of other ethnic groups from the outset of the Heraclid/Dorian settlement. It is against this background that the narratives associated with specific Laconian communities must be analyzed.

The Foundation Traditions of the Laconian Perioikic Communities

Of the 57 known Laconian communities (excluding Sparta), 32 have at least one tradition associated with their foundation. Some were assigned more than one tradition; thus, a total of 43 accounts of the remote past of different communities have been identified, with protagonists that vary considerably. Figures predating the Heracleidae takeover of Laconia ("pre-Heracleidae") are the most prominent, associated with the archaic history of twelve. Next come the Heracleidae of the Return narrative, associated with six, perhaps seven, communities – there is a specific tradition concerning Boios, founder of Boiai on the Malea Peninsula, who was said to be a descendant of Heracles, but who does not seem to have been connected to the Return narrative itself. Argives appear associated with five communities, and Arcadians with four. Dardanians, essentially those who accompanied Aeneas in his flight from Troy, are connected to three communities, while Lybians (linked to Danaus) appear in the traditions of two communities, as do Aeginetans and Lakedaimonianz. Achaeans, Athenians, Dorians, Epidaurians, Ionians, and divinities were each responsible for the settlement of at least one community in ancient Laconia.

There are many ways to approach these data. One is to seek the likely motivations for a given tradition within a specific historical context and, from there, to date it to that context. Alternatively, these traditions can be considered either very ancient stories preserved over centuries or as innovations whose meanings were limited to the period in which they were reproduced. None of these approaches, on its own, yields reliable results, since all of them oversimplify the meaning of such narratives, either by assigning them to a single historical context or by assuming an absolute continuity of meaning. The safest approach, in my view, is a diachronic study of these narratives, placing greater emphasis on the context in which a given tradition was retold, without automatically treating it as a faithful reproduction of a very remote past or as an exclusive reflection of the present. This, I believe, provides a better understanding of change and even of contradictory traditions, while making it possible to identify layers that may be parallel or superimposed. In this regard, it is reasonable to proceed from the earliest attested traditions toward the most recent ones.

The earliest preserved tradition is that associated with Oitylos, on the western coast of the Mani Peninsula. According to a scholion on Homer's *Catalogue of Ships*, Pherecydes (*FGrH* 3 F 39, 168), a sixth-century author, states that Oitylos was named after a son of Amphianax. It is unclear whether this is the same

Amphianax who is sometimes also called Iobates, the Lycian king connected with the myth of Bellerophon (Ps.-Apoll. 2.2.1). In any case, Pausanias (3.25.10) asserts much later that this Amphianax was the son of Antimachus of Argos. He is possibly referring to the same tradition, in which case the earliest tradition from Laconia attributes the foundation of Oitylos to an Argive hero.

Fifth-century narratives do not mention eponymous heroes, but only conquests and colonies. As noted earlier, Pindar (*Isth.* 7.12–15) presents Amyklai as a conquest of the Heracleidae, settled by Dorians and the Theban Aegeidae. In discussing the origins of the Spartan helots, Hellanicus of Lesbos (*FGrH* 4 F 188) describes them as the inhabitants of the city of Helos who were subjugated by the Spartans, but does not specify how or by whom the city was originally occupied. Finally, Herodotus attributes to the Battle of the Champions the conquest of the entire eastern coast of Laconia (1.82), which in his time included Ionians settled in Kynouria, later Dorianized under Argive domination (8.73.2). As for colonies, there are the Aeginetans settled in Thyrea in 431 (Thuc. 2.27.2; 4.56.2–57.3) and Thucydides' statement (7.57.6) that Kythera, on the island of the same name, was colonized by the Lakedaimonians. This initial picture is possibly a later product of the consolidation, in the Archaic period, of Sparta's narrative about its own past, which legitimized its political hegemony over Laconia. There is a clear, gradual (and aggressive) expansion of the city, from Amyklai to Cape Malea, alongside a (less aggressive) colonization of a neighboring island and the settlement of exiled allies within its own territory.

The traditions of the following phase, though very brief, share the same foundation: conquest and colonization. What can now be called "colonization," however, is in fact a "second step" of conquest rather than a parallel process. The main source for this is the previously mentioned Ephorus (*FGrH* 70 F 117): according to him, the Heracleidae automatically took possession of all the land between the cities of Aigys and Las when they conquer Sparta. Given the sparse population of the region (since the Heracleidae had expelled all its previous inhabitants), the kings Eurysthenes and Procles were compelled to resort to foreigners to populate it—not only the Dorians who had arrived with them, but *any* foreigners willing to settle there. Aigys, Amyklai, Pharis, Helos, and Las were completely repopulated, and their inhabitants enjoy the same status as the Spartans. However, as noted earlier, Ephorus' tradition also addresses the origin of the helots: they were not enslaved natives, but part of the same group of colonists who repopulated Laconia under the rule of the Heracleidae. What gave the helots a different

trajectory from that of the other communities was their refusal to pay tribute to Sparta and to relinquish their isonomy, as proposed by king Agis – and accepted by the other cities, which from that point onward assumed the status of *perioikoi*. It is worth pausing here to examine Ephorus' account more closely.

Firstly, the cities mentioned in his account were probably not chosen at random: all of them appear in Homer's *Catalogue of Ships* (*Il.* 2.581–602). Thus, in order to situate his narrative in the past, Ephorus probably used Homer as a source on the cities that existed at the time of the Dorian arrival. This explains, for example, why Pharis, never again mentioned in the sources (and possibly nonexistent), is included in the narrative, or why Las is described as Sparta's main port, even though it was well established that this role belonged to Gytheion (cf. Bernardo, 2025: 478–479). Secondly, Ephorus' narrative presents a highly negative image of the Spartan kings. They are portrayed as tyrannical, installing rulers (about whom nothing further is said in any ancient source) in other cities to govern on their behalf, and already in the following generation one of them attempts to impose taxes on all cities except Sparta. Of the six cities, only Helos is said to have rebelled, whereas the others apparently accepted the new *status quo*. In other words, the *perioikoi* are depicted as a kind of helot population, albeit in a better condition than the actual helots of Helos. This tradition runs parallel to Isocrates' *Panathenaicus* (177–181), also from the fourth century, which presents a similarly unified account, merging Spartans and *perioikoi* into a single isonomic collective before the former enslave the latter. This shared narrative, limited to Ephorus and Isocrates, may reflect the conditions of the fourth century itself, particularly in the context of disputes among Spartans, Boeotians, and Athenians concerning the control of each polis over its dependent populations (Xen. *Hell.* 5.1.32–36; 6.3). Isocrates' account, at the very least, should be read with some suspicion, since the *perioikoi* correspond, in his speech, to the (Doric) *demos* of Sparta that was politically demoted by an aristocracy which, in the process, seized the best agricultural land. Given that the aim of the *Panathenaicus* was precisely to contrast Sparta and Athens so as to highlight the superiority of the latter, it is highly probable that Isocrates was not drawing on a historical tradition (cf. Mossé, 1977) or, more pertinently for the present purposes, one current in *Lakoniké*. Isocrates likely constructed such a narrative in order to contrast Sparta and Athens (cf. Delahaye, 2022, p. 125), more specifically with regard to their respective political attitudes toward their own *demoi* — since the Athenians had incorporated their *demos* into their *polis*' government, rather than demoting it, as the Spartans had done. I believe

that Ephorus' version would be a critique along the same lines, denouncing the degrading treatment meted out by the Spartans to those who had originally been their equals – though it is impossible to assert this with any certainty on the basis of a single fragment cited indirectly by another author.

Thirdly and returning to Ephorus, the same context may have generated the need to distinguish the Messenians, recently freed from Spartan domination, from helots. The Messenians were not the same people as the helots and could therefore maintain their narrative of return from exile (see Bernardo, 2023), countering the Spartan claim that they were merely slaves like the Laconian helots (Isoc. 6.28, 88). Lastly, it is noteworthy that Ephorus justifies the occupation of Aigys on grounds of security: it lay on the frontier between Sparta and its enemies. One might initially think of the Messenians; yet there is no tradition mentioning any rivalry between Spartan and Messenian Heracleidae at the outset of their settlement. These "enemies," I would argue, are those of the fourth century—and perhaps not even the Messenians, but the Arcadians, now entrenched at Megalopolis (see Hornblower, 1990). This interpretation is further supported by the fact that, according to a tradition reported by Pausanias (8.27.3–4), five other cities on Sparta's northern frontier joined Megalopolis on the grounds that they were originally Arcadian.[10]

What we find in this second phase, in the fourth century, is an anti-Spartan reinterpretation of the earlier model of conquest and colonization. The Heracleidae and the Spartans tyrannically subjugated not only the very people who had helped them occupy Laconia, but also the Arcadians who resisted them. Such a picture seems to reflect the fourth-century context, when Messenians and Arcadians were threatening the frontiers of Spartan Laconia. It is always possible that some of these traditions already existed and, within this new hegemonic context, came to the fore and helped shape the actions and discourse of Arcadians, Boeotians, and Messenians regarding the reasons to defect from and/or oppose Sparta.

In the third phase, characterized mainly by the work of Pausanias, significant changes can be observed. After the fourth century, conquest and colonization cease to be the central elements of the narrative. Geronthrai is, for the first time, added to the narrative of gradual Heracleid conquest and the expulsion of the native population – which still includes Pharis and Amyklai (Paus. 3.2.6;

[10] Something similar may have occurred in the Triphylian cities, which had connections to Triphylus, sometimes described as the grandson of Amyklas (Paus. 10.9.5), at other times as the son of Arkas, the Arcadian eponymous hero (Polyb. 4.77). See also Malkin (1994: 86–87) on the Triphylians becoming Arcadians in the fourth century.

22.6–7). The fact that Las is no longer associated with this tradition, as it had been in Ephorus, may not be coincidental. When Pausanias (3.24.10) describes Las, the only tradition he reports about its past is the connection between its eponymous hero, Las, and the Homeric hero who killed him on the way to seek Helen's hand in marriage (Achilles or Patroclus). In Pausanias' own time, the city still possessed a statue of Heracles and a cult of the characteristically Dorian Apollo Karneios (3.24.6 and 8, respectively). Nonetheless, the preserved tradition is that of a pre-Heracleid eponymous hero and his link to Homeric figures. This may simply reflect Pausanias' interest in Greece's Homeric past – perhaps implicit in his attempt to identify the Homeric cities of Bryseai, Augeiae, and Messe (Hom. *Il.* 2.582–583) with historical sites (Paus. 3.20.3, 21.5, 25.9). However, most of the other traditions he preserves connect villages to pre-Homeric founders – local, foreign, and even divine.

Side was named after one of the daughters of the Lybian Danaus (Paus. 3.22.11); Kynouria and Helos after Argive sons of Perseus (Paus. 3.2.2; 20.6, respectively); Thyrea after a son of the Arcadian Lykaon (Paus. 8.3.3); and Teuthrone after an Athenian eponymous founder (Paus. 3.25.4). In addition, Pausanias (3.22.9) states that Kyparissia, a city mentioned by Strabo (8.5.2) but already in ruins in his time, had been inhabited by Achaeans. This may reflect an autochthonous identity, asserting that its population had not been displaced by Argives or Lakedaimonians after the arrival of the Heracleidae. Once again, these traditions may date to long before the second century AD, but it is significant that, when Pausanias recorded them, no apparent effort was made to connect them to the Spartan Heracleid past. When such an association does exist, it is usually through the pre-Heracleid dynasties of Laconia. Therapne, Alesia, Pellana, and Gytheion, all key locations in the Spartan plain, are associated with stories about Myles and Therapne, offspring of the autochthonous king Lelex, as well as Tyndareus, Menelaus, Helen, and Orestes (Paus. 3.19.9; 20.2; 21.2; 22.1, respectively). In this regard, the case of Boiai is particularly interesting. Pausanias (3.22.11) presents two foundation stories for the city. In one, it was founded by a Heraclid named Boios. In the other, it was the result of a synoecism of three cities: Etis, Aphrodisias, and Side. He states that the inhabitants of these three cities were guided to Boiai by an oracle of Artemis, but only after being expelled from their homelands. Neither the identity of those who expelled them nor the date of the event is specified, but it appears to belong to a very remote past. What stands out is the foundation story of two of the cities involved in the synoecism: Etis and Aphrodisias were, in the same passage in Pausanias, founded by the Dardanian Aeneas during his flight from Troy. There seems

to be little reason not to interpret these myths as attempts to connect local histories with those of Rome, the dominant Mediterranean power at the time when Boiai was synoecized. If this occurred in the late Hellenistic period, when the city begins to produce a significant amount of archaeological material (see Bernardo, 2025: 265), its growth may have been at least partially influenced by the Roman intervention in the region, epitomized by Augustus' organization of the League of the Free Laconians. In any case, studies such as those of Susan Alcock (1993) and Anthony Spawforth (2012) offer many further instances of the same kind, illustrating how Roman influence brought about significant changes in the Greek cultural landscape. It is therefore possible that this was the case with Boiai – which, according to a gloss by Stephanus of Byzantium (s.v. Βοιών), may have retained its identity as a Heracleid and Dorian city, but now incorporating the Dardanians of Aeneas and the Libyans of Danaus.

In summary, the traditions of the first and second centuries AD establish a degree of distance between the Laconian cities and the Spartan Heracleid past, focusing instead on their pre-Heracleid founders and on connections with Homeric heroes. This is noteworthy because even in places where there is evidence of Dorian traditions, such as Las, Gytheion and possibly Boiai, the preserved past is primarily pre-Dorian. It is, of course, clear that many Laconian cities did not simply sever their ties with Sparta. Epigraphic evidence points to both private and public connections with the Spartans, as well as to similar traditions.[11] Nevertheless, it would be surprising if the events of the Hellenistic and early Roman periods had not influenced these cities' traditions about themselves. Las, for instance, seems to have shifted from being an exemplary Heracleid port to a city founded by Las and taken by the Dioscuri rather than by the Heracleidae. Boiai, in turn, appears to have evolved from a Heraclid city (though probably not founded by one of the returned Heracleidae) into a city associated with the followers of Aeneas and Danaus. Some of the traditions reported by Pausanias may indeed be very ancient, but it would be mistaken to ignore the possibility that at least some of them are relatively recent (perhaps dating to the first century BC or AD), or at least that they had recently acquired renewed relevance, emphasizing the histories of cities no longer under Spartan domination. In this sense, they may have both reflected and contributed to shaping the new political position of the Laconian cities.

[11] On the ties between Spartan families and other cities of Laconia, see Spawforth, 1978 with *IG* V.1 971, 1172; *SEG* 23.310. On traditions anchored in the Spartan past, see Poulsen, 1991.

Conclusions

Three phases emerged in the discussion of traditions associated with the archaic history of Laconian communities. The narratives of the first phase, which spans the late sixth and the fifth centuries, focus on the gradual conquest of Laconia by the Heracleidae and the (re)occupation of the territory by Dorians and other peoples. Large areas lack specific traditions, such as the Malea and Mani peninsulas, where multiple associations are found. There, we encounter local eponymous heroes with varying degrees of connection to Sparta. At Oitylos there is an Argive founder; at Tainaron, an eponymous hero descended from the house of the Tyndaridae; and possibly at Boiai, a Heracleid – if this last tradition is indeed ancient. We also find colonies of Lakedaimonians at Kythera, and of Spartan allies – Epidaurians and Aeginetans – at Epidauros Limera and Anthene. In this regard, the narrative of Heracleid conquest and (re)occupation appears, at least initially, to have been specifically tied to central Laconia and Messenia. Other regions under Spartan influence possessed their own distinct narratives (conquest with reoccupation, conquest without reoccupation, colonization, etc.), perhaps allowing room for identities other than the pan-Lakedaimonian actively fostered by Spartan regional dominance.

The second phase, which seems to begin and end in the fourth century BC, still focuses on the conquest and (re)occupation of central Laconia, but now the narrative is shaped so as to present a negative image of Sparta and its domination over the *perioikoi* and helots. It is no surprise that this occurs precisely when Spartan hegemony was being challenged. Ephorus and Isocrates portray a gradual subjugation by Sparta of previously free Greek populations and, even more harshly, of peoples of the same stock as the Spartans themselves. At the same time, cities on the northern frontier of Laconia, when faced with the opportunity to change sides, begin to emphasize an Arcadian origin rather than a two-century-long association with the Lakedaimonians. Beyond political developments, these narratives may also reflect a shift in the sources of these traditions: whereas in the first phase they focus almost exclusively on Spartan history, in the second they are retold from Arcadian and perhaps Athenian perspectives.

A similar shift may be observed in the third phase, which preserves the narrative of gradual conquest and reoccupation but gives greater prominence to what appear to be local traditions. There is a sudden proliferation of local eponymous heroes of multiple origins, with varying degrees of association with Spartan, Laconian, and broader Mediterranean traditions. These

traditions may predate the Roman period; the main difference is that they now present their own version of history, rather than one mediated by Spartans or Athenians. This can be seen, for example, in Pausanias' account of the foundation of Oitylos by the son of the Argive Amphianax, a tradition already attested in Pherecydes. At the same time, there are elements that clearly point to more recent traditions, such as those connected to the synoecism of Boiai. Two of its three constituent cities are said to have been founded by Aeneas, while the third is named after one of the daughters of Danaus – an especially convenient detail, given that Pausanias (3.22.13) mentions temples of Serapis and Isis at Boiai, probably established during the Hellenistic period, when these cults begin to spread across the Aegean (see Mazurek, 2016, p. 7–18).

This interpretation is only a first attempt to make sense of traditions reported by many authors in very different contexts. Even so, it demonstrates that the ancient Laconian communities possessed histories distinct from that of Sparta. They were connected to Spartan history, but their pasts were not merely an appendage to it. For instance, during the period of Spartan hegemony, the Laconian *perioikoi* may have referred to themselves as Lakedaimonians, while maintaining traditions that their own communities have been founded by and alongside Arcadians, Ionians, Argives, Achaeans, or even Athenians. This allows us to view the history of Spartan hegemony over Laconia from a slightly different angle, one that is closer to that of the majority of its ancient inhabitants.

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Table 1 – Traditions on the Archaic history of the Laconian communities

Community	Association	Sources
Kyparissia	Achaeans	Strab. 8.5.2, Paus. 3.22.9
Belemina	Arcadians	Liv. 35.34.8 com Paus. 8.27.3-4
Leuktra	Arcadians	Paus. 8.27.3-4
Malea	Arcadians	Paus. 8.27.3-4
Oion	Arcadians	Paus. 8.27.3-4, 8.45.1
Kythera	Argives	Hdt. 1.82.2
Oitylos	Argives	Ferecides *FGrH* 3 F 168, Paus. 3.25.10
Thyrea	Argives	Hdt. 1.82.2, Paus. 3.2.2
Prasiai	Argives (Kynouros, son of Perseus)	Paus. 3.2.2
Helos	Argives (Perseus)	Strab. 8.5.2, Paus. 3.20.6
Teuthrone	Athenians (Teuthras)	Paus. 3.25.4
Aphrodisia	Dardanians (Aeneas)	Paus. 3.22.11, 8.12.8
Etis	Dardanians (Aeneas)	Paus. 3.22.11, 8.12.8
Boiai	Dardanians (Aeneas) and Lybia (Side, daughter of Danaus)	Paus. 3.22.11-12
Gytheion	Divinities (Apollo and Heracles)	Paus. 3.21.8
Boiai	Dorians	Steph. Byz. s.v. Βοιών
Anthene	Aeginetans	Lys. fr. 31, Thuc. 5.41.2
Thyrea	Aeginetans	Thuc. 2.27.2, 4.56.2-57.3, Paus. 2.29.5

Side	Lybia (Side, daughter of Danaus)	Paus. 3.22.11
Epidauros Limera	Epidaurians	Paus. 3.23.6-7
Boiai	Heracleidae (Boios)	Paus. 3.22.11
Aigys	Heracleidae (Dorians and foreigners)	Éforo FGrH 70 F 117
Pharis	Heracleidae (Dorians and foreigners)	Éforo *FGrH* 70 F 117
Helos	Heracleidae (Dorians and foreigners)	Éforo *FGrH* 70 F 117
Las	Heracleidae (Dorians and foreigners)	Éforo *FGrH* 70 F 117
Geronthrai	Heracleidae (Dorians)	Paus. 3.2.6, 3.22.6
Amyklai	Heracleidae (Dorians, foreigners and Thebans)	Pind. *Isth.* 7.12-15; Éforo *FGrH* 70 F 117, Paus. 3.2.6, 3.19.6
Prasiai	Ionians	Hdt. 8.73.3
Kythera	Lakedaimonians	Thuc. 4.53.2, 7.57.6
Zarax	Lakedaimonian (Zarax)	Paus. 1.38.4
Bryseai	Pre-Heracleidae	Hom. *Il.* 2.581-583
Aigiai	Pre-Heracleidae	Paus. 3.21.5
Messe	Pre-Heracleidae	Hom. *Il.* 2.582, Paus. 3.25.9
Pellana	Pre-Heracleidae	Ferecides *FGrH* 3 F 168, Paus. 3.25.10
Therapne	Pre-Heracleidae	Isoc. 10.63, Paus. 3.19.9
Kromnos	Pre-Heracleidae (Arcadians)	Paus. 8.3.4, 8.27.3-4
Aigys	Pre-Heracleidae (Arcadians)	Paus. 3.2.5, 8.27.3-4; *SIG* 665
Thyrea	Pre-Heracleidae (Arcadians)	Paus. 8.3.3
Alesia	Pre-Heracleidae (Myles)	Paus. 3.20.2
Helos	Pre-Heracleidae (Heleatai)	Teopompo *FGrH* 115 F 13

Therapne	Pre-Heracleidae (Therapne, daughter of Lelex)	Paus. 3.19.9
Las	Pre-Heracleidae (Las)	Paus. 3.24.10
Tainaron	Pre-Heracleidae (Taínaro, neto de Icário)	Ferecides *FGrH* 3 F 39

ia: Penn State, 1991.