

King Agesilaus and the Trial of Phoebidas

Larisa PECHATNOVA¹

Abstract. The article explores the tradition about the capture of Thebes fortress Cadmea by the Spartan commander Phoebidas (382 BC). The purpose of the article is, first, to consider the degree of participation of King Agesilaus in the capture of Cadmea, and, secondly, to find out the reason why Agesilaus defended Phoebidas in court. The author concludes that Agesilaus' defense of war criminals like Phoebidas and Sphodrias had disastrous consequences for Sparta. According to the author, the blame for the violation of the Peace, the break of relations with the allies and the defeat of the Battle of Leuctra can be partly laid on Agesilaus.

Rezumat. Articolul explorează tradiția despre cucerirea fortăreței Cadmea de către comandantul spartan Phoebidas (382 î.Hr.). Scopul articolului este, în primul rând, de a analiza modul în care regele Agesilaus a participat la cucerirea Cadmei și, în al doilea rând, de a afla motivul pentru care Agesilaus l-a apărat pe Phoebidas în instanță. Autoarea concluzionează că apărarea de către Agesilaus a criminalilor de război precum Phoebidas și Sphodrias a avut consecințe dezastruoase pentru Sparta. Potrivit acesteia, vina pentru încălcarea păcii, ruperea relațiilor cu aliații și înfrângerea în bătălia de la Leuctra pot fi pusă parțial pe seama lui Agesilaus.

Keywords: Agesilaus, Phoebidas, Leontiadas, Sparta, Thebes, Cadmea, Xenophon, Diodorus, Plutarch.

We know more about the Spartan king Agesilaus than about any other *basileus* of Sparta, primarily thanks to a rich tradition. His contemporary, the Athenian Xenophon, wrote a lot about Agesilaus. Xenophon fully expressed his admiration for the Spartan king in the tractate '*Agesilaus*', where the king is depicted in the most favorable light. In '*Hellenica*' Agesilaus is also the main personage. The special attitude of Xenophon towards Agesilaus was also manifested in the way he depicted the participation of the king in the trial of Phoebidas.

Despite his apparent bias, Xenophon remains the main source of our knowledge of Phoebidas. All later authors, such as Diodorus, Plutarch or Cornelius Nepos, wrote several centuries after the events of interest to us and used sources whose reliability cannot be established. But they have valuable information that should not be rejected only on the grounds that this information does not agree with Xenophon's version².

¹ St. Petersburg State University, Institute of History, Russia; email: l.pechatnova@spbu.ru.

² RICE 1974, 164.

The fact that much more information has been preserved about Agesilaus than about any other Spartan king is partly due to his unusually long reign (399–360), and in the most difficult period for Sparta. Agesilaus became king shortly after the brilliant victory of the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War, and died in an era when Sparta had already ceased to be the leader even of the Peloponnesian League. Let's try to at least concisely assess the degree of Agesilaus's guilt in the collapse of the Spartan Empire.

It is very difficult to give an unambiguous answer to this question. But some moments are well visible. A long stay in power and the absence of strong competition from the co-rulers led to a significant increase in the power of Agesilaus³. In fact, he made many decisions alone. An excellent psychologist and talented actor, he managed to charm the entire ruling elite thanks to two simple but very productive tricks: firstly, constantly showing generosity, and secondly, demonstrating the deepest respect and reverence for the main magistrates of the state – the *ephors* and the *gerontes*. There was no other such king in Sparta, who would have learned to manipulate people so cleverly. He fascinated many. Among his friends and admirers was and Xenophon, who sincerely considered him a great king.

But almost sole and extended in time power, as a rule, leads to an aberration of the consciousness of the bearer of this power. This rule turned out to be true and for Agesilaus. The fact is that the king from time to time made decisions that went against international legal norms and Sparta's own obligations. Recall that in a short period of time, Agesilaus saved from execution two of the highest Spartan officers, Phoebidas and Sphodrias, who were tried for war crimes – violation of the oath and disobedience to the authorities.

In this article, I would like to consider one specific case – the story of Agesilaus' intervention in the trial of Phoebidas⁴. This story has been considered more than once in the scientific literature, but, as a rule, quite fluently. There are several works in which this topic is touched in one way or another. We will refer to them later. But first, let's look at the sources.

The most detailed story about the capture of the Cadmea by Phoebidas and his subsequent punishment for illegal actions belongs to Xenophon. Let us briefly summarize the events as they are presented by Xenophon.

³ Agesilaus, from the very beginning of his reign, apparently set himself the goal of neutralizing or even getting rid of his co-rulers – the kings from the Agiad dynasty. The most significant of the Agiads, who reigned together with Agesilaus, was king Pausanias (409–396). But he was co-ruler of Agesilaus for only four years. In 396, not without the help of Agesilaus, Pausanias was sentenced to death (Xen. Hell. III. 5. 25) and ended his life in exile. Pausanias's son Agesipolis I (395–380) fell completely under the influence of Agesilaus (Plut. Ages. 20; Diod. XV. 19. 4). Cleombrotus, the younger brother of Agesipolis, reigned for a short time (380–371) and died in the battle of Leuctra.

⁴ Four years later, in 378, Agesilaus will again put pressure on the judges and force them to justify the *harmost* Sphodrias. For this political process, see our article: PECHATNOVA 2021, 47–63.

In 382⁵, Phoebidas, brother of Eudamidas, who was sent to Thrace with a large army, went after his brother with additional forces (Hell. V. 2. 25)⁶. Phoebidas on the road to Thrace, passing through the territory of Boeotia, encamped near Thebes. Here Leontiades⁷, one of the *polemarchs* of Thebes, entered into negotiations with Phoebidas. Leontiades was at the head of the oligarchic *hetaeria*, focused on an alliance with Sparta (V. 2. 25)⁸. He advised Phoebidas to capture Cadmea, the citadel of Thebes, arguing that in this way 'Thebes will be completely under the control of the Lacedaemonians' (V. 2. 26, hereinafter translated by C.L. Brownson). Leontiades, persuading Phoebidas, argued that such an action would be 'the greatest service to his fatherland' (V. 2. 26). The Theban asked the *harmost* to help him and his supporters carry out a coup d'état, and promised that, having come to power, he would immediately send significant military assistance to the Spartans fighting against Olynthus (V. 2. 27). Phoebidas accepted this offer and, with the help of Leontiades and his supporters, captured the Cadmea (V. 2. 29).

Xenophon paints a vivid picture of the Spartans' seizure of the Cadmea. He gives a number of curious details that make the story itself lively and dynamic. Xenophon's accents are arranged as follows: Phoebidas only followed the instructions of Leontiades, who have led the Spartan detachment to the Theban citadel and ordered that no one be allowed into the Acropolis without his (Leontiades – *L.P*) order (V. 2. 29). Leontiades chose a good time when the Thebans celebrated the Thesmophoria. Therefore, the Spartans were able to secretly and with minimal risk enter the city and capture the Theban citadel. Here the main person is clearly Leontiades.

What follows is the classic description of a coup d'état carried out with the support of a Spartan garrison. Immediately after seizing power, Leontiadas cracked down on political opponents: Ismenias, on the orders of Leontiadas, was arrested and imprisoned in Cadmeia, and about 300 of his associates fled (*ἀπεχώρεσαν*)⁹ to Athens (Xen. Hell. V. 2. 30–31). Thebes moved towards a more rigid oligarchic regime, similar to corporate tyranny: all significant positions, including the *polemarchia*, passed into the hands of the conspirators led by Leontiadas

⁵ Henceforth, all dates are BC.

⁶ In Diodorus, most likely, by mistake, Phoebidas was sent first to Thrace, and after him already Eudamidas (XV. 19. 3).

⁷ For the origin of Leontiadas, his family and previous career, see esp.: TUFANO 2020, 67–74. S. Tufano shows through a number of examples that a recurrent tendency of Leontiadas' family seems to have been the support of Sparta and of its foreign policy.

⁸ The another *polemarch* was Ismenias, who led a faction with a pronounced anti-Spartan attitude. Apparently in 382 the balance of political forces in Thebes was approximately equal, since the highest magistrates, *polemarchs*, were the heads of the opposing parties. The fact that two politicians of different orientations were chosen for the same position suggests a system which allows for an institutional opposition (TUFANO 2020, 71). Perhaps, Ismenias enjoyed more authority among the Thebans than Leontiadas: they remembered and appreciated the active support that the Ismenias' party provided to the Athenian exiles during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants in Athens (BERESFORD 2014, 6).

⁹ Diodorus (Ephorus) gives the same figure, but instead of the neutral *ἀπεχώρεσαν* 'to go' he uses another verb *ἐφυγάδευσεν*, i.e., 'to be expelled', which greatly changes the meaning (BUCK 1994, 66).

(V. 2. 32). Xenophon calls the new rulers of Thebes tyrants (V. 4. 13), and the regime established by them is tyrannical (V. 4. 1)¹⁰. This can be assessed as a covert condemnation of those who helped the Theban oligarchs come to power. After all, the Spartans, who from archaic times had a reputation as tyrant-fighters (Her. V. 68; 92; Thuc. I. 18. 1; Isocr. IV. 125; Arist. Pol. V. 8. 18. 1312 b; Plut. Mor. 859 d)¹¹, now did not overthrow tyrannical regimes, but planted them. It is worth recalling their active assistance in establishing the tyranny of the Thirty in Athens (Xen. Hell. II. 3. 4)¹².

Thus ends the first part of Xenophon's story about Phoebidas, where the action took place in Thebes, and the second part begins, where the action is transferred directly to Sparta. After the account of the coup at Thebes, Xenophon reports on the reaction of the Spartans to the unauthorized capture of the Cadmea by Phoebidas: 'Leontiades proceeded at once to Lacedaemon. There he found the ephors and the majority of the citizens angry with Phoebidas because he had acted in this matter without authorization by the state' (Hell. V. 2. 32). Further, Xenophon sets out the Agesilaus' point of view on the criminal behavior of Phoebidas. Here the criterion that guided the king in assessing the actions of Phoebidas in Thebes is important. Let's take this passage: 'Agesilaus, however, said that if what he had done was harmful to Lacedaemon, he deserved to be punished, but if advantageous, it was a time-honoured custom that a commander, in such cases, had the right to act on his own initiative. 'It is precisely this point, therefore', he said, 'which should be considered, whether what has been done is good or bad for the state (προσῆκει σκοπεῖν, πότερον ἀγαθὰ ἢ κακὰ ἐστὶ τὰ πεπραγμένα)' (V. 2. 32). Agesilaus explicitly defines harm and benefit from the point of view of politics, not morality.

Agesilaus made this curious statement, most likely, not in the Spartan Assembly, often called the *apella*, but in the Little Assembly, which Xenophon calls the Little *Ecclesia*¹³. It was in it, apparently, that the top leadership of Sparta discussed and made a decision regarding the situation in Thebes. In any case, Xenophon, having stated the point of view of Agesilaus, immediately reports that Leontiades, who appeared in Sparta to explain the situation, spoke precisely before the *eccletes* (Λεοντιάδης ἐλθὼν εἰς τοὺς ἐκκλητίους ἔλεγε τοιάδε...) (Hell. V. 2.

¹⁰ About the same, but in detail, says Plutarch: 'the Thebans ... lost their ancestral form of government and were enslaved by Archias and Leontidas, nor had they hopes of any deliverance from this tyranny ...' (Pel. 6. 1, translated by B. Perrin.); and elsewhere: 'Archias, Leontidas, and their associates... took the power into their own hands, and tyrannized against all equity and law' (De gen Soc. 576 a, translated by W. Goodwin)

¹¹ About the Spartans as tyrant-fighters, see esp.: PECHATNOVA 2020, 206–225.

¹² For Xenophon's attitude towards tyrannical regimes, see: LEWIS 2004, 65–74; BUXTON 2017, 25–29.

¹³ The name 'the Little *Ecclesia*' (τὴν μικρὰν καλουμένην ἐκκλησίαν) is found only in Xenophon's account of Cinadon's conspiracy (Hell. III. 3. 8). Since Xenophon, apart from the name, does not give any comments on the Little *Ecclesia*, there is a significant scatter of opinions in science. However, all researchers believe that we are talking about some kind of elite assembly, different from the usual Spartan Assembly (*apella*). Apparently, this was an emergency council, which was convened by the *ephors* on special occasions. It most likely included the highest magistrates of the state – kings, *gerontes* and *ephors* (CARTLEDGE 1987, 131; GISH 2009, 343).

33)¹⁴. Leontiades bluntly stated that if the Spartans supported the coup he had arranged and recognized the new government of Thebes as legitimate, then he would ensure the absolute loyalty of the Thebans to them. The speech of Leontiades, as quoted by Xenophon, sounds very convincing: ‘... a brief message from you will suffice to secure from that quarter all the support that you may desire...’ (V. 2. 34). At really, as Xenophon adds, during his reign ‘Leontiadas and his party... gave the Lacedaemonians even more support than was required of them’ (V. 2. 36). Xenophon, apparently, does not accidentally quote a lengthy quotation from the speech of Leontiadas. Apparently, his goal was to shift at least part of the responsibility for the capture of Cadmeia from the Spartans to the Theban instigator.

The opinion of king Agesilaus and especially the agitation of Leontiadas did their job, and the judges decided to leave the Spartan garrison in Thebes and bring to justice the main opponent of Leontiadas – Ismenias¹⁵. On the last point, apparently, Leontiadas, the new ruler of Thebes, insisted very much. According to Xenophon, an exit court of the Peloponnesian League¹⁶ took place in Thebes, which included three Spartans and one representative from each of the allied polities. Apparently, Xenophon did not accidentally mention the composition of the court, thereby hinting at the absolute legality of the sentence passed on Ismenias. Ismenias was accused of *medism* (pro-Persian sympathies)¹⁷ and friendly (*xenic*) relations with the Persian king, and this at a time when the King's Peace was still preserved and Sparta had rather friendly relations with Persia (Hell. V. 2. 35). H. Hack points out the absurdity of such an accusation, ‘since there was no one who had not courted the Mede at one time or another during the Corinthian War’¹⁸. J. Dillery calls these accusations obviously ridiculous and grotesquely exaggerated¹⁹. The trial of Ismenias was nothing more than a theatrical performance with

¹⁴ It is possible that the term ἐκκλῆται, which occurs three times in Xenophon (Hell. II. 4. 38; V. 2. 33; VI. 3. 3), specifically refers to the members of the Little *Ecclesia*. In all three places, where the *eccletes* are mentioned, they are talking about urgent and delicate matters, the discussion of which could only be conducted behind the scenes. The first case concerns the establishment of order in Athens, which meant the recall and resignation of Lysander. This had to be done, of course, quickly and without publicity. The second case is the story of Phoebidas, and the third is the discussion of peace conditions after the defeat of the Spartans at the battle of Leuctra in 371.

¹⁵ But here's what is curious: Xenophon says nothing about the sentence passed on Phoebidas. He diverts the reader's attention by engaging him in the details of Ismenias' trial.

¹⁶ Plutarch, however, states that Ismenias was taken to Sparta (Pelop. 5. 3) and after a trial, executed in some cruel way (De gen Socr. 576 a).

¹⁷ Ismenias, like Leontiadas, also led an oligarchic party, but opposed to Spartan interference in their factional struggles (Hell. Oxy. 12. 1–2: ‘Of the two political factions, the party of Leontiadas were pro-Spartan, while the party of Ismenias were labeled as atticizers as a result of their support for the [Athenian] *dēmos* in exile’, translated by A. Beresford). Ismenias was one of those who, in 396 or 395, received a bribe from the Persian envoy Timocrates, who was sent to Greece to bribe prominent politicians in Thebes, Corinth and Argos in order to form an anti-Spartan coalition (Xen. Hell. III. 5. 1). So, the true accusation of Ismenias was that he actively contributed to the unleashing of the Corinthian War. His exceptional wealth (Plat. Men. 90 a; Rep. I. 336 a) may also have been very attractive to accusers.

¹⁸ HACK 1978, 226.

¹⁹ DILLERY 2003, 219.

absolutely predictable result: Ismenias was sentenced to death and his property was probably confiscated²⁰. P. Cartledge considered this trial the first of a series of such trials, which were a parody of justice. Including thanks to such unfair and cynical trials, Sparta became infamous in the years after 382²¹.

Xenophon named Leontiadas, head of the Laconophilic party in Thebes, as the undeniable instigator of Phoebidas. Xenophon's desire to shift the blame from Sparta to Thebes is understandable: with his rejection of Boeotia and everything connected with it, such tendentiousness of the Athenian historian is not surprising. On the one hand, Xenophon's Phoebidas is a true *Spartiate*, 'for he was a man with a far greater passion for performing some brilliant achievement than for life itself'. On the other hand, this man clearly did not correspond to his high position in the army. After all, according to Xenophon, 'he was not considered one who weighs his actions or has great practical wisdom' (Hell. V. 2. 28). Here one can see Xenophon's hidden allusion to the Spartan practice of appointing relatives and friends to important posts. An experienced military man, Xenophon, apparently, more than once observed the unpleasant consequences for Sparta of such appointments, based solely on family and friendly ties.

Later authors have some discrepancies with Xenophon. So, Diodorus (Ephorus) insists that the very idea of capturing the Cadmea came from the Spartan authorities, and Phoebidas only implemented the government's directive: '... they (Spartans – *L.P.*) were mindful of the danger that Thebes, if a suitable occasion arose, might claim the leadership of Greece. Accordingly, the Spartans gave secret instructions¹ to their commanders, if ever they found an opportunity, to take possession of the Cadmeia' (XV. 20. 1–2, hereinafter translated by C.H. Oldfather). According to Diodorus this was a secret order allegedly given to all the Spartan military leaders²², that is, in essence, we are talking about a conspiracy directed against Thebes. If, according to Xenophon, the Spartans' seizure of the Cadmea went smoothly, without causing a rebuff from the Thebans, then Diodorus, on the contrary, claims that the inhabitants of Thebes put up fierce resistance to the Spartan squad: 'When the Thebans, resenting this act, gathered under arms, he (Phoebidas – *L.P.*) joined battle with them and after defeating them exiled three hundred of the most eminent Thebans' (XV. 20. 2).

Plutarch generally aligns himself with Diodorus, but blames not the Spartan authorities in general, but specifically Agesilaus for the instigation of Phoebidas: 'Of course this gave rise at once to a suspicion that while Phoebidas had done the deed, Agesilaus had

²⁰ HACK1978, 226; DILLERY 2003, 219.

²¹ CARTLEDGE 1987, 374.

²² Most scholars believe that this Diodorus' statement is most likely a gross exaggeration (e.g., SEAGER 2008, 160). But there are voices in defense of his version. So, according to H. Hack, 'Diodorus' view finds support in the haste with which Agesilaus came to Phoebidas' aid soon after the occupation, when the Spartans put the latter on trial for taking unauthorized action' (HACK 1978, 223).

counselled it; and his subsequent acts brought the charge into general belief' (Ages. 24. 1, hereinafter translated by B. Perrin). Along the way, Plutarch also gives a moral assessment of the king's behavior, accusing Agesilaus of the fact that the interests of his friends are more important for him than the interests of the cause (Ages. 23. 6–7).

However, in the biography of Pelopidas, Plutarch places somewhat different accents. The instigators of Phoebidas are here named the Theban oligarchs, who convinced the Spartan *harmost* to capture the Cadmea: 'Therefore Archias, Leontidas (at Xenophon – Leontiadas – *L.P.*), and Philip, men of the oligarchical faction who were rich and immoderately ambitious, sought to persuade Phoebidas the Spartan, as he was marching past with an army, to take the Cadmeia by surprise, expel from the city the party opposed to them, and bring the government into subserviency to the Lacedaemonians by putting it in the hands of a few men' (Pelop. 5. 2, hereinafter translated by B. Perrin). There is no irresolvable contradiction with what Plutarch wrote in 'Agesilaus', since in Pelopidas' biography Plutarch naturally focused on the events in Thebes, and not Sparta.

The reaction of the Greeks to this absolute lawlessness is reported by many ancient authors. Isocrates and Polybius mention the capture of the Cadmea among the many crimes of the Spartans (Isocr. IV. 125–126; Polyb. IV. 27. 6–8). Diodorus claims that the Spartans' seizure of the Cadmea caused such indignation in the Hellenic world that the Spartan authorities were forced, in order to appease the allies, to arrange a show trial and impose an impressive monetary fine on Phoebidas (XV. 20. 2). Plutarch even cites the amount of this fine – a hundred thousand drachmas (Pelop. 6. 1).

A review of the sources leads to the following observations: Diodorus (Ephorus) and partly Plutarch, where he followed Ephorus, clearly show an anti-Spartan orientation. The Spartans planned an attack on Thebes in advance and only under the pressure of public opinion staged a formal trial of Phoebidas. It was they who dealt with Ismenias, the opponent of the rapprochement between Thebes and Sparta. Leontiadas and his party played a comparatively minor role in their versions.

A completely different, clearly pro-Spartan version is presented by Xenophon. He made Leontiades the main initiator of the Spartan attack on the Cadmea. It was he who persuaded the not too smart Phoebidas to occupy the Cadmea. He was also able to convince the Spartans to keep their garrison at Thebes. In Xenophon, Leontiadas is the villain who managed to deceive the Spartans and impose his will on them.

We join the opinion of R. Buck that a strong anti-Spartan orientation, even in the choice of words, raises suspicions about the veracity of Ephorus. The version of the long-accepted plan of the Spartan politicians to capture Cadmea at the opportunity sounds like a

rhetorical construction. The report of a battle between Thebans and Spartans during their march towards the Theban citadel is also highly doubtful²³.

On the other hand, Xenophon is hardly right when he completely removes the blame from the Spartans and exposes the Theban Leontiadas as the main autor of the events in question. Such a rehabilitation of the Spartans looks too biased. But the overall balance in evaluating the messages of Diodorus (Ephorus) and Xenophon is in favor of Xenophon's version²⁴.

After a review of the sources, we will try to answer the two most important questions for us: by whose order, secret or explicit, Phoebidas acted and what Agesilaus was guided by, speaking in his defense.

In the summer of 382 BC Phoebidas and his troops seized Thebes and helped the Theban oligarchs, led by Leontiadas, establish a regime here ready to cooperate with the Spartans. In Xenophon's version, the initiative came exclusively from Leontiadas, who, in order to defeat political opponents, was ready to surrender Thebes to the Spartans. Phoebidas allegedly only agreed with the plan proposed by Leontiadas, nothing more. The Spartan attack on Thebes in peacetime completely violated the traditional rules of interstate relations. From any point of view the act was absolutely unlawful since at that time the King's Peace still remained in force, and this is how it was perceived by all Greeks, including the Spartans themselves. Before Agesilaus made his point clear, the Spartans had no doubt that Phoebidas was guilty.

At the court session, Agesilaus apparently defended Phoebidas, an unconditional war criminal, so openly that this gave rise to rumors, the essence of which is reported by Plutarch: it was Agesilaus who advised Phoebidas to commit this criminal act (Ages. 24. 1). But, on the other hand, we do not find in Xenophon even a hint that Agesilaus pushed Phoebidas to capture the Cadmea. Plutarch, by the way, refers to rumors rather than facts. Thus, the sources do not give an unequivocal answer to the question of whether Agesilaus actually led the actions of Phoebidas in Thebes or not.

Of course, in the first quarter of the 4th century, Agesilaus was the main political figure not only in Sparta, but throughout Greece. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine that such an important decision as the capture of Thebes could be carried out without his direct instructions. And it can hardly be considered an accident that the seizure of the Theban citadel was carried out by a person from the king's inner circle. Recall that for many years the foreign policy of Sparta was led by Agesilaus. His co-rulers of the Agiad dynasty, as a rule, did not

²³ BUCK 1994, 68.

²⁴ Ibid.

seriously compete with him, since each of them ruled for a relatively short time and did not have time to acquire sufficient political weight.

In favor of the fact that it was Agesilaus who stood behind Phoebidas, one more consideration can be given: the king hated both Thebes and all of Boeotia as a whole. He always remembered the public humiliation to which the *beatarchs* in Aulis subjected him: they ordered the royal sacrifices to be thrown down from the altar at the time when Agesilaus performed sacrifice before going to Asia Minor in 396. They spoiled the colorful spectacle conceived by Agesilaus, during which he was going to portray himself as the new Agamemnon on the way to Troy (Xen. Hell. III. 4. 3). The vindictive and deeply offended king could not forgive the Boeotians for such an insult. This shameful episode for Agesilaus should always be remembered when considering his policy towards Thebes²⁵.

There is no consensus in the scholarly literature about Agesilaus' role in this story. Some believe that Agesilaus may well have inspired Phoebidas to take over the Cadmea before he even left Sparta. They definitely see the hand of Agesilaus behind Phoebidas' actions²⁶. D. Rice suggested that the Theban Leontiades could also have a great influence on the harmost. He connected different versions of ancient authors and came to the conclusion, 'that it was Agesilaus who conceived with Leontiades the plan of inviting Phoebidas' Spartan army into Thebes'²⁷. The same point of view is shared by R. Seager. In his opinion, Agesilaus could remotely control the joint actions of Phoebidas and Leontiadas²⁸. R. Seager explains this position of Agesilaus by his hatred of Thebes: 'Yet it is not incredible that Agesilaus, ...whose hatred of Thebes may have made him particularly sensitive to any manifestation of Theban independence, had suggested that Phoebidas explore the possibility of setting up a reliable puppet government'²⁹.

However, disagreements in the sources forced some researchers to completely reject the version according to which Agesilaus stood behind Phoebidas. So, I. Surikov considers unfounded the version according to which Agesilaus is accused of direct incitement of

²⁵ H. Hack considers, that the initiator of the incident at Aulis was Ismenias, the leader of the anti-Spartan faction in Thebes (HACK 1978, 212, 214).

²⁶ CAWKWELL 1976, 79; CARTLEDGE 1987, 156; SEAGER 2008, 160.

²⁷ RICE 1974, 180.

²⁸ Leontiades probably belonged to the circle of Agesilaus' foreign friends and, very possibly, was even his 'guest friend' (ξένος). A similar policy of forming client-friends from people who owned wealth, position and political power in their own states was already actively pursued by Lysander. And, of course, Agesilaus could act in the same spirit, maintaining friendly relations with the pro-Spartan oligarchs in many Greek cities. The appearance of Leontiadas in Sparta and the opportunity given to him to deliver a speech in defense of Phoebidas proves the closeness of the Theban to someone from the leadership of Sparta. This someone was, most likely, Agesilaus. He really wanted the power in Thebes to be in the hands of pro-Spartan oriented rulers loyal to him personally. Apparently, the *decarchies* of Lysander served as a model for him.

²⁹ SEAGER 2008, 160.

Phoebidas³⁰. In his opinion, the *harmost* could well have acted spontaneously, being unable to refuse an easy opportunity to seize the Cadmea, and with it Thebes. Like any Spartiate, he dreamed of glory and exploits and could not refuse such a chance to become famous.

Agesilaus, by virtue of his status, was a member of the judicial board³¹ and therefore participated in the trial of Phoebidas on a completely legal basis. He, as an influential and long-ruling king, had the opportunity to influence the judges, imposing his personal opinion on them. Of course, three dozen *gerontes* were easier to manipulate than a Spartan popular assembly, no matter how obedient it was (Arist. Pol. II, 8, 3, 1273 a; Diod. XI. 50). We also recall that in Sparta, court decisions were made on the basis of previously applied practices and precedents, and not in accordance with written laws (there was no written legislation in Sparta). This, of course, opened up scope for all sorts of manipulations. Aristotle considered the lack of written legislation to be a major flaw in the Spartan judicial system (Pol. I. 6. 14. 1270 b). Indeed, as P. Cartledge observed, 'his lack of written laws or decrees of course gave great scope for interpretation to those officials who were empowered to administer the rules...'³².

We believe that Agesilaus would in any case defend Phoebidas, regardless of whether he acted on the king's orders or made a decision completely independently. Firstly, for the king with a dubious right to the throne³³, this trial was another test of his strength and influence³⁴. Secondly, it was extremely important for Agesilaus to save Phoebidas from execution both as a spartan citizen and as a person from his inner circle. Phoebidas belonged to a noble family (Plut. Ages. 34. 8–11: story of Isidas, Phoebidas's son), was close associate of Agesilaus, and enjoyed his unconditional trust. In any case, in 378, during a campaign against Thebes, the king appointed Phoebidas to a high post, making him the *harmost*³⁵ (military governor) at the Thespieae (Xen. Hell. V. 4. 41).

³⁰ SURIKOV 2015, 117.

³¹ We know very little about the judicial system of Sparta. Undoubtedly, the Spartan court was fundamentally different from the judicial system of democratic Athens. The judicial board of Sparta is characterized by a small number of judges and their actual irremovability.

³² CARTLEDGE 2000, 12.

³³ On the struggle of Agesilaus for the throne, see: PECHATNOVA 2020, 521–526.

³⁴ Agesilaus a few years later defended in court a man who was not part of his circle of friends. We are talking about Sphodrias, the Spartan *harmost* in Boeotian Thespieae, who in 378 BC invaded Attica with an army in order to capture the Athenian harbor of Pireus. The raid was unsuccessful, and Sphodrias himself, for actions not authorized by the Spartan government, was put on trial and escaped punishment solely due to the protection of Agesilaus (Xen. Hell. V. 4. 15–32).

³⁵ In Sparta, the term '*harmost*' (ὁ ἄρμοστῆς) meant a military rank, and was not just one of the synonyms for the word 'commander'. This is partly confirmed by Diodorus in his account of the capture of Chalcedon by Alcibiades in 409: 'Hippocrates... had been stationed by the Lacedaemonians in the city as commander (ἡγεμῶν) (the Laconians call such a man a '*harmost*' (ἄρμοστῆν))...' (XIII. 66. 2). Diodorus repeats the same about Lysander, who 'they (Lacedaemonians – L.P.) ordered... to visit the cities and set up in each the magistrates they call *harmosts*...(τούς παρ' αὐτοῖς καλουμένους ἄρμοστὰς)' (XIV. 10. 1). In 387, according to the Peace of Antalcidas, Sparta recalls her *harmosts* from Asia Minor, but, despite her promises, leaves them in many other Greek cities (Polyb. IV. 27.

The main argument of the king in the defense of Phoebidas was that this *Spartiate*, in his opinion, was certainly useful (cr hv simo") to Sparta (Plut. Ages. 23. 7). At the same time, Agesilaus referred to some ancient custom (aj cai' on ei\ nai nov mimon)³⁶, according to which the actions of field commanders should be evaluated only on the basis of one test – harmful or useful for the state were the results of their activities (Xen. Hell. V. 2. 32). Agesilaus considered the seizure of the Cadmea to be extremely beneficial to the state, and this became the main argument in favor of Phoebidas' acquittal. The king in this case completely ignored the international agreements that Sparta swore to abide by. As J. Dillery observed, 'in fact, Agesilaus' apparent disregard for the just... illustrates the *dichotomy* between Sparta's internal *arete* and her external brutality'³⁷. Here we observe the usual behavioral stereotype of the *Spartiates* – a contemporary of Agesilaus. They strictly observed ethical norms only within their own society. Their virtues did not extend to the outside world. This generic trait of the Spartans was clearly formulated by Thucydides: 'The Lacedaemonians are exceedingly virtuous among themselves, and according to their national standard of morality. But, in respect of their dealings with others, although many things might be said, they can be described in few words— of all men whom we know they are the most notorious for identifying what is pleasant with what is honourable, and what is expedient with what is just' (V. 105. 4, translated by B. Jowett).

Recall that the famous commander and a person close to Agesilaus, Lysander, behaved in the same way abroad, however, like many other senior officers. The fundamental social norms that the Spartans adhered to in their homeland ceased to operate for them as soon as they found themselves outside of Sparta. The Spartans treated their allies with arrogance and disdain, as if those were their servants or slaves. (Thuc. VIII. 38. 3: Pendaritus; VIII. 84. 1–3: Astyocho; Diod. XIII. 66. 5; XIV. 12. 2–9: Clearch; Plut. Lys. 13: Lysander; Lys. 15: Callibius). They broke oaths easily. It is no coincidence that Lysander is credited with saying that adults should be deceived with oaths in the same way that children should be deceived with dice (Plut. Lys. 8. 5; Polyae. I. 45. 3; Aelian. V. h. VII. 12). The outright cruelty and imperial manners of the Spartan military greatly harmed Sparta and destroyed its authority in the eyes of the allies.

Returning to the trial of Phoebidas, we note that, although the court found Phoebidas guilty of criminal wrongdoing, he, thanks to the efforts of Agesilaus, escaped with only a fine and suspension from office (Plut. Ages. 6. 1; Diod. XV. 20. 2), still Cadmea remained under

5). In 374, Sparta once again promised in an agreement concluded with Athens to remove all its garrisons (Diod. XV. 38), but the *harmosts*, together with the garrisons, finally disappeared only after the battle of Leuctra (Xen. Hell. VI. 3. 18; Paus. VIII. 52. 4; IX. 6. 4). For the *harmosts*, see esp.: BOCKISCH 1965, 129–239.

³⁶ Probably, the mention of some archaic rule is an unfounded statement by Agesilaus. In the absence of written laws, the Spartan kings, as recognized bearers of ancient customs and religious norms, could well interpret them in the way they needed or simply invent them.

³⁷ DILLERY 2003, 218.

Sparta's control³⁸. It implies that the Spartan authorities retroactively sanctioned the capture of Cadmea, i.e., in effect turned a blind eye to the willfulness and recklessness of Phoebidas, and thus approved the violation of the terms of the King's Peace. The ancient authors are unanimous in the fact that it was the opinion of Agesilaus that determined the lenient sentence passed on Phoebidas. The king managed to overcome the initial resistance of the judges and achieved a verdict on the preservation of the Spartan garrison in Thebes. Here is how Plutarch puts it: '...he (Agesilaus – *L.P.*) ... was often carried away by ambition and contentiousness, and particularly in his treatment of the Thebans. For he not only rescued Phoebidas from punishment, but actually persuaded Sparta to assume responsibility for his iniquity and occupy the Cadmeia on its own account...' (Ages. 23. 6–7). In all probability, Agesilaus himself could have paid the fine huge of 100,000 *drachmas* (approx. 17 *talents*)³⁹, to which Phoebidas was sentenced (Plut. Ages. 6. 1; Diod. XV. 20. 2)⁴⁰. This is quite in line with his policy of supporting friends.

Agesilaus began to pursue such a policy from the very beginning of his reign (400/399). According to Xenophon's account, '... when the state pronounced him sole heir to the property of Agis, he gave half of it to his mother's kinsfolk, because he saw that they were in want...' (Xen. Ages. 4. 5–6, hereinafter translated by E. C. Marchant). Plutarch assessed the act of the king as follows: 'he (Agesilaus – *L.P.*) distributed... the half of his estates, thereby making his inheritance yield him good-will and reputation instead of envy and hatred' (Plut. Ages. 4. 1). Such extraordinary generosity of Agesilaus is evidence that from the first steps of his reign he planned to win over as many Spartans as possible, especially among the ruling elite. To this end, he showed in every possible way his respect for the *ephors* and *gerontes* (Plut. Ages. 4. 3) and was always ready to support them financially (Xen. Ages. 11. 8; Plut. Ages. 4. 3). He did not

³⁸ In this place Xenophon only briefly reports what happened, without expressing his opinion about the decision of the authorities to continue the occupation of the Cadmea. But later in his account of the Spartans' defeat at the battle of Leuctra, Xenophon makes it quite clear that this catastrophe was the punishment of the gods for the iniquity, committed by the Spartans in Boeotia: 'Now one could mention many other incidents, both among Greeks and barbarians, to prove that the gods do not fail to take heed of the wicked or of those who do unrighteous things... Lacedaemonians, namely, who had sworn that they would leave the states independent, after seizing possession of the Acropolis of Thebes were punished by the very men, unaided, who had been thus wronged, although before that time they had not been conquered by any single one of all the peoples that ever existed; while as for those among the Theban citizens who had led them into the Acropolis and had wanted the state to be in subjection to the Lacedaemonians in order that they might rule despotically themselves, just seven of the exiles were enough to destroy the government of these men' (Hell. V. 4. 1). For Xenophon, Sparta's intervening in Theban *stasis* and her defeat in the battle of Leuctra are closely linked, despite being more than ten years apart. On the civil struggle in Thebes, see esp.: BUXTON 2017, 21–40.

³⁹ CARTLEDGE 1987, 156.

⁴⁰ D. Rice believes the fine was never paid (RICE 1974, 182). Fines of 15–17 talents were usually awarded to Spartan kings suspected of corruption. So in 446 the king Pleistoanax was sentenced to a fine of 15 (Schol. ad Aristoph. Nub. 858 f), and the king Agis II in 419 – to a fine of 17 talents (Thuc. V. 63; see also: Diod. XII. 78).

forget about his army either. During the war with Persia in 396–394 BC Agesilaus gave his soldiers the opportunity to enrich themselves by allowing them to plunder the lands and cities of the Asia Minor satrapies (Xen. Ages. 1. 16). He offered his friends a completely legal way of enrichment – the sale of valuable trophies, which the king helped them acquire for a small price. Xenophon admired this feature in the character of Agesilaus so much that he fully endowed Cyrus the Great with this property in his utopian novel 'Cyropaedia' (VIII. 2. 13–14).

The popularity of Agesilaus is due not only to his generosity, demonstratively modest lifestyle and military successes. It is worth remembering that his path to power was not an easy one. Agesilaus was not the direct heir to the throne and therefore received the usual state upbringing and education (the so-called *agoge*), which is mandatory for any *Spartiate*, except for the direct heir (Plut. Ages. 1. 1). Agesilaus grew up in the barracks, like all other young *Spartiates*, and thanks to this he gained experience that the rightful heirs to the throne did not and could not have. He became his own for many Spartans and enjoyed their trust and respect. Plutarch noted this special quality of the king – his ability to respectfully communicate with fellow citizens, regardless of their status: '...he (Agesilaus – *L.P.*) was much more in harmony with his subjects than any of the kings; to the commanding and kingly traits which were his by nature there had been added by his public training those of popularity and kindness' (Ages. 1. 3). Agesilaus was clearly closer in lifestyle and mentality to ordinary citizens than other Spartan *arkhagetai*.

Xenophon, and after him Plutarch, in every possible way emphasize, as a special merit of Agesilaus, the constant support that he provided to his relatives and friends. Xenophon calls this peculiar trait of the king's character 'love for friends' (*φιλεταιρία*) and describes with pathos the manifestations of such love: '...yet no traces of arrogance could have been detected in him, whereas signs of a fatherly affection and readiness to serve his friends...were evident' (Xen. Ages. 8. 1). And Plutarch, a more objective and less interested witness than Xenophon, directly says that Agesilaus put friendship above the 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' (Plut. Ages. 13. 3).

Such adherence of Agesilaus to people close to him sometimes became dangerous for the state. He promoted his relatives to high positions, regardless of their abilities and skills. So, according to sources, the king made a serious mistake when 'he appointed as admiral Peisander, his wife's brother', although he had no experience in maritime affairs (Xen. Hell. III. 4. 29)⁴¹. The result was the crushing defeat of the allied fleet at Cnidus in 394, which put an end to Spartan hegemony at sea. The commanders appointed for the campaign against Olynthus in 382 (the brothers Eudamidas and Phoebidas, and Agesilaus's half-brother Teleutias) were

⁴¹ Xenophon does not openly criticize Agesilaus for such an appointment. But his comment leaves no doubt about the true attitude of the historian to the king's personnel policy. He characterizes Peisander as 'a man who was ambitious and of a stout spirit, but rather inexperienced in making such provisions as were needful' (Hell. III. 4. 29).

probably also proteges of Agesilaus. The choice of these people, according to P. Cartledge, convincingly indicates that Agesilaus was the undisputed inspirer of the entire project⁴².

The story of the trial of Phoebidas sheds light on Agesilaus' priorities. For him, it was fundamentally important to acquire as many supporters as possible. With the help of his clients, among whom there were the highest magistrates of the country, he was able for a long time to manage both the foreign and domestic policies of the Spartan state. The system of patronage created and successfully operated by Agesilaus allowed him to fully use his family, friends, clients and even political opponents for his own purposes⁴³. However, local priorities and personal preferences of Agesilaus often conflicted with the foreign policy interests of Sparta. The king achieved a mild punishment for Phoebidas, and a complete justification for Sphodrias. But this was the trigger that extraordinarily hastened the collapse of Sparta as an imperial state.

Agesilaus proved to be a poor strategist. He overestimated his strength and underestimated the determination of offended allies to resist Sparta's outright aggression. The neglect and cynical attitude of Agesilaus to international law and his own oaths cost dearly to the state that Agesilaus defended all his life. Agesilaus did Sparta a disservice by supporting the adventurers who blew up the King's Peace and eventually led Sparta to the defeat and collapse of her Empire.

Xenophon's stories about Phoebidas, as well as later about Sphodrias, are hardly accidental insertions. We believe that Xenophon introduced them to his '*Hellenica*' quite consciously. He thus showed his true attitude to the foreign policy pursued by Agesilaus. Xenophon does not directly blame Agesilaus for the failures that befell Sparta, but, on the other hand, he does not hide the fact that the state is responsible for the crimes of both commanders. And this, of course, is a hint at Agesilaus, who in those years was responsible for the foreign policy of Sparta. Even if Agesilaus did not directly direct the actions of Phoebidas and Sphodrias, he nevertheless considered it his duty to protect these ambitious and reckless Spartans. Xenophon considered such position of Agesilaus to be erroneous, as follows from his commentary on the defeat of the Spartans at Leuctra (Hell. V. 4. 1). Polybius, even more clearly than Xenophon, spoke about the episode with the Cadmea, considering it part of the general aggressive, but erroneous policy of Sparta (IV. 27. 6–8).

In the 14th chapter of the '*Lacedaemonian Politeia*', Xenophon have criticized just such commanders as Phoebidas and Sphodrias were. He considered them the main culprits for the collapse of the Spartan Empire. According to him, '... they strive far more earnestly to exercise rule than to be worthy of it' (14. 5). It is because of such people '... now many (from the Hellenes

⁴² CARTLEDGE 1987, 373.

⁴³ CARTLEDGE 1987, 159.

– L.P.) are calling on one another to prevent a revival of Lacedaemonian supremacy' (14. 6). Xenophon ends his invective with the words that the first persons in the state now '... obey neither their god nor the laws of Lycurgus' (14. 7).

The seizure of the Cadmea by Phoebidas is only one episode, although the most important, among the events that became milestones on the path of Sparta to military defeat and its transformation into a secondary state⁴⁴. Xenophon unequivocally points out (Hell. V. 4. 1) that the whole story with the Theban stasis and the armed intervention of Sparta is a key turning point, launched the chain of events that inexorably led Sparta to Leuctra⁴⁵.

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⁴⁴ DILLERY 2003, 236.

⁴⁵ BUXTON 2017, 24.

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