

The Border of War and Peace Myth and Ritual in Argive-Spartan Dispute over Thyreatis

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“I was especially inclined to laugh at the people who quarreled about boundary-lines... And when I looked toward the Peloponnese and caught sight of Cynuria, I noted what a tiny region, no bigger in any way than an Egyptian bean, had caused so many Argives and Spartans to fall in a single day.”¹

Thus speaks Menippus, Lucian’s character who soared to the Moon on an eagle’s wings and looked back at the Earth. The fact that in the second century AD an ancient conflict between the Argives and the Spartans over a strip of borderland is picked out by the satirical writer as a memorable demonstration of human absurdity may give us an initial hint of the evocative power of the subject. This paper explores the evolving ideology of the conflict over Cynuria and the shifting networks of ritual, mythological and political associations this conflict was embedded in throughout its history. This inquiry will cause us to probe the boundaries of the ancient Greek conceptions of war and peace, ritual confrontations and real hostilities.

The Argive proposal

The starting point of this paper is a consideration of seemingly eccentric terms of a peace treaty, regulating the issue of Cynuria, put forward by the Argives to the Spartans. It is the year four hundred twenty BC. An unstable peace between Sparta and Athens is teetering. In addition, a thirty-year truce between Sparta and Argos has expired, and the Spartans are anxious to renew it in order to avoid fighting with both Argos and Athens. The Argives, on the other hand, worriedly imagine that they are about to confront a coalition between the Spartans, Athenians, Boeotians and Tegeans.² They curb their aspirations to head an alliance of city-states independent of Sparta, and send envoys to Sparta with the

¹ Lucian. *Icaromenippus* 18.1-2, 11-16. Μάλιστα δὲ ἐπ’ ἐκείνους ἐπήει μοι γελᾶν τοῖς περὶ γῆς ὄρων ἐρίζουσι [...]. ἀποβλέψας δὲ δὴ καὶ ἐς τὴν Πελοπόννησον, εἶτα τὴν Κυνουρίαν γῆν ἰδὼν ἀνεμνήσθην περὶ ὅσου χωρίου, κατ’ οὐδὲν Αἰγυπτίου φακοῦ πλατυτέρου, τοσοῦτοι ἔπεσον Ἀργείων καὶ Λακεδαιμονίων μίᾳ ἡμέρᾳ. Translation A.M. Harmon.

² Thuc. 5.36.1, 5.40.3.

goal of obtaining peace on the best possible terms. Thucydides describes the negotiations:

“What the Argives first demanded was that they might be allowed to refer to the arbitration of some state or private person the question of the Cynurian land, a borderland about which they have always been disputing, which contains the cities of Thyrea and Anthene, and which is occupied by the Spartans. The Spartans at first said that they could not allow this point to be discussed, but were ready to conclude upon the old terms. Eventually, however, the Argive ambassadors succeeded in obtaining from them this concession: -- For the present there was to be a truce for fifty years, but it should be competent for either party, there being neither plague nor war in Sparta or Argos, to give a formal challenge and decide the question of this territory by battle, as on a former occasion, when both sides claimed the victory; pursuit not being allowed beyond the frontier of Argos or Sparta. The Spartans at first thought this mere folly; but at last, anxious at any cost to have the friendship of Argos, they agreed to the terms demanded, and committed them to writing. However, before any of this should become binding, the ambassadors were to return to Argos and communicate with their people, and in the event of their approval, to come at the feast of the Hyacinthia and take the oaths.”³

At this point the relations between Sparta and Athens become even more strained, owing to Alcibiades’ intrigues. Alcibiades then orchestrates a treaty between Athens and Argos, persuading the Argives to abandon their agreement with the Spartans. In the following summer (419 BC) Argos enters into a war with the Spartan ally Epidaurus; in another year, the Spartans defeat the Argives

³ Thuc. 5.41.2-3. καὶ οἱ πρέσβεις ἀφικόμενοι αὐτῶν λόγους ἐποιούντο πρὸς τοὺς Λακεδαιμονίους ἐφ’ ᾧ ἂν σφίσι αἱ σπονδαὶ γίγνοιτο. καὶ τὸ μὲν πρῶτον οἱ Ἀργεῖοι ἠξίουσαν δίκης ἐπιτροπὴν σφίσι γενέσθαι ἢ ἐς πόλιν τινὰ ἢ ἰδιώτην περὶ τῆς Κυνουρίας γῆς, ἧς αἰεὶ πέρι διαφέρονται μεθορίας οὐσης (ἔχει δὲ ἐν αὐτῇ Θυρέαν καὶ Ἀνθήνην πόλιν, νέμονται δ’ αὐτὴν Λακεδαιμόνιοι). ἔπειτα δ’ οὐκ ἐώντων Λακεδαιμονίων μεμνήσθαι περὶ αὐτῆς, ἀλλ’, εἰ βούλονται σπένδεσθαι ὥσπερ πρότερον, ἐτοῖμοι εἶναι, οἱ Ἀργεῖοι πρέσβεις τάδε ὁμῶς ἐπηγάγοντο τοὺς Λακεδαιμονίους ζυγχαρῆσαι, ἐν μὲν τῷ παρόντι σπονδὰς ποιήσασθαι ἔτη πενήκοντα, ἐξεῖναι δ’ ὀποτεροισὺν προκαλεσαμένους, μήτε νόσου οὐσης μήτε πολέμου Λακεδαίμονι καὶ Ἀργεῖ, διαμάχεσθαι περὶ τῆς γῆς ταύτης, ὥσπερ καὶ πρότερόν ποτε ὅτε αὐτοὶ ἐκότεροι ἠξίωσαν νικᾶν, διώκειν δὲ μὴ ἐξεῖναι περαιτέρω τῶν πρὸς Ἄργος καὶ Λακεδαίμονα ὄρων. τοῖς δὲ Λακεδαιμονίοις τὸ μὲν πρῶτον ἐδόκει μορῖα εἶναι ταῦτα, ἔπειτα (ἐπεθύμουν γὰρ τὸ Ἄργος πάντως φίλιον ἔχειν) ζυγεχάρησαν ἐφ’ οἷς ἠξίουσαν καὶ ζυνεγράψαντο. ἐκέλευον δ’ οἱ Λακεδαιμόνιοι, πρὶν τέλος τι αὐτῶν ἔχειν, ἐς τὸ Ἄργος πρῶτον ἐπαναχωρήσαντας αὐτοὺς δεῖξαι τῷ πλήθει, καὶ ἦν ἀρέσκοντα ἦ. ἦκειν ἐς τὰ Ὑακίνθια τοὺς ὄρκους ποιησομένους. καὶ οἱ μὲν ἀνεχώρησαν. Translation R. Crawley, modified.

in the battle of Mantinea.⁴ The Peloponnesian war rolls on, and we are left to ponder the significance of the fleeting and idiosyncratic vision of peace that featured a battle for the disputed territory. What advantage did the Argives seek by proposing to replay the battle for Cynuria? In the modern scholarship, the Argive suggestion is interpreted as an indulgence in nostalgic archaizing at the cost of realistic engagement with the political situation.⁵ However, dismissing the Argive move as an outmoded oddity runs a serious risk of overlooking any pragmatic objectives that the Argives might have had. This paper endeavors to find such objectives. I also believe that a careful analysis of the ways in which the issue of Cynuria was handled would produce a new information about the mechanisms through which the relations of peace were established between city-states.

An attempt to understand the motivation that drove the Argives to propose the rerun of the battle has to start from the question about the nature of the conflict for Cynuria. Why was Cynuria so central in the negotiations between Sparta and Argos? It is unlikely that the importance of Cynuria derived from its economic or strategic worth.⁶ Cynuria is an isolated mountainous area.⁷ The mountain range of Parnon and the ridges of Mt Partheneion separate it, respectively, from both Sparta and Argos. Cynuria's economic value must have been insignificant:⁸ it is not rich in natural resources, and poorly suited for agriculture – there are only two plains in it (one of them near the city of Thyrea, on the coast of the Argolic Gulf). Furthermore, the conflict between the Spartans and the Argives, referred to by Thucydides and Lucian, is regularly described in other sources as a conflict over Thyreatis, the plain near Thyrea:⁹ thus, the confrontation apparently focused on only a small piece of Lucian's "Egyptian bean."

A striking feature of Thucydides' concise presentation of the confrontation over Cynuria/Thyreatis is that the description of the course of the conflict supersedes the account of its causes. We learn a great deal about the conflict's temporal complexity. In the present moment of Thucydides' narrative, Cynuria is inhabited by the Spartans. However, Thucydides also portrays the Argives and the Spartans as *always* disputing over Cynuria, which is called a "border-

⁴ Thuc. 5.43-47, 5.53, 5.66-74.

⁵ Hanson 2005, 344, n.37; Hornblower (2002 [1983], 84) describes the Argive proposal as a "comic moment."

⁶ See below the discussion of Cynuria's value as a "buffer zone" (Kelly 1970b, 980) between Argos and Sparta.

⁷ On the isolation of Cynuria, see Kelly 1970b, 979-980.

⁸ Brelich 1961, 22; Kelly 1970b, 980; cf. Robertson 1992, 191.

⁹ The ancient authors use the appellations Thyrea, Thyrae and Thyreatis to describe the area. I employ "Thyreatis" throughout this paper, to distinguish the region from the city of Thyrea.

land”¹⁰ despite having been under Sparta’s control from the middle of the sixth century BC.¹¹ A further temporal reference is introduced: a certain past occasion on which both Sparta and Argos considered themselves victors. This past occasion is put forward as a blueprint for a future battle for Cynuria.

The mentions of the earlier battle and of the conflict’s perpetual nature indicate that the traditional history of the conflict played an important role in the conflict’s present. Interestingly, the Argive proposal seeks to remove the issue of Cynuria from history into the safe space of a ritual. The condition that in the battle for Cynuria the pursuit cannot proceed beyond the frontiers of Argos and Sparta disconnects the question of Cynuria’s possession from the possibility of a wider territorial conquest. Moreover, the fight for this territory becomes the manifestation of concord between Argos and Sparta. It follows from the prominence of the history and ritual in the Argive proposal that the key to understanding of the importance of Cynuria/Thyreatis in the Argive-Spartan relationship should be sought not in the economic and strategic factors but in the ideology of the conflict over this territory. By the “ideology of the conflict” I mean a conceptual framework, including the past course of the conflict as conceived by each side, that informed the perception of the conflict’s meaning. In the course of my argument, I will attempt to elucidate the particular visions of the past that the Argives and the Spartans might have operated with at the moment of the treaty. After reconstructing the ideology of the conflict, we will be in a better position to identify the ways in which this ideology was utilized and manipulated by the Argive proposal to ritualize the confrontation over Cynuria. This, in turn, should help us to answer the question concerning the synchronic practical gains the Argives were hoping to achieve by the treaty.

Sources

Our most important source concerning the conflict over Cynuria/Thyreatis is Herodotus’ description of the so-called Battle of Champions (1.82). This battle is commonly identified with the “former occasion, when both sides claimed the victory,” mentioned by Thucydides.¹² Herodotus dates the battle by the time of Croesus’ appeal to the Spartans for help against the Persians (in 546 BC, by our reckoning). The Spartans, Herodotus tells us, had just seized the territory of Thyreatis from the Argives, who were ready to fight for the return of their land. The warring sides agreed that in lieu of a full-scale battle, only three hundred men from each side should fight. The rest of the two armies departed to avoid

¹⁰ γῆς...μεθόριας. Thuc. 5.41.2; also 2.27.2. Figueira (1993, 528-529) points out the peculiarity of Thucydides’ definition of Cynuria/Thyreatis as a borderland.

¹¹ On the dating of the Spartan annexation of Cynuria, see below.

¹² Thuc. 5.41.2. Hornblower 2008, 97 with further references.

involvement in the battle. In the course of fighting, only three men were left alive, two Argives and a Spartan. The Argives returned to Argos, believing that they had won, but the Spartan stripped the enemy corpses of armor and returned to his post in the Spartan camp. The next day, when both armies came back to learn the outcome, a disagreement broke out over who should be considered the victor; the argument turned into a fight, and after both side had suffered many casualties, the Spartans defeated the Argives. This confrontation, Herodotus says, led to changes in both the Spartan and the Argive customs concerning their hairstyles: the Argives resolved to cut their hair short till they had won Thyreatis back, while the Spartans began to grow their hair long.

The Battle of Champions is not the only attested military clash focused on Cynuria/Thyreatis. Thucydides' assertion that the Argives and the Spartans "always dispute" for Cynuria is matched by Pausanias' account, portraying Cynuria as a primordial conflict zone. Pausanias dates the first Spartan military involvement in Cynuria by the reign of Echestratus, the son of eponymous Agis, and even prior to the reign of Prytanis, the son of eponymous Eurypon.¹³ He also refers to a struggle for Thyreatis between the Spartans and Argives in the reign of Theopompus.¹⁴ Furthermore, Plutarch mentions a speech of Polydorus (the Agiad king contemporary with Theopompus, according to the inherited tradition), made on the occasion of the Spartan victory over the Argives, "after the battle of the three hundred."¹⁵ Plutarch's wording is interesting: he says that in the battle of the three hundred the Argives were "again" (πάλιν) defeated by the Spartans, suggesting a previous Spartan victory over the Argives in a battle of three hundred.¹⁶ The sources portray the dispute over Cynuria as remaining unresolved for a long time after the episode during the Peloponnesian War described by Thucydides: Pausanias mentions an arbitration of the disputed territory between Sparta and Argos by Philip and then again, by the Roman senator Gallus.¹⁷

Conflicting interpretations of the dispute over Thyreatis

A major advance in the understanding of the ideological underpinnings of the conflict over Thyreatis was made by Angelo Brelich in his classic study *Guerre, agoni e culti nella Grecia arcaica*. Brelich called attention to the long duration of the

¹³ Paus. 3.2.2, 3.7.2.

¹⁴ Paus. 3.7.5. In addition, Pausanias transmits a tradition of the Spartan defeat by the Argives at Hysiai (Paus. 2.24.7), which is often connected to the conflict over Cynuria in the modern literature (Wade-Gery 1949, 80; Brelich 1961, 23, n.29 gives other references); however, see Kelly 1970a.

¹⁵ Plut. *Apophthegmata Laconica* 231e.

¹⁶ Brelich 1961, 25.

¹⁷ Paus. 7.11.1-2.

conflict, the reports of its inception in the legendary antiquity, and the incommensurability between the value of the disputed territory and the scale of the conflict.¹⁸ He also emphasized the repeated appearance of regulations, mitigating the magnitude of the fighting.¹⁹ Brelich observed that the dispute over Thyreatis shared these features with another ancient conflict over a border territory, the war for the Lelantine Plain between Eretria and Chalcis. He noticed a resemblance between the aetiology of the Spartan and Argive hairstyles given by Herodotus, and a tradition associating a particular hairstyle with the Lelantine war,²⁰ and suggested that the references to hair-cutting tied these border conflicts to ritual initiations of young men into adulthood.²¹

Brelich also reconstructed some religious connotations of the conflict over Thyreatis. The conflict was linked with one of the most important Spartan festivals, the Gymnopaediae. The festival featured choruses of *paides* in honor of the Spartans who fell at Thyrea; the choral leaders wore wreaths called *thyreatikoi*, commemorating the victory at Thyrea.²² The ritual celebration of the battle for Thyreatis during the Gymnopaediae occurred in the framework of the cult of Apollo Pythaeus,²³ a divine figure important in Laconia, and at the same time strongly associated with Argos.²⁴ Brelich remarked that Apollo Pythaeus was connected to the confrontation between Argos and Sparta,²⁵ and also apparently once united the two city-states in some sort of federal cult.²⁶ Brelich concluded that the dispute over Thyreatis (as well as the Lelantine war) originated as a ritual combat for the border territory, during which the participants transitioned from the status of ephebes to adulthood. Over time, these ritual combats were transformed into real wars, leaving only an “aura” of cultic and

¹⁸ Brelich 1961, 22, 29, 29-30, n.38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29. The examples include the restriction of the number of the participants to three hundred on each side (Hdt. 1.82.3); the Argive proposal that the pursuit in a future battle for Cynuria should not go beyond the borders of Argos and Sparta (Thuc. 5.41.2); Polydorus’ insistence in that the aim of the battle was solely the possession of the disputed territory and not the conquest of the enemy’s city (Plut. *Apophthegmata Laconica* 231e).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

²² *Ibid.*, 30-31. Sosibius via Athenaeus 15.678b-c, *Anecd. Bekk.* 1, 32, *Suda* s.v. Γυμνοπαΐδια.

²³ Paus. 3.11.9; Brelich 1961, 31.

²⁴ Brelich 1961, 32, 34. Ancient sources (Telesilla via Paus. 2.35.2) claim that the epithet Pythaeus is originally Argive.

²⁵ According to a tradition reported by Pausanias, the cult of Apollo Pythaeus in Asine figured in an ancient episode of the Spartan-Argive hostilities. Paus. 2.36.4. Brelich 1961, 32.

²⁶ Thuc. 5.53.1, Diod. 12.78.1. Brelich 1961, 33-34. The evidence for the federal cult of Apollo Pythaeus that included both Argos and Sparta is complicated and can be only briefly considered in the current presentation. See below n.108.

ritual associations.²⁷ However, Brelich himself admitted that such an explanation left some problems unresolved. The relation between the ritual limitation of violence and apparent cases of severe bloodshed is perplexing. For example, in Herodotus' narrative, the regulation limiting the number of the combatants to three hundreds on each side is combined with the annihilation of all but three participants.²⁸ A further and major problem is that Brelich's "ritual aura" does not explain the nature of fighting over Thyreatis once the ritual combats, according to Brelich's model, were transformed into real confrontations. Brelich perceived the cultic and ritual details, cropping up in our sources in connection to the dispute over Thyreatis, as synchronically inconsequential, stripped of their "original" initiatory context in the distant past.²⁹ However, the perpetuation of a ritual at a given moment in time tends to endow it with a range of current functions and significances.³⁰ A proper reconstruction of a ritual therefore ought to consider its successive modifications in form, content and function over a span of time: the rituals connected to the confrontation over Thyreatis need to be embedded in their historical contexts. Finally, Brelich's analysis presents an additional methodological problem in that Brelich uses the sources in an undifferentiated fashion, without distinguishing between earlier and later ones.

Indeed, Thomas Kelly, who carefully examined the ancient sources on the history of the strife between Sparta and Argos in a chronological manner, came to the following unsettling conclusion: "the later the writer the more he professes to know about the early warfare between the two states."³¹ Kelly asserts that the centuries-long struggle between Argos and Sparta, stemming from the earliest times, was invented in the fourth century BC and then elaborated on by the later historians.³² The gist of Kelly's argument is as follows. The earliest mention of the conflict between Argos and Sparta is Herodotus' description of the Battle of Champions; the passage of Thucydides about the Argive suggestion to replay the battle is the next oldest reference.³³ Both sources portray the

²⁷ Brelich 1961, 83-84.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁹ Thus, for example, Brelich mentions the Argive proposal to the Spartans of replaying the battle for Thyreatis (Brelich 1961, 17), but he does not offer any remarks on the import of this suggestion in 420 BC.

³⁰ Kowalzig 2007, 34.

³¹ Kelly 1970b, 1000.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Tyrtaios' fragment P. Oxy. 3316 (not yet discovered at the time of Kelly's article) is sometimes cited as an Archaic evidence of the war between Sparta and Argos. Cartledge 2002, 109. However, a rarely acknowledged feature of the poem is that it is written in the future tense, which opens the possibility that the poem does not portray to a historical event. Indeed, the description of military events in the future tense finds parallels in Archilochus fr. 3 and *Hymn. Hom. Dem.* 265-267, both of which, as I plan to argue in a different paper, refer to rituals.

conflict as focused solely on the issue of the territory of Cynuria/Thyreatis.³⁴ On this subject Kelly observes that the accessible road from Sparta to Cynuria passed through the territory of Tegea; the alternative mountainous route was very difficult. Kelly infers that a precondition for Sparta's being strategically interested in the occupation of Cynuria (as a buffer zone protecting the Spartans from a potential Argive attack and making a Spartan attack on the Argive plain possible) was Spartan dominance over Tegea.³⁵ Sparta gained control of Tegea sometime in the middle of the sixth century,³⁶ which therefore must provide a *terminus post quem* for the Spartan military interest in Cynuria. This date fits well with the date of the Battle of Champions derived from Herodotus (546 BC); after that point there is an unambiguous record of continual hostilities between Sparta and Argos.³⁷

Kelly argues that the ancient writers coming after Herodotus and Thucydides were influenced by the post-mid-sixth-century hostile relations between Sparta and Argos and assumed that the two states were antagonistic throughout their history.³⁸ The first mention of a specific conflict between Sparta and Argos predating the Battle of Champions is found in Ephorus, whom Kelly credits with the introduction of the idea of the strife between Argos and Sparta as the defining theme of the early Peloponnesian history.³⁹ For Pausanias the traditional enmity between the two states was a given. Pausanias makes numerous references to it, providing, for example, a list of six early Spartan kings who engaged in confrontations with the Argives. Kelly remarks that the kings on the list belong to such remote past that their historicity is highly unlikely; for him, the list is an example of a later baroque embellishment on the theme of primordial Argive-Spartan strife.⁴⁰

Kelly's analysis seems to undercut several points of Brelich's argument, such as the early inception of the conflict for Thyreatis and the long duration of the conflict. However, at this point a crucial distinction must be made between the historical reality of the centuries-long confrontation over Cynuria/Thyreatis and the historical reality of the *tradition* describing such confrontation. I consider Kelly's argument about the mid-sixth century inception of Sparta's military involvement in Cynuria to be persuasive; however, his claim that the tradition of the ancient conflict between Argos and Sparta was invented in the fourth century is less convincing. While it is plausible that the specific details concerning the early confrontation are a later elaboration, already Thucydides

³⁴ Kelly 1970b, 974, 979-980.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 980-981.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 975, n.16 with further references.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 984.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 985.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 994-995.

states that the two states were “always disputing” over Cynuria.⁴¹ Plato and Xenophon also share belief in a tradition of the primordial conflict between Sparta and Argos.⁴² Further, our earliest source, Herodotus’ account, contains elements such as the equal numbers of the battle participants on each side, or the aetiology of haircuts, highly evocative of ritual. Thus, Herodotus does not provide us with a dry military report of the Battle of Champions in 546 BC as an inception of Argive-Spartan conflict: rather, his description suggests that he is familiar with the tradition of the conflict, endowed with ritual overtones. Let us attempt to reconstruct the various stages of the development of this tradition. The starting point for this reconstruction should obviously be a closer examination of our earliest source, Herodotus.

Myth, ritual, history: What Herodotus has joined together

As we have seen, the date of the Battle of Champions (546 BC) matches Kelly’s reconstruction of the Spartans becoming interested in the annexation of Cynuria after they have gained control of Tegea. While we lack a literary source, contemporary or earlier than Herodotus, that would corroborate Herodotus’ dating of the Spartan conquest, an archaeologically attested explosive appearance of the Spartan settlements in Cynuria in the middle of the sixth century fits the date provided by Herodotus.⁴³ Thus, it is likely that Herodotus’ account of the Spartan annexation of Cynuria in the middle of the sixth century has some foundation in reality.

However, one should observe that the connection between the Battle of Champions and Croesus’ appeal for help against the Persians, on which the precise dating of the battle is founded, is extremely flimsy. The story of the battle appears in a vignette that turns to have no causal relation with the Spartan assistance for Croesus:⁴⁴ the Spartans decide to help Croesus “despite their conflict with the Argives,”⁴⁵ but then the news of Croesus’ capture arrive as they are ready to sail out, so they cancel the expedition. This lack of causal relation elicits a suspicion that Herodotus attached the description of the Battle of Champions to Croesus’ appeal on some other grounds than his rigorous knowledge of the historical link between the two events. The fragility of the battle’s dating compels us to examine the historicity of the rest of the passage,

⁴¹ αἰεὶ ... διαφέρονται, Thuc. 5.41.2. Thucydides’ wording elicits Kelly’s objection, not backed up by any evidence, that αἰεὶ “cannot be taken in temporal sense.” Kelly 1970b, 974, n.10.

⁴² Plato *Leg.* 3.686b, Xen. *Hell.* 3.5.11. Kelly 1970b, 985, nn.53,54.

⁴³ Kennell 2010, 52. Cartledge 2002, 123 also supports this date for the Spartan annexation of Thyreatis.

⁴⁴ Dillery 1996, 221.

⁴⁵ Hdt. 1.83.

which is commonly interpreted as a straightforward chronological account of the past.⁴⁶ However, a more careful look at the episode reveals disturbing anachronisms and aberrations. First, it was long ago observed that Herodotus' description of the Argive supremacy in the Peloponnese at the time of the Spartan attack⁴⁷ brings to mind the legendary past of Agamemnon's rule over the islands rather than the realia of the sixth century.⁴⁸ Further, 546 BC seems late for the Spartan adoption of the long hair: representations of long-haired Spartan youths are attested much earlier.⁴⁹ Finally, the outcome of the battle of Champions – the death of all but three participants – is extraordinary.⁵⁰ A hoplite battle in which all of the participants are killed off is easier accommodated in the world of myth than in the world of military history.

A reasonable explanation of these peculiarities is that Herodotus incorporated a legendary tradition of a lethal battle into his account of the fighting over Thyreatis. Suggestions along these lines have been made in the past by Richard Tomlinson and Noel Robertson.⁵¹ Yet both these scholars, in different ways, underestimate the potential significance of such a legend. Tomlinson's focus of interest is the historical reality of the interactions between Argos and Sparta in the sixth century BC. Thus, while he notices the "romanticizing" in Herodotus' account and posits a question concerning its causes, he leaves the question unanswered.⁵² Robertson's assertion is that the story of the battle of Champions was "invented" as an aetiology of a certain festival.⁵³ However, such a privileging of the ritual at the expense of the affiliated myth disregards the interactions between the ritual and the myth, which are arguably central in the generation of messages.⁵⁴ My argument will attempt to examine the historical implications of the mythical tradition about the battle for Thyreatis considered jointly with its allied rituals.

⁴⁶ As recently as Kennell 2010, 52.

⁴⁷ "At this time the land as far as Malis in the west belonged to the Argives, both the mainland and the islands, including Cythera and the rest." Hdt. 1.82.2. All translations from Herodotus are by A.L. Purvis.

⁴⁸ Beloch 1912, 204, n.1; Kelly 1970b, 977-978; Tomlinson 1972, 88; tentatively, Asheri et al. 2007, 139. Cf. Hdt. 1.1.2.

⁴⁹ Tomlinson 1972, 89; Lipka 2002, 194. For Plutarch, this custom possessed the antiquity of Lycurgus' ordinance. Plut. *Lys.* 1.2-3. David 1992, 14.

⁵⁰ The rate of mortality in a hoplite battle has been assessed as three to ten percent for the winning side, and ten to twenty percent for the defeated one. Krentz 1985, 18; Hanson 1995, 306-307.

⁵¹ Tomlinson 1972, 89; Robertson 1992, 184; Köiv 2003, 131.

⁵² Tomlinson 1972, 89.

⁵³ Robertson 1992, 207.

⁵⁴ The definition of myth with which I operate is "a given society's codification of its own traditional values in narrative and dramatic form." Nagy 1990, 436. Similarly, Lincoln 1999, 147. On the relation between myth and ritual, see the discussion in Kowalzig 2007, 22-23.

Ritual connotations, as we have already observed, are conspicuous in the description of the Battle of Champions. The aetiology of the Spartan and Argive hairstyles suggests an association with rites of passage.⁵⁵ For Sparta, in particular, we have Xenophon's statement that the men were allowed to grow long hair after they left the age grade of *hébóntes*.⁵⁶ A subtler point, also indicative of a ritual, is a paradoxical pattern of cooperation between Sparta and Argos, emerging from Herodotus' phrasing. Herodotus reports that the Spartan custom of wearing long hair was established as an opposite of the Argive adoption of the short hair.⁵⁷ The Argives and the Spartans appear to define themselves through their antagonism; their hair-related customs are contrasting and complementary, operating in one system of signification.

Thus, even a relatively rapid examination of the passage uncovers interlocking elements of history, myth and ritual. The joining together of such elements, often stemming from different sources, is at the heart of Herodotus' historical method.⁵⁸ Sometimes Herodotus identifies his sources; at other times different narrative strands are amalgamated. Moreover, in many cases it is possible to pinpoint the modifications that Herodotus made in the traditional accounts included in his *History*.⁵⁹ The following discussion attempts to determine the outlines of the constituent traditions that Herodotus merged in his description of the dispute over Thyreatis, and to identify the adjustments that he introduced.

Beautiful death in Thyreatis

My working hypothesis so far is that Herodotus combined the mythical tale of a deadly battle for Thyreatis and some ritual elements (whose nature we will discuss later) with the historically veracious story of a large-scale confrontation between Sparta and Argos that resulted in the Spartan appropriation of Cynuria. The idea that Herodotus combined the myth of a lethal battle and an account of a historical confrontation receives some support from the existence of a version in which the battle of six hundred champions is unaccompanied by further military conflict. Plutarch, citing the *Peloponnesian History* by Chrysermus, reports that when, after the deadly battle of the six hundred champions, both

⁵⁵ Brelich 1961, 80-81; Robertson 1992, 206.

⁵⁶ Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 11.3. Ducat 2006a, 109-111. Cf. Pettersson 1992, 85. *Hébóntes* were the oldest age group that did not have full citizen status (despite their prominence in military service). Ducat 2006a, 104-112.

⁵⁷ Λακεδαιμόνιοι δὲ τὰ ἐναντία τούτων ἔθεντο νόμον. "The Spartans established a contrary regulation." Hdt. 1.82.8.

⁵⁸ Bakker 2002, 15, 18-19, 29; cf. Dewald 2002, 283, 286-287; Griffiths 2006, 140.

⁵⁹ Burkert 1965; Griffith 1989; Calame 2003 [1996], 86-108; Giangiulio 2001; Giangiulio 2005; Griffiths 2006, 140-141.

sides still claimed victory,⁶⁰ “the Amphictyonic Assembly, after a personal inspection of the battlefield, decided in favor of the Spartans.”⁶¹ We will return to the peculiar detail of the Amphictyonic Assembly arbitrating between the Spartans and the Argives. Now let us examine another difference between the versions of Herodotus and Plutarch/Chrysermus: the fate and function of the last Spartan to remain alive, Othryades.

Herodotus ends the story of the battle by telling that Othryades “was ashamed to return to Sparta because his comrades had died; he killed himself there in Thyrea.”⁶² No shame figures in Plutarch’s rendering: Othryades, the Spartan general, is wounded mortally, summons the remaining strength to build a trophy, and writes upon it a victory dedication in his own blood.⁶³ The same story reoccurs in several other sources, including an epigram attributed to Simonides.⁶⁴ Herodotus’ account is our earliest attestation of the tale of Thyrea, since the attribution of *Anth. Pal.* 7.431 to Simonides is tentative.⁶⁵ However, we cannot automatically assume the absolute chronological primacy of Herodotus’ version. The question is, could the suicide of Othryades have featured in the mythical tradition about the lethal battle that ended with the Argive-Spartan dispute over the victory?

We can answer this question in part, I believe: this episode is unlikely to be stemming from the *Spartan* version of the myth, since the suicide of the last Spartan survivor does nothing to bolster the Spartan claim of victory.⁶⁶ Conversely, the heroic death of Othryades as presented by Plutarch and the epigrams perfectly fits the Spartan ideology of a beautiful death, i.e. the death in battle that brings salvation and glory to the city.⁶⁷ Thus, this version, despite its later attestation, is possibly more similar than Herodotus’ version to the variant of the myth prevalent in Sparta.

Interestingly, we also have traces of an Argive variant of the mythical battle for Thyreatis. Pausanias reports that the Argives considered themselves victors

⁶⁰ Compare Thuc. 5.41.2: “when both sides claimed the victory.”

⁶¹ Plut. *Parallela Minora* 306b. Translation F.C. Babbitt.

⁶² Hdt. 1.82.8.

⁶³ Plut. *Parallela Minora* 306a-b.

⁶⁴ *Anth. Pal.* 7.431 (attributed to Simonides); 7.430; 7.741; Theseus via Stob. *Flor.* 3.7.68 (= *FGrH* 453 F 2), on which see Corcella 1996, 263, with n15 for further literature. Only one epigram (*Anth. Pal.* 7.526) speaks of Othryades’ suicide (following the erection of the trophy).

⁶⁵ See Bravi 2006, 89-90, with bibliography.

⁶⁶ It is noteworthy that Plutarch vehemently disagrees with the Herodotean version of Othryades’ death: “Notice how roughly he has handled Othryades, whom they [the Spartans] particularly admired and honored.” Plutarch, *De Herodoti malignitate* 858d. Translation L. Pearson. On the anomalous nature of Herodotus’ motivation of Othryades’ suicide see Dillery 1996, 227; Robertson 1992, 201; Tomlinson 1972, 89.

⁶⁷ Loraux 1977. On the heroization of the Spartans fallen at Thyrea, see Currie 2005, 99, n.59 with further references.

in the contest for Thyreatis with the Spartans.⁶⁸ In another passage, he describes seeing in the theater in Argos “a representation of a man killing another, namely the Argive Perilaus, the son of Alcenor, killing the Spartan Othryades.”⁶⁹ Thus, it appears that the Argives at some point presented the death of Othryades as their own victory.⁷⁰ Why did Herodotus incorporate the suicide of Othryades, rather than the episode of Othryades’ glorious death, into his narrative? Herodotus’ variant can be at least partially explained as the result of the joining of two tales, the mythical battle and the historical confrontation.⁷¹ In the process of joining, the figure of Othryades, pivotal in the traditional story, becomes marginalized.⁷²

While Herodotus’ story of Othryades’ suicide somewhat departs from the conventional ideology of the glorious death, the theme of the beautiful death emerges forcefully in a different episode, which turns to be implicitly connected with the battle for Thyrea. I refer to the famous scene when before the battle of Thermopylae a messenger reports to Xerxes that the Spartans are engaged in combing their long hair. Demaratus explains to the astonished Xerxes that it is a custom for the Spartans to arrange their hair when they are about to risk their lives.⁷³ At this point we may remember Herodotus’ statement that the Spartans adopted long hair in commemoration of the victory at Thyrea. This custom turns out to be not only a joyful sign of triumph and a tribute to the heroic dead, but a preparation for becoming a beautiful corpse,⁷⁴ if need be, in emulation of the three hundred at Thyrea.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Paus. 10.9.12.

⁶⁹ Paus. 2.20.7. Translation W.H.S. Jones. In Herodotus, Alcenor is the name of one of the two Argive survivors; Plutarch gives the name of Agenor instead.

⁷⁰ Asheri et al. 2007, 140.

⁷¹ The story of Othryades’ suicide out of shame to be the only survivor may also in part have been motivated by Herodotus’ sympathy toward Aristodemus, the sole survivor of Thermopylae, who was dishonored at Sparta as a ‘trembler,’ and then fell at Plataea after proving himself one of the bravest fighters. On Herodotus’ sympathy toward Aristodemus, see Ducat 2006b, 34-38.

⁷² The placement of the suicide of Othryades at the very end of Herodotus’ account of the confrontation over Thyreatis intensifies the impression of the episode’s marginalization in Herodotus’ rendering.

⁷³ Hdt. 7.208.3, 7.209.3.

⁷⁴ On the Spartan hair arrangement in preparation to dying beautifully, see David 1992, 16.

⁷⁵ On the similarities between Herodotus’ descriptions of the battles of Thyrea and Thermopylae see Dillery 1996. All the potential explanations of these similarities that Dillery considers involve Herodotus, consciously or unconsciously, patterning the accounts of Thyrea and Thermopylae after one another. Dillery 1996, 234. However, a qualitatively different scenario is also imaginable: the tradition of Thyrea could have molded the tradition of Thermopylae independently and prior to Herodotus.

The ritual battle

The Spartan annexation of Cynuria probably dates to the middle of the sixth century BC, as we have discussed. Can we date the mythical tale of the conflict over Thyreatis? While living, changing myths are notoriously difficult to date, the detail of the strangely cooperative attitude of the Argives and the Spartans, expressed in the equal number of the battle participants on each side, is unlikely to have been first conceived after the Spartan takeover of Cynuria: it probably derives from the earlier period, when Sparta and Argos, as Kelly argues, were not yet enemies.⁷⁶

We arrive at a paradox: the myth of the confrontation between Argos and Sparta, focused on the issue of Thyreatis, appears to predate any real clash of interests between Argos and Sparta in that area. What was the significance of the myth of the confrontation before there was a real confrontation? And how do we account for the traces of cooperation and ritual, noticeable in Herodotus' description of the conflict over Thyreatis? As a solution, I propose to adopt a modified form of Brelich's hypothesis that the Argives and the Spartans engaged in ritual combats for the border territory of Thyreatis. In contrast to Brelich, I do not consign the ritual confrontations to the prehistoric past, but rather suggest that they took place in the Archaic period until Sparta disrupted the tradition by the annexation of Cynuria.⁷⁷ The outcome of each battle determined to which city-state the border territory of the Thyreatis would belong till the next encounter.⁷⁸ I submit that these ritual battles commemorated and reenacted (in an attenuated form) the mythical deadly battle of the six hundred Champions.

The idea of the ritual reenactments of the battle for Thyreatis helps to explain why Herodotus merged the myth of the battle with the story of the Spartan conquest of Cynuria, which happened only about a hundred years before Herodotus' time.⁷⁹ While Herodotus probably was not aware of the past practice of the ritual battles, the reenactments that occurred till the middle of the sixth century could have "modernized" the myth, creating an impression that it was situated not in the legendary past, but in a relatively recent historical time. Herodotus' mention of the Spartan adoption of the long hair in his account of the confrontation over Thyreatis indicates that the long hair may have been

⁷⁶ Kelly 1970b, 1001.

⁷⁷ Brelich very cautiously considered a possibility that battles with limited number of participants, analogous to the battle of Champions, were fought in Thyreatis "in tutte le epoche." Brelich 29-30, n.38. See also Köiv 2003, 132.

⁷⁸ The mechanism of such variable possession is obscure, but possibly it concerned the revenue from the territory.

⁷⁹ Tomlinson remarks that the "folk-tale versions of events," reported by Herodotus, such as the story of Cypselus, typically "belong to remoter times than the mid-sixth century." Tomlinson 1972, 89.

linked to the participation in the ritual battle. In Sparta in the classical period the right to wear long hair coincided with the attainment of full citizenship.⁸⁰ If we assume that it was the same in the Archaic period, we can infer that the (hypothetical) ritual battle functioned as a rite of coming of age for its participants, marking their transition into full citizen status.⁸¹

Fighting at the *Gymnopaedia*

I hypothesized that in the Archaic period the Argives and the Spartans fought in ritual battles for the territory of Thyreatis. What follows is an attempt to reconstruct further details concerning the setting and organization of such battles. We have already mentioned Brelich's observation of the connection between the tale of battle for Thyreatis and an important Spartan festival, the *Gymnopaediae*,⁸² which involved choruses in honor of the Spartans fallen at Thyrea, as well as wreaths, called *thyreatikoi*, worn by the choral leaders in the memory of the Spartan victory at Thyrea.⁸³ The current *communis opinio* is that the commemoration of the battle for Thyreatis is a later addition to the festival. A detail, reported by Athenaeus on the authority of Sosibius, of choruses at the *Gymnopaediae* performing songs of Alcman and Thaletas,⁸⁴ creates an impression of the festival practices that predate 546 BC (the accepted date of the

⁸⁰ See above n. 56.

⁸¹ The hypothesis that there was an Archaic Spartan tradition of ritual battles, serving as rites of passage, finds a typological parallel in the later attestation of Spartan group combats, bearing initiatory overtones, such as the *Platanistas* (Paus. 3.14.8-10; Ducat 2006a, 208-209; Kennell 1995, 55-59) and the ball games. Kennell (1995, 40) shows that, at least in the Roman period, the Spartan ball game was "a type of graduation ceremony, marking the transition from ephebe to adult." It was organized as a tournament, in which pairs of ephebic teams (*sphairists*), representing five *obai*, the ancient constituent villages of Sparta, competed against each other (Kennell 1995, 40). The Spartan ball game probably was the same as the game of *episkuros* (Kennell 1995, 61; cf. Crowther 1997, 6; the main source on *episkuros* is Pollux 9.103-107). In a recent article, Elmer (2008, 420) interprets *episkuros* as "a symbolization of a boundary dispute." The nexus of the boundary dispute and a rite of passage strikingly resembles my suggestion of the ritual battle.

⁸² Brelich 1961, 30-31. The *Gymnopaediae* was one of the principal Spartan festivals, as attested by Paus. 3.11.9. Its importance is also apparent in earlier periods: Ducat 2006a, 266; Nagy 1990, 348n56. The festival was attended by strangers at least from the Classical period on: Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.61, Plut. *Agex.* 29.1, Plut. *Cimon* 10.6. My presentation is based on the recent discussion of the *Gymnopaediae* by Ducat 2006a, 265-274; see also Pettersson 1992, 42-56; Robertson 1992, 147-165; Richer 2005.

⁸³ See above n.22.

⁸⁴ Athen. 15.678c. Translation Ducat 2006a, 269.

battle at Thyrea).⁸⁵ However, as I have argued, the myth of the battle of the six hundred champions should be detached from the date of 546 BC; when it is done, nothing prevents us from assuming that the myth of the battle at Thyreatis was a primary component of the Gymnopaediae. I propose that this myth, with its underlying ideology of the beautiful death, was the *aition*⁸⁶ of the Gymnopaediae.⁸⁷ Further, I suggest, as a working hypothesis, that the Archaic predecessor of the Gymnopaediae (which I will call the “proto-Gymnopaediae”) constituted for the Spartans the framework in which the ritual battles between the Spartans and the Argives took place.⁸⁸

The conjectured role of the ritual battles as coming-of-age rites matches the “initiatory themes”⁸⁹ perceptible in the accounts of the Gymnopaediae from the Classical period on. It seems that the age-group of ephebes played a particularly prominent part at the Gymnopaediae.⁹⁰ The festival’s name suggests that the participating *paides* (whom we probably can identify as the ephebes⁹¹) were naked – an impression confirmed by ancient texts.⁹² The nakedness strengthens the resemblance to an initiation ritual.⁹³ A Spartan speaker in Plato’s *Laws* describes the Gymnopaediae as “a fearful act of endurance prac-

⁸⁵ Wade-Gery 1949, 80; Ducat 2006a, 271; cf. Köiv 2003, 130-131.

⁸⁶ I adopt Nagy’s definition of an *aition*: “a myth that *traditionally* motivates an institution, such as a ritual.” Nagy 1999 [1979], 279§2n2. Nagy stresses that the aetiological tradition is not derivative, but parallel to the ritual.

⁸⁷ At present, no convincing hypothesis exists concerning the aetiology of the Gymnopaediae. Previously, the accepted position was Wade-Gery’s suggestion that the festival was instituted by the Spartans in 668 BC (the traditional date of the Gymnopaediae, deriving from Eusebius) as a morale-boosting measure following their defeat by the Argives at Hysiai in 669 BC (Wade-Gery 1949, 80-81). However, this idea has been criticized by Kelly, who contends that Paus. 2.4.7 is the only mention of the battle of Hysiai; moreover, the battle’s date (669 BC) is a result of a modern emendation (Kelly 1970a, 32, 34).

⁸⁸ On the Argive festival associated with the ritual battles, see below.

⁸⁹ Ducat 2006a, 274; cf. Pettersson 1992, 55.

⁹⁰ Paus. 3.11.9. See Kennell 1995, 68-69 (who thinks it is a late feature).

⁹¹ Ducat (2006a, 268) remarks that the *paides*, frequently mentioned in the ancient sources as the participants of the Gymnopaediae, must have been *paidiskoi*, adolescents in their late teens. (He comments, however, that *-παῖδια* probably is not derived from *παῖς* “child”, but is rather related to *παίζειν* “to play, to dance”. Ducat 2006a, 266.)

⁹² Athen. 14.631b; Hesych. s. v. Γυμνοπαῖδια. Ducat 2006a, 272-273.

⁹³ Ducat 2006a, 274. One more indication of the connection between the Gymnopaediae and the rituals of coming of age can be derived from a peculiar Spartan law, which excluded the Spartans who failed to marry at the proper age from watching the Gymnopaediae, but compelled them to march naked around the agora in the winter, singing a self-imprecating song (Plut. *Lyc.* 15.1). Ferrari (2002, 120) interprets this chastisement as a disgraceful parody of the Gymnopaediae, “a perversion of the ritual through which they [the bachelors] had attained manhood.”

ticed in our own community, where people have to fight [*diamakhomenôn*] against fierce and stifling heat.”⁹⁴ This portrayal of the festival as an ordeal is particularly reminiscent of an initiation rite.

A question arises concerning the location of the proto-Gymnopaediae. If this festival featured the ritual battle, then it must have comprised a procession from Sparta to the battle site in the territory of Thyreatis. The historical Gymnopaediae, in contrast, was celebrated solely in Sparta. How do we explain this difference between the conjectural proto-form of the festival and its attested form? We know of one Spartan festival that was connected to the battle for Thyreatis and celebrated in the territory of Thyreatis: the Parparonia.⁹⁵ Georgius Choeroboscus mentions Parparos as a site of a battle between the Argives and the Spartans in Thyreatis;⁹⁶ Hesychius speaks of *agôn* and *choroi* established at that site.⁹⁷ The festival of Parparonia, attested in the famous Damonon inscription (5 c. BC), included athletic competitions.⁹⁸ The situation in which both the Gymnopaediae and the Parparonia were connected to the myth of the confrontation over Thyreatis is explicable if the proto-Gymnopaediae, previously celebrated both in Sparta and in Thyreatis, was restructured following the elimination of the ritual battle in the sixth century. In the absence of the ritual battle, the part of the Gymnopaediae taking place in Sparta would have probably gained prominence. Subsequently, the celebration in Thyreatis could have become detached from the festival of the Gymnopaediae, turning into a separate festival.

A partnership between Argos and Sparta

The idea of a ritual (as opposed to a real) confrontation between Sparta and Argos presupposes the existence of an amicable, cooperative relationship between the two states. Below I review some evidence, centered around the traditional theme of the Argive-Spartan confrontation over Thyreatis, that suggests a presence of such partnership between Argos and Sparta in the Archaic period.

We have noted earlier an arresting detail in Plutarch’s account of the battle of Champions: the battle was managed by the body called the Amphictyonic

⁹⁴ Pl. *Leg.* 1.633c. Translation Ducat 2006a, 273, modified. I am particularly interested in Plato’s use of the military language in the figure of “battling with the heat.” While such representation of the festival as an endurance test is unique in our sources (Ducat 2006a, 273-274), it must be taken seriously as an early evidence.

⁹⁵ Wade-Gery 1949, 79n7; Brelich 1961, 31, n.42; Phaklares 1990, 226-227; Billot 1992, 87-88; Robertson 1992, 179-207; Polignac 1995, 55, n.54; Kōiv 2003, 127-128.

⁹⁶ Choerob. in Theodos. 297, 4-6.

⁹⁷ Hesych. s.v. Πάρπαρος.

⁹⁸ *IG* v 1, 213 lines 44-49, 62-64.

Assembly (οἱ Ἀμφικτύονες).⁹⁹ Plutarch (on the authority of Chrysermus) credits the Amphictyonic Assembly both with setting up the battle of the six hundred as a solution of the Argive-Spartan dispute over Thyreatis, and with the authoritative ruling of the Spartan victory. While many elements of Plutarch's account, such as the story of the death of Othryades, clearly stem from the myth of the battle for Thyrea, it is tempting to interpret the reference to the Amphictyonic Assembly (whose exact identity requires further research) as a vestigial memory of the supervision of the Argive-Spartan ritual battles by an alliance of city-states.¹⁰⁰

Another hint concerning the association between Argos and Sparta comes from the passage in Pseudo-Plutarch's treatise *On Music* recounting the establishment of the Gymnopaediae, the festival that we hypothetically linked with the ritual battles:

“Now music was first organized at Sparta, under the direction of Terpan-der; for its second organization Thaletas of Gortyn, Xenodamus of Cythera, Xenocritus of Locri, Polymnestus of Colophon, and Sacadas of Argos are said to have been chiefly responsible, since it was at their suggestion that the festival of the Gymnopaediae at Lacedaemon was instituted and so too the Apodeixeis in Arcadia and the so-called Endymatia {festival of Apparelling} at Argos.”¹⁰¹

There are several noteworthy features in the passage. The linkage of the poets from different parts of Greece to the inception of the Gymnopaediae depicts the festival as characterized by a strong Pan-Hellenic trend. It is particularly remarkable to find an *Argive* poet, Sacadas, connected to the foundation of the Spartan festival. *On Music* presents Sacadas as a quintessential Pan-Hellenic figure: in addition to crediting Sacadas with a series of victories at the inception of the Pythian games, the treatise also attributes to him the composition of a chorus that combined three systems of tuning – the Dorian, the Phrygian, and the Lydian.¹⁰² Another figure connected to the foundation of the Gymnopa-

⁹⁹ Plut. *Parallela Minora* 306a-b.

¹⁰⁰ See below n.108.

¹⁰¹ Ps.-Plutarch, *On Music* 1134b-c. Ἡ μὲν οὖν πρώτη κατάστασις τῶν περὶ τὴν μουσικὴν ἐν τῇ Σπάρτῃ, Τερπάνδρου καταστήσαντος, γέγνηται· τῆς δὲ δευτέρας Θαλήτας τε ὁ Γορτύνιος καὶ Ξενόδαμος ὁ Κυθήριος καὶ Ξενοκρίτος ὁ Λοκρὸς καὶ Πολύμνηστος ὁ Κολοφώνιος καὶ Σακάδας ὁ Ἀργεῖος μάλιστα αἰτίαν ἔχουσιν ἡγεμόνες γενέσθαι τούτων γὰρ εἰσηγησαμένων τὰ περὶ τὰς Γυμνοπαιδίας τὰς ἐν Λακεδαίμονι λέγεται κατασταθῆναι, <καὶ> τὰ περὶ τὰς Ἀποδείξεις τὰς ἐν Ἀρκαδίᾳ, τῶν τε ἐν Ἄργει τὰ Ἐνδυμάτια καλούμενα. Translation B. Einarson and P.H. de Lacy.

¹⁰² Ps.-Plutarch, *On Music* 1134a. Compare Nagy 1990, 89-91. Pausanias (2.22.8) also ascribes to Sacadas the distinction of inventing the Pythian *nomos*.

diae, Polymnestus of Colophon, is similarly Pan-Hellenic, described by Pindar as “the voice common to all.”¹⁰³

The story of the institution of three Peloponnesian festivals on the advice of the same “committee” suggests a possibility of a historical connection between the festivals. Moreover, Gregory Nagy observes a semantic link between the names of the Spartan *Gymnopaediae* and the Argive *Endymatia*: they contain “opposite notions of ritual undressing and dressing.”¹⁰⁴ Such opposition strikingly recalls Herodotus’ report of the Spartan decision to wear long hair in contrast to the short hair of the Argives.¹⁰⁵ Pseudo-Plutarch’s account seems to contain traces of the same cooperation-in-opposition as does Herodotus’ aetiology of the hairstyles. It is plausible that the *Endymatia* was the festival associated with the ritual battle on the Argive side.¹⁰⁶

A consideration of the figure of Apollo Pythaeus, the deity presiding over the *Gymnopaediae*, further illuminates the paradoxical antagonistic concord between Argos and Sparta. We have briefly reviewed Brelich’s findings about the worship of this deity in both Argos and Sparta,¹⁰⁷ the association between Apollo Pythaeus and the tradition of the Argive-Spartan confrontation, and the existence of a federal cult of Apollo Pythaeus that apparently counted both Argos and Sparta as members.¹⁰⁸ However, how do these separate pieces of evidence coalesce into a historically nuanced understanding of the Argive-Spartan relations in the Archaic period, and how do they clarify the nature of the dispute over *Thyreatis*?

Barbara Kowalzig makes a major step forward in answering these questions. Kowalzig notices the frequent association between the cult of Apollo Pythaeus

¹⁰³ Strabo 14.1.28.

¹⁰⁴ Nagy 1990, 344; also Ducat 2006a, 187-188.

¹⁰⁵ Hdt. 1.82.7.

¹⁰⁶ Leitao (1995, 143) suggests that the *Endymatia* was “the occasion on which young men in Argos assumed warrior garb for the first time.” Similarly, Robertson 1992, 207, who connects the festival to the tradition of the battle for *Thyreatis*; Ceccarelli 1998, 119.

¹⁰⁷ Kowalzig (2007, 145-146) gives a concise summary of the literary and epigraphic attestation of the cult of Apollo Pythaeus in the Argolid and around the Argolic Gulf, including Cynuria, where two sixth-century inscriptions to Apollo Pythaeus were found in Tyras and Kosmas. The sanctuaries of Apollo in these two locales produced numerous dedications of weapons (both full-sized and miniature) and a bronze sixth-century statuette of a hoplite. Phaklares 1990, 176, 179-182; Polignac 1995, 54. On the cult of Apollo Pythaeus see also Billot 1992; Köiv 2003, 304-308; and Kowalzig 2007, 132-154 (discussed below).

¹⁰⁸ See above nn. 24,25,26. Kowalzig (2007, 149-153) connects the worship of Apollo Pythaeus with the Archaic Calaurian amphictyony. Köiv (2003, 304-310) similarly proposes the existence of an Archaic amphiktyony around the cult of Apollo Pythaeus.

and inter-*polis* boundaries.¹⁰⁹ She proposes that the Archaic cult of Apollo Pythaeus at Asine¹¹⁰ had the function of mediating between communities of the Argolid in their long-standing territorial disputes. Importantly, Kowalzig argues that the cult operated not by resolving the conflicts but by embracing the competing versions of the disputing sides and commemorating their irreducible variance through recurrent rituals.¹¹¹ Kowalzig also notes the prominence of Apollo Pythaeus in the conflict over Thyreatis,¹¹² but she considers the deity to be an embodiment of the *real* hostility between the two states.¹¹³ However, Kowalzig's reconstruction of the character of Archaic Apollo Pythaeus as a mediator between communities at variance perfectly fits the idea that this deity oversaw the ritual battles between Argos and Sparta in the framework of the Gymnopaediae, uniting the two *poleis* in their confrontation.¹¹⁴

The metamorphosis of the *Hippeis*

I have suggested that the ritual battle happened in Sparta in the framework of the Gymnopaediae (and perhaps in the framework of the Endymatia in Argos), and served as a coming of age rite for its participants. But who were these participants – whose rite of passage was it? A consideration of the Spartan institution of *hippeis*, which has not been taken into account until now, can help us to answer this question.

The Spartan *hippeis* were an elite corps of hoplites (their equestrian appellation notwithstanding), who numbered three hundreds. In the Classical period, the *hippeis* fought in close proximity to the king and had the task of protecting him. They also served as the Spartan “emergency force” in cases of internal or external danger.¹¹⁵ The *hippeis* were chosen on the basis of their excellence from

¹⁰⁹ Kowalzig 2007, 147-148; similarly, Polignac 1995, 54n52.

¹¹⁰ See above n. 25.

¹¹¹ Kowalzig 2007, 132-154, esp. 147-149, 153-154.

¹¹² Kowalzig 2007, 155-157.

¹¹³ “Apollo Pythaeus stood for what separated Argives and Spartans, imbued with connotations of the Spartano-Argive conflict.” Kowalzig 2007, 156.

¹¹⁴ There is an indication that the territory of Thyreatis could at some point have been defined as a federal space of ritual, called μέσον. The attestation comes an enigmatic pronouncement: Ἄκρον λάβει καὶ μέσον ἔξεις (“Take the *akron*, and you will have the *meson*”). Apparently, this was an oracle that the Aeginetans received from Delphi in 431 BC, when they were expelled from Aegina by the Athenians, and given Thyreatis by the Spartans to settle (Zenobius 1,57, *CPG* 1.22-23; Apostolius 1,97, *CPG* 2.264; Thuc. 2.27; Figueira 1993, 535-538). I propose that *meson* may have referred to the territory of Thyreatis as a sacred communal space once shared by Argos and Sparta. This sense of the word *meson* is attested on Lesbos (*Messon*): see Nagy 2007, 24.

¹¹⁵ Figueira 2006, 58-60.

the body of *hébóntes*.¹¹⁶ The relevance of the *hippeis* to the present discussion stems from their character as picked troops and from their number, coinciding with the number of the Spartan warriors at Thyrea. In a recent article, Thomas Figueira suggests that the three hundred Spartans who fought in the battle of Champions must have been *hippeis*.¹¹⁷ In the light of the previous discussion, we can modify Figueira's suggestion: the battle, in which all the Spartan participants die heroically, can be construed as a foundation myth of the *hippeis*, setting a benchmark for their fighting conduct.

Here, however, a question arises. I have hypothesized previously that the battle of Champions is a foundation myth for the Gymnopaediae; now the battle seems to fit also as a foundation myth for the institution of *hippeis*. Are the Gymnopaediae and the *hippeis* related to each other, and if yes, what is the nature of their connection? My first observation is that the festival and the military unit show similarities with the non-overlapping aspects of the myth.¹¹⁸ This fact opens the possibility that the Gymnopaediae and the *hippeis* are two distinct institutions resulting from a split of their common predecessor, which prior to the split fully matched the myth of the battle. How can we imagine the entity uniting the *hippeis* and the Gymnopaediae? The easiest solution would be to conceive of a festival (the proto-Gymnopaediae) in which the proto-*hippeis* took part. Their role, I propose, would be fighting in the ritual battle. Thus, I reconstruct the ritual battle as an initiation into the category of the proto-*hippeis*.

The idea that the proto-*hippeis* played the key role in the ritual of coming of age entails an assumption that they were an age grade.¹¹⁹ The historical institution of *hippeis* was certainly not an age grade. While the *hippeis* were chosen from the age grade of *hébóntes*, only some of the *hébóntes* were promoted to the status of *hippeis*. Age-grade transition, on the contrary, involves all members of a particular age-class. However, while the historical *hippeis* did not constitute an age grade, they apparently were sometimes perceived as such. Aristophanes of Byzantium in his treatise on the terms describing age categories, charts the following progression of the ages: *meirakion*, *meirax*, *neaniskos*, *neanias*. Concerning the latter he says: "The Spartans called these *hippeis*, and those who manage them *hippagretai*."¹²⁰ This "flavor" of an age grade displayed by the historical *hippeis* might be an echo of the prehistory of this institution.

¹¹⁶ Xen. *Lac.* 4.3-4. Figueira 2006, 62-67.

¹¹⁷ "It would be incongruous for the Spartans to choose another elite group of the same size, inasmuch as the *hippeis* probably already existed." Figueira 2006, 60.

¹¹⁸ The resemblance between the *hippeis* and the myth of the battle lies, as we have observed, in the number of the warriors, and in their elite status. In contrast, the basis of the Gymnopaediae's link to the myth of the battle for Thyreatis is the explicit ancient attestation that the festival featured "thyreatic crowns" and hymns honoring the fallen at Thyrea.

¹¹⁹ My use of the term "age grade" is based on the discussion by Bernardi 1985, 2-4.

¹²⁰ Arist. Byz. *Nomina aetatum* (fragmenta) 275.8-9. Figueira 2006, 64.

Let us now attempt to sketch the trajectory of the development and obliteration of the ritual battles between Argos and Sparta alongside with the changes in the character of the proto-*hippeis*. The comparative evidence from other Greek city-states indicates that the Spartan *hippeis* at first must have been a body of aristocratic horsemen.¹²¹ It is possible that the practice of the ritual battles with the Argives existed already in that period, as an elite activity, but we cannot say anything about its organization or function. Next, at the historical stage when a homogenizing restructuring of the Spartan society took place, the aristocratic group of “ur-*hippeis*” must have been subsumed into the new social framework.¹²² Eventually, the age-grade of hoplite proto-*hippeis* emerged from this process. I believe that the practice of the ritual battles as reconstructed in this paper started in that period. For the Archaic period a rough demographic estimation shows that the number of the Spartiates born in the same year by their mid-twenties would be 100-200 men.¹²³ Thus, if we presume that the number of the participants in the ritual battle approximated the number of the three hundred Champions, it follows that the older *hēbōntes* were assembled for the ritual battle every two or three years. The ritual battles must have been abolished at the latest in the middle of the sixth century, when Sparta adopted more aggressive expansionist politics in the Peloponnese and annexed Cynuria. The age-grade of *hippeis* was at some point transformed into an elite military unit; the details of this makeover are unclear. However, one can envisage a scenario in which the transformation would be precipitated by the very practice of the ritual battles: the strategy of choosing the best soldiers among all of the available young men, instead of manning the field indiscriminately with particular two or three age-classes, would result in a much stronger fighting force with higher chances of victory.¹²⁴

The Argive proposal again

Let us now return to the starting point of this exploration, the Argive proposal to the Spartans in 420 BC to conclude a peace treaty, accompanied by a ritual-

¹²¹ Figueira 2006, 68, and nn. 95,96 with further references.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ I omit the calculation here for the brevity of the presentation. I follow Figueira 1986, 168n10 in using the Male Mortality Level 4 of the “South” populations (Coale and Demeny 1966, 782-783) as an approximation of the Greek population pattern, and also in assuming that the number of 5000 of the Spartan *Homoioi* participating in the campaign of 479 BC (Hdt. 9.10.1, 9.11.3, 9.28.2) included men 20-49 years old. Figueira 1986, 167-168.

¹²⁴ Such selectivity is more likely to develop closer to the point of the disintegration of the tradition of the ritual battles, when the perception of the battle as a rite of passage would be attenuated.

ized rerun of the battle for Cynuria.¹²⁵ The preceding discussion suggests that this proposal derived from the historical antecedent of the Archaic Argive-Spartan ritual battles for the territory of Thyreatis. But what were the synchronic goals of the Argives in resurrecting the practice of the ritual battles? My answer to this question can be only previewed in the framework of this exposition; I plan to present it at length in a different publication.

In Argos in 421-417 BC there was a strong political tension, eventually developing into an open strife, between the oligarchic and democratic factions. In general, the oligarchic party advocated peace with Sparta, while the democratic party endorsed the war with Sparta (and an alliance with Athens).¹²⁶ The struggle between the factions resulted in abrupt shifts in the Argive foreign policy, oscillating in its alignment between Sparta and Athens. I submit that the Argive suggestion of replaying the battle of Champions in the framework of a peace treaty with Sparta was a motion promoted by the oligarchic faction.¹²⁷ Who were the Argive oligarchs? One group that we can identify is the thousand picked warriors – an elite force resembling the Spartan *hippeis* – who, assisted by the Spartans, carried out an oligarchic coup in Argos in 418 BC.¹²⁸ According to Diodorus, the Argives instituted the unit of the Thousand, to be trained at public expense, in 421 BC. The Thousand consisted of the “younger citizens who were at the same time the most vigorous in body and the most wealthy.”¹²⁹ I argue that these thousand aristocratic young supporters of oligarchy were intended to fight with the Spartans in the rerun of the battle of Champions.¹³⁰ Thus, the reintroduction of the practice of the ritual battles would have greatly strengthened the position of the Argive oligarchic faction. Even though the ritual battles were not reinstated in 420 BC, in the Thousand the oligarchs acquired the backing of a highly trained military force, which was later put to use in the oligarchic coup of 418 BC.

In the heated political atmosphere of Argos between 421 and 417 BC, with its volatile foreign policy and the oligarchic and the democratic factions vying for popularity, both factions appealed to the authority of the tradition. Generally, the democrats put emphasis on the myth of the war for Thyreatis and presented the perspective of fighting with Sparta as the extension of that

¹²⁵ Thuc. 5.41.2-3.

¹²⁶ Thuc. 5.76.2-3. Hornblower 2002, 84; Kagan 1962.

¹²⁷ So already Kagan 1962, 210. Characteristically, this proposal of the peace with Sparta was abruptly abandoned by the Argives in favor of an alliance with Athens, called in the context “a sister democracy.” Thuc. 5.44.1.

¹²⁸ Thuc. 5.81.2, Diod. 12.80.2-3.

¹²⁹ Diod. 12.75.7. Translation C.H. Oldfather.

¹³⁰ Piérart (2009, 278) makes a similar suggestion.

myth.¹³¹ The oligarchs, interested in the peace with Sparta, advanced the possibility of the ritual resolution of the dispute over Thyreatis.

However, the oligarchs' drive for power apparently required a more flexible attitude than an unrelenting promotion of the peace with Sparta. For example, the Argive Thousand made some spectacular switches in their attitude to Sparta: in between the plan to fight in the ritual battle in 420 BC and the Spartan-assisted coup of 418 BC, the Thousand heroically confronted the Spartans in the battle of Mantinea (summer 418 BC), which earned them a great popularity in Argos.¹³² I propose that the propagandistic device that assisted the Thousand in switching fluently between the pro-Spartan and anti-Spartan orientation was their adroitness in emphasizing or obscuring the connection between the myth of the ancient struggle for Thyreatis and the ritual battle for that territory. By substituting the exhortation to battle with an exhortation to ritual battle, a spokesman of the Thousand could have kept employing the charismatic rhetoric of military valor and struggle for the primordially Argive land, even if the underlying message was of peace with Sparta; this belligerent diction also would smooth the transition when it became necessary to maneuver toward backing the war with Sparta.

A comparison of the Archaic practice of the ritual battles for Thyreatis, and the manipulations of the myth-ritual complex of the confrontation over Thyreatis in the Argive politics of 421-417 BC highlights the extremely variable and adaptable relations between the myth and ritual, and their embeddedness in the political and social circumstances of the day. The ritual morphs into a real conflict, and then mutates back into a ritual, according to the aspirations of the participants and their preference for war or peace.

¹³¹ However, the pretext under which Argos set out to war with Epidaurus in 419 BC – that the Epidaurians failed to deliver a sacrificial victim that they owed to Apollo Pythaeus (Thuc. 5.53.1) – shows that the Argive democrats (who apparently were behind the Epidaurian war) could also use references to ritual to their political advantage. Interestingly, Diodorus (12.78.1) states that the Argives accused the *Spartans* of not delivering the victim to Apollo Pythaeus. I see in the Argive accusation another reverberation of the theme of the confrontation over Thyreatis, now used by the democratic faction. See Brelich 1961, 32-34; Kowalzig 2007, 154-160 on the Argive attempts to appropriate the cult of Apollo Pythaeus in the fifth century BC.

¹³² Thuc. 5.72.3; 5.73.4; Diod. 12.79.4-7; Arist. *Pol.* 1304a25-26.

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