CHAPTER TWO

THE SPARTAN HEGEMONY (401–399 BC)

During the years immediately following the surrender of Athens, Sparta can reasonably be called the hegemon of Greece. With few exceptions, most of Greece had agreed, not necessarily enthusiastically, either to follow or at least to respect its leadership. Although this period of acknowledged Spartan supremacy proved transient, no single power at this time wished openly to challenge Sparta. That withal, in the face of Spartan imperial incompetence and myopic policies, many states began to take a more independent position regarding the victors. The fruition of this inclination lay a few years in the future, but for the moment Sparta stood as the pre-eminent power in Greece. Having dealt with defeated Athens and some recalcitrant allies, the Spartans now turned to another local problem before confronting the serious problems of their treaty obligations to the Persians.

A. THE ELEIAN WAR (401–400 BC)

The Spartans took advantage of this occasion to curtail the growing power of Elis and to settle some old grudges. The issues were several. The Eleians had in the course of the fifth century extended their power southwards to the Neda River. They had in the process subdued the strategically important city of Lepreon, a staunch Spartan ally. The site itself commands a hill overlooking a valley that leads both to the main coastal route between Pyrgos in the north and Kyparissia in the south and another between Bassai in the east and the road to the western coast. In 471 the Eleians had gathered the small cities of the region, Lepreon included, into the new city of Elis. Like the legendary synoikismos of Athens, that of Elis did not entail the destruction of Lepreon but rather a transfer of power to the new city. Yet Lepreon seems still to have enjoyed a great deal of independence. The Spartans, however, could not have been pleased either by the growth of Eleian power on their borders or the eclipse
of a loyal ally. Subsequent events are quite uncertain, but Lepreon was the focus of the problem. At some unknown date thereafter, the Lepreans had waged war on some Arkadians, probably over Triphylia. In the conflict the Arkadians so pressed the Lepreans that the latter sought help from Elis. The price for Eleian support was high. In return for an alliance, the Lepreans offered the Eleians half of their land. After the war the Eleians returned it on the stipulation that the Lepreans pay an annual contribution of one talent to Olympian Zeus. This tribute in reality went into the coffers of the Eleians, who administered Zeus’ sanctuary. At the outset of the Peloponnesian War, the Lepreans refused to pay the levy, and appealed to Sparta for arbitration. Fearing that Sparta would find in favor of Lepreon, the Eleians refused arbitration, and ravaged the Leprean territory. The Spartan reaction was predictable. Having decided in favor of Lepreon and installing a garrison in the city, the Spartans ruled that Lepreon was autonomous and that the Eleians were the aggressors. The Eleians responded by accusing Lepreon to be in revolt and the Spartans in violation of the Peace of Nikias.

The Eleians next openly but legally defied Sparta, when they joined a larger movement with their neighbors against the Spartan hegemony of the Peloponnesos. In 421 the Eleians allied themselves with Argos, Mantineia, and Athens, this on the eve of the Olympic games of 420. When in the summer of 420 the Eleians sent heralds to announce the sacred truce, the result was anything but peaceful. The chronology is unclear, but again Lepreon lay at the heart of the problem. The Eleians refused to allow the Spartans to sacrifice at Olympia or to compete in the games, because they had violated the sacred truce. The Eleians claimed that the Spartans had attacked one of their forts and had sent hoplites to Lepreon. They imposed a fine on Sparta, but promised themselves to pay it on the condition that Sparta return Lepreon to them. There can be no question that the Eleian position was calculated to provoke Sparta. Proof comes from the military response of Elis’ new allies, all of whom

---

1 Elis and Lepreon: Hdt. 4.148.4; 9.28.4; Thuc. 5.31.2, 34, 47–49; Diod. 11.54.1; Strabo 8.3.30; Paus. 4.15.8, 20.1–2; 5.5.5, 10.2; 6.22.4. W.W. How and J. Wells, A Commentary on Herodotus, I (Oxford 1912) 350; A.W. Gomme et al., A Historical Commentary on Thucydides, IV (Oxford 1970) 26–29; J.G. Frazer, Pausanias’s Description of Greece, III (London 1898) 473–476; S. Lauffer, ed., Griechenland (Munich 1989) 381–382.