

**Sparta's Lame King:
Agesilaus (399-360 BC)**

by R.L. Porter

When on campaign with a large force of allies, Sparta's Eurypontid king, Agesilaus, was reproached for not making a fair contribution of his own soldiers to the joint force. After dividing the huge throng of allied soldiers into one crowd and his Spartans into a much smaller group, he asked the men to stand up as their professions were called out: potters, blacksmiths, carpenters, etc. After a time all the allies were on their feet but not yet a single Spartan. Now at last he asked the "soldiers" to stand, at which time all the Spartans arose. "You see, my friends, how many soldiers we send out compared with you." The point was clear. Only the Spartans were professionals. It was a nicely staged piece.

Agesilaus had come to the Spartan throne unexpectedly in 399 BC when his nephew, the proper heir, was declared illegitimate through

the politicking of Lysander who had brought Sparta victory over Athens in the Peloponnesian War (404 BC). Agesilaus was middle-aged and unlike most Spartan kings had personally gone through the rigorous military training education for ordinary Spartan soldiers. He and Lysander had also been lovers and Lysander was hoping to use the new king as a pawn, but as soon as Agesilaus took charge of the army, Lysander's power was broken and he was demoted to the rank of "King's Meat Cutter". Agesilaus was now in charge and maintained his control over Sparta for an amazing forty years. During these years he led Sparta from being the leader of all Hellas to being a broken third-rate power, stripped of territory, population, wealth and prestige. Despite this terrible achievement, he was still loved and respected at home when he died in Africa, where he was serving as a mercenary to make his bankrupt country a bit of money. He was an astonishing eighty-four years old when he died. Canadians are not so forgiving of their failed politicians.

Agesilaus was something of a runt in the Spartan litter for he was small in size and lame from birth—lower class Spartans were exposed at birth for such defects. Yet he overcame these handicaps and gained a reputation for great endurance and personal bravery. He made a virtue of Spartan simplicity, living in a ramshackle house, eating soldiers' rations and wearing a ratty old military cloak wherever he went. In other words, he projected the perfect image of the mythical Spartan—one suspects he would have welcomed some modern "media" attention, for he was a dramatic fellow, as the first paragraph of this piece suggests.

Agesilaus in the end was undone by his failure to adapt to new conditions developing in the fourth century BC, and by a poor overall understanding of what were Sparta's real interests. In other words, he behaved like the perfect stupid Spartan depicted by Athenian prejudice.

Relations with Persia

Agesilaus, like some romantic avatar of the Homeric king Agamemnon, attacked Persian possessions in Asia Minor in 396 despite not having the naval and financial resources to bring off such

an offensive. By 387 he was forced to back down and make a disgraceful peace with Persia in which Sparta became Persia's paid policeman in Greece. Of course the Persian king could switch his support at any time to a rival power. There was no honour for Sparta in this arrangement, only a postponement of her inevitable collapse.

Relations with Thebes

It was Agesilaus' blind and relentless hatred of Thebes which eventually brought Sparta to her knees. Theban cavalry in 396 had thrown Agesilaus' sacrifice at Aulis (the exact place of Agamemnon's sacrifice 800 years earlier) into the sea, ruining his staged propaganda event on the eve of his sailing against Persia. In 382 one of Agesilaus' cronies had actually occupied Thebes with a garrison, but by 378 they had been driven out and the fruitless attacks on Thebes had then begun. In 375 the Thebans had already proved they could beat a Spartan army. However, it was at Leuctra in 371 that the final blow fell.

Newly evolved tactics were used by the Theban general Epaminondas to crush the Spartan army totally. Of the seven hundred strong Spartan contingent, four hundred men died that day including Sparta's other king, Cleombrotos. On that battlefield Classical Sparta collapsed and died, never to rise again to first-rate power. Yet poor old Agesilaus missed that exciting battle, for he was convalescing at home!

Agesilaus in the end was what we could call a yesterday's Spartan. He was a plain and limited man who was totally unable to see the need for a more constrained role for Sparta because of her restricted manpower resources. He was arrogant and heavy-handed with Spartan allies and subjects, and above all he was not about to change Sparta's outmoded battlefield tactics. The amazing thing about all this is that despite the total catastrophe he led his people into, he was still highly regarded by them. For in the end he had proven himself steadfast and true to an outmoded code and way of life. He was a true Spartan, if an outdated one.