

# It is more than a Spartan sanctuary : the international scope of the Amyklaion

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## Introduction

Until now, much research about religion and sanctuaries of the ancient Spartans has mainly emphasised their particularism within the rest of the greek world. Like many other areas of the city's history, religious practices have often been interpreted through the distorting prism of the 'Spartan mirage'. To define the latter, a concept that many of you are probably familiar with or have heard of, let us say that the scarcity of written sources from the Spartans themselves, combined with either meliorative or depreciatory Athenian accounts, has indeed generated a phenomenon of distortion of the historical discourse on the city, which has grown from the fifth century BC to the present day.

Research on Spartan religion and sanctuaries is no exception to the general tendency to distort the discourse on the city, making the Spartans an exception in the Greek world. The Spartans are thus often presented as particularly godly men among the other ancient Greeks, while many of their sanctuaries are supposedly having original features. Likewise, their foreign ritual practices would be, on the one hand, survivals of ancient Bronze Age practices, while, on the other hand, one would observe in Sparta a more pronounced civic dimension of the rite than elsewhere, with the aim of integrating the young into the civic community.

Let us state from the outset that recent research (over the last 40 years in fact) tends to relativise the exceptional character of Sparta's religion, while nevertheless recognizing the local characteristics of the Spartan pantheon, cults and practices.

The purpose of this paper will be to start from the case of the cult of Apollo Amyklaios and Hyakinthos, its sanctuary (the Amyklaion) and its main religious festival (the Hyakinthia), in order to propose a study of its importance on several geographical scales, while endeavouring to highlight the specificities of each scale.

Excavated since 2005 by the Amykles Research Project, led by the late Angelos Delivorrias and Stavros Vlivos, the sanctuary is located 5 km southwest of the centre of the modern Sparta, on the hill of Agia Kyriaki. The sanctuary, whose religious activity began in the late Bronze Age, housed a double cult of Apollo and Hyakinthos, until its probable deconsecration and transformation into a space for Christian worship during the 4th and 5th centuries AD.

It was especially famous for the Apollo's shrine, the so called "Throne" of the god, among other architectural remains, that we strongly encourage you to visit on the site.

The sanctuary was the privileged place of celebration of the Hyakinthia festival, which, during spring or early summer, gathered all the inhabitants of the Lacedaemonian territory, all social categories included, to honour and sacrifice to Apollo and Hyakinthos, before sharing a banquet.

The objective will be to study both the site and the festival, moving from the local to the international level, to show that this cult cannot be understood only on the scale of Sparta, and if we consider that the Spartan religion functioned in a vacuum, isolated from the outside world.

## I. The Amyklaion, an amyklean sanctuary

Let's start with Amykles.

Amyklai was one of the 5 *komai* of the city of Sparta, i.e. one of the 5 villages (Limnai, Kynosoura, Meso, Pitanè and Amyklai) which, by synoecism during the Early Iron Age or early archaic period, between the 9th and the middle of the 8th century, merged to become the city of Sparta.

Amyklai, however, occupies a special position, in that it is located 5 km to the south of the others. Above all, Amyklai is reputed, from Pindar and Pausanias onwards, to have been conquered by Sparta and integrated into the city, with its sanctuary of the Amyklaion.

The anteriority of the sanctuary of the Amyklaion in relation to the city of Sparta is attested. Prior to its gradual monumentalisation from the late 8th or early 7th century, the hilltop of Agia Kyriaki was the site of open-air ritual banqueting activities since Mycenaean times. This ritual feasting has recently been highlighted by the work of Vicky Vlachou.

Even after the potential conquest and integration of Amyklai into the city of Sparta, the Amykleans continued to have a special connection with the sanctuary of the Amyklaion. This special relationship is clearly shown in Xenophon, *Hellenics*, IV, 5, 11. In his account of the military operations during the Corinthian War, which pitted Sparta against Corinth, Athens and Argos in the early fourth century, Xenophon details a well-known passage which is that of the Lechaion disaster in 390 BC. During Spartan operations led by Agesilaus around Corinth, near the port of Lechaion, a more of Spartan hoplites from Amykles left the army to return to Sparta. It is said that "the people of Amykles, from time immemorial, go home to the feast of the Hyakinthia to sing the pean, whether they are in the field or absent for some other reason". It is therefore to celebrate the Hyakinthia at the Amyklaion that the Amykleans in the army obtain the right to leave the army. But they are attacked by Athenian peltasts led by Iphicrates: it is a carnage, with 250 deaths counted.

But, if the Amyklaion was originally a sanctuary primarily frequented by the inhabitants of Amykles, and if the latter were able to preserve a privileged link with it after their

attachment to Sparta, it must be noted that the Amyklaion is henceforth and above all one of the components of the Spartan cult system.

## II. The integration of the Amyklaion in the spartan cult system

So let us rise to the level of the Spartan city now.

The attachment of Amykles to the Spartan community marks the completion of Sparta's territorial construction, and it is the integration of the Amyklaion into the city's cultic landscape that constitutes the main aspect of it.

Pausanias III, 2, 6:

It is generally accepted that the myth of Apollo and Hyakinthos tells the story of the replacement of the hero cult of Hyakinthos by that of Apollo. The myth presents Hyakinthos as a young man who was loved by Apollo, but the latter accidentally killed Hyakinthos because of the wind Zephyr, which, in jealousy, blew on the object to divert it from its course. Apollo then established a cult in honour of his lover.

The scheme generally used to explain this myth sees in the death of Hyakinthos and the establishment of a cult in his honour by Apollo, the passage from a cult of a heroic nature to a divine cult in honour of Apollo.

The suffix -vθ- in the name Hyakinthos could be pre-Hellenic, which would prove the anteriority of the cult of Hyakinthos, to which a cult of Apollo would have been grafted at the time of the supposed conquest of the Achaean Amykles by the Dorian Sparta.

The distinction between the two divinities is visible in the nature and sequence of the rites rendered to them:

1. Death of Hyakinthos: collection / mourning / enagismos (characteristic of a chthonian heroic cult)
2. Apollo and renewal: festival / dances / songs / thysia / banquet (characteristic of the Apollonian cult)

The superposition of the cults is visible in the architecture of the sanctuary: the Throne of Apollo, the main naos of the Amyklaion sanctuary, was built by Bathykles of Magnesia in the second half of the 6th century. The tomb of Hyakinthos also serves as an altar and as a base for the cult statue of Apollo.

- Paus. III.19.3 : "The pedestal of the statue is fashioned into the shape of an altar; and they say that Hyacinthus is buried in it, and at the Hyacinthia, before the sacrifice to Apollo, they devote offerings to Hyacinthus as to a hero into this altar through a bronze door, which is on the left of the altar".

The ensemble was surrounded by an enclosure covered with sculpted decorations. The enclosure - the "Throne" itself - was built by Bathykles and dates from the 6th century BC. But

the supposed tomb of Hyakinthos is supposedly earlier - although there are no remains to verify this claim, while the statue, which is known from Pausanias' description and imperial Roman coins, probably dates from the early 7th century (remains of the fixing base are still visible on the site).

The "Throne" of Apollo is thus a composite ensemble, combining elements from different periods, which materialise the history of the cult and the progressive and unique association between Hyakinthos and Apollo. The Throne of the Amyklaion would thus bear the mark of the geographical extension of the city of Sparta.

Beyond the unique architecture of the Throne, the sanctuary of the Amyklaion seems to constitute an essential link in the cult system of the city of Sparta and the Hyakinthia celebrated there appear to be one of the main ones in the Spartan calendar.

Without going into detail about all the rites performed, let's dwell quickly on the procession/pompè. This is described in detail by Polycrates (reported thanks to Athenaeus of Naucratis). The whole city is involved in this procession which seems to start from Sparta, to go to the Amyklaion. Young horsemen parade in the theatre, while young girls from the most important families are on racing or ceremonial chariots. This staging of the unity of the city is both a general demonstration of the age groups and also seems to materialise the territorial integrity of the city, reaffirming the inclusion of Amykles in particular.

This procession is mentioned by Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, 219 and is probably the origin of the name of the Hyakinthian road that linked Sparta and Amykles.

### III. A common celebration for all the Lacedaemonians ?

Beyond the city of Sparta alone, the Amyklaion seems to have been the main sanctuary for the entire Lacedaemonian community, including helots and even *perioikoi*.

HERODOTE IX.7.11 thus makes the Hyakinthia an indispensable celebration for the Lacedaemonians as a whole:

"Οἱ γὰρ δὴ Λακεδαιμόνιοι ὄρταζόν τε τοῦτον τὸν χρόνον καὶ σφι ἦν Ὑακίνθια"

Polemon, quoted by Athenaeus 138f, refers to the *kopis* of Hyakinthia. For the Lacedaemonians, kopids were collective ritual meals held in the open air, in the shade of tents erected near certain sanctuaries (including the sanctuary of Apollo Karneios - according to Athenaeus IV.141e-f - and the Amyklaion according to Athenaeus IV.140a). At least some of them seem to be open to the wives and children of citizens.

That of the Hyakinthia is specific in that it is said to welcome all the inhabitants of Lacedaemoni without distinction. Polemon even states that the numerous sacrifices offered by the citizens lead to kopids offered to all their relatives and slaves: the helots and probably the *Perioikoi* would therefore even be included?

The presence of helots is also corroborated by a passage in Plutarch. In *Moralia*, 775c-e, he mentions the story of Damocrita and her daughters. Mention of a great popular festival, often interpreted as the Hyakinthia. Mention is made of nocturnal mystery cults, where

women are said to play an important role, with young girls, children, but also and above all: with the maids : in other terms, with female helots.

The presence of the *Perioikoi* is more debated, even if that of the elites and *Perioikic* representatives is often postulated. Without going into the terms of the debate, we should nevertheless mention the existence in the Perioikis of inscribed sherds mentioning the name Hyakinthos, which cannot prove the attendance to the Hyakinthia, but at least the diffusion of the cult throughout Lakonia.

This openness contrasts sharply with what is believed to be known about Spartan commensal practices. The *syssitia*, that is the obligatory communal meals between groups of Spartan citizens, seem to be quite different from the more open *kopides*.

Beyond the Amykleans, beyond the Spartans alone, it is therefore the whole of Lacedaemoni, citizens and non-citizens alike, that would be involved in the celebration of the Hyakinthia? As with Amykles, but on a larger scale, one of the functions of the Hyakinthia seems to be the reaffirmation of the territorial integrity not only of the city of Sparta, but of the whole Lacedaemonian territory, here considered as an *ethnos*.

The Hyakinthia would thus serve, among other things, to affirm the unity of the city at all scales:

- Within the oikos
- Within the civic community between age groups
- Within the Lacedaemonian community as a whole

But the study of the Amyklaion and the Hyakinthia can also be done on a more international scale.

#### IV. The international renown of the sanctuary and the Hyakinthia

To begin with, we observe that the Amyklaion seems to have been the best known of the Spartan sanctuaries outside Laconia.

Polybius, V. 19.2-3 speaks of a temenos of Apollo at Amyklai, "the most famous of all the sanctuaries of Laconia".

This importance is confirmed by a passage in Pausanias III, 10, 8, concerning the twin sanctuaries of Apollo Thornax and Apollo Amykleos, respectively to the north and south of Sparta:

"in Thornax, which you will reach as you go along, is an image of Apollo Pythaeus, made after the style of the one at Amyclae; the fashion of it I will describe when I come to speak of the latter. For in the eyes of the Lacedaemonians the cult of the Amyclaean is the more distinguished, so that they spent on adorning the image in Amyclae even the gold which Croesus the Lydian sent for Apollo Pythaeus "

Four pieces of information here:

1. The relationship between the two sanctuaries
2. The anteriority of the Amyklaion
3. The preeminence of the latter for the Lacedemonians

Aristophanes, Lys. 1297-1300, also says: "Come and glorify the god of Amykles, worthy of our respect".

This fame also appears in Herodotus IX.7 and 11. Just as the celebration of the Carneia in 490 delayed the arrival of the Lacedaemonian army at Marathon, the celebration of the Hyakinthia would have delayed the sending of the Lacedaemonian troops against the Persians during the Second Median War. Herodotus, speaking for the Athenians, blames the Spartans for loving the Hyakintia festival:

"You Lacedemonians stay here at home celebrating the festival of Hyakinthos and entertaining (or dancing) yourselves, betraying the cause of your allies" .

## V. The place and time of diplomatic communication

In addition to its fame beyond Laconia, the sanctuary is especially known for welcoming foreigners in the context of the Hyakinthia festival: besides the citizens, their families, their acquaintances and their slaves (helots), we learn from Polycrates, in Athenaeus, IV, 139f, that the *kopis* of the Hyakinthia was also open to "those of the foreigners who are there"!

This openness to foreigners is not unique, however, since foreign representatives are also mentioned in the Gymnopedia.

Beyond this openness to foreigners, we note above all the role of the sanctuary in international diplomatic relations.

Thucydides V.23.4-5, reporting the conditions of the alliance treaty between Sparta and Athens in 421, recalls that the latter must be renewed every year by the arrival of Athenian envoys during the Hyakinthia. The stone bearing the inscription of the treaty was displayed in the sanctuary:

"These clauses shall be ratified by an oath to be taken by the men who made it, on behalf of each of the two cities, for the other treaty. This will be renewed every year; for this purpose the Lacedaemonians will go to Athens at the time of the Dionysia, and the Athenians to Sparta at the time of the Hyakinthia. Each people shall erect a stele: one in Sparta, near the temple of Apollo of Amykles, the other in Athens, near that of Athena on the Acropolis".

It is thus noted that the same measures concern both cities. It is nevertheless interesting to note that in Athens: the renewal takes place during the Great Dionysia, which took place in the theatre of Dionysus, at the foot of the Acropolis, which shelters the city's poliadic cults: Zeus Polieus and Athena Polias. This festival took place in March-April, when the Aegean sea becomes again perfectly navigable, which allowed it to be attended by a number

of foreign representatives, leading historians to attribute a role, if not of "propaganda", then at least of political communication to this festival.

In the treaty reported by Thucydides, the Spartan counterpart is the Amyklaion and the time chosen is the Hyakinthia. This is likely due to the supposed date of the Hyakinthia, which probably took place at the same time that the Great Dionysia, in late spring. Both celebrations are, in part, festivals of renewal of nature and of the unity of the city, and are attended by strangers, when the seas are navigable... This could mean that the Amyklaion was the sanctuary of choice for the registration, publicity and renewal of diplomatic treaties, to other *poleis*?

There is another practical reason linked to the calendar that explains the choice of these two religious feasts to advertise treaties. The beginning of the navigable season is also the beginning of the spring and summer military season! It is therefore the ideal place to affirm and reaffirm peace treaties and alliances to other *poleis*, to reassure them as the war season is approaching... In short: just like the Acropolis and the Great Dionysia in Athens, the Amyklaion and the festival of the Hyakinthia seem to be in Sparta the privileged place and time for diplomatic communication.

Thucydides V.41.3 confirms this hypothesis, since when the Argians had to come to Sparta to swear an oath of peace in 420, the following year, it is still the time of the Hyakinthia that is chosen.

Finally, the inscription IG V.1 relating to the contributions of Sparta's allies during the Peloponnesian War and found in two fragments by abbot Fourmont in the church of Agios Vasilios near Xirokambi and by Yannis Pikoulas in 1987 in the monastery of Zerbitsas, 15 km north of Sparta, was probably also exposed in the sanctuary of the Amyklaion.

## VI. The cult geography of the cult of Apollo Amyklaios and the Hyakinthia in the Mediterranean

Finally, and I will end with this aspect, Apollo Amyklaios and Hyakinthos were honoured elsewhere than in Laconia, especially in the Dorian area.

The festival of Hyakinthia is found in Miletus, while the month of Hyakinthos is attested in Gytheio, Byzantium, Lato, Thera, Rhodes, Kalymnos, Knidos or Kos...

A tomb of Hyakinthos is mentioned in Taranto, a Spartan colony, while sanctuaries of Apollo Amyklaios are mentioned in Gortyna in Crete, Melos, but also in Cyprus.

The question of how this etymology spread is widely debated. According to the different theories of W. Burkert or Y. Vernet, Hyakinthos would be Achaean, Apollo Dorian, while the name Amyklaios could have Phoenician origins. The threads are very difficult to untangle and theories range from a role of Phoenician merchants during the Early Iron Age, but that of a Dorian emigration in the 9th-8th century is also considered, even that of Mycenaean networks in the 12th century. These hypotheses are not necessarily exclusive of each other and each case could bear the mark of different processes of syncretism and cultic

assimilation. It is not the role of this paper to cut this Gordian knot, but this question allows us to raise the question of the integration of the Amyklaion within a cult network that goes far beyond Laconia.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope to have succeeded, from the case of the Amyklaion and the Hyakinthia, in highlighting the principle of the scales of worship.

The Amyklaion appears to be far more than a mere spartan sanctuary. Besides the well known spartan scale, the Amyklaion is also that of the Amykleians, which is not exactly the same as that of the Lacedaemonians or the whole Greek world. The Hyakinthia fulfil functions of civic integration of young people at the level of the city, but can also act as a registration chamber or as a vector of communication of the international treaties.

The sanctuary and its cult can only be understood through the consideration of scope and geographical scales. Each scale has its own specificities, involving different actors, practices and purposes.

This type of analysis by scale, as well as the comparative approach with the rest of the Greek world, finally allows us to take Spartan sanctuaries and religion out of their religious isolation in research, and to place Sparta in a common framework of analysis with the other Greek cities.