



---

The 'Servile Interregnum' at Argos

Author(s): P. A. Seymour

Source: *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 42, Part 1 (1922), pp. 24-30

Published by: [The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/625932>

Accessed: 28/09/2013 17:01

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## THE 'SERVILE INTERREGNUM' AT ARGOS

OUR evidence for events in Argos after her crushing defeat by Kleomenes at Sepeia (*circ.* 494 B.C.) is so scrappy, incoherent, and to a large extent so late, that accurate reconstruction is well-nigh impossible. But a fresh attempt may at least throw into relief certain points which deserve more consideration than they seem to have received.

If we except the passage in Aristotle, *Pol.* 1303A (the exact significance of which is disputed), our sole authority for the so-called Servile Interregnum is Herodotos, *Bk.* 6, 83. It is necessary to quote the passage in full.

Ἄργος δὲ ἀνδρῶν ἐχρήρωθη οὕτω ὥστε οἱ δοῦλοι αὐτῶν ἔσχον πάντα τὰ πρήγματα ἄρχοντες τε καὶ διέποντες, ἐς δ' ἐπήβησαν οἱ τῶν ἀπολομένων παῖδες. ἔπειτ' ἐσφας οὗτοι ἀνακτώμενοι ὀπίσω ἐς ἑωυτοὺς τὸ Ἄργος ἐξέβαλον· ἐξωθεύμενοι δὲ οἱ δοῦλοι μάχη ἔσχον Τίρυνθα. τέως μὲν δὴ σφί ἦν ἄρθμια ἐς ἀλλήλους, ἔπειτα δὲ ἐς τοὺς δούλους ἦλθε ἀνὴρ μάντις Κλέανδρος, γένος ἐὼν Φιγαλεὺς ἀπ' Ἀρκαδίας· οὗτος τοὺς δούλους ἀνέγνωσε ἐπιθέσθαι τοῖσι δεσπότῃσι. ἐκ τούτου δὲ πόλεμός σφί ἦν ἐπὶ χρόνον συχρὸν, ἐς δ' δὴ μόγις οἱ Ἀργεῖοι ἐπεκράτησαν·

Dr. Macan<sup>1</sup> infers from this chapter 'the admission of the "slaves" to the franchise.' The wording of the first sentence in the extract may seem to support this inference, but Dr. Macan himself considers the chapter to involve both 'exaggeration and misconception,' and we may later see some considerations that tell against his inference. For myself I can find in Herodotos' account no convincing evidence of the actual and formal enfranchisement of the slaves. On the contrary, they are throughout described as *δοῦλοι*, and the last episode in the narrative is an attack from Tiryns of these *slaves* against their *masters*. Another remarkable point is that until the outbreak of hostilities at the finish, we hear nothing of any actual conflict between the slaves and their Argive owners. The natural presumption is no doubt that the servile upheaval could not fail to be attended by intense friction and even actual fighting; but neither when the slaves first took charge, nor again when they were later expelled, does Herodotos mention any armed conflict. The first battle in which he says the slaves took part is against, not Argos, but rebellious Tiryns. After the expulsion, there is actual concord between masters and slaves; and the subsequent rupture is represented as due to external influences. These points in the story may prove significant.

Plutarch<sup>2</sup> took Herodotos to mean that the slaves were enfranchised,

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Macan's *Hdt.*, 6, 92, note.

δοῦλοις, ἀλλὰ τῶν περιόικων ποιησάμενοι πολίτας τοὺς ἀρίστους, συνέκισαν τὰς γυναῖκας.

<sup>2</sup> *Plut., de Mul. Virt.*, 4: Ἐπανορθούμενοι δὲ τὴν ὀλιγανδρίαν, οὐχ, ὡς Ἡρόδοτος ἱστορεῖ, τοῖς

and expressly contradicted his alleged statement. But we must repeat that Herodotos does not say that Argos rectified her *ὀλιγανδρία* by admitting slaves as citizens; his assertion is that Argos had to submit to an unwelcome slave-domination, of which she rid herself as soon as she was able. Plutarch's reference to the enfranchisement of *περίοικοι* will be considered below.

We may safely assume that this servile upheaval, whatever its actual form, occurred practically immediately after the battle of Sepeia, *i. e.* in 494. It will help to give perspective to the problem if we now consider when the slaves' domination was brought to an end by their expulsion from Argos. Busolt<sup>3</sup> thinks that by 481 at least Argos was again in the possession of its former lords, since the embassy from the Panhellenic Congress at the Isthmos finds a king there and the *βουλή* in charge.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, he believes that the slave-supremacy could not have lasted beyond 487, since 'only the old Dorian Argos could have demanded from the Aeginetans and Sikyonians the payment of the fine' imposed on them by Argos, apparently on religious grounds, after Sepeia.<sup>5</sup> But it seems to me impossible to date the expulsion earlier than 478. There were troops from Mycenae and Tiryns at Plataea in 479, apparently a joint contingent of 400 men;<sup>6</sup> these Tirynthians could not have been the expelled Argive slaves, with whom we can scarcely believe Mycenae would willingly co-operate, for while, of course, the Mycenaean would welcome a close understanding with Tiryns when they both fell away from Argos in or soon after 494, they must have rather felt keen resentment against those *δοῦλοι* who subsequently defeated their Tirynthian friends in battle and seized their town. The slaves' seizure of Tiryns must accordingly be dated subsequent to 479. Again, the Tirynthians' presence at Plataea meant that they accepted Spartan leadership and acknowledged Spartan hegemony—a capital offence in Argos' eyes. There could have been no concord between the slaves at Tiryns and their late owners if the former had already thus openly sided with Argos' most deadly foe. Thirdly, Herodotos is explicit that the expulsion did not take place until the sons of the slain at Sepeia had reached manhood, a process not yet fully completed in 481.<sup>7</sup> On all these grounds I think we cannot date the slaves' expulsion before 478. The considerations urged by Busolt do not meet the arguments just set out against his earlier date, but they do go to strengthen the impression that the aristocratic *βουλή* at Argos was never really dislodged from its position after Kleomenes' victory; in other words, that Sepeia was not followed by a period during which *enfranchised* slaves took absolute charge of the State.

Can we define with any clearness the position of slaves in Argos prior to 494? Unfortunately, our information on this point is of the scantiest. There were doubtless many slaves in the private houses of Argos; we hear of these *οἰκέται* in Thucydides 5, 82. But the lexicographer Pollux mentions also a class of *γυμνήτες*, whom he ranks alongside of the Lacedaimonian Helots

<sup>3</sup> Busolt, *Gr. Gesch.*, 2, p. 564, note 2.

<sup>4</sup> Hdt., 7, 148-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 92.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Cp. the Argive reason for desiring a thirty-years' truce with Sparta. Hdt., 7, 149.

and the Thessalian *πενέσται*.<sup>8</sup> Was there then in Argos, as in Lacedaimon, a class of land-serfs, owned by the State and allotted by it to individual citizens for the cultivation of their estates? Busolt suggests<sup>9</sup> that these *γυμνήτες* may have been poorer citizens who served as light-armed troops, and whose economic and social position, like that of the Hektemoroi in Solonian Athens, was practically that of slaves.<sup>10</sup> We cannot doubt that in a commercial city like Argos there were many poor unprivileged citizens, and that after the great loss of life at Sepeia, they would attain a new value and political importance in the life of their community. But there is no need to reject the valuable morsel of information as to the existence of land-serfs preserved for us by Pollux. Even if the name *γυμνήτες* points to the use of those bearing it as light-armed, that would not prove citizen-status; the Lacedaimonian use of the Helots in this capacity was notorious. I suspect indeed that the existence of these agricultural serfs throws considerable light on the nature of the 'servile interregnum.' Among them there must have been many who had gained their masters' confidence sufficiently to be appointed overseers on the estates, just as on Attic farms a slave might become an *ἐπίτροπος* or an *ἐπιστάτης*.<sup>11</sup> When thousands of these masters were suddenly cut off in battle, leaving only small children at home, who then remained competent to undertake the management of their properties except these slaves? Can we doubt that many estates at once fell practically into the hands of the slaves who lived on them to work them? Even in cases where the overseer or the serfs generally remained loyal to the house they served, the Argive authorities would know that their control over their vassals had now become highly precarious, and that they must walk warily if they wished to avoid open rebellion. The *δοῦλοι* must be placated, or worse might follow. No doubt a spirit of unrest spread rapidly, both in the rural districts and among the domestic slaves in the city itself. But the aristocrats apparently handled a desperate situation with great skill. They succeeded in avoiding an open rupture; and thus the old *βουλή* of the eighty remained at least in nominal charge. They even perhaps avoided any overt or formal act whereby the slaves became legally free or secured citizen status. But they allowed them to behave very much as if they were free; in much of the business of the farms and of the city the co-operation of the slaves had become suddenly indispensable. Some of them even forced their way into the subordinate offices;<sup>12</sup> and in the dangerous years that followed 494 they were no doubt left to believe that their new status would not be questioned. Thus for sixteen anxious years, the Argive aristocrats submitted to a degree of servile domination which, however galling, had to be endured until the boys became men; and Herodotos' chapter is but an exaggerated

<sup>8</sup> Pollux, *Onomastikon*, 3, 83. Μεταξὺ δὲ ἐλευθέρων καὶ δούλων οἱ Λακεδαιμονίων εἴλωτες καὶ Θετταλῶν πενέσται καὶ Κρητῶν κλαρώται καὶ μνωῖται καὶ Μαρνανδύων δωροφόροι καὶ Ἀργείων γυμνήτες καὶ Σικυνίων κορυνηφόροι.

<sup>9</sup> Busolt, *Gr. Gesch.*, 1, 211 note.

<sup>10</sup> Cp. *Ath. Pol.*, chap. 2. καὶ ἐδούλευον οἱ πένητες τοῖς πλουσίοις κ.τ.λ.

<sup>11</sup> For slaves as 'overseers,' Cp. Xen.,

*Mem.*, 2, 5, 2; 2, 8, 3; and Heitland's comments, *Agricola*, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Thus I suggest Herodotos' phrase ἄρχοντες τε καὶ διέποντες should be interpreted. Even so, the phrase probably overstates what actually occurred, the exaggeration being due either to Herodotos' source, or to his own misunderstanding of it.

account of this strained and abnormal situation. The aristocrats could not have been altogether bereft of power, or they could never have succeeded so well. They would certainly be much aided by disunion and lack of organisation among the slaves themselves; they would rally the poor and hitherto unprivileged burgesses to their side; and perhaps further strengthened their position by enfranchising members of some of the perioecic cities; probably, too, the Argive women, fearing the indignity of wedlock with their former slaves, gave the *βουλή* support far beyond woman's wont, for they seem to have been well able to assert themselves with vigour in times of crisis.<sup>13</sup>

We have only the most summary account of the expulsion in 478 or thereabouts. The boys, having now grown up, *σφεας ἐξέβαλον*, 'threw the slaves out.' There is no hint of any actual fighting between the two parties at this date, except what is implied in these words; and they do not necessarily imply that the matter came to actual blows. What follows in Herodotus rather suggests that the slaves left Argos after an understanding had been arrived at. For years probably the serfs had been pressing for the regularisation of their position, and they doubtless became most insistent and discontented as the heirs of their dead masters in increasing numbers reached manhood, and threatened to reassert the earlier servile status of their dependants. One thing the Argive councillors must have sought to avoid above all things during this period of humiliation and weakness was an outbreak of open hostilities with their own slaves; and by adroit means we can only guess at, they managed to evade the issue until well after Plataea. Then, because the *βουλή* judged the moment propitious or because the slaves themselves insisted, the matter came to a head. Actual strife was still avoided; but it was made clear to the slaves that the city would not yield their claim to citizenship and was now in a position to maintain that refusal; on the other hand, the disaffected *δοῦλοι* were too numerous and determined to be reduced without a ruinous intestine struggle. An agreement was arrived at. The slaves were to leave Argos, and make an attempt upon rebellious Tiryns. If they succeeded in reducing that fortress, the Argives undertook to recognise them as members of an allied perioecic city. Tiryns, like Mycenae, had been a thorn in Argos' side ever since it had thrown off its allegiance in 494. In concert with Mycenae, it had sent a contingent to Plataea; had recognised Spartan hegemony; and could be used by Sparta to hold Argive pretensions severely in check. Nothing would be more agreeable to Argos than its reduction by a body of slaves who were prepared to recognise Argive leadership; and we need not doubt that if some time between 487 and 481 Argos could spare 1000 volunteers to aid Aegina against Athens,<sup>14</sup> there would be many Argives willing to serve in the same capacity with their expelled slaves against Tiryns. On the other hand, the slaves would gain a new home where they would enjoy all but complete freedom, and an entirely new and higher status relatively to their old masters. This compact was successfully carried out. The slaves fell upon the Tirynthians, defeated them in battle, and took possession of their

<sup>13</sup> Cp. Plutarch, *de Mul. Virt.*, 4; and the women's help in building the Long Walls, *Thuc.*, 5, 82.  
<sup>14</sup> *Hdt.*, 6, 92.

city. Thereafter for a term, probably till 473–2, they were at concord with Argos, until seduced from their loyalty by the intrigues of Sparta and the ‘prophet’ from Phigalia.

It remains to discuss Plutarch’s statement, mentioned above, that after Sepeia Argos enfranchised ‘the best’ of the *περίοικοι*. Plutarch’s statement does not stand alone. Aristotle<sup>15</sup> also says that, following on the disaster, the Argives *ἠναγκάσθησαν παραδέξασθαι τῶν περιοίκων τινάς*. Pausanias<sup>16</sup> again twice speaks of a *συνοικισμός* during this period, in one reference giving it so large a scale that Busolt<sup>17</sup> thinks his narrative must be exaggerated. Obviously these *περίοικοι* were the members of the Argolid cities which had been reduced under Argive hegemony to the status of subject allies, though information as to the exact details of their condition is wanting. From Herodotos 8, 73, it would seem that they were also known as Orneatae, from the fact that Orneae having been among the first places reduced, its citizens gave their name to a political status; but Dr. Macan suspects that the phrase from which this inference can be made is a gloss. At all events, after Sepeia some of these perioecic cities, notably Mycenae and Tiryns and perhaps others, fell away from their allegiance. Some, however, remained loyal, particularly perhaps Cleonae; and as later in 418 and 415, so perhaps now Orneae was also a staunch centre of Argive influence.<sup>18</sup> Many others no doubt were wavering; and in the circumstances it would have been no surprising thing for Argos to seek to strengthen their loyalty and at the same time to repair her own broken citizen ranks by enfranchising many of their members. This policy need not, and in fact, as I imagine, did not, imply the total dissolution of the favoured communities, and the transplanting of their whole citizen body to Argos. The rebellious towns, Mycenae and Tiryns, were indeed ultimately razed, and their existence as separate communities brought to an end; but in these cases we have evidence<sup>19</sup> as against Pausanias that no enfranchisements took place, but rather only enslavement and expulsion; though we may see below that there were interesting exceptions to this rigorous vengeance in the case of Tiryns. For the other towns mentioned in Pausanias (Hysiae, Orneae, Midea, and the rest) we have no direct evidence that they rebelled at all; I suspect that any or all of these were communities whose loyalty was secured after Sepeia by the enfranchisement of some of their citizens, and a liberal revision of the terms of alliance between them and the hegemonic state of Argos.

<sup>15</sup> Arist., *Pol.*, 1303A.

<sup>16</sup> Paus. 8, 25, 8. ‘*Ἀνέστησαν δὲ καὶ Τίρυνθιους Ἀργεῖοι, συνοίκους προσλαβεῖν καὶ τὸ Ἄργος ἐπαυξῆσαι θελήσαντες*; and 8, 27, 1. ‘The Arcadians gathered together at Megalopolis to increase their strength,’ *ἔτε καὶ Ἀργεῖους ἐπιστάμενοι τὰ μὲν ἔτι παλαιότερα μόνον οὐ κατὰ μίαν ἡμέραν ἐκάστην κινδυνεύοντας ὑπὸ Λακεδαιμονίων παραστῆναι τῷ πολέμῳ, ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἀνθρώπων πλῆθει τὸ Ἄργος ἐπηύξησαν καταλύσαντες, Τίρυνθα καὶ Ἰστιάς τε καὶ Ὀρνεὰς καὶ Μυκῆνας καὶ Μίδειαν καὶ εἰ δὴ τι ἄλλο πόλισμα οὐκ ἀξιόλογον ἐν τῇ Ἀργολίδι ἦν, τὰ τε ἀπὸ Λακεδαιμονίων*

*ἀδεέστερα τοῖς Ἀργείοις ὑπάρξαντα καὶ ἅμα ἐς τοὺς περιοίκους ἰσχὺν γενομένην αὐτοῖς*.

<sup>17</sup> Busolt, *Gr. Gesch.*, 3. p. 114 note.

<sup>18</sup> For Cleonae as ‘ally’ of Argos against (a) rebellious Mycenae (468?), (b) at Tanagra (457), (c) at Mantinea (416), v. Strabo 377; inscription quoted in Hill’s *Sources*, chap. iii. No. 95, and Thuc., 1, 107; and Thuc., 5, 67. For Orneai, cp. Thuc., 5, 67 and 6, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Diod., XI. 65; Ephoros (*apud Steph. Byz.*) *frag.* 98; Strabo, 372–3.



Certainly Orneae is met with later as a separate community<sup>20</sup> in alliance with Argos, and Hysiae<sup>21</sup> seems also to have been in the same condition.

If the reconstruction suggested in this article recaptures at all the essential truth for this period, it involves a sharp distinction between the treatment accorded to the perioecic cities (whose free members would be themselves Dorians), and that dealt out by Argos to her own *γυμνήτες* or agricultural serfs (who would be mainly of pre-Dorian stock); and the racial difference would go far to explain the divergent treatment. We have taken Aristotle's reference in the *Politics* to be to the enfranchisement of members from the subject cities. This is very much the interpretation of Aristotle's passage given by Susemihl and Hicks; but Newman<sup>22</sup> objects on the ground that the word *περίοικοι* in Aristotle never seems to bear a meaning analogous to that which it would bear in any technical discussion of, say, the Lacedaimonian constitution. Newman accordingly takes the Aristotelian *περίοικοι* to be here equivalent to Herodotos' *δοῦλοι*, and consequently infers, like Dr. Macan, that the slaves were actually enfranchised. But in the light of all the evidence, it seems to me far more probable that in this passage Aristotle has simply taken over the word *περίοικοι* which he found in his authority; and that in that authority, whatever it was, *περίοικοι* referred to the inhabitants of the subjected Argolid towns. In that case, the testimony of Aristotle tells rather against any enfranchisement of the *δοῦλοι*, and in favour of the views elaborated above.

Our last task must be to clear up, if we can, when this partial *συννοικισμός* took place. Plutarch's story necessitates the view that it occurred soon after Sepeia, as the enfranchised *περίοικοι* were wedded to the widows of those slain by the Spartan king. On the other hand, Pausanias' reference, to some extent corroborated by Strabo, seems to date it subsequently to the reduction of Tiryns and Mycenae, the former of which was perhaps besieged from 472 to 468, and the latter from 468 to a date after the Helot revolt (464). We can dismiss the date which depends upon the reduction of Mycenae, for the reason given, that other evidence shows that no Mycenaean was granted Argive citizenship. But apart from this, there is no necessary conflict between Plutarch and Pausanias. The policy of enfranchisement may have begun as early as 494 and need not have ceased until after the fall of Tiryns more than twenty years later. It was perhaps most vigorously pursued in the earlier years immediately after the disaster, when most of all it was urgent for Argos to confirm the allegiance of her wavering *περίοικοι*, and to increase her own citizen roll. There was then probably a lull, but the policy was resumed for a moment when Tiryns surrendered. But who were the Tirynthians that were accepted into the Argive register? We can hardly believe that they belonged to the slaves who had gone back on the compact of 478, and had treacherously assailed the city which had connived at their establishment at Tiryns. We have probably here the outcome of a pretty episode of conflicting passions and intrigue. Even in 494, when Tiryns first fell away, there may have been a party loyal to Argos. But the disloyalists prevailed, and placed themselves

<sup>20</sup> Thuc., 5, 67 and 6, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Thuc., 5, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Newman's edition of the *Politics*, Vol. IV. p. 304, note.

under the protection of Sparta, and served with her at Plataea. When the δούλοι seized their city in 478, they no doubt expected Spartan succour. But Sparta, preoccupied with other matters, allowed them to be shamefully subdued to a servile domination; and later, about 473, when faced by the formidable insurrection of Tegea and the Arcadians allied with Argos, Sparta even, in her anxiety to create a diversion against Argos and to detach her from the rebels, sent the Phigalian seer and made common cause with the slaves. This base betrayal rankled in the Dorian hearts of those who, having freed Tiryns from Argive control, and having fought alongside Sparta in defence of Greece, found that their only reward was to be abandoned beneath the heel of ejected slaves. Many of them must have swung back to loyalty to Argos; and doubtless, during the long siege of the serfs to which Argos had to resort, they gave much aid to the besiegers. Argos, again, would have no mercy for the slaves who had played her false. Thus, when at last the gates of Tiryns were opened, those Dorian περίοικοι who had repented of their post-Sepeian rebellion, became citizens of victorious Argos; while the treacherous slaves were driven out, after the failure of their two great efforts for freedom—first in Argos itself and then in Tiryns—to find a precarious livelihood as fishermen in the mean coastal township of Halieis.<sup>23</sup>

P. A. SEYMOUR.

---

<sup>23</sup> Strabo, 373; Ephoros, *frag.* 98.