



Summary :

King of Sparta. Campaigned in 396 BC against the Persians in Asia Minor to secure the independence of the Greek cities. In 394 BC he was recalled to face a coalition of the leading Greek cities. Following the Peace of Antalcidas (386 BC) he managed to preserve Spartan hegemony. The ceaseless clashes with Thebes and Athens gradually brought about its downfall. He served as a commander of a mercenary force in Egypt, where he died in 360/359 BC.

Date and Place of Birth

445/444 BC, Sparta

Date and Place of Death

360/359 BC, Port of Menelaus (Cyrene)

Main Role

King

1. Biography

Agesilaus was born in 445/444 BC. He was the son of the Spartan King Archidamus II from his second spouse, Eupolia. As he was not destined as a successor to the throne, he received the upbringing of a normal citizen, the customary Spartan discipline. He was rather small and lame by birth, but this did not stop him from standing up to the challenges of military life. Although lacking in good looks, his cheerful character and demeanour made him endearing. The virtues he exhibited as a young man attracted the interest of Lysander, whose favourite he became. He married Cleora, and had three children, Eupolia, Proauga and Archidamus.¹

2. Political and Military Activity

In around 400 BC and with the support of Lysander, Agesilaus succeeded his half-brother Ages II, since the regular successor, Leotychidas, was considered illegitimate.² At that time Sparta was dominant politically and militarily, having emerged victorious from the Peloponnesian War. Soon after his coronation, Agesilaus played a part in revealing and thwarting the conspiracy of Cinadon, aimed at overturning the polity.³

Escalating the war against the Persians to liberate the Greek cities of [Asia Minor](#), in spring of 396 BC Agesilaus landed at [Ephesus](#) leading a force of 8,000 men. He managed to mislead the satrap Tissaphernes with respect to the direction of his military operations, and instead of [Caria](#) he invaded and pillaged [Hellespontic Phrygia](#). During the winter and until spring of 395 BC he intensely prepared in Ephesus and then invaded Lydia again, perhaps tricking the enemy once more. Close to [Sardis](#) he trapped and defeated Tissaphernes' army. In fall he invaded [Phrygia Magna](#), penetrating as far as [Paphlagonia](#), where he became allied with the local potentate, and returned to Hellespontic Phrygia.⁴ Agesilaus probably intended to wrench as many regions as possible, inciting revolts in the hinterland to secure the coastal areas.⁵

While preparing to march once more in spring of 394 BC,⁶ he was called back to Greece to face a coalition of Greek cities backed by the Persians.⁷ Though Agesilaus was positively pro-oligarchic, he was apparently moderate when it



came to dealing with the domestic political affairs of the cities of Asia Minor.⁸ From 394 to 387 BC he fought with distinction in several battles of the Corinthian War.⁹ Perhaps he was opposed to the rapprochement between Sparta and Persia which led to the [Peace of Antalcidas](#).¹⁰

In the following years he pursued an aggressive policy to preserve Spartan hegemony, but the clashes with Athens and Thebes led to its dissolution. After 371 BC he was forced to fight to preserve Sparta's very existence, facing incursions and internal unrest.¹¹ In 366/365 BC he helped the mutinous satrap Ariobarzanes in the Hellespont.¹² In order to secure precious resources for Sparta he served successfully as the leader of a mercenary force in Egypt in 361/360 BC. Returning with a sum of 230 talents, he steered into the Harbour of Menelaus in Cyrene, where he died in the winter of 360/359 BC. He was succeeded by his son Archidamus III.¹³

3. Assessment

The view of the ancient literature on Agesilaus is generally favourable.¹⁴ His close friend and admirer [Xenophon](#) wrote an encomium bearing his name and Isocrates praised him for his Panhellenism.¹⁵ Theopompus considered him the greatest man of his times.¹⁶ Diodorus recognized his bravery and military skill,¹⁷ but thought he was too bellicose.¹⁸ Plutarch criticized some of his actions, but extolled his personality in his biography and in his *Moralia*,¹⁹ while Polyaeus provides evidence for his military genius and his fine character.²⁰

During the Renaissance Agesilaus was seen as the quintessential Classical man, in all except for his looks off course.²¹ From the 18th century until our days, his fame was tarnished due to ethical and political reasons.²²

Of the more recent scholars, Cartledge is more critical on the subject of his foreign policy, while Cawkwell attempts a concise but thoroughly researched and balanced approach. Indubitably a brave soldier and an able tactician, Agesilaus was not a great strategist.²³ There are indications of his Panhellenism, but the subject is still debated.²⁴

The charge that his aggressive policies led to Sparta's downfall is surely overblown. On the contrary, through his tactic he managed to secure Spartan supremacy for many years. The fact that he is the most widely known exponent of this policy does not mean he was solely responsible for it. The roots of Sparta's decline need to be understood in the context of economic, social and demographic changes. Perhaps he should be mostly blamed for remaining loyal to Lycurgus' spirit and for his unwillingness or inability to promote reforms.²⁵

1. Plut., *Ages.* 1-2.1, 19.10-11, 40.5; Nep., *Ages.* 8.1. On his upbringing see Cartledge, P., *Agesilaos* (London 1987), pp. 20-33.

2. Xenoph., *Ages.* 1.5; Xenoph., *Hellen.* 3.3.1-4; Plut., *Ages.* 3.4-9; Nep., *Ages.* 1.

3. Xenoph., *Hellen.* 3.3.4-10.

4. Xenoph., *Ages.* 1.6-16 & 1.23-25; Xenoph., *Hellen.* 3.4-25 & 4.1.1-41; *Greek Oxyrrynchus* 11(6), 12(7), 21(16)-22(17).1-3; Plut., *Ages.* 6-13; Diod. S.



79.1-3; Nep., *Ages.* 2.1-3.6.

5. Seager, R.S., "Agesilaos in Asia: propaganda and objectives", *LCM* 2 (1977), p. 184· Kelly, D.H., "Agesilaos' strategy in Asia Minor", *LCM* 3 (1978), p. 98.

6. Xenoph., *Hellen.* 4.1.41· *Greek Oxyrrynchus* 22 (17).4.

7. Xenoph., *Hellen.* 4.2; Plut., *Ages.* 15; Diod. S. 14.83.1; Nep., *Ages.* 4.1-4.4.

8. Xenoph., *Ages.* 1.37-38; Parke, H.W., "The development of the second Spartan empire", *JHS* 50 (1930), pp. 37-79.

9. Xenoph., *Ages.* 1.6-10; Xenoph., *Hellen.* 4.3-5.1· Plut., *Ages.* 16-23; Diod. S. 14.83-84, 97; Nep., *Ages.* 4.5-5.

10. Plut., *Ages.* 23.2-4; Cawkwell, G.L., "Agesilaos and Sparta", *CQ* 70 (1976), pp. 68-69. For the opposite view see Smith, R.E., "The opposition to Agesilaos' foreign policy", *Historia* 2 (1953/4), pp. 287-288; Cartledge, P., *Agesilaos* (London 1987), pp. 195-199; Lewis, D.M., *Sparta and Persia* (Leiden 1977), p. 145, note 61.

11. Xenoph., *Ages.* 2.21-25· Xenoph., *Hellen.* 5-7· Plut., *Ages.* 23-25· Diod. S. 15.19.31-34, 52, 59, 83· Nep., *Ages.* 5-7.

12. Xenoph., *Ages.* 2.26.

13. Xenoph., *Ages.* 2.27-31· Plut., *Ages.* 36-40.5· Διόδ. 15.92.2-3, 93.2-6· Nep., *Ages.* 8.2-6.

14. Cartledge, P., *Agesilaos* (London 1987) examines critically the sources on Agesilaos, pp. 53-73; Cawkwell, G.L., "Agesilaos and Sparta", *CQ* 70 (1976), pp. 63-66.

15. Isocr., *Letter to Archidamus* 11.

16. Plut., *Ages.* 10.10.

17. Diod. S. 15.92.2.

18. Diod. S. 15.19.4.

19. Plut., *Mor.* 208b-236e.

20. Polyaeus., *Strategemata* 2.1.1-33, 2.3.10, 3.11.15, 4.4.3.

21. Rawson, E., *The Spartan tradition in European thought* (Oxford 1969), p. 135.

22. Cartledge, P., *Agesilaos* (London 1987), pp. 420-426, mentions and discusses these views.

23. Just to mention one, that he sailed for Asia without having secured his rear, despite the manifest hostility of the major Greek cities, and that he was not diligent enough in developing the Spartan fleet, see Cartledge, P., *Agesilaos* (London 1987), pp. 208-218.

24. Cawkwell, G.L., "Agesilaos and Sparta", *CQ* 70 (1976), pp. 69-71.

25. Cawkwell, G.L., "Agesilaos and Sparta", *CQ* 70 (1976), pp. 83-84.



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Glossary :

	talent, the Numismatic weight unit. The silver talent equaled 60 mnai or 6000 silver drachmas.
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Chronological Table

445/4 BC: Birth of Agesilaos

400 BC: Most likely date of ascendance to the throne

399 BC: Suppression of Cinadon's conspiracy

Spring of 396 BC: Agesilaos campaigns in Asia, invasion of Hellespontic Phrygia

Spring/Summer of 395 BC: Invasion of Lydia, victory near Sardis

Fall of 395 BC: Invasion of Phrygia Magna, advance as far as Paphlagonia

Spring of 394 BC: Agesilaos recalled to Greece

394-387 BC: Agesilaos takes part in the Corinthian War



386 BC: Peace of Antalcidas. Agesilaus presides over the council of the Greek cities

381-377 BC: Agesilaus' military activities consolidate Spartan hegemony in Greece

377 BC: He is seriously wounded in the leg and forced to remain off the field for several years

370 BC: He repels the Boetian invasion of Laconia

366/5 BC: Agesilaus in the Hellespont aiding the mutinous satrap Ariobarzanes

362 BC: He repels a new Boetian invasion of Laconia

361/360 BC: Agesilaus leads a mercenary force in Egypt

360/359 BC: He dies in Cyrene