AYIOS STEPHANOS IN SOUTHERN LACONIA AND THE LOCATIONS OF ANCIENT HELOS

by Richard Hope Simpson and Richard Janko

‘There is a Pylos before Pylos, and another Pylos besides’
(verse from the epic cycle cited by Strabo viii. 3. 7, cf. Aristophanes Eq. 1059)

This article originated when R.H.S. drew some of his published and unpublished observations on Laconian topography to the attention of R.J., who had just brought out the final report on the excavations at Ayios Stephanos. Consideration of these observations and of other recent scholarship has led us to reconsider the significance of Ayios Stephanos in the Late Bronze Age, the location(s) of ancient Helos, and the network of premodern roads in the region. The photographs were taken by R.H.S. in 1956 during his extensive survey of southern Laconia, on behalf of the British School, when he first discovered the site of Ayios Stephanos. The maps, compiled by the authors, have been drawn by Jennifer Grek Martin.

I. AYIOS STEPHANOS AND ITS HISTORY

Ayios Stephanos lies in South Laconia on the western edge of the modern Helos Plain (Fig. 1). The excavations that were undertaken there in 1959–77 by the late Lord William Taylour, under the auspices of the British School, have revealed a coastal settlement with a long history, which can be reconstructed in detail from a stratigraphic sequence that is, for the Bronze Age, almost complete. Although the site now lies some 2 km north of the sea (Fig. 2), it was clearly once a promontory that was attached to the mainland only by a saddle at its west side, as can be seen when it is viewed from the north (Fig. 3). Drill-cores in the Helos Plain have revealed the approximate location of the ancient shore-line, and have allowed geologists to infer that the site was still a promontory during the Bronze Age (Kraft, Aschenbrenner and Rapp 1977, with AS figs. 13.5–13.6), with beaches suitable for the use of ancient shipping on the north, the south and to a smaller extent the east sides of the hill (R. Janko in AS, 553–4, with Fig. 2). These have now completely disappeared under the alluvial fill of the Helos Plain (Fig. 4), which has largely been deposited in the three millennia since the end of the Bronze Age (J. Bintliff in AS, 527–50).

1 We write in memory of Lord William Taylour, Alan Wace and Lady Helen Waterhouse. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the British School at Athens, the University of Michigan and Queen's University at Kingston. R.H.S. thanks especially T.M. Smith, the administrative assistant of the Department of Classics, Queen's University, E. Gunsinger, the secretary, and Dr G. Barber of the Department of Geography.

2 The site named Souroukla, discovered near Skala in 1921 by Carl Blegen, was not Ayios Stephanos, as has been suggested, but Skala: Ayios Nikolaos. See §II below.
Fig. 1 – Location Map.
Ayios Stephanos in southern Laconia and the locations of ancient Helos

Founded in EH I, Ayios Stephanos was a thriving settlement during two phases of EH II (R. Janko in AS, 557–65); the discovery of a closed vessel in EM IIA Early schematised ware shows that the site was already in contact with central Crete during EH IIA (J. A. MacGillivray in AS, 176). Abandoned later in EH II and deserted until the very end of EH III, the hilltop was reoccupied at the beginning of MH I (R. Janko in AS, 565–71). From the start of the Middle Bronze Age the finds show that the site was a major port, trading with Kythera and Crete in particular. As its prosperity increased, rectangular houses succeeded apsidal ones and its layout assumed a more Minoan aspect; Minoan and minoanizing pottery abounds, and an inscription in Linear A was found. However, Ayios Stephanos always retained its Helladic traditions in pottery and burial customs, and never became a Minoan ‘colony’ (ibid. 579–89). Its economy probably relied on coastal trade, fishing, metallurgy and the export in uncut form of the green decorative stone lapis lacedaemonius, which occurs only here in the eastern hemisphere and was worked in the Lapidaries’ Workshop at Knossos (ibid. 581–3, 595–6). In the Late Bronze Age the fortunes of Ayios Stephanos fluctuated, apparently in tandem with those of its trading partner Knossos: there are signs of decline after LH IIA Early, and of a revival in LH IIIA1. At least portions of the settlement were destroyed by fire in LH IIIA2 Early; it then declined sharply and was partly abandoned until the transition from LH IIIB to LH IIIC Early, when it was extensively rebuilt, apparently by refugees from elsewhere on the mainland (ibid. 592–604). The reoccupation lasted for two building-phases, but at the end of LH IIIC Early the site was abandoned; in one sector there was evidence of burning, and possibly of a massacre, since a pit containing four severed heads was found (ibid. 605). It was reoccupied for a while during the Byzantine period, at a time dated by pottery and coins to c. 1250–1320 (G. D. R. Sanders in AS, 389–95; R. Janko in AS, 482–4, 606–9).

The successive locations of Helos

The name Helos (‘marsh’) was presumably given because of the extensive deltaic fill at the mouth of the river Eurotas, as Strabo must already have understood (viii. 5. 2, cf. ix. 2. 17). Ayios Stephanos was deserted during almost all of the historic period, and it is clear that in Classical and Hellenistic times the main centre in the Helos plain was a large village at Stou Manolaki on the east side of the gulf: see §III below. For the earlier history of Helos we have only the traditions recorded by later writers, principally the 4th-cent. B.C. historian Ephorus, the 1st-cent. geographer Strabo, and the 2nd-cent. A.D. traveller Pausanias, together with the oral tradition preserved in the Catalogue of Ships in Homer’s Iliad, which lists Helos as a ‘town by the sea’ (ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης) in the kingdom of Menelaus (ii. 584). This passage, cited by both Strabo and Pausanias, was of course well known to Greek and Roman writers, as Homer was the cornerstone of their education. It seemed reasonable to expect, when Ayios Stephanos was excavated, that it would turn out to have been the Homeric Helos, and this identification was soon proposed (PL i. 103, PL ii. 193–4, cf. CSHII, 78). Recent scholarship has been more sceptical (Themos 2007; R. Janko in AS, 595), mainly on account of the evidence for a Classical and Hellenistic centre at Stou Manolaki. However, according to Pausanias, the inhabitants of Helos had been expelled by the Spartans (iii. 2. 6–7, cf. iii. 20. 6, and see §IV below). This strongly suggests the dissolution of an earlier Helos; and it would not
be surprising if the name ‘Helos’ had been applied to a different location subsequently. Place-names could substantially shift their locations between the Bronze and the Iron Ages, as a number of instances in Messenia and elsewhere, including that of Pylos, demonstrate; there the ‘Pylos under Mt Aigaleon’, which we can now identify as the ‘Palace of Nestor’, was abandoned in favour of the Pylos at Koryphasion, as was still remembered in Strabo’s day (ἡ μὲν οὖν παλαία Πύλος ἡ Μεσσηνικὴ ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἀιγαλέω πόλης ἦν, κατεσπασμένης δὲ ταύτης ἐπὶ τὸ Κορυφασίω τινὸς αὐτῶν ὄρμου [Strabo viii. 4. 2]; cf. Chadwick 1973, 39–59). In southern Laconia Helos (at Stou Manolaki?) was already in ruins in Pausanias’ day (see §III below). After the period of upheaval in the early Middle Ages the name Helos was applied to Skala, which had replaced Gytheion as the main port of Laconia by A.D. 878 (for Medieval Helos see R. Janko in AS, 606–9, and cf. Appendix below). The location of Helos has since changed again, as it is now the name of a village, the former Dourali, in the centre of the plain. As regards the earliest Helos, the ‘Homeric’ one (cf. §IV below), our re-examination of the evidence points to Ayios Stephanos, as the most important settlement in the Helos Plain during most of the Bronze Age.

II. THE HELOS PLAIN IN THE LATE HELLADIC PERIOD

Survey

As in the rest of Laconia, early survey in the Helos plain by the British School (Wace and Hasluck 1908–09) was primarily concerned with the historic periods, principally the search for architectural remains and inscriptions. In 1936–38, however, Helen Waterhouse (then Helen Thomas) began a survey of Prehistoric Laconia, on behalf of the School, and at the instigation of Alan Wace in particular. Her work was interrupted by World War II, and was not later resumed. She published a brief report of the results in BSA vol. 51 (Waterhouse 1956). In 1956–58 Richard Hope Simpson continued the exploration, again at the instigation of Wace, and on behalf of the School. The results of both surveys, that of 1936–38 and that of 1956–58, were later combined in a single publication, ‘Prehistoric Laconia Parts I and II’, in BSA vols. 55 and 56 respectively (here abbreviated as PL i and PL ii); but the two surveys themselves were entirely separate (the two authors did not meet until 1959). It follows that rumours (some of which have been published) of (supposed) joint ‘visits’ to sites in Laconia, by ‘Waterhouse and Hope Simpson’ together, are imaginary.

This pioneer exploration of prehistoric Laconia has been described as ‘extensive’ (MG, 111–112) or ‘non-intensive’ (LS i. 52–3); and this is certainly true for most of Laconia. But in spring 1956 Wace, when ‘briefing’ Hope Simpson, strongly recommended much more survey in the Helos plain. Here the only ‘new’ Mycenaean settlement recorded by Waterhouse in the district had been Skala: Ayios Nikolaos (alias the ‘Souroukla’ investigated by Blegen in 1921), since the onset of World War II had prevented further survey in the plain. Consequently, Hope Simpson’s coverage of the Helos plain, mainly in autumn 1956, was much more intensive than in most other parts of Laconia. All hills and hill slopes on the borders of the plain were examined, as was the higher ground within it (but not the surface of the more recent alluvial deposits). Whenever a prehistoric site was found, it was exhaustively searched, and sufficient time was spent (for instance, two whole days at Ayios Stephanos) to record its visible features (with a sketch plan), collect diagnostic and/or distinctive artefacts, and estimate, as closely as possible, the extent of the
surface remains, and usually in particular the ‘spread’ of the (usually more ubiquitous and more diagnostic) Mycenaean potsherds.

It is, of course, impossible to gauge the extent of an ancient settlement solely on the basis of the present locations of the artefacts observed on its surface, let alone to establish the density of habitation within its (supposed) boundaries. The sites are often severely damaged, having been eroded or disturbed/ruined by later activity (Hope Simpson 1984, 1985; cf. LS i. 40–47). Fortunately in 1956–58 the visibility of the surfaces on the sites in the Helos plain was generally good, since the land surrounding the plain was still under cultivation and the fields were still being ploughed (in contrast to the ‘neglect of cultivation’ later encountered in the 1983–89 Laconia Survey [LS i, 41, 47]; cf. Hope Simpson 1984, 116). The methods of recording in the 1956–58 survey were simple, using only tape measure, compass bearings and pacing for estimating the extents of the ‘spreads’ of visible artefacts. But in most cases there were sufficient indications for assessing at least the approximate sizes of the Mycenaean sites observed.

At the invitation of Lord William Taylour, in summer 1973 J.L. Bintliff made a study of the region around Ayios Stephanos, which was intended ‘to place the important Bronze Age settlement then being uncovered in the context of the environmental features of the area, and to relate the history of the site to the general development of human occupation in the Helos District’ (AS, 527). This study, completed in 1975, was first published in the monograph based on his Ph.D. dissertation (Bintliff 1977, 451–97). For his chapter in the Ayios Stephanos publication (AS, 527–550), Bintliff decided to revise and update his discussions of the geology and geography of the Helos plain, but to repeat his 1975 commentaries on the archaeological sites substantially unchanged. Unfortunately some of his interpretations of the archaeological data (see below for ‘Ayios Strategos’ in particular) were at variance with the published record (PL i. 87–103, PL ii. 164, 170–73), as has been observed (MG 105–6, 111–12). Consequently, it is now necessary to call in question some of his conclusions, especially concerning the locations of ancient Helos, since they have been based, at least partly, on unsubstantiated assumptions.

Subsequent finds (i.e. since c. 1973) in and around the Helos plain have been relatively few, and have mainly been recorded briefly and in a piecemeal manner. Recently, however, A. Themos has begun a more systematic study of the plain and of the locations of Helos in antiquity. For the Mycenaean period the most important recent discoveries he reports are of further chamber tombs both north and northwest of Peristeri (formerly Tsasi), together with indications of a Mycenaean settlement at Solakoi, between Peristeri and Philisi, on hills west of the tombs. He also found EH, Mycenaean and later material on the Anemomylos hill c. 2 km to the south (and c. 7 km northeast of Skala). These sites, and others of various dates and at various other locations in the vicinities of Skala and Peristeri, have been briefly introduced by Themos pending fuller publication and further survey in the region (Themos 2007, esp. 460–4). On our map (Fig. 2) the ‘new’ Mycenaean sites are provisionally marked as 19A (Solakoi) and 19B (Anemomylos), and are discussed below.

The Mycenaean sites in the Helos Plain (Fig. 2)

In the summaries here only a brief description of each site is given and only the Mycenaean material is reviewed. A provisional assessment of the type of each Mycenaean site is given, together with an estimate of its extent (wherever possi-
ble). These summaries are not intended to be a replacement for the original published records (mostly in PL i) of the primary investigations of the sites, but to establish the true nature of our data for reconstructing the pattern of Mycenaean habitation in and around the plain.

The estimates of the sizes of the Mycenaean settlements are based mainly on the distributions of Mycenaean sherds observed on the surfaces of the sites, and are therefore provisional, due to the limitations (discussed above) inherent in surface survey. The settlements were obviously much smaller than the modern communities in the district. In Laconia, as in neighbouring Messenia, most of the Mycenaean sites appear to have been between c. 0.5 ha and c. 2.0 ha in extent, and several apparently of even smaller size. Sites over c. 2.5 ha are rare and may be considered ‘large’ (for this time). In the Helos plain many of the smaller Mycenaean sites were classified as ‘hardly more than hamlets or farms’ (PL ii. 173 and n. 316). Accordingly, the schematic assignations, adopted below, of types of settlement (i.e. ‘village’, ‘hamlet’ and ‘farm’) are likewise provisional, and intended to reflect the relative sizes of the sites in this period. The term ‘village’ is here used for settlements estimated to have been larger than c. 1.0 ha, i.e. over 10,000 m². A settlement estimated to have occupied between c. 0.5 m and c. 1.0 ha is termed a ‘hamlet’, being too small to be considered a ‘village’, but evidently more than only a ‘farm’ (Melathria near Skoura, at a size of c. 0.7 ha, as estimated by Cavanagh and Crouwel 1992, is a good example of such a
'hamlet': cf. *LS i*. 144–7 and *LS ii*. 406–7 [Q3009], Cavanagh et al. 2005, 96–110). Settlements estimated as under c. 0.5 ha are here given the artificial designation ‘farm’. In some cases this may be a misnomer, since the (usually few) surface finds may reflect only seasonal activity (*LS i*. 44) and/or use during only part of the working day by persons who return to their homes at night (cf. *MG* 143). It is indeed difficult to determine the nature of these smallest sites (cf. Cavanagh et al. 2005, 312–13). In general, it is not always possible to provide even approximate estimates of sizes; in several cases, however, it is apparent that many of the figures given by E. Banou for the sizes of Mycenaean settlements in Laconia are considerably exaggerated, especially for the major sites, and several settlements listed by her as large villages appear to have been of only moderate size (Banou 1996, 100–102; *MG*, 99–112 *contra*). The data are certainly not sufficient to enable any reliable assessments of the probable sizes of the settlements in any of the Mycenaean sub-periods, although minimum extents can now be estimated for the Menelaion in LH III B2 and for Ayios Stephanos in LH III C Early (discussed below).

The sites are listed here in the order (roughly southwest to southeast) adopted in *MG*, and mainly with the same numbers (*MG*, 105–6, nos. E 14 to E 24, corresponding to *GAC*, 112–15, nos. C 19 to C 27, i.e. in reverse order to that in *PL i*. 87–104). Some additional numbers are used, especially those for the recent discoveries (mentioned above) near Peristeri and Skala; and some further information is added from the 1956–1958 field notebooks and other records.

14. *Ayios Stephanos* (Figs. 3 and 4)
Taylour 1972; *AS*.

Although the excavations have been relatively small in scale, the sequence of human habitation, principally in the Bronze Age, has been sufficiently demonstrated. In particular, the extent of the material dated to LH III C Early, from the excavated structures and in

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Fig. 3 – Ayios Stephanos from the north.
the scatter of surface sherds, has been estimated as at least 26,500 m² (R. Janko in AS, 598), marking Ayios Stephanos as a large ‘village’ at this time.

14A. Ayios Stephanos: South
PL i. 100; Banou (1996), 50–1.

A few LH III sherds were found on a low terrace c. 200 m south of Ayios Stephanos, at the east foot of the hill range bordering the plain, and below a limestone outcrop. The terrace is immediately above the marsh here, and would have been just above the shore in the Mycenaean period, and adjoining, or forming part of, the Ayios Stephanos harbour. A ‘farm’, or at most a ‘hamlet’, is suggested here.

15. Stephania: Lekas (South)
PL i. 97; GAC, 113 (C 18); MG, 105 (E 15); LS ii. 298–9 (KK139); Banou (1996), 52–3; AS, 534–5.

To the north and northwest of Ayios Stephanos the original marine inlet is now a marsh. This would have been the most sheltered part of the Ayios Stephanos harbour area (cf. Bintliff 1977, 457–9). On the northwest and west edges of the marsh there are several very low hillocks (or more elevated land), the southernmost of which stands only five or six metres above the level of the marsh. The surface sherds within the c. 150 m by c. 120 m area of the site were mainly EH and MH, and 11 pieces of lapis lacedaemonius were also found. Mycenaean activity was evidenced only by two sherds from LH III stemmed bowls. If these indicate a Mycenaean habitation site, this would probably have been only a ‘farm’, occupying only part of the site.

16. Stephania: Lekas, Panayiotis (Fig. 5)
PL i. 95–7; Bintliff 1977, 457–9, 478–80; GAC, 113 (C 19); MG 105–6 (E 16); LS ii. 298 (KK136); Banou 1996, 51–2; MFHDC, 49; Themos 2007, 456; AS, 535–548.

This is an isolated hillock, standing c. 15 m above the level of the surrounding fields, c. 400 m south of the main road to Skala, at the northwest corner of the plain. In 1956 the ruined farmhouse known as Panayiotis stood at its top. Although Mycenaean surface sherds
were found in 1956 over a wide area, c. 250 m by c. 180 m, this spread appears to be partly due to later cultivation. It is likely that actual Mycenaean buildings occupied mainly the upper area, c. 130 m by c. 110 m, which may have been enclosed by a circuit wall (PL i. 96, fig. 13 (sketch plan); cf. MFHDC, 49). Accordingly this site should probably be classified as a ‘village’ of medium size only. It certainly does not merit the measure of importance assigned to it by Bintliff (Bintliff 1977 and AS locc. cit.).

16A. Stephania: Lekas (site to southwest)
PL i. 97 (under ‘Lekas South’); MG, 106 (under E 16).

On a low rise in the ground, about 200 m southwest of Lekas, Panayiotis, traces of MH and LH III habitation were found in the vicinity of three large pits, in the sides of which some walls of mud brick and stone were revealed. The site itself was small, and the remains probably indicate a Mycenaean ‘farm’ or at most a ‘hamlet’.

17. Skala: Xeronisi
PL i. 95; GAC, 113–14 (C 20); MG, 106 (E 17); Banou 1996, 53; LS ii. 298 (KK137); Themos 2007, 456; AS, 534.

This was in 1956 a low mound, resembling an islet, about 2 km west-southwest of Skala and south of the main road. It stood only c. 5 m above the level of the former marsh. On its top was a ruined modern mud-brick hut, in whose walls and in the small area around it were several EH sherds and a few MH and LH III. The site had been mostly ploughed away. The evidence suggests no more than a ‘farm’.

17A. Skala: Ayios Ioannis
PL i. 95; GAC, 113–14 (under C 20); MG, 106 (under E 17); LS ii. 298 s.v. ‘Vasilopotamos, Skala’ (KK346); AS, 534.

About 3 km west of Skala, north of the main road and opposite Xeronisi (no. 17 above), was the small roadside eikonostasis of Ayios Ioannis. A few LH III and later sherds were
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found on the small terrace above, on the tip of a spur projecting from the barren hills north of the plain. Here also no more than a Mycenaean ‘farm’ is indicated.

18. Skala: Ayios Nikolaos (alias Souroukla)
Waterhouse 1956, 170 (s.v. ‘Skala’); PL i. 94–5; GAC, 114 (C 21); MG, 106 (E 18); Bintliff 1977, 456–7; Coulson 1992, 89–91, 93, with fig. 26; LS ii. 298 (KK138); Banou 1996, 53–4; AS, 2, 532–3; Themos 2007, 456–7.

This low hillock, with its ruined chapel of Ayios Nikolaos, is about a kilometre west of Skala. It lies between two of the channels leading from the springs of Vasilopotamos. In 1921 the site, then called Souroukla, was noted and cursorily examined by Blegen (Coulson 1992, loc. cit.; but cf. AS, 2 and Hope Simpson 2009, for Coulson’s mistaken identification of Souroukla with Ayios Stephanos). It was subsequently more fully surveyed by Waterhouse (loc. cit.) and by Hope Simpson in 1956 (PL i. loc. cit.). In 1956 it had been mostly cleared of stones and sherds which had been left in heaps on the edges of the site. In these heaps, in addition to some MH and Geometric sherds, there were several Mycenaean, including some characteristic LH IIIB (cf. Coulson 1992 for the probably LH IIIB sherds collected here by Blegen). If most of this site, c. 120 m east to west by c. 80 m (MG, loc. cit.), was occupied by the Mycenaean settlement, this would qualify as a small ‘village’.

19. Peristeri (formerly Tsasi): East
PL i. 92–4; GAC, 114 (C 22); MG, 106 (E 19); Bintliff 1977, 459; Spyropoulos 1981, 129; LS ii. 297 (KK132); Banou 1996, 54; Themos 2007, 460–3; AS, 535–6.

The Mycenaean chamber tomb excavated by Karachalios had been cut into the south slope of a low hill at the north edge of the plain and about 500 m east of Peristeri. Among the contents of the tomb were two jugs of LH IIIA2 or LH IIIB1 date (PL i. loc. cit., with references). A few LH III sherds were found in 1956 near the tomb, but EH sherds were more abundant both on the hill and in the area generally. It is likely that the settlement to which the tomb belonged was elsewhere, perhaps at Solakoi (19A below), less than a kilometre northwest.

19A. Peristeri: Solakoi

Themos records that in 1976–77, during the construction of a road from Skala to Grammousa, two chamber tombs were revealed at Solakoi (or ‘stous lakkous’) northwest of Peristeri. One of the tombs had been destroyed in the course of the construction, and the other had been excavated by Steinhauer subsequently. The finds, now in the Sparta Museum, include pottery said to range from LH IIA to the latest LH IIIIC (‘sub-Mycenaean’). A further chamber tomb was found later in the same area, on the west side of this new Skala–Grammousa road (Spyropoulos loc. cit.). Unfortunately, the part of the hillside into which this tomb had been dug was later levelled for the construction of a house. In 2004 a further tomb was found in the area. This, and some of the finds, are discussed and illustrated by Themos (loc. cit.); it also contained finds said to range from LH IIA to Sub-Mycenaean or early Protogeometric (although the Sub-Mycenaean or early Protogeometric was said to have been in a level above the fill which covered the interior). Full publication of the finds is promised, and this will presumably clarify the stratigraphy. Themos also reports Mycenaean sherds on the hills west of the area of the tomb. Although he does not give any details of these Mycenaean sherds or their number or distribution, the quantity and quality of the finds from the tombs suggests a ‘village’ of up to medium size here.

19B. Skala: Anemomylos
Themos 2007, 463–4; LS ii. 298 (KK347 ‘Panigyristra’).

The Anemomylos hill lies a kilometre northeast of Skala, east of the Eurotas, in the
dist, at the foot of the hill is the Byzantine church of Ayios Yeoryios or Panigyristra (Themos 2007, 463 n. 40). On the flat top of the hill (whose main axis is north to south) Themos found a mass of sherds and tile fragments, ranging from prehistoric to Hellenistic, including some EH and Mycenaean. This was perhaps a small Mycenaean ‘village’.

20. Vlachioti: Kokkinada
*PL* i. 92; *GAC*, 114 (C 23); *MG*, 106 (E 20); Bintliff 1977, 460; Banou 1996, 55; *AS* 535–6; *LS* ii. 298 (KK133).

About a kilometre northwest of Vlachioti, on the east side of the road to Myrtia, is a large hill with reddish soil, appropriately named Kokkinada. In 1956 some LH III sherds were found on its west slope. To the west of this hill, and on the east slope of a small knoll, two large pits (with fig trees growing in them) may have been the remains of chamber tombs. A small Mycenaean site, either a ‘farm’ or a ‘hamlet’, seems to be indicated.

20A. Vlachioti (Southeast)
*PL*, i. 92; *GAC*, 114 (under C 23); *MG*, 106 (under E 20); Bintliff 1977, 460; *LS* ii. 298 (under KK135); *AS*, 536.

A few LH III and classical sherds were found a short distance southwest of Vlachioti, near a farmhouse on the cliffs above the road to Asteri. This was probably only a Mycenaean ‘farm’.

21. Asteri: Karaousi (Fig. 6)
*PL* i. 89–92; Taylour 1972, 262–3; *GAC*, 114–15 (C 24); *MG*, 106 (E 21); Bintliff 1977, 460–1; *LS* ii. 298 (KK142); Banou 1996, 56; Banou 1999, 79; Banou 2000, 197–8; *AS*, 536–7, 595, 600, 602, 605; Themos 2007, 458, 469–70.

About 200 m north of Asteri, and east of the road to Vlachioti, is the hillock named Karaousi, which superficially resembles a Thessalian ‘high mound’ site (Fig. 6). Its almost flat upper surface is c. 160 m northwest to southeast by c. 100 m. Mycenaean sherds, ranging from LH I-II to LH IIIC Early, many of which were of fine quality, were in 1956 plentiful all over the hill and its slopes, with a concentration on the lower south slopes. The sherds were spread over an area c. 250 m by c. 150 m (cf. *PL* i. 90, fig. 10), but this wide distribution was evidently due mostly to massive erosion, as the trial excavations revealed (Taylour 1972, loc. cit.). Five small trenches were dug, but only one wall was revealed, and there was no discernible stratification. Most of the pottery found in the trials was Mycenaean, including some LH IIIC Early and one piece of LH IIIC Middle (*AS*, 602; Themos 2007, 458). In the northwest and west slopes of the hill c. 300 m east of Karaousi were four pits which seemed to be the remains of chamber tombs (*PL* i. fig. 10), described by Bintliff as ‘collapsed “caves”’ (Bintliff 1977, 460–1), and below them surface sherds of various periods including several LH II-III, the finest of which were from *alabastra* (*PL* i. 91 n. 120). The evidence is sufficient to establish the existence of a medium-size Mycenaean ‘village’ here, corresponding both in size and type to that estimated (above) for 16. Stephania: Lekas, Panayiotis.

22. Asteri: site to North
*PL* i. 92; *GAC*, 115 (C 25); *MG*, 106 (E 22); Bintliff 1977, 462; *LS* ii. 299 (but incorrectly listed as ‘b’ under KK143. Dragatsoula, Asteri); Banou 1996, 55–6; *AS*, 536.

About 2 km north of Asteri a small Mycenaean site was found, on one of several small and low undulating hills east of the road to Vlachioti. The diagnostic sherds were all LH III, of shapes and fabrics similar to those from Asteri: Karaousi, and including distinctive LH IIIB *krater* and *kylix* fragments. There were medieval (or later) building remains on the east slope. This site was selected by Cavanagh and Crouwel (1992, 80) for comparison with the Melathria settlement, near Skoura in the southeast part of the Sparta plain. The top surface of both sites was c. 100 m by c. 80 m, so that both would appear to belong to the same category of ‘hamlet’ (cf. *PL* ii. 173 n. 316).
23. Asteri: Dragatsoula

*PL* 1. 89, *GAC*, 115 (C 26); *MG*, 106 (E 23); Bintliff 1977, 461–2; *LS* ii. 299 (KK143); Banou 1996, 56–7; Banou 1999, 79; Themos 2007, 458, 469; AS, 536.

The flat-topped hillock named Dragatsoula is about 500 m southeast of Asteri, and south of the road to Kato Glykovrysi (formerly Vezani). It is above and c. 150 m east of the chapel and cemetery of Ayios Nikolaos, and on the northern edge of the plain. Although its top surface is about 140 m by 120 m, prehistoric sherds were not found over all of this area. EH were by far the most abundant. Only two MH and two LH III diagnostic sherds were found, probably indicating no more than a Mycenaean ‘farm’.

24. Ayios Efstratios (or Ayios Strategos) (Figs. 7–10)

Wace and Hasluck (1908–9), 161; *PL* i. 87–9, with sketch plan fig. 9; *GAC*, 115 (C 27); *MG*, 106 (E 24); Bintliff 1977, 462; *LS* ii. 299 (KK136, but with no mention of N, EH, MH finds); Banou 1996, 57–8; Themos 2007, 457, 469; AS, 536–7, 543, 595.

Despite the detailed publication (*PL* i. 87–9) of the data obtained in 1956 in the area of the chapel of Ayios Strategos (*alias* Ayios Efstratios), there has been considerable confusion concerning their quantity and quality and their extent and significance. The name of the chapel is itself uncertain. Wace and Hasluck knew it as ‘Hagios Strategos’, and this was adopted by Waterhouse and Hope Simpson (in *PL*), but in the form ‘Ayios Strategos’. In *GAC* and *MG* this was ‘corrected’ to ‘Ayios Efstratios’, and this ‘correction’ was adopted in *LS*. But Themos (loc. cit.) cites it as ‘Ai Strati’ (evidently a local abbreviation) or ‘Ayios Strategos’. It is clear that *all* these names, whether right or wrong, refer to the same chapel (accordingly, on *AS* fig. 13.2 there should be only *one* mark for the ‘classical’ site presumed here). But Ayios Strategos/Ayios Efstratios was not ‘also named Elitsa’ (*pace* *LS* ii loc. cit. and *AS*, 595).

In view of the confusion concerning the finds made in the vicinity of the chapel, we itemize them here:

1. On the hillock of the chapel (Figs. 7–8) the only diagnostic sherds were a few black glazed, which appeared to be late classical. These were the only signs of classical (and/or Hellenistic) activity observed in the area in 1956 (these, not the remains at Stou Manolaki c. 2.5 km to the north, are referred to in *MG* loc. cit., *pace* *LS* ii loc. cit.).
2. On the small hillock (marked 1. on PL i. fig. 9) south of the chapel the only diagnostic sherds were the Neolithic and EH found in 1956.

3. No remains were observed on the thin ridges north of the chapel, but there were a few coarse and undiagnostic sherds at the foot of one ridge, and, at the foot of another, vestiges of houses (presumed to be those seen by Wace and Hasluck) which appeared to be ‘relatively modern’ (marked 5. on PL i. fig. 9).

4. On the easternmost hillock (marked 2. on PI i. fig. 9), about a kilometer east-south-east of the chapel, was the house (or hut) of Kotsikas (Fig. 10). Here EH, MH and LH II-III sherds were found in 1956, in two places, one northwest of the house, the other to its east, within a total area of c. 100 m east to west by c. 70 m (as recorded in the field notebook and as published in MG loc. cit.). This 0.7 ha extent indicates a Mycenaean ‘hamlet’ or at most a small ‘village’. (cf. PL ii. 173 n. 316). And this is the only place in the area where evidence for a Mycenaean habitation site has been found.

5. At the place named Elitsa (marked 3. on PL i. fig. 9), about 500 m north of the house of Kotsikas, a structure was revealed in section by the cutting for a track (PL i. 89 with n. 111). The thin walls of the structure could not be measured, or even photographed, without prior cleaning (not allowed under the terms of the permit), but they appeared to incline inwards. The remains were interpreted as those of ‘a very small and poorly built tomb of tholos type’ (cf. MG loc. cit.). A Mycenaean date was inferred from the two LH III jug bases found nearby, whose shape resembled that of the jugs from the tomb east of Peristeri (no. 19 above). As Dickinson remarked, ‘The “tholos” at Ayios Efstratios, of which Bintliff makes much, is unlikely to be more than a stone-built equivalent of an ordinary chamber tomb’ (1992, 112–13). Bintliff’s description (AS, 536), ‘... the uppermost tip of the tholos appears out of a marly hillock’ is inconsistent with the observations made of this structure in 1956. The ground here was almost flat, and the structure had no protruding tip. Apparently the remains have now been destroyed (Banou 1996, 57), presumably by a further widening of the track. As Dickinson commented (1992, 113 n. 24), the tomb ‘fails to be mentioned’ in GAC. It was certainly not of sufficient significance to merit classification as a ‘royal tomb’ (AS, 543, etc.). This exaggeration of the importance of the Mycenaean remains found in the vicinity of Ayios Strategos/Efstratios in particular has led to the formulation of unsubstantiated hypotheses concerning the Mycenaean habitation of the Helos plain and the traditions relating to ancient Helos. A more appropriate assessment of the data for Mycenaean settlements in the plain is given in the summary below.
Fig. 7 – Ayios Efstratios from the south.

Fig. 8 – Ayios Efstratios from southeast.
Fig. 9 – To west from Ayios Efstratios.

Fig. 10 – Kotsikas from southeast.
Summary

1. The sizes of the Mycenaean settlements

The Mycenaean settlements discovered around the Helos plain were all on low hills, hillocks or low ‘rises’ in the ground, and most would have adjoined either sea or marsh. The cultivable land would not have been large, but agriculture would be supplemented by good pasture and by fish (including freshwater) and wild fowl. Obviously not all of the Mycenaean sites in and around the plain have been found, but their distribution pattern is already apparent. The estimates above of their sizes are mainly based on surface survey. But in 1956–1957 this was thorough and prolonged at every site found and was facilitated here by the erosion; and most of the ground surveyed was still being ploughed. According to these estimates, the Mycenaean settlements may be classified (provisionally) as follows:

Large ‘village’: only Ayios Stephanos.
21. Asteri: Karaousi
‘Farm’: 14A Ayios Stephanos: South; 15. Stephania: Lekas (south); 16A. Stephania: Lekas (site to southwest); 17. Skala: Xeronisi; 17A. Skala: Ayios Ioannis; 20A. Vlachioti (southeast); 23. Asteri: Dragatsoula; possibly also 19. Peristeri (east).

Allowing for the limitations inherent in surface survey, it is possible that some ‘farms’ may in reality have been ‘hamlets’; and some ‘hamlets’ may have been as large as small ‘villages’. But the overall mixture of mainly small sites with only a few larger is credible and corresponds well enough with the ‘carrying capacity’ of the land (as outlined by Bintliff 1977 and in AS, 527–550, as also by Wagstaff 1982).

2. The history of the Helos plain in Mycenaean times

LH I-IIIA1 – For the early Mycenaean periods we rely mainly on the data from the Ayios Stephanos excavations. The site, with its harbour and foreign connections, was obviously the most important in the plain up to the time of its partial destruction in LH IIIA2 Early. Of the other sites where early Mycenaean pottery has been found, 19A. Peristeri: Solakoi and 21. Asteri: Karaousi, and (apparently) 16. Stephania: Lekas, Panayiotis, were probably no more than small ‘villages’ at this time; and 24. Kotsikas, near Ayios Efstratios, would have been only a farm, or at most a hamlet.

In Laconia in general, as in neighbouring Messenia, the early Mycenaean periods seem to have been a time of separate and small ‘chiefdoms’, as evidenced in particular by Mansions 1 and 2 at the Menelaion, the Vapheio tholos tomb, and at Pellana the rock-cut chamber tombs imitating tholoi (AS, 576–597; SM I, 448–456 and passim). Evidence from Messenia includes Nichoria Unit IV-4 (the miniature ‘megaron’) and the tholos tombs at Myrsinochori and Mirou: Peristeria.
LH IIIA2–IIIB – In this ‘koine’ period of overall expansion in the Mycenaean world, Ayios Stephanos itself was apparently in decline. No house walls datable to these periods were found in the excavations, although this may be due in part to leveling operations, both for the LH III B2/C1 and LH III C Early buildings and later for the medieval structures.

Elsewhere in the plain, however, the evidence (mainly from survey) indicates an increase in population, as in the rest of Laconia (PL ii. 170–3). All of the known Mycenaean sites in the plain were inhabited at this time, and there were now ‘villages’ of medium size at Stephania: Lekas, Panayiotis, Asteri: Karaousi, and probably also at Peristeri: Solakoi. But none of these settlements were sufficiently large or significant to be considered as candidates for an ‘administrative centre’. Moreover, we need not assume the existence of such a centre at this time, since it is possible, if not probable, that the plain would have been now under the control of a major centre in the Sparta plain.

LH IIIB2–LH IIIC – The end of the LH IIIB2 period was the time of destructions at the main fortresses of the Argolid, and of Mansion 3 at the Menelaion (SM I, 452–4, 461). In the transitional LH IIIB2/C1 phase and in LH IIIC Early Ayios Stephanos was rebuilt on a large scale and possibly fortified. In Trial Trench VI on the east side a broad area of stones was interpreted as ‘foundations of a substantial structure’ and possibly part of a fortification wall (Taylour 1972, 249–51). These ‘foundations’ were associated with LH IIIB2/C1 and LH IIIC Early pottery (AS, 377, 386–7, 598, 599). But, as Taylour remarks, this small trench was not sufficient to confirm the existence of a Mycenaean fortification here. The ‘traces of rubble foundations of ancient walls’ observed in 1956 on the north and south sides of the hill (PL 1, 97 and sketch plan, fig. 14) were not subsequently explored by excavation.

It is reasonable to infer that the revival of Ayios Stephanos in LH IIIC Early was partly the work of refugees, survivors of the destructions and turmoil at the end of LH IIIB elsewhere in Laconia, where many sites were apparently not occupied in LH IIIC (PL ii, 172–3; AS, 600–2), and the Mycenaean settlement at the Menelaion was in decline (SM I loc. cit.). In the Helos plain LH IIIC Early pottery has been found only at Ayios Stephanos, Peristeri: Solakoi and Asteri: Karaousi (Mountjoy 1999, 213, cf. AS, 602). For LH IIIC Middle, after the abandonment at Ayios Stephanos, we have only the one sherd from Asteri: Karaousi (Mountjoy loc. cit.), although it is possible that Peristeri: Solakoi was also then still occupied, since Submycenaean was reported at two of the tombs (Themos 2007, 460–2). Evidently Ayios Stephanos is marked as the most important site in the plain in LH IIIC Early. It is, however, unlikely that it was an administrative centre for the plain at this time. Since there are so few signs of continuing occupation at former LH IIIB settlements in the plain, no such centre would be expected.

III. THE LOCATION OF HELOS IN HISTORICAL TIMES

Archaeological evidence

For the Protogeometric and Geometric periods in the Helos plain we have few data. At Asteri: Karaousi Late Protogeometric or early Geometric sherds were found with Mycenaean on the slope below the hollows in the ground interpreted as re-
mains of collapsed chamber tombs (*PL* i. 92, n. 121). But most of our evidence consists of the recent finds on the hill of Pyrgakia, about a kilometre southwest of Peristeri, near the east bank of Eurotas (Zavvou and Themos 1999, 187; Themos 2007, 462–3 with figs. 10–13). Finds from a pithos burial at the east foot of the hill included Geometric sherds. The excavations revealed that it had been dug into levels rich with Protogeometric and Geometric pottery; and Protogeometric, Geometric and Classical to Hellenistic sherds were found elsewhere on the hill. We await full publication of these finds, but they appear sufficient to establish the existence of a Protogeometric to Geometric ‘village’ here. This site, however, is far removed from the marshes to the east and west of the Eurotas delta, so that it would not be a likely candidate for the name Helos.

There is nothing to suggest more than a few sporadic minor settlements in the plain during these periods, c. 950 to c. 775 B.C. (Coulson 1985, 65, there classified as DA I–III). There is, moreover, also no evidence for any continuing habitation here during the period c. 1050 to 950 B.C., the time of the ‘hiatus’ in Laconia between the date calculated for the latest Mycenaean pottery and that assigned to the earliest Dark Age pottery which can be recognized (Coulson 1985, 63–6; Cartledge 1992; *AS*, 605; Demakopoulou 2009, esp. 103).

For the Archaic period we have as yet no archaeological data from the plain, although presumably by this time the Helos district would have been incorporated into the Spartan ‘core territory’ (Shipley 2000, 379, 388–9; Shipley 2004, 589).

The evidence for the Classical to Hellenistic periods in the plain is considerable, but very incomplete, since much of it comes only from the ‘extensive’ surface survey (mainly in 1956) which was aimed at the prehistoric. The only excavated site in the plain, Ayios Stephanos, was not settled during these periods (*AS*, 606). Most of the sites (listed below) where black glazed (BG) sherds were recorded in 1956 were on or near the Mycenaean sites. It was seldom possible to assign the sherds definitely to either Classical or Hellenistic. In most cases, therefore, we use the abbreviation C/H (= Classical and/or Hellenistic). The approximate positions of most of the sites are shown on *AS*, fig. 13.2 (on p. 533). Some corrections, however, must be made to this map, where many of the ‘Classical’ sites are of course located at, not beside, the Mycenaean sites (numbered on Fig. 2 here) where they were found. The locations are as follows:

About 1 km south-southwest of 14. Ayios Stephanos a few BG (C/H), together with tiles and near rock-cut foundations (*PL* i. 100).

A few BG (C/H) east of 16. Lekas, Panayiotis (*PL* i. 97).

Some BG (C/H) at 16A. Lekas, site to southwest (*PL* i. 97). *AS*, fig. 13.2, shows ‘Classical’ in error at 15. Lekas, south. Bintliff in *AS*, 534 and fig. 13.2, reports ‘Classical’ at 17. Xeronisi also.

A few BG (C/H) at 17A. Ayios Ioannis (*PL* i. 95).

Between Skala and Peristeri abundant remains, including C/H BG, tiles and column bases at Romaika, less than 1 km southwest of Peristeri (*PL* i. 94; Zavvou 1997, 208; Themos 2007, 463). Finds south of Peristeri also extend east of the road to Skala. Further to the southwest, C/H finds at Pyrgakia (see above) and at Ayia Paraskevi (Themos 2007, 462–3 and map on p. 471). At Pyrgakia, BG sherds and tiles and a burial chamber in the form of a shrine; at Ayia Paraskevi, limestone column bases and ancient walls below the church.

At 19B Anemomylos to the south, and about 1 km northeast of Skala, sherds from prehistoric to Hellenistic including C/H BG.
At 19. Peristeri, east, some BG (C/H) was found in the area (PL i. 94).
C/H BG sherds at three locations near Vlachioti (PL i. 92): (i) a low hill c. 100 m north of the village; (ii) a hill c. 200 m north of 20. Kokkinada; and (iii) at 20A, a short distance southeast of Vlachioti, above a cliff east of the road to Asteri.
Further south, at Tsirines, about halfway between Vlachioti and Asteri, BG sherds and fragments of tiles and columns (Themos 2007, 458).
At 21. Asteri: Karaousi some C/H BG sherds on the slope below the (assumed) chamber tombs (PL i. 92, and see §II above). Other ‘Classical’ sherds were observed by Bintliff ‘to the west of the road entering Asteri from the north’ (AS, 536). This location, however, is not marked on AS, fig. 13.2, whereas ‘Classical’ is marked (in error) on that map at the site of 22. Asteri, site to north (cf. AS, 536).
At 24. Ayios Efstratios (alias Ayios Strategos) and vicinity. The only C or H found were ‘some black glazed classical late (?) sherds’ on the hillock of the chapel itself (PL i. 89, and see §II above). These finds are marked (as Classical) twice on fig. 13.2, i.e. both as at Ayios Efstratios and as at Ayios Strategos.

Stou Manolaki

Themos has now provided further confirmation (Themos 2007, 459) of the previous reports (Le Puillon de Boblaye 1835, 94–5; Wace and Hasluck 1908–1909, 161–2; Hondius and Hondius-van Haeften 1919–21, 150; PL i. 103) of the concentration of Classical, Hellenistic and Roman architectural and ceramic remains at ‘Stou Manolaki’ c. 1.5 km east of Asteri, on the north side of the road to Makrynara (as shown on Fig. 2, and on AS fig. 13.2). Themos estimates the area covered by ancient remains as c. 50,000 m² (50 stremmata), indicating a large settlement. (However, on Themos’ map [2007, 471] Stou Manolaki is marked c. 2 km south of its true position and Ayios Strategos is marked c. 1 km east of its true position.) The site is on the slopes of a low ridge above the north edge of the plain. To the south and southeast the plain is here not marshy, and so would have been a suitable location for the hippodrome at Helos for the chariot races at the games in honour of Poseidon. IG V 1, 213, discussed below, includes Damonon’s victories in the chariot races at these games, together with those at Sparta and Thouria, early in the 4th century B.C. (for the date of the inscription, after 403 B.C., see Jeffery and Johnston 1990, 448). Bintliff (AS, 536) supposes that the name ‘Sto Manolaki’ (more properly ‘Stou Manolaki’), meaning ‘the property of Manolaki’, refers to ‘the whole area from Asteri to the ridge in the marly hills to the east’, i.e. the whole c. 1.5 km between the Stou Manolaki ridge and Asteri. But it seems very unlikely that the land belonging to one man (Manolaki), and before World War II, would have been so extensive. Bintliff (AS, 543) exaggerates the extent of ancient remains in the district, most of which would have been valuable agricultural land.

A harbour at Ayios Efstratios?

To support his hypothesis of an ancient port at Ayios Efstratios, Bintliff (AS, 536–7) categorizes the few Classical/Hellenistic sherds found there on the hillock of the chapel as ‘important finds’, and asserts that ‘Classical, Hellenistic and Roman material is abundant’ over all the area ‘from the hinterland of Asteri down to the coast at the southern end of the hills’, i.e. down to the vicinity of the chapel. This assumption, however, is
not supported by the survey results, which give no indications of port installations here or any signs of a settlement of even moderate size during these periods (and this former coastal area was meticulously searched in 1956). Between Asteri and Ayios Efstratios the only signs of ancient activity recorded are the reported (and not dated) ‘pithoi with human bones’ at Keramidionas, c. 600 m southeast of 23. Asteri: Dragatsoula (PL i. 89). The paucity of Classical to Hellenistic remains found in the district should serve to call in question the theory that Ayios Efstratios was a harbour of any importance at this time. The location was far from ideal. The shores, on two sides of a headland, would have been exposed to the winds (the prevailing winds here are the North and South, cf. Wagstaff 1982, 40–44, esp. Table 2–4), from which the low hillocks would have afforded little or no protection. No safe anchorage would have been available, since the sea here would have been too shallow. Boats would have had to be beached. These shores would have been no more than a landing place, for the local fishermen and for others in cases of necessity.

The ancient testimonia

We do not know exactly when the district of Helos was absorbed into the Spartan ‘core territory’ (Shipley 1977, 252–3; Shipley 2004, 574, 589). A supposed early settlement of Helos was said to have been dissolved by the Spartans (Hellanikos FGrH 4 F 188 ap. Harp. s.v. ἐλαιωτεύειν, cf. Shipley 2000, 383). Helos was certainly of sufficient importance to be given special mention (together with Asine) among the coastal territories raided by the Athenians under Nikias in 424 B.C. after their successful attack on Kythera (Thuc. iv. 54. 4). Thucydides’ story does not imply that the centre of Helos was then actually on the coast. Stou Manolaki, the location indicated by the archaeological evidence and consistent with Pausanias’ account (see below), would have been only c. 2.5 km from the coast, and easily accessible. Thucydides tells us that the Athenians ravaged the land (ἐδειξαν τὴν γῆν) for (only) about seven days (bivouacking at night). This would only allow for raids of short duration at each location (including the more remote Asine) and presumably not at places where any sizeable garrison would be expected (e.g. Gytheion, which would otherwise have been mentioned). If these raids took place in June, the Athenians might have been able to destroy some grain crops before they could be harvested, as Philip V did here later (Polyb. v. 19, 7–8).

That Helos was a cult site is attested by the inscription, IG V 1, 213, on the stele (early 4th century B.C.) celebrating the victories of Damonon and his son in the games at various Lakedaimonian festivals (Shipley 2004, 593 with references). These included Damonon’s victories in chariot races at Sparta, Helos and Thouria in the games of the Πολιοδοκία, a festival in honour of Poseidon Gaiaochos (for this epithet and his hippodrome at Sparta cf. Xen. Hell. vi. 5. 30); on the inscription the epithet appears as γαίαοχος. In the 4th century B.C. Helos was one location of helot settlement in Laconia (Theopompos FGrH 115 F 13 ap. Ath. vi. 272a). In 370/369 it may have been an unwalled polis (Xen. Hell. vi. 5. 32). Helos is omitted in Pseudo-Scylax’ Periplus (46), a work which was written during the reign of Philip II of Macedon (Shipley 2008, 282–4); the coastal itinerary passes from Gytheion via a ‘fort’, presumably Trinasos, past the river Eurotas directly to Boia, which it calls a polis. The omission of Helos
implies that it was inland and had no usable harbour. The Heliaia where Philip V encamped in 219/218 B.C. is described by Polybius as a τόπος (v. 19. 7–8), which implies that Helos was then ‘a nucleated or dispersed settlement that was not a polis’ (Shipley 2000, 383). Since Philip put it to the torch (αὐτὸν τὸ τόπον πάντα κατεσφυράλει) and destroyed the crops (Polyb. v. 19. 8), it was presumably at this time still Spartan territory (cf. Shipley 2000, 388 Table 1). Strabo describes Helos as a village (κόμη) in his day (viii. 5. 2); but by the time of Pausanias (2nd century A.D.) it was in ruins (iii. 22. 3).

The most crucial literary evidence for the location of the historic Helos is Pausanias’ account (ibid.) of his journey from Gytheion to Akriai. It is often assumed that Pausanias travelled to Akriai by land, visiting Helos on the way. But his account in fact shows that this journey was by sea, in the manner of the periplous around the Laconian Gulf, from Tainaron to Malea, as described by Strabo in the 1st century B.C. (viii. 5. 2). This was obviously the normal way, since going by land from Gytheion to Akriai would have involved either wading through the marshes or making a long detour around them.

The first observations made by Pausanias in the account of his journey are of Trinasos, named, as he says, after the three islets (modern Trinisa) which lie off this part of the mainland (... νησίδων, ἀλὰ ταύτη πρόκειται τῆς ἱππείρου). He notes that Trinasos was on the mainland (ἐν τῇ ἱππείρῳ), i.e. not on the islets, and on the left as you go and about 30 stades (= c. 6 km) from Gytheion (the actual distance from ancient Gytheion to Trinisa is c. 5 km). He believes that the walls of Trinasos were of a fort and not a city. Obviously Pausanias did not take the trouble to visit the place and verify this assumption; whereas, if he had taken the road (here the main road to Krokeai and Sparta), he could not have avoided Trinasos, since it was either on or beside this road. It was visited by Leake (TM 1, 232–3), who says ‘Not only the lower parts of the walls of the third order remain on every side except towards the sea, but in the centre are the foundations also of some buildings of the same kind of masonry’. Evidently, however, Pausanias could only have seen the walls at a time when they were still high enough to be visible from a distance. Apparently they no longer existed at the time of Forster’s visit (Forster 1906–1907, 22–3, cf. LS ii, 296 [JJ126]).

Pausanias next records that about 80 stades (= c. 16 km) further on (towards Akriai) were the remnants of the ruins of Helos (... προελθόντι δὲ ἀπὸ Τρινασοῦ στάδια ὡς οὐκ ὕδακτον τοῦ Ἐλους τὰ ἐρείπια ὑπόλοπα ἢν; the last six words are misconstrued by Jones in the Loeb edition as ‘I came to the ruins of Helos’). This is surely where and when Pausanias’ guide and/or his boatman would have pointed towards the ruins of Helos. And, according to the archaeological evidence (reviewed above), he would have pointed to the site at Stou Manolaki, and probably from opposite the Ayios Efstratios promontory (the actual distance from Trinisa to Ayios Efstratios is c. 12 km). From this point to Akriai the estimated distance given by Pausanias is 30 stades (= c. 6 km), whereas the actual distance would have been c. 4 km.

In view of the lack of means at the time for calculating distances travelled by sea, the differences between the estimates given by Pausanias and the actual distances are understandable. Perhaps, due partly to the slow pace of sea travel, Pausanias tended to exaggerate the distances. In one instance, his sea journey from Messa to Oitylos (Paus. iii. 25. 9–10), Pausanias estimates the distance as 150 stades (= c. 30 km), whereas in reality it would have been under 20 km (Frazer, Pausanias iii. 402; Forster 1906–1907, 243). Moreover, especially when travelling by sea,
Pausanias often mentions places near his route but which he obviously did not visit (e.g. Hippola, Paus. iii. 25.9). It is apparent that the ruins of Helos were not of sufficient interest to Pausanias to be worth a visit. His bare mention of them is in sharp contrast to his discussion of the sights of Akriai, including the sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods (Paus. iii. 22.4), now identified at Kastraki near Kokkinia (De La Genière 1989 and 1990, cf. LS ii, 308–9 [MM219]). In short, it appears that Pausanias never actually visited Helos (the journey from Gytheion to Akriai might itself have been enough for one day). But his account is nevertheless consistent with the archaeological evidence, also supporting a location of the centre of Helos on the east side of the plain, and most probably at Stou Manolaki. Pausanias’ testimony, that Helos was in ruins in his day, is apparently corroborated by the fact that it is not listed in Ptolemy’s itinerary (Geog. iii. 16. 10), written at about the same time in the 2nd century A.D.

IV. The traditions concerning ‘Homeric’ Helos

The traditions about Helos in prehistory are meagre. According to Strabo (viii. 5. 2) and Pausanias (iii. 20. 6), the town (πόλις, πόλισμα) was founded by Perseus’ son Helius (Pausanias calls him the youngest son). The implausibly named Ἐλος would have been invented to explain the name Helos (‘marsh’), which of course needed no explanation. According to Pausanias (iii. 2. 7), the town was inhabited by Achaean, i.e. the pre-Spartan and non-Dorian Greeks who lived in Laconia during the Late Bronze Age and who can be shown to have spoken an Arcado-Cypriot dialect (Buck 1955, 8). Games of Poseidon, called Ποσοιδανία, are known to have existed in classical Helos (see §III above, from IG V 1, 213, lines 9-10, Ποσοιδανία Δαμόνιονας ἐν Κατερίνη Κέλτει, from the victory-stele of Damonon erected at the temple of Athena on the acropolis of Sparta in the early 4th century B.C.). Conceivably these games have their roots in a cult practised at the original Helos; for Ποσοιδανία derives from the Arcadian form of the god’s name Ποσοιδάν. Whereas in other Doric dialects he was called Ποσειδάν, the form Ποσοιδανία was standard in Laconia, reflecting the speech of the previous population. The Helos of Homer lay on the sea; but the existence of a cult of Poseidon at the Helos of the classical period would not necessarily imply that the latter Helos was on the coast, since Poseidon Gaiachos was also worshipped at inland sites such as Thouria and Sparta itself (IG V 1, 213). A bronze fish, said to have been found between the Amyklaion and Vaphio village, bears the dedication Ποσοιδανίον (retrograde). It was dedicated in the 6th cent. B.C. (SEG xi. 692; Jeffery 1961, 200, no. 34; cf. Cartledge 1979, 96).

Nothing else is known of Helos until the Spartan conquest. Our earliest source for this conquest is a fragment of the 4th-century historian Ephorus, who states that Agis the son of Eurytheneis, i.e. the second king of Sparta in the Agiad line, took away the rights of the conquered Laconians; the men of Helos rebelled, but Agis captured Helos and enslaved them (Ephorus 70 F 117 Jacoby, in Strabo viii. 5. 4): Άγιος δὲ τῶν Εὐρυσθένεων ἀφελέσθη τὴν ἱστομίαν καὶ συντελεῖν προστάξαι τῇ Σάπτῃ, τοὺς μὲν ὄνων ἂλλης ὑπακούσα, τοὺς δὲ Ἐλείους τοὺς ἄχοιντας τὸ Ἐλος ποιησαμένους ἀπόστασιν κατὰ κράτος ἄλλων πολέμῳ καὶ κριθήναι δούλους ἐπὶ τακτοῖς τοῖς.

Two passages of Pausanias offer another version of this tradition. First, in his account of early Laconian history (iii. 2. 5–7) the traveller relates that, eight reigns after the overthrow of Orestes’ son Tisamenus, the Spartan king Teleclus defeated
the ‘perioecic’ towns of Amyclae, Pharis and Geranthrae (normally called Geronthrae, the present Geraki), which the Achaeans still held. The inhabitants of the latter two towns left the Peloponnese under a truce, but the Amyclaeans held out for a long time (the effect of their bravery was to be their incorporation into Sparta as its fifth ‘obe’). Pausanias also mentions the expulsion of the Achaeans from Geronthrae in another passage (iii. 22. 6, with Clavier’s emendation). Under Teleclus’ son Alcamenes the Spartans subdued Helos, ‘a town on the sea which the Achaeans held’, and defeated the Argives who had come to the aid of its inhabitants (ἀνέστησαν δὲ καὶ Ἐλος ἐπὶ θαλάσσῃ πόλισμα Ἀχαιῶν ἐχώντων καὶ Ἀργείως τοῖς ἔλλοισιν ἐμύνοντας μάχη νικῶσιν, Paus. iii. 2. 7). Pausanias’ verb ἀνέστησαν indicates that the Spartans displaced or drove out the inhabitants of Helos, and need not imply that settlement continued at the same site. Secondly, in a digression regarding the Spartan shrine of Eleusinian Demeter, Pausanias notes that the Spartans bring to the shrine on appointed days a wooden image of Kore, Demeter’s daughter, from Helos, which ‘was a city on the sea which Homer too has mentioned in his Catalogue of the Lacedaemonians’. After stating that it had been founded by Helius, Pausanias continues that ‘the Dorians reduced Helos by siege, and its inhabitants were the first to be public slaves of the Lacedaemonians’—whence the name ‘Helots’. He confirms that they were not Dorians by adding that the Messenians, who were conquered later, came to be called Helots even though they were Dorians (iii. 20. 6).

Pausanias’ picture is geographically consistent and historically plausible – a continuing Spartan expansion southwards to the coast. However, as Cartledge remarked (1979, 106–7), it is chronologically impossible that it occurred as late as Pausanias claims: such an expansion is more likely to have occurred in the tenth or ninth century than on the eve of the conquest of Messenia, which according to the traditional chronology was soon to follow. Pausanias’ chronology implies a huge gap, of the duration of eight kingships, between the destruction of the Mycenaean palaces at the end of LH IIIB2 (or soon after), if that were to be equated with the ‘return of the Heracleidae’, and the eventual conquest of Helos by the Spartans. The discrepancy between his account and that of Ephorus suggests that the dates of these events were simply unknown. But it does not follow that the broad outlines of the story told by Ephorus and Pausanias are false. All the evidence does indicate that the Helots of Laconia were a remnant of a pre-Dorian, Mycenaean population; a conquest is needed in order to explain the traces of their dialect, their subjection to the Spartans (so Cartledge 1979, 96), and place-names like the πόλις Ἀχαιῶν τῶν Παρακοπαρισσίων near Asopos (Paus. iii. 22. 9). It is even possible that in south Laconia the displacement of the Achaeans began only a generation or two after the destruction or abandonment of the Mycenaean centres in the Vale of Sparta (at the Menelaion this took place partly at the end of LH IIIB2 and partly in LH IIIC Early, cf. SM I, 460–2).

The archaeological record, although incomplete, and for most sites from surface survey only, indicates a marked contrast between a relative density of Mycenaean habitation along the edges of the Helos plain down to LH IIIC Early and an apparent scarcity of settlements in the later LH IIIC and Protogeometric to Geometric periods. As was noted in §II, Ayios Stephanos was the largest settlement in the region during

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3 There is no justification for a total rejection of the literary accounts here purely on the (alleged) grounds that the inconsistencies ‘... could reflect attempts to harmonise divergent traditions’ (Dickinson 2006, especially 50–4).
the Bronze Age, at least until its partial destruction in LH IIIA2 Early. During its period of relative eclipse in LH IIIA2-IIIB2, other sites such as Lekas, Peristeri and Asteri may well have overtaken it in size and importance. However, during its short-lived renaissance in LH IIIIC Early, when its size was augmented by arrivals from elsewhere, it reached the same dimensions as in its earlier heyday. After its final destruction, the largest (and indeed only) site in the region known to have had LH IIIIC Middle pottery is Asteri: Karaousi (AS, 600, 602). LH IIIIC Late is now reported from two of the tombs at Peristeri: Solakoi (Themos 2007, 460–3). The area of Peristeri is hidden from the sea by the cliffs at the mouth of the Eurotas gorge; the then coastline was probably c. 5 km away. Peristeri: Solakoi, fairly well protected from attack by sea, could perhaps have offered an adequate refuge for survivors of the destruction of Ayios Stephanos in LH IIIIC Early, if they did not sail away to Crete, Cyprus or elsewhere (AS, 605). But in Laconia it seems that more remote settlements inland like Phoiniki, or defensible larger settlements like Epidaurus Limera on the east coast, seem to have had the best chances of survival (AS, 600–2; Gallou 2009).

After LH IIIIC Late (Submycenaean), there was severe depopulation in most of Laconia, during the ‘hiatus’ from c. 1050 to c. 950 B.C. discussed in §III above (Coulson 1985, 63–6; Cartledge 1992; Demakopoulou 2009). For the succeeding Protogeometric and Geometric periods in the Helos plain we have only the few sherds (from tombs?) from Asteri: Karaousi, and Protogeometric and Geometric sherds from a tomb and a settlement at Peristeri: Pyrgakia. Whether there was any continuity from LH IIIIC to Protogeometric at any of these sites is unknown. It seems unlikely at Asteri, but would not be surprising at Peristeri, which is a more concealed location. But neither of these places would have been major centres at this time, and Peristeri would then have been far from the coast. There is accordingly no evidence for any major Early Iron Age centre in the plain, nor is it likely that such a centre then existed.

The settlement most likely to be reflected by the tradition of ‘Helos, a town by the sea’ in the Catalogue of Ships in Homer’s Iliad needs to have been both sufficiently large and sufficiently memorable to have given rise to such a tradition. Moreover, since it is evident that Homer has adopted (and adapted) the Catalogue from a previous poem (or poems) transmitted orally, this tradition must have preceded his own Iliad. It seems most improbable that a settlement of the requisite size and significance existed in the Helos plain in the Early Iron Age. Both the available archaeological evidence and the tradition itself strongly support the proposition that the ‘Homeric’ Helos reflects a Late Bronze Age centre, and that accordingly we should be looking for the most prominent Mycenaean settlement on the Late Bronze Age shoreline of the plain. The choice appears to have been narrowed down to three possibilities, in three separate parts of the plain:

(i) One possibility is the site of Peristeri: Solakoi (19A) near Skala, to the north of the central part of the plain. Of all the known Mycenaean sites in and around the plain, this is the only one where chamber-tombs have been found (Themos 2007, 460–2; the existence of such tombs at Asteri: Karaousi is only inferred). The extent of the settlement here is not known, but neither the sizes nor the contents of the tombs suggest more than an ordinary Mycenaean ‘village’ here, of medium size; and this would have been too far up the Eurotas from the Mycenaean coastline to qualify as a ‘town by the sea’. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the Eurotas would have been navigable up to this area, since so much of its water disappears into the limestone, to emerge at the springs of the Vasilopotamos (AS, 553) west of Skala near Skala: Ayios Nikolaos (18 on Fig. 2).
(ii) On the east side of the plain the largest site in this area, Asteri: Karaousi, was also only of medium size, although it was twice the size of the Mycenaean ‘hamlet’ at Kotsikas near Ayios Efstratios (the site apparently suggested by Bintliff, in AS, 543). The structure found at Elitsa, c. 500 m north of Kotsikas, was certainly not a ‘royal’ tomb, although it was inferred that it was a tomb of some kind. In the publication it was characterized as ‘a very small and poorly built tomb of tholos type’ (see §II above). If Mycenaean, it could have been the stone-built equivalent of a small chamber-tomb. It was not excavated, but was observed by survey alone.

(iii) The only real candidate for ‘Homeric’ Helos remains Ayios Stephanos, at the southwest edge of the plain. It is true that Ayios Stephanos was in severe decline during the nadir of its occupation in LH IIIA2-IIIB2; other sites were probably larger at that time, notably Asteri: Karaousi and Peristeri: Solakoi. But for the rest of the Bronze Age, down to the end of LH IIIC Early, Ayios Stephanos was definitely the largest site on the margins of the Helos plain, and must also have been the best harbour (AS, 552–4). Neither Asteri: Karaousi nor Peristeri: Solakoi seems likely to have had the walls that would have inspired traditions of a siege by the Dorians, whereas Ayios Stephanos may well have had such fortifications, especially in LH IIIC Early, once the settlement had been rebuilt and had regained its former size. The traditions about the Helos recalled by Homer would have developed from folk memories of this large and generally prosperous Mycenaean settlement and of the successful attack on it in LH IIIC Early, as shown by the excavations (for the evidence see AS, 605). After its abandonment, there may no longer have been any site of comparable size in the region, since there are few finds of the later LH IIIC phases in Laconia (AS, 600–5). Nor would we expect any immediate emergence of a main centre in the Helos plain either in or shortly after the ‘Dark Age’. The historic Helos, most probably at Stou Manolaki (see §III above), is unlikely to have been prominent until the 6th century B.C. at earliest.

APPENDIX

THE PRE-MODERN ROADS IN THE HELOS PLAIN AND VICINITY

The evidence for Archaic to Byzantine routes and bridges in and around the Sparta plain has been discussed by members of the British School (Armstrong et al. 1992) in connection with the Laconia Survey. Their study, however, does not include detailed review of the remains of ancient roads for wheeled traffic in Laconia south of the Sparta plain.

The remains of ancient roads in the area

Our evidence comes mainly from Leake’s account (TM i. Chapter VI) of his journey from Mistra to Monemvasia via Helos in March 1805 (cf. Wagstaff 1992). On March 25, after passing Sklavochori (modern Amyklai) and reaching the Eurotas, Leake first followed the west bank of the river (for about 6 km) and then crossed to the east bank at the Vasiló–Perama ford, near the foot of Mt. Lykovouni (see the map of Leake’s journey in Laconia in 1805 and 1806, Wagstaff 1992, 282 fig. 77). After following the east bank for over 10 km southeast of the ford, Leake arrived at a spot near Grammousa (now Ambelochori) ‘where the modern road passed over a flat surface of rock in which the ruts of chariot wheels are still remaining for a distance of thirty or forty paces’ (Leake TM i. 194). To the south of this point, on the descent to the south towards Tsasi (now Peristeri), Leake recorded ‘similar tracks of wheels’, winding ‘in curves first to the right and then to the left, for the purpose of
Fig. 11 – Road between Grammousa and Peristeri.

(a) from northwest
(b) detail
Fig. 12 – Deep wheel ruts between Grammousa and Peristeri, from north.

Fig. 13 – Curving wheel ruts between Grammousa and Philisi, from southeast.
easing the descent; in some places there are marks of two to three ruts close together’. In 1956 these traces were followed for ‘practically the whole distance between Grammousa and Tsasi’ (PL i. 85 n. 73; LS ii. 297 [KK341]). The wheel ruts were from c. 0.10 m to 0.20 m wide (at the top), usually about 0.05 m deep, and c. 1.20 m apart (inner edge to inner edge), as Leake says, 'four feet two inches asunder and two inches deep'. We illustrate here (Fig. 11) the stretch c. 100 m long ('not less than 100 paces') further to the south, c. 1.5 km north of Tsasi, where the ancient road is 'ascending a hill to Tsasi' (Leake, TM i. 195). About 500 m north of this, and c. 2 km south of Grammousa, the wheel ruts at one point (Fig. 12) were c. 0.30 m deep (but here only c. 0.06 m wide at the bottom of the ruts). According to Themos, these remains of the ancient road between Grammousa and Tsasi (Peristeri) have now been destroyed (presumably only in part) by recent agriculture (Themos 2007, 458 n. 16). It is unfortunate that in 1956 there were neither the means nor the time to attempt a fuller record. Nevertheless, Leake's observations, and his measurements, were confirmed.

At the west edge of Peristeri, on the way to Philisi, and near the northern edge of the Helos plain, the ancient road appears to have divided (cf. Wace and Hasluck 1908–9, 162), one branch running southwest towards Skala and the other branch curving southeast towards Vlachioti (the curving outer wheel rut is seen in Fig. 13 from the southeast). Further traces of this eastern branch have now been recorded by Themos. Ancient wheel ruts (now covered over) were observed, by many inhabitants of Vlachioti, on the flat ground above the church of Zoodochos Piyi, southeast of the village (Themos 2007, 457–8), and oriented towards Asteri. To the east of Asteri (then Priniko) Leake saw, and transcribed, a Roman milestone (IG V i. 1109 = Leake, TM i. no. 22), presumed to have been on the road from Gytheion to Asopos shown in the Peutinger Table (Wace and Hasluck 1908–9, 162; Bölte 1929, 1342; Themos 2007, 458 n.16; cf. Pritchett 1980, 239 Fig. 11 and 254–5, but with no mention of the milestone). Leake's account (TM i. 199) reads:

'March 26. This morning, at a quarter of an hour beyond Priniko, I meet with an inscribed column, which was uncovered by the plough not long since in a field at the foot of the heights on the left of our road. The inscription contains the names of the Emperors Constantine, Valentinian, Valens and Constans. The marsh is a little distance on the right.'

(For the route see Wagstaff 1992, 282 fig. 77.) Subsequently Leake took the pass (to the Molaoi plain) between the two peaks of 'the mountains of Beziane' (i.e. Mt. Kourkoula). After describing the cave under its (higher) northern peak, he continues (TM i. 200):

'A little under the cave I see some tracks of ancient wheels in the rock, of the same dimensions as those I measured yesterday.'

The only other traces of ancient roads reported in the Helos plain itself are the wheel tracks seen in 1956 c. 1200 m southwest of Ayios Stephanos, 'worn in the rock, running north to south, with a gauge of the same dimensions as those between Tsasi and Grammousa ...' (PL i. 100). No photograph was taken of these ruts in 1956, but it was noted that they were shallow and of small extent. They may have been on or near the line of the ancient 'straight' (ευθεία) road from Sparta to Gytheion via Krokeai (Paus. iii. 21. 4–5, cf. iii. 20. 3), if this was via Trinasos.

Remains of ancient roads near Epidauros Limera

On his return from Monemvasia on the next day, March 27, 1805, Leake investigated 'Palea Monemvasia' (i.e. Epidauros Limera), and south of the acropolis he discovered further ancient wheel tracks (TM i. 216–7):

'From the ruins I descend, on the south side, into the ravine of a torrent, which is cultivated with corn, and bordered by low rocks. A sloping road, about 100 yards in length, conducts into it down the side of the hill; the road is cut out of the rock, is just wide enough for a car, and still preserves some traces of wheels.'
In 1957 these traces were followed for over 100 m on the north side of the ravine north of the Ayia Triadha chapel and in the vicinity of the main clusters of Mycenaean chamber tombs (PL ii. 136 n. 52 and fig. 10; Gallou 2009, 85). Although the wheel ruts were here very faint and shallow, it was established that their gauge was ‘the same as that of the stretch between Tsasi and Grammousa’ (PL ii. loc. cit.). This section of ancient road did not in fact lead into the ravine, but runs gently downhill from northwest to southeast, towards the shore less than a kilometre south of Epidaurus Limera. Also in 1957, a further section was observed c. 600 m to the northwest, marked by faint traces of wheel ruts of the same gauge, and again running northwest to southeast, skirting the hill slope west of Epidaurus Limera. It is not certain that the two sections are parts of the same ancient road; but they were both in the same (early modern?) track which winds down the slope between them and then crosses the ravine to Ayia Triadha. South of the northwest section there was a ruined rectangular structure (marked ‘ruin’ on PL ii. fig. 10) which appeared to be Roman or later, although some Classical and/or Hellenistic sherds were observed in the vicinity.

Commentary

1. The roads

The physical evidence for ancient wheeled traffic in southern Laconia, reviewed above, clearly indicates an important road between Sparta and Monemvasia. The depth of the ruts in the sections between Grammousa and Peristeri, together with the provisions for easing the descent, imply heavy loads and very probably four-wheeled carts with iron-shod wheels. As Pritchett says, ‘we seem to have in this route leading from Sparta to Epidaurus Limera the longest stretch yet identified of a road having wheel-ruts with a uniform gauge’ (Pritchett 1980, 179). But the main port of Sparta in the classical to Roman periods was Gytheion. And the main road from Sparta to Gytheion in Roman times was via Krokeai (Paus. iii. 21. 4–5) and (probably) Trinasos. The Peutinger Table is presumed to be a copy of the official map of the Roman roads used by the Imperial Post (the cursus publicus). It shows the main stations along the roads and the distances between these stations. In the Greek section (discussed by Pritchett 1980, 197–288) the distance between Sparta and Gytheion (the ‘Cytmon’ of the scribe) is shown as 30 Roman miles, equivalent to the 240 stades recorded by Strabo (viii. 5. 2). The distance from Gytheion to Asopus is shown as 27 miles (implying ‘a considerable detour inland to circumvent the marshes’, AS, 606), and that from Asopus to Boiai as 25 miles. The Peutinger Table shows no road to Epidaurus Limera.

We have no means of determining when the roads between Sparta and Monemvasia and southwest of Ayios Stephanos, as evidenced by the wheel ruts, were first used. But we can attempt to establish the time(s) of the maximum use(s) of these roads from other evidence for the transportation on these routes of heavy goods, especially stone and liquids.

Imports of heavy goods into Laconia would not have been numerous or frequent at any time within the Geometric to Hellenistic periods. Laconia did not lack stone or timber for construction. The Spartans may have needed to import additional agricultural products; but the necessary supplements would have come from neighbouring Messenia, and by other routes (Armstrong et al. 1992 passim).

2. The export of Laconian stone

There is no evidence for any large-scale export of stone from Laconia until the Roman period, when decorative stone (marble etc.) was exported from various Laconian quarries (Kokkorou-Alevras et al. 2009, with references). These included the very big (εὑ offence data) one on Mt. Taigetos which Strabo mentions as having been recently opened (viii. 5. 7), and which was presumably one of the quarries of Sochas (Kokkorou-Alevras et al. 169 with n. 2). The stone for export from the Sochas quarries would have been conveyed to Gytheion, presumably via the Xerokambi bridge, which is probably of the 1st century B.C. or 1st century A.D. (Höper 1981; Armstrong et al. 1992, 297, 305; LS i. 152, Ill. 5.1, 245; LS ii. 293 [GG107]).
The *lapis lacedaemonius* quarries near Krokeai were greatly exploited in Roman imperial times, especially in the 1st century A.D., and again in the early Byzantine period, mainly in the 6th and 7th centuries (Warren 1992, 295–6). But the stone would probably not have been transported in large amounts at any one time during these periods, since it was used in relatively small quantities, usually in combination with other decorative materials (Warren loc. cit.). It would therefore be unlikely that the wheel ruts southwest of Ayios Stephanos (see above) were caused by the conveying of *lapis lacedaemonius* to the coast here. Pack-animals may have sufficed to take the stone to Gytheion for export, or to some other point of exit, for which Paizoulia (39 on Fig. 2; cf. *PL* i. 105) has been suggested (AS, 606), i.e. the beach there at Glyphada. Pieces of the stone have been found at Paizoulia (Banou 1996, 49), and there was a Roman or early Byzantine building of some size, with 'tile bonding courses', at the east foot of the hill (*PL* i. loc. cit.). Classical, Hellenistic and Roman sherds are abundant in the area, and more Roman or Early Byzantine house remains in the sand on the beach include one c. 38 m by c. 22 m, also containing tile or brick and mortar, and another structure incorporating parts of two vaults (Forster 1906–7, 230). A less likely exit point is Trinisa, where Kraft discovered a structure only c. 0.50 m under the sea, near the shore (Kraft 1992, 99–102). Bintliff (AS, 537–8, cf. 606) found late Roman ’combed ware’ sherds in its chambers; but he exaggerates the suitability of Trinisa as a ‘harbour’.

*Lapis lacedaemonius* was again in use in medieval times, from the 11th to 13th centuries and ’from Trebizond in Anatolia via San Marco in Venice to Westminster Abbey in London’ (AS, 606, citing Warren 1992, 296). But it has been argued that there does not appear to be evidence for exploitation of the quarries themselves in the medieval period: ‘… the scores of Medieval Roman and Venetian pavements were simply reusing and cutting fine stones from earlier Roman buildings …’ (Warren, loc. cit., citing Gnoli 1971, 43–62). Yet the sheer volume and number of pieces of *lapis lacedaemonius* used in the 13th-century Norman churches at Palermo, where Byzantine architects were brought in, surely suggests renewed quarrying (R. Janko, personal observation). However, if the stone was quarried in medieval times, pack–animals would probably have been sufficient to take the stone to the shore, since *lapis lacedaemonius* occurs naturally in pieces of no very great size.

3. Medieval routes from Sparta to Skala (Medieval Helos or Elos)

’By the reign of Basil I (867–76), Elos, an alternative name for Skala in the Byzantine and Ottoman periods, had replaced Gytheion as the principal port of Laconia’ (Armstrong 2002, 341–3; cf. Wagstaff 1982, 58–9 and AS, 606–9 with references for Medieval Helos). Under Basil I, Elos was the name of a naval base. After the ecclesiastical reorganization by Leo VI (839–912) Elos was the name of a diocese, whose bishop was mentioned as late as 1452 (Wagstaff, loc. cit.). Skala's name, 'landing place' (literally 'staircase' or 'steps'), was appropriate, since it lay at the head of two navigable rivers, the Eurotas (although only the part south of Skala) and the Vasilopotamos. Sparta and (after 1204) Mystras were connected with Skala by road only, via Daphni and Levetsova (modern Krokeai), since the Eurotas was not navigable north of Skala. Other attested medieval routes (discussed in Armstrong 2002, loc. cit., with map, Ill. 7.1) include that from the Chrysapha basin to Skala via Goritsa, Zoupaina, Geraki and Grammousa. The last part of this route, the section from Grammousa to Peristeri and Skala, coincides with the section of road observed by Leake (discussed and illustrated above) which is proved to have been used by wheeled traffic.

4. The export of Laconian olive oil by Venetian merchants

In 1082 the emperor Alexios I Komnenos proclaimed an edict, rewarding the Venetians for their military assistance against the Normans by giving them a part of the harbour of Constantinople, annual payments by the state to Venetian churches, and tax-free trading rights. This was apparently part of a general reform which gave trading concessions to Italian maritime republics amounting to ‘a medieval version of free trade’ (Armstrong 2002,
Ayios Stephanos in southern Laconia and the locations of ancient Helos

361–4; Armstrong 2009, 313–4). Prior to 1082, Byzantine trade had been completely under state control, and the activities of foreign traders had been strictly regulated.

Although Laconian olive production was already renowned, it appears that Laconian olive oil was not exported on a commercial scale until the arrival of the Venetians. The stimulus of their trading ventures in this Komnenian era (Middle Byzantine III, 1081–1204) is reflected not only by the prosperity of Sparta in the 12th century (Armstrong 2009, 317–8) but also that of the territory covered by the British School’s Laconia Survey. Here also there was now a dramatic rise in prosperity, shown by numerous ‘new’ settlements and a remarkable increase in agricultural activity (Armstrong 2002, 361–8; Armstrong 2009, 319–20).

Alexandria was now a major destination for Laconian olive oil, as was northern Italy. In addition, some was exported to Constantinople itself. Armstrong discusses two of the extant Venetian commenda contracts (trade contracts valid only for the duration of a sea-voyage), one dated 1150 and the other 1151, both for the conveyance of Laconian olive oil to Constantinople (Armstrong 2009, esp. 314–7).

We have no direct evidence as to where the olives were gathered or where they were processed. The most likely scenario is that they would be taken to a centre or centres (including Sparta) for pressing and that the oil would then be transported to the coast, mainly by road. Remains of four medieval olive presses have been found at Sparta itself, including one, probably of the 12th century, whose monolithic stone base was found in situ, together with two small pithoi, one inside the other, used to collect the pressed oil (Bakourou 2009, 307–10 with references, cf. Armstrong 2009, 316–8). We know of no other certainly medieval olive presses in Laconia (none were found in the Laconia Survey); but it is unlikely that Sparta was the only place where the oil for export was extracted. The presses themselves were obviously neither large nor sophisticated. The Venetians, who were probably responsible for all exports of Laconian olive oil at this time, would surely here had to tap the resources of several districts in Laconia to fill their quotas. There is no reason to believe that all of the oil came from regions west of the Eurotas. Suitable olive groves surely existed east of the river also, to the south of Chrysapha for instance, and at Goritsa, Geraki and Vrondama, among other fertile ‘pockets’.

The pressed oil was probably put into wooden barrels (Armstrong 2009, 316–7) and conveyed to the coast by four-wheeled carts (drawn by oxen?), such as those seen by Leake at Mistra carrying barrels of olive oil (TM i, 135). Although the main road from Sparta to Skala was then evidently via Daphni and Levetsova, the medieval route between Sparta and Skala where wheel ruts have been found is that via Grammousa and Peristeri. By either or both of these routes the oil would arrive at or near Skala. From there it could be carried either to the coast south of Skala (no doubt by boat along the Vasilopotamos or the Eurotas) if destined for Alexandria or the west, or, if destined for Constantinople, by the road to the southeast (discussed above), also attested by wheel ruts, via Vlachioti, Asteri and Molaoi, to the coast north of Monemvasia. It would then be taken by small boat to a big ship anchored off the shore (cf. Armstrong 2009, 316 for the ‘vast’ size of these trading ships). Monemvasia would have been the safest exit point for exports to Constantinople, since an exit from the coast south of Skala would have necessitated going round Cape Malea, where the seas have always had an infamous reputation (see AS, 587):

Κάβο Μαλιά, Κάβο Μαλιά
Βοήθεια Χριστί και Παναγιόν
‘Cape Malea, Cape Malea! 
Help us Christ and the Virgin.’

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ABBREVIATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Special abbreviations


*SAL* = W.G. Cavanagh, C. Gallou and M. Georgiadis (eds.), *Sparta and Laconia from prehistory to pre-modern*, BSA Studies 16 (London 2009).


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