

## Bones for Orestes

*George Huxley*

WHEN THE PYTHIA had ordered the Spartans to search for the bones of Orestes, they were not able to find them. Further enquiry at Delphi brought the instruction to look at Tegea in Arkadia “in a level place where two winds puff under mighty compulsion, blow is countered by blow, and woe lies on woe.” There the son of Agamemnon was buried, and if they were to carry off his bones, they would be superior to Tegea.<sup>1</sup> In due course the Spartan Lichas, having been told by a smith at Tegea of large bones found by him in a coffin during the digging of a well, conjectured that they were the relics indicated by the Pythia, the smithy being the place described in her oracle. Pretending to be an exile from Sparta, he came back to Tegea, hired the yard where the well had been dug and carried the bones off to Sparta (Hdt. 1.67.5–68.6).

Herodotos believed that the bones had been discovered at Tegea since he used words *ἐν Τεγέῃ* in 1.68.1 and *ἐς Τεγέην* in 1.68.6. The legendary Arkadian associations of Orestes are, however, much closer with Oresteion (or Oresthasion) than with Tegea itself. There Artemis defended him from the Furies according to Pherekydes (*FGrHist* 3 F 155a,b); Euripides (*Orestes* 1645) tells how Orestes spent a year at Oresteion (which, like Pherekydes, the poet placed in Parrhasia) before journeying to Athens; and according to Asklepiades (12 F 45) and pseudo-Apollodoros (*Epit.* 6.28, p.226 Wagner), Orestes died at Oresteion from a snakebite. Pausanias, who included the πόλις Oresthasion in Mainalia (8.21.3), also stated that Oresthasion was renamed Oresteion after Orestes son of Agamemnon

<sup>1</sup> Hdt. 1.67.2–4. In the oracle Tegea is called ‘a certain Tegea in Arkadia’: the unusual expression may be intended to distinguish the Arkadian Tegea from the Cretan; the latter is said to have been founded by Talthybios (Steph.Byz. *s.v.* Τεγέα). The Pythia said that Sparta, having appropriated Orestes, would become the *ἐπιτάρροθος* of Tegea. LSJ render the word ‘master, lord’, but J. E. Powell’s ‘helpmate’ is closer to the usual meaning (*A Lexicon to Herodotus s.v.*). So the Pythia did not envisage outright conquest of Tegea by Sparta, as Parke and Wormell recognized (*The Delphic Oracle* I<sup>2</sup> [Oxford 1956] 96).

(8.3.2). The eponymous hero of Oresthasion had been Orestheus.<sup>2</sup> But he gave way to Orestes, whose death was placed in the territory of Oresthasion (or Oresteion). Accordingly, as Professor Forrest has argued,<sup>3</sup> it is at or near Oresthasion rather than at Tegea itself that the finding of the bones of Orestes (in the mid-sixth century B.C.) is best placed; at the time of the discovery Oresthasion would have been in the Tegeate domain.

The yielding of Orestheus son of the Arkadian Lykaon to Orestes nephew of the Spartan Menelaos was politically advantageous to the Spartans, who needed easy access to their lands in Stenyklaros. Their route led by way of the Upper Eurotas and beside the left bank of the Alpheios, uncomfortably close to Oresthasion, the territory of Orestes but formerly of Orestheus.

When the bones had been taken, Tegea was worsted in the struggle, and a treaty was made with the Spartans. An inscribed excerpt from the treaty was set up jointly by the two parties on a stele beside the Alpheios to serve notice (in particular to fugitive Messenians) that the Tegeates had undertaken “to expel Messenians from the territory and not to make them citizens of Tegea.”<sup>4</sup> The Alpheios flows closest to Stenyklaros when it passes through the Megalopolis plain, and the stele could well have been set up beside the river near Oresthasion; but a position further upstream and closer to Tegea is also possible, since the terms of the treaty may have required Tegea to give up all claims to the Megalopolis plain. The headwaters of the Alpheios continued to mark the boundary between Sparta and Tegea even in the time of Pausanias, who believed that the river, having gone underground in the plain of Tegea, reemerged at Asea and later mingled its waters with the Eurotas.<sup>5</sup>

To the reasons for placing the discovery of the bones at Oresthasion rather than at Tegea can be added a geological argument. Professors Parke and Wormell suggested that large bones of heroic size fit for

<sup>2</sup> Paus. 8.3.1 (2.261, 16 and 17 Spiro) calls him Ὀρεσθεύς. J. Hejnic prefers ‘Oresthasius’ (*Pausanias the Perieget and the Archaic History of Arcadia* [Prague 1961] 40). At Hdt. 9.11.2 the manuscripts vary between ἐν Ὀρεσθείῳ and ἐν Ὀρεσλείῳ.

<sup>3</sup> *A History of Sparta* (London 1968) 74.

<sup>4</sup> Arist. fr.592 Rose. For the meaning of the expression Μεσσηνίους ἐκβαλεῖν ἐκ τῆς χώρας καὶ μὴ ἐξεῖναι χρηστοὺς ποιεῖν, see F. Jacoby, *Abhandlungen zur griechischen Geschichtschreibung*, ed. H. Bloch (Leiden 1956) 342–43.

<sup>5</sup> 8.54.1–2, discussed by W. K. Pritchett, *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography* 1 (Berkeley 1965) 125.

Orestes are likely to have been remains of a prehistoric monster.<sup>6</sup> The shoulder-bone of Pelops (perhaps a cetacean's scapula) preserved at Olympia was a comparable, if geologically less ancient, relic also authenticated by Delphi.<sup>7</sup> It happens that the Megalopolis basin is well furnished with remains of large extinct animals. In the Pleistocene period the basin was a shallow lake on whose shores various large creatures lived during alternating cold and warm phases of the climate. When the waters of the lake drained away from the basin through the pass of Karytaina, the vegetation was no longer adequate to support such animals. So they disappeared; but their bones were preserved underground, to be revealed gradually by the eroding Alpheios and its tributaries. Amongst the remains found in the basin are fossilized bones of early elephants, mammoths, hippopotami and Bovidae. The first discovery of large bones hereabouts in modern times was made in 1902 by a woodcutter near Isioma, at the northwestern extremity of the basin, in a watercourse at the foot of Mount Lykaion. In the same year excavations by Professor Skouphos yielded five tons of fossilized bones. Amongst remains recovered from the western bank of the Alpheios are bones of Cervidae and *Equus Abeli*.<sup>8</sup> That fossilized remains had been discovered in the Megalopolis basin in antiquity is shown by Pausanias, who reported that large bones were preserved at Megale Polis; they were said to come from a giant who had helped Hoplodamos to protect Rhea when Zeus was born to her on Mount Lykaion (8.32.5 and 8.36.2-3). The geological evidence thus supports the suggestion that 'the bones of Orestes' were found at Oresthasion or Oresteion in the Megalopolis basin, not at Tegea.

A sequence of events can now be suggested. Large bones of Pleistocene date were discovered at Oresthasion. They were given respectful burial in a seven-cubit-long coffin fit for a hero. This may have happened as early as the late eighth century, when the cult of heroic relics began in the Peloponnese.<sup>9</sup> A smith digging a well at Oresthasion found the reburied bones in the mid-sixth century when

<sup>6</sup> *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.1).

<sup>7</sup> Paus. 5.13.4-6; see also H. W. Parke in *Hermathena* 48 (1933) 153-62.

<sup>8</sup> J. K. Melentis in *Ιστορία του Έλληνικού Έθνους* I (Athens 1970) 15-17; also *op.cit.* 382 (bibliography of Melentis' numerous studies of Pleistocene remains, including finds made by Skouphos in 1902 in the Megalopolis basin, in *Annales géologiques des pays helléniques* between 1960 and 1969).

<sup>9</sup> Compare J. N. Coldstream, "Hero-cults in the Age of Homer," *JHS* 96 (1976) 8-17.

Anaxandridas and Ariston were kings of Sparta, and news of the discovery reached Delphi. Lichas found the bones and took them to Sparta, as Herodotos described; the historian, however, believed the smithy to have been at Tegea, though in fact the bones were found *λευρῶ ἐνὶ χώρῳ* at Oresthasion, which lay in Tegeate territory at the time.

Having appropriated the bones, the Spartans possessed a talisman entitling them, in their own opinion at least, to dominance in the entire Peloponnese. The placing of Agamemnon's palace in Sparta instead of at Mycenae was another aspect of the same mythological campaign.<sup>10</sup> The Tegeates claimed, according to Pausanias (8.54.4), that the tomb from which the bones of Orestes were taken lay beside the road from Tegea to Thyrea; but this would be a later development of the story, put about after Tegea had lost Oresthasion. Not even the Tegeates could seriously claim to have the real bones of Orestes after the success of Lichas. The 'bones of Arkas' at Mainalos would have been a reassuring substitute—at least until they were removed to Mantinea on the command of Delphi (Paus. 8.9.3); but the winners of the war, real and mythological, for Oresthasion were the Spartans. There, in the Megalopolis plain, the huge 'bones of Orestes' had been reburied in a seven-cubit coffin, and there in the time of kings Anaxandridas and Ariston, Lichas the alert Spartan had dug them up.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stesichoros fr.216 Page.

<sup>11</sup> I am obliged to Professor W. G. Forrest for helpful conversations.