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SPARTAN IDENTITY AND ORESTES’ “REPATRIATION”

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Abstract - This study will examine how the transferal of Orestes’ bones from Tegea to Sparta led to the appropriation of an identity which is traced back to the pre-Doric past and will discuss the significance it held for the Spartans and their city. Much of the hero’s power resided in the bones; for that reason it was essential that a city or sanctuary have possession of the bones. The aim of this study is to make evident that the “repatriation” of Orestes was not associated exclusively with the external policy of the city.

Keywords - Orestes; Spartan identity; House of Agamemnon

One of the ways of coping with the collective memory is the creation or the appropriation of particular identities, which are dated back to the distant past and serve the purposes and benefits of the present. People gain understanding of the present through experience, knowledge about the past and, all the way round, these memories are often used for the social identity to be justified, explained, legitimized or even censored. Moreover, the accommodation, maintenance, or rejection of collective memory are considered as strategies of memory or forgetfulness, which have always been important means in coping with the conflict between social groups for the purpose of gaining control and authority\(^1\).

In this study we intend to show how the transferal of Orestes’ bones from Tegea to Sparta led to the appropriation of an identity – traced back to the pre-Doric past – as well as the significance of this identity for the Spartans and their city. We will also examine other cases of this Spartan endeavor to connect its past with the house of Agamemnon and appropriate this particular identity. There are different opinions in the scholarship regarding the relation between Spartan politics and the transferal of Orestes’ bones\(^2\). The majority of scholars

\(^1\) Le Goff 1988.