

### 11.3. Cornelius Nepos / On Epaminondas

*Epaminondas (died 362 BCE) was one of the noblest and ablest of all the Hellenes. Boeotia was counted as unprolific in great personalities, but Athens never produced a statesman of more unblemished integrity and patriotism, or greater capacity for organizing men and handling them on the battlefield. He was a real genius in the military art, breaking away from the conventions of the old-style Laconian drillmasters, and developing new tactics that were later perfected by Philip and Alexander. It was due largely to Epaminondas that Sparta was deposed from that hegemony of Hellas which she had so long held and abused.*

Nep. Ep. Source: William Stearns Davis, *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-1913), Vol. I: Greece and the East, pp. 276-279.

Epaminondas was the son of Polymnis, and was born at Thebes. He was of an honorable family, though left poor . . . but he was among the best educated among the Thebans; he had been taught to play the harp and to sing to its accompaniment by Dionysius [a famous musician], to play the flute by Olympiodorus, and to dance by Calliphron. For his instructor in philosophy he had Lysis of Tarentum, a Pythagorean, to whom he was so devoted that—young as he was—he preferred the society of a grave and austere old man, instead of companions of his own age; nor did he part with him until he had so far excelled his fellow students in learning, that it might easily be seen that in the same way he would excel in other pursuits.

After he grew up and began to apply himself to gymnastic exercises, he studied not so much to increase the strength as the agility of his body; for he thought that strength suited the purposes of wrestlers, but that agility conduced to excellence in war. He used to exercise himself very much, therefore, in running and wrestling, as long as he could grapple, and contend standing with his adversary. But he spent most of his labor upon martial exercises.

To the strength of body thus acquired were added many good qualities of mind; for he was modest, prudent, grave, wisely availing himself of opportunities, skilled in war, brave in action, and of remarkable courage. He was so great a lover of truth that he would not tell a falsehood, even in jest; he was also master of

his passions, gentle in disposition, submitting to wrong not merely from the Theban people, but from his own friends. He was a remarkable keeper of secrets, a quality no less serviceable sometimes than ability to speak eloquently....He bore poverty so easily that he received nothing [in way of reward] from his [native Theban] state save glory. He did not avail himself of the means of his friends to maintain himself, but he often used his credit to relieve others to such a degree that it might be thought all things were in common between him and his friends; for when any one of his countrymen had been taken by the enemy, or when the marriageable daughter of a friend could not be married for lack of a dowry, he used to call a council of his friends and to prescribe how much each should give according to his means [toward the dowry or ransom].

He was also remarkably free from covetousness, as is shown when the envoy of King Artaxerxes the Persian came to Thebes to bribe Epaminondas with five talents [to get the Thebans to help the king], but Epaminondas said to him: “There is no need for money in this matter: for if the king desires what is for the good of the Thebans, I am ready to do it for nothing; if otherwise, he has not silver and gold enough to move me, for I would not exchange the riches of the whole world for my love for my country. You, who have tried me thus without knowing my character, and who have thought me like yourself I do not blame—and I forgive you; but quit the city at once, lest you corrupt others, though unable to corrupt me.”

He was also an able speaker, so that no Theban was a match for him in eloquence; nor was his language less pointed in brief replies than elegant in an elaborate speech. [At the battle of Mantinea, while his Boeotians were winning the day, he was mortally wounded by a javelin]: when he saw that if he drew out the iron head of the dart he would instantly die, he kept it in until they told him “that the Boeotians were victorious.” “I have lived long enough,” he then said, “for I die unconquered.” The iron head was then extracted, and at once he died.

He was never married, and when blamed on that account [since he would leave no children] he said: “I cannot want for posterity. For I leave behind me a daughter,—the victory of Leuctra, that must of necessity not merely survive me, but be immortal!”