

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

ANCIENT HISTORY

OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE in
Ancient History

H407

For first teaching in 2017

H407/11 Summer 2025 series

Contents

Introduction	2
Paper 11 series overview	3
Section A overview	5
Question 1*	5
Question 2*	9
Question 3	11
Section B overview	13
Question 4	13
Question 5*	14
Question 6*	15
Copyright information	16

Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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Paper 11 series overview

Performance in this option was generally good, although there was a noticeable increase in weaker responses compared to previous years. A recurring issue was candidates not indicating the correct question number, or omitting it entirely when beginning a new response.

Engagement with the modern interpretation in Question 3 remained strong. Many candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of how to assess the *convincingness* of an argument, rather than just recounting factual content or evaluating ancient sources unnecessarily. However, some still spent valuable examination time evaluating sources in Question 3, which is not required.

Weaker responses across all questions often lacked reference to sources or misattributed them; particularly confusing Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon. There was also continued confusion over the Hellenic, Delian, and Peloponnesian Leagues, and persistent inaccuracies such as referring to Herodotus and Aristotle as Athenian, or Plutarch as Roman. Misunderstandings of key terms and historical context, such as using 'ostracism' to mean exile or misinterpreting the Peace of Nicias, were also common.

In Section A, Question 1 was more popular and generally well answered, although many candidates did not cover the full date range (492–431 BC), focusing only on the Persian Wars. Stronger responses addressed the evolution of Persian policy and used a wide range of sources, including epigraphic evidence. Weaker responses lacked chronological awareness and sometimes included irrelevant material, such as Persian-Spartan treaties post-431.

Question 2, though less popular, was often answered well. Strong responses tracked the changing fortunes of Athens and Sparta during the Archidamian War and evaluated the likelihood of peace using a range of sources and perspectives. However, some candidates misunderstood the scope of the question or confused key events and treaties. There was also a lack of precision in knowledge of the Peace of Nicias and its terms.

Question 3 was generally well handled, with many candidates using a structured approach to assess the interpretation. Successful answers focused on the Megarian Decree and its role in the outbreak of war, drawing on Thucydides, Plutarch, and Aristophanes. Weaker responses either ignored the decree or confused it with other decrees, and some lacked a secure grasp of the chronology or the passage's key points.

In the Depth Study, there was a notable rise in references to the Spartan 'Apella,' based on a misunderstanding of Plutarch, and continued issues with candidates not including dates, which affected marks for precision and contextual understanding. Some relied on abstract quotations without linking them to specific events, weakening their arguments.

Timing was better managed this year, with fewer candidates neglecting the 36-mark questions. Overall, while many candidates demonstrated strong analytical skills and source engagement, there remains a need for greater chronological precision, accurate source attribution, and clearer understanding of key historical concepts.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• focused sharply on the demands of the question, using well-chosen evidence and contextual knowledge to construct a clear argument • selected and applied sources that were directly relevant to the specific terms of the question • showed a confident grasp of the chronological framework, ensuring events and developments were accurately placed in time • demonstrated depth of understanding of the historical period, reflecting both breadth and precision in knowledge • evaluated arguments by testing the credibility of the specific claims being made, rather than offering generalised source critique.	• struggled with Spartan chronology, leading to confusion over key events, figures, and their correct placement in the timeline • focused on providing a general narrative of the period rather than addressing the specific demands of the question • misattributed events to incorrect individuals or groups, undermining the accuracy of the argument • offered broad, unfocused evaluations instead of assessing the specific claims or interpretations presented • prioritised description over analysis, recounting events without exploring their significance or implications.

Section A overview

Overall, candidates showed a good grasp of the key events across both essay periods, though there was a wider spread in performance than in previous years. Stronger responses demonstrated clear chronological awareness and used relevant evidence to support well-structured arguments. The most effective answers remained tightly focused on the terms of the question, with evaluation often precise and convincingly applied.

Question 1*

- 1* 'The Persians were consistent in their policy and actions towards the Greek states from 492–431 BC.'

To what extent do the sources support this statement?

You must use and analyse the ancient sources you have studied as well as your own knowledge to support your answer. **[30]**

This was the more popular of the two Section A essay questions, and responses varied widely in quality. Stronger responses demonstrated a clear understanding of the full date range (492–431 BC), with answers structured thematically around Persian policy, such as imperialism, revenge, diplomacy, and shifts toward peace. These responses often made effective use of ancient sources, particularly Herodotus and Thucydides, and showed awareness of the evolving nature of Persian-Greek relations, including the significance of the Peace of Callias.

Better answers also incorporated archaeological evidence, such as the Serpent Column and Persian inscriptions (e.g. Naqs-e Rostam), though some candidates showed uncertainty about which king commissioned which monument and what they actually stated. A few responses also referenced the Athenian offer of earth and water in 508 BC as useful background, even though it fell outside the specified date range.

Weaker responses tended to focus narrowly on the Persian Wars (492–479 BC), neglecting the later period up to 431. This limited their ability to address the question's emphasis on consistency. Some candidates confused key events or figures, such as the two Megabazoi, and misattributed actions to the wrong Persian kings. There was also confusion between peace treaties and alliances, with some claiming Athens and Persia became allies after the Peace of Callias.

Chronological imprecision was a recurring issue, with some candidates unclear about the sequence of invasions or the timeline of Persian involvement in Greek affairs. Misunderstandings about the nature of 'medizing' and the use of terms like 'alliance' further weakened some arguments.

Overall, the best responses were those that addressed the full period, used a wide range of sources critically, and evaluated the extent to which Persian actions were consistent, rather than simply descriptive.

Exemplar 1

		In the second half of the Persian Wars
		under the Xerxes from 480-478 ^{BC} was
		the battles of Thermopylae 480BC, Salamis
		479BC, Plataea 479BC and Mycale 479BC.
		In these battles under Xerxes and then the
		Mardonius. Example of Persian policy and
		actions towards the Greeks are shown
		particularly in Thermopylae 480BC in Herodotus's
		(Hdt) histories and Aeschylus Persians about
		Salamis. In Thermopylae (480BC) the
		Persians were given help by a Spartan
		slave on how to defeat the Spartans on
		day 3 of the battle. According to Hdt
		the Persians but asked the Spartans to
		"give up their weapons in which the Spartans
		responded "come and take them". And when

The Persians ~~historically~~ ~~defeated~~ filled with
 Hubris under their new leader believed they
 could "fly so many arrows it would cover
 the sun". The Spartans responded how they
 like to fight in the shade. The Persians
 attributed to Sparta is one of superiority
 and confidence. And even though they win
 this battle the Greek states don't back down
 and so other battles continue. Like Salamis
 in 479 BC. In Aeschylus Persians, the Queen
 Atossa talks on how could the Greeks possibly
 win if they don't have riches or a large army.
 The messenger talks on how the Greeks are
 monster and vicious. This shows how the
 Persians saw the Greeks from a Greek viewpoint.
 This play was shown just after the Persian
 wars after Persia had burned Athens acropolis
^{around} in 480 BC. The battle of Salamis proves the
 Persians still believe they are superior to the
 Greek city states, even if they lost the battle
 due to the Athenian naval commander Them-
 istocles strategy. However ~~Both~~ Aeschylus
 and Hdt are known to "exaggerate everything"
 (Gruen) but are still reliable due to having
 a strong truth and the ~~the~~ exaggeration be based
 on what was told from people at the time.

Exemplar 1 shows some engagement with the question and includes relevant events, but it lacks precision and depth. There are factual inaccuracies and generalisations about Persian policy that need clarification, such as treating Persian actions as uniform across time and regions. The analysis tends to describe rather than evaluate, and it doesn't fully explore how Persian aims shifted in response to changing circumstances. Herodotus and Thucydides are not clearly referenced or critically used, which limits the strength of the argument. With clearer structure, more accurate detail, and deeper source engagement, the answer could be significantly improved.

Misconception: Confusing the key literary historians on Persia.

Examiners frequently note that candidates struggle to distinguish between ancient authors when discussing relations between Persia and the Greek states in the 5th century BC. This often leads to confusion over who describes what, and when. Understanding which historian covers which events and how they portray Persian involvement is essential for accurate and well-supported answers. The following guide outlines the key contributions of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, helping clarify their respective focuses and how Persia features in their works.

Herodotus focuses on the earlier part of the 5th century, especially the Persian Wars (492–479 BC). His *Histories* cover:

- The causes of conflict between Persia and the Greek world.
- The Ionian Revolt and Persian expeditions under Darius and Xerxes.
- Key battles such as Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis, and Plataea.
- Persian motivations, customs, and leadership, often with anecdotal detail.

Thucydides, by contrast, begins his History of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC but does offer a narrative and assessment of the period after the Persian Wars in a part of Book 1 called the *Pentekontaetia*. His *History of the Peloponnesian War* covers:

- Persia, mainly in the context of later diplomacy and funding during the Peloponnesian War.
- Internal Greek politics and warfare, with Persia playing a more background role until later in the conflict.
- The Egyptian expedition (c.460 BC), where Athens supported a revolt against Persian rule – an example of mid-century Athenian aggression towards Persia.
- The Peace of Callias (though not named explicitly), which some believe marked a temporary resolution between Athens and Persia in the mid-5th century.

Xenophon continues the narrative after Thucydides, covering events from 411 BC onwards in his *Hellenica*. His work covers:

- The role of Persian satraps like Tissaphernes and Pharnabazus in shaping Greek interstate politics.
- Persian financial support for Sparta, especially in naval campaigns against Athens.
- The Treaty of 411 BC and subsequent negotiations involving Persia and Greek states.
- The strategic importance of Persian-controlled Asia Minor and its impact on Greek diplomacy.
- The shifting alliances between Persia, Sparta, and Athens, including Persian attempts to play Greek powers against each other.
- The actions of Cyrus the Younger and his support for Spartan commander Lysander.

In short: Herodotus is the main source for Persian-Greek conflict up to 479 BC, while Thucydides is more relevant for Persian involvement in Greek affairs from the late 5th century onwards. Xenophon is useful for understanding how Persia reasserted influence in Greek politics through diplomacy and financial support, particularly in the late 5th century.

Question 2*

- 2*** How far would you agree that the Peace of Nicias of 421 BC was always the most likely outcome of the first ten years of the Peloponnesian War?

You must use and analyse the ancient sources you have studied as well as your own knowledge to support your answer. **[30]**

Although less popular than Question 1, this essay was generally well answered by those with a secure grasp of the chronology and context of the Archidamian War. Stronger responses directly addressed the key term 'always', evaluating whether peace was a consistent likelihood throughout the first decade of conflict. These candidates often explored shifts in Athenian and Spartan strategy, particularly the impact of leaders such as Pericles, Cleon, and Brasidas, and used ancient sources like Thucydides, Plutarch, and Diodorus effectively.

Better answers demonstrated nuanced understanding of Pericles' initial strategy, the consequences of the plague, and the turning points at Pylos and Sphacteria. Many also discussed the role of Spartan internal politics, such as the influence of hawks and doves, and the implications of Brasidas' campaigns in Thrace. Some candidates used Aristophanes and the Thoudippos Decree to argue that Pericles' policy was unsustainable, making peace increasingly likely.

However, weaker responses often lacked precision, with some confusing the Peace of Nicias with the Thirty Years' Peace or not understanding its terms. Chronological errors were common, including misdating events or misunderstanding the scope of 'the first ten years.' A few responses drifted into irrelevant content, such as the Argive Alliance or the Sicilian Expedition, which fall outside the question's timeframe.

There was also confusion over key details, for example, the number of Spartans captured at Sphacteria, and some candidates misrepresented figures like Brasidas or Pericles. Evaluation in weaker answers tended to be generalised, lacking focus on the specific likelihood of peace at different stages of the war.

Overall, the strongest responses were those that tracked the evolving military and political landscape, used sources critically, and maintained a clear focus on the question's central claim.

Exemplar 2

		Indeed, Athens entered the war in 431 with a strong sense of purpose and strategy. Thucydides informs us that this strategy was largely shaped by the General Pericles who urged the Athenians not to engage the Spartans on land, to retreat inside the city walls whilst using their superior navy to raid the Peloponnesian coastlines - a strategy designed to weather Spartan annual invasions whilst gradually reducing their capacity for war. As such, the Athenian strategy of attrition in 431 is indicative of a state unlikely to sign a peace treaty within only 10 years, as they evidently had strategised for a long-term struggle. Moreover, whilst Thucydides tells us that Pericles presented this strategy as defensive, nowhere in the extant sources is Athens portrayed as at war unwillingly, with both Thucydides and Xenophon portraying Athens as eager for war, not peace. This is further evidenced by Thucydides' account of the Athenian ^{siege} interventions in Potidea, an act which the Corinthians viewed as a "direct threat" and the Peloponnesian League ^{saw as} a provocative intervention. Interventions such as these are are as told by Thucydides sparked Corinthian interest for
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2	continued	Athens meaning that by 431, Athens was eager for war, Corinth would not accept peace and therefore, though peace may have been desirable for Sparta, the peace of Nicias was not the most likely outcome in the 430s.
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This extract demonstrates precise historical knowledge and applies it directly to the question. It doesn't just recount events but evaluates how factors like the death of Pericles, the rise of Cleon and Brasidas, and the strain of war shaped the conditions for peace. The answer uses Thucydides effectively, not just for narrative support but to explore his views on unpredictability and political pressure. It also avoids asserting inevitability, instead showing how peace became more likely over time. This balance of detailed evidence, thoughtful analysis, and source engagement makes the answer both convincing and well-argued.

Question 3

3 Read the interpretation below.

So the Megarian decree had economic effects, and was surely intended to. Of course the Athenians took good care not to be wrongfooted morally: hence a religious aspect was needed for the punishment of an ostensibly religious offence. ... But the Megarian decree was seen, with justification, as Athenian aggression, and Corinth, remembering the 460s, must have thought Athens was up to her old intrigues. ... It seems then that for much of the 430s war looked imminent, and to that extent Thucydides, who under-reports the earlier stirrings and expansion, should be corrected. But his general picture of Athenian expansion, forcing the Spartans to war, stands.

5

S. Hornblower, *The Greek World 479–323 BC* (adapted)

How convincing do you find Hornblower's interpretation of the Megarian decree and the reasons for the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War?

You must use your knowledge of the historical period and the ancient sources you have studied to analyse and evaluate Hornblower's interpretation. [20]

This interpretation question was generally well handled, with many candidates demonstrating a clear understanding of the passage and engaging directly with Hornblower's argument. Stronger responses focused on the key points raised in the extract, particularly the Megarian Decree, its economic and moral implications, and the broader context of rising tensions in the 430s, and assessed how convincingly these were presented using detailed knowledge and relevant ancient sources.

The best answers structured their responses around specific claims in the passage, using Thucydides, Plutarch, and Aristophanes to support or challenge Hornblower's interpretation. These candidates often explored the idea of Athenian provocation, the strategic use of the decree, and the role of Corinth and Sparta in escalating hostilities. Many also recognised the reference to Thucydides 1.23 and discussed the 'earlier stirrings' of conflict in the 460s, including Megara's shifting alliances and Athens' growing assertiveness.

Weaker responses tended to either ignore the passage or engage with it only superficially. Some candidates provided general essays on the causes of the Peloponnesian War or the Megarian Decree without linking their points back to Hornblower's interpretation. Others confused the Megarian Decree with unrelated decrees or lacked a clear understanding of its terms and significance.

There was also some chronological confusion, particularly around the events of the 460s and 430s, and a few candidates misunderstood key phrases in the passage, such as 'justification' or 'under-reporting.' Evaluation in weaker responses was often vague or generic, lacking precise engagement with the specific arguments presented.

Overall, the most successful answers were those that remained focused on the question of how convincing Hornblower's interpretation was, using detailed knowledge and source analysis to reach well-supported conclusions.

Section B overview

Many candidates responding to Question 4 demonstrated a secure understanding of the material, particularly in recognising key themes across the provided passages. However, there was a notable lack of focus on the concept of utility; rather than engaging critically with the broader value of each source, candidates often mined the passages for content relating to motherhood without considering its relevance or limitations. This approach undermined the depth of their conclusions.

Evaluation of sources in questions 5 and 6 was generally stronger. Some candidates continued to rely on standardised, generic phrases at the end of their answers, often repeating whole paragraphs, instead of directly assessing the reliability of the passage they had used. Those who did attempt evaluation frequently echoed the same judgement each time the same author was referenced. Ideally, source analysis should be contextual and show an awareness of how each passage contributes to the line of argument being developed.

Question 4

4 Read the passages below.

Lykourgos gave the greatest possible attention to girls' upbringing also. For them, before puberty, he instituted a physically tough curriculum of running, wrestling, discus and javelin throwing, so that the products of their wombs should have a really strong start in a powerful body, and develop all the more strongly. As a result the mothers would also better tolerate childbirth and be able to endure labour pains more easily and successfully. He had no time for the idea of a sheltered upbringing for girls any more than boys, and eliminated all forms of feeble effeminacy, ...

Plutarch, *Life of Lykourgos (Lycurgus)*, 14.1–2 [Lactor 21 D70]

As far as Lykourgos was concerned, there were enough female slaves to produce clothing, whereas the most important task for freeborn women was producing children. So as a first priority he laid it down that physical fitness was as important for women as for men. So he established women's competitions in both running and wrestling, in the belief that the offspring of two strong parents would be all the more robust. He saw, too, that among other nations generally when a newly married woman joined her husband's household his initial response was to spend an inordinate amount of time with her. His policy was the exact reverse. He ordained that it was a disgrace for a man to be seen going into or leaving his wife's room. With such constraints imposed upon their association, it was inevitable that the husband's sexual desire would be all the greater, and any consequent children will be more vigorous than if their parents had had too much of one another.

Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans*, 1.4–5 [Lactor 21 D68]

How useful are these passages for our understanding of the importance of motherhood in Sparta?

[12]

The overall profile of responses to this question was positive, with most candidates scoring above Level 3, although many still seemed to treat it as the least important and left it to last, often running out of time. Candidates generally showed strong understanding and enthusiasm for the topic, with many drawing on a good range of sources such as the 'running girl' statue from the British Museum, *Lysistrata*, and other parts of Plutarch's *Lycurgus*.

The best responses focused closely on the passages and used other sources to evaluate their usefulness, rather than simply discussing how convincing they were. Some weaker answers strayed into general commentary on women rather than addressing motherhood specifically. Better answers recognised the functional view of motherhood in Sparta and supported their points with relevant evidence, though only the very best explored aspects not mentioned in the passages, such as Plutarch's sayings of Spartan women.

While many noted similarities between Plutarch and Xenophon, few identified the possibility of direct influence. A number of otherwise strong responses did not include external references or broader context from the same authors, limiting their access to the highest levels.

Question 5*

5* 'The *Gerousia* was the only body which could influence political decisions in Sparta.'

To what extent do the sources agree with this statement?

You must use and analyse the ancient sources you have studied as well as your own knowledge to support your answer. [36]

Question 5 proved popular, attracting nearly twice as many responses as Question 6, with just under half reaching Levels 5 or 6. However, many candidates misinterpreted the key term 'only,' agreeing that the *Gerousia* was influential without adequately challenging the exclusivity implied. Some responses focused on individuals such as Alcibiades or Archidamus without linking them to their respective political bodies, while others did not distinguish between bodies and individuals altogether. The influence of Sparta's allies was rightly credited where mentioned, and some candidates argued that the notion of the *Gerousia* being the sole influential body contradicted the idea of a balanced constitution. Most candidates demonstrated sound knowledge of the composition and duties of various political bodies, though confusion persisted around the powers of the *Gerousia* and Ephors, particularly in relation to events such as the 432 debate and the arrest of Pausanias.

The probouleutic role of the *Gerousia* was often overlooked or misunderstood, with terms like 'veto' and 'probouleusis' used without explanation. Plutarch's account, especially the 'crooked choice,' was frequently misinterpreted, and source attribution was generally weak. The Ephors were recognised for their short-term but significant influence, with examples like Sthenelaidas and Brasidas cited, though inaccuracies about Brasidas' role and status were common. The Assembly's role was sometimes conflated with that of the Peloponnesian League, and the Corinthian complaint was occasionally misapplied. Chronological approaches were praised for showing how influence shifted over time, though this was absent from many mid-range responses. More successful responses demonstrated secure understanding of the *Gerousia*'s functions, the sources describing it, and the historical context. Less successful responses struggled to distinguish between legislative, judicial, and policing roles, particularly regarding the Ephors. Misconceptions from popular media, such as the film *300*, also contributed to confusion about the nature and age of Spartan officials.

Misconception: the *Apella*



Examiners often note confusion among candidates regarding the correct terminology for the Spartan Assembly. A frequent misconception is the use of the term *Apella* to describe the Assembly, when in fact this term is not used by any of the key ancient sources. Neither Thucydides, Xenophon, Aristotle, nor Plutarch refer to the Assembly as the *Apella*, and its use is largely a modern scholarly convention based on limited and uncertain evidence. To avoid inaccuracy, candidates are advised simply to refer to it as the Spartan Assembly, which is both clear and historically safer.

Question 6*

6* 'During the period 478–404 BC, the Battle of Mantinea was the only time Sparta could be deemed militarily successful on the battlefield.'

To what extent do you agree with this statement?

You must use and analyse the ancient sources you have studied as well as your own knowledge to support your answer. [36]

Question 6 was less popular overall and tended to attract candidates with either strong knowledge of Spartan military history or limited understanding of the political system. The best responses addressed the full period from 478 to 404 BC, incorporating battles from Tanagra in 457 through to the naval engagements of the Ionian War. These responses demonstrated a broad use of sources, particularly Thucydides, and showed a nuanced understanding of the Battle of Mantinea including its military significance, psychological impact, and value as a historical source. However, many candidates lacked detailed knowledge of Spartan warfare before 431 BC, with few referencing Tanagra or earlier campaigns. While most were confident discussing Pylos, Sphacteria, Brasidas' northern campaign, the Sicilian expedition, and the invasions of Attica, fewer explored the tactical details or strategic implications of Mantinea itself, nor Thucydides' reflections on its importance.

Some candidates interpreted 'battlefield' narrowly as land battles, while others included naval engagements; both approaches were credited. A recurring issue was the tendency to focus solely on the Peloponnesian War, which limited the ability to reach the highest levels. Weaker responses often argued that Mantinea was Sparta's only success, despite also citing other victories, undermining their own argument. Stronger responses challenged the exclusivity of the claim by referencing other successes such as Tanagra, Delium, and the establishment of Decelea, as well as naval victories at Natrium and Aegospotami, though some questioned whether these were truly Spartan achievements due to Persian funding and non-Spartan crews. The best answers also considered why someone might view Mantinea as uniquely successful, offering a balanced evaluation.

Some candidates cited the suppression of the 464 BC helot revolt as a success, though it was noted that the helots were not defeated but allowed to leave. Misconceptions persisted, such as the claim that Brasidas defeated Thucydides, and confusion between figures like Lycurgus and Lysander or Cimon and Cleon. Gylippos' role in Syracuse was mentioned, with stronger responses acknowledging he was the only Spartan present. Failures such as Pylos, Sphacteria, and early Ionian War setbacks were well covered, with more sophisticated answers critiquing Spartan tactics prior to 425. Some responses included events outside the period, such as Thermopylae and Plataea, which detracted from relevance.

The most effective answers concluded by noting that despite setbacks, Sparta ultimately won the war, offering a compelling counterpoint to the claim in the question.

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Question 4: *Plutarch, Life of Lykourgos (Lycurgus)*, 14 1-2 (Lactor 21 D70), 978-0-903625-40-1 LACTOR 21 Ed. M. G. L. Cooley [2017], p126

Question 4: Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans*, 1 4-5 (Lactor 21 D68), 8-0-903625-40-1 LACTOR 21 Ed. M. G. L. Cooley [2017], p124

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