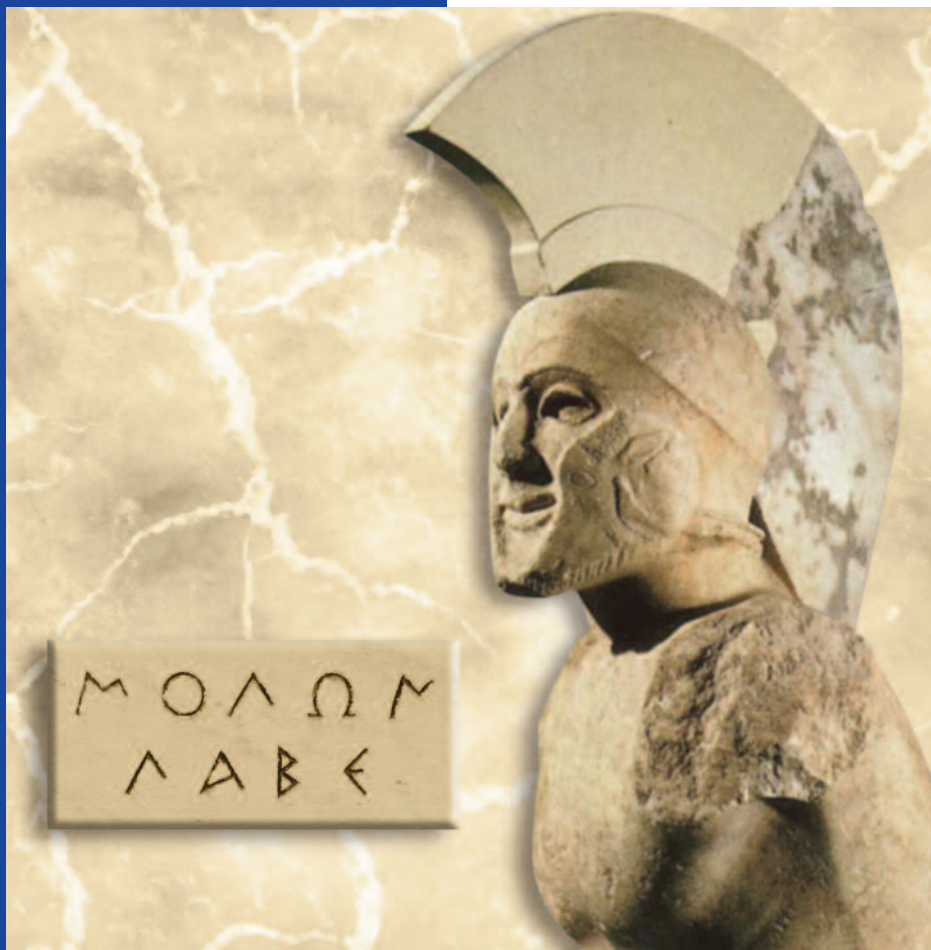


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**A HISTORY OF
ANCIENT SPARTA:
VALOR, VIRTUE, AND
DEVOTION IN THE
GREEK GOLDEN AGE**

COURSE GUIDE



Professor Timothy B. Shutt
KENYON COLLEGE

A History of Ancient Sparta: Valor, Virtue, and Devotion in the Greek Golden Age

Professor Timothy B. Shutt
Kenyon College



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Valor, Virtue, and Devotion in the Greek Golden Age
Professor Timothy B. Shutt



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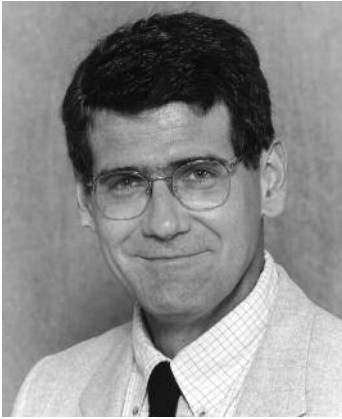
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A History of Ancient Sparta: Valor, Virtue, and Devotion in the Greek Golden Age

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About Your Professor

Timothy B. Shutt

For more than twenty years, Professor Timothy Baker Shutt has taught at Kenyon College, famed for splendid teaching, literary tradition, and unwavering commitment to the liberal arts. No teacher at Kenyon has ever been more often honored, both by the college and by students, for exceptional skills in the classroom and as a lecturer. Professor Shutt's courses in Kenyon's interdisciplinary Integrated Program of Humane Studies and, before that, in the Department of English, have always been heavily oversubscribed.

Shutt is a native of Ohio, raised in Michigan and schooled in Connecticut. During his high school years at the Hotchkiss School, he was honored as an All-American swimmer and devoted much of his time to drama. He majored in English as an undergraduate at Yale ('72). After three years at St. Mark's School of Texas, where he taught English and history and coached swimming, Shutt went on to graduate school in English, specializing in medieval literature and the history of ideas at the University of Virginia as a Du Pont Fellow. After earning his Ph.D. in 1984, Shutt spent two further years at Virginia as a Mellon Post-Doctoral Research Fellow and took a position at Kenyon in 1986, where he has taught happily ever since, deeply enjoying interaction with his students and the peaceful life of the Ohio countryside.

Shutt is a jovial extrovert and a polymath—a born teacher and lecturer—interested in nearly everything and everybody. In the Integrated Program in Humane Studies, he teaches literature, philosophy, history, art history, religious studies, and, at times, the history of science. He has written on military history, baseball, and birding in addition to his academic studies and gives regular talks at the Brown Family Environmental Center at Kenyon on migratory birds and on observational astronomy and the lore of the stars. He also works, when time permits, as a sports announcer for Kenyon football games, and for championship swimming meets nationwide, claiming longtime Detroit Tiger announcer Ernie Harwell as his inspiration. Shutt also travels regularly as a spokesperson for Kenyon, giving talks and lectures on behalf of the college from coast to coast. But his real vocation is reading and the classroom.



Sculpture of Spartan Warrior © The Art Archive/Archaeological Museum Sparta/Gianni Dagli Orti; Inscription from the memorial to Leonidas at Thermopylae, Greece

Sculpture of a Spartan warrior, ca. fifth century BCE, found in Sparta by British archaeologists in 1925.

Introduction

The Spartans form one of the enduring coordinates of Western culture—an enduring and inspiring “farthest north.” No one was more devoted to courage and to duty; no one trained with greater commitment and enthusiasm to achieve his ends. And no one was committed more thoroughly and relentlessly to the annihilation of self and of self-regard in service of the greater communal good. The Spartans were oppressive to the local “helots” in particular. The Spartans were narrow-minded, and narrow-minded by design. But what they did no one ever did better, and they did it with signal success for centuries on end; at once inspiring and appalling the hundred generations or so that have followed. On the basis of such achievements, the ancient Spartans surely deserve our attention, and, I say, deserve our duly qualified respect as well.

Lecture 1:
Aura and Overview:
“Come and take them.”

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge’s *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece*.



Outnumbered fifty to one—if not hundreds to one or, indeed, thousands to one—at the narrow pass at Thermopylae in north central Greece, King Leonidas of Sparta, in command of the picked, largely Spartan holding force detached by the Hellenic alliance to defend the approaches to Attica and the Peloponnese, responded in the late summer of 480 BCE to the request of the “Great King” Xerxes of the Persian Empire, far and away the largest and most powerful which had ever been to that point, anywhere at any time, that he and his followers “lay down their arms” with the most celebrated and, in my view, the most inspiring instance of cogent Laconic taciturnity on record. It consisted, in the proudly Doric Greek of the Spartans, of two words, “*molon labe*,” “come and take them.” Which Xerxes accordingly did. But the process took three days and, by modern estimates, twenty thousand or more Persian and allied casualties, as the three hundred picked Spartans, and their Thespian and at least some Theban companions, who remained till the bitter end, fought with consummate skill and courage to the death and to the last man. Xerxes succeeded in forcing the pass. But the self-sacrificing devotion of the Spartans and their allies, for very good reason, gave him pause. These Hellenes, and the Spartans in particular, were not like other men. Overcoming them, clearly and shockingly, would be no easy matter, whatever the odds. The Greeks, by contrast, despite the defeat, were, no doubt to their surprise, encouraged. Maybe, just maybe, they could hold their own against the Persians after all. And a month or so later, at Salamis, under the inspired leadership of the Athenian Themistocles, and the next year under the leadership of the Spartan regent Pausanias at Plataea and the Spartan king Leotychidas at Mycale, they defeated the Persian invasion once and for all. But, at least arguably, the decisive factor was the unswerving, self-sacrificing, all but suicidal heroism of the Spartan “*homoioi*” or “equals” at Thermopylae, which revealed to the Persians what they were up against and revealed to the rest of the Greeks, quite simply, that they had a real chance to win if they were but willing to pay the price. They were and they did.

The wider victory was by no means a uniquely Spartan accomplishment. Despite the heroism of Leonidas and his peers, the most brilliant and influential Greek leader was the wily, unscrupulous, and blindingly brilliant Athenian Themistocles. But the Athenians could not have turned back the Persians without Sparta, and, by more or less uncontroversial consensus, when the most venturesome Greek *poleis*, beyond the pale of immediate and overwhelming Persian influence, decided to resist the ambitions of the Great King, they chose the Spartans as their leaders. For since the mid-sixth century at least Sparta had been, without serious dispute, the dominant *polis* of the

Hellenic world, and the Spartans were all but universally admired for their surpassing *arete* or “virtue” and *eunomia* or “good government” or “good laws or customs.” And they were, beyond that, again by universal consensus and by a wide margin, the most accomplished warriors in Greece, and indeed, so far as can be told, the most accomplished warriors in the world. As a popular contemporary video game puts it, to me at least, movingly and accurately, they were, man to man (and, as we shall see, very probably woman to woman as well), “beyond elite,” simply and terrifyingly unbeatable at anything remotely resembling even odds.

As clear and evocative exemplification of the Spartan spirit at its best as one could wish for in fact emerged in the course of the British School excavations below the Spartan acropolis in 1925, when the British team, to their surprise, unearthed what is probably the finest work of sculpture ever discovered at Sparta—to all appearances local work, presumably at the hands of Laconian, “perioecic” craftsmen. The statue represents the head and upper torso of a warrior, wearing a crested helmet with cheek-pieces crafted to resemble the head of a ram. A local Spartan worker at the dig, so we are told, at once dubbed the statue “Leonidas,” and for perfectly understandable reasons. The scholarly consensus, in fact, suggests that the statue was completed during or shortly after Leonidas’s lifetime, but most authorities believe that it does not—indeed, for a variety of reasons, could not—represent Leonidas himself. I am, for my own part, not so sure. But whether the statue is meant to honor a god, an earlier hero, or Leonidas himself, it certainly and memorably evokes something moving and distinctive in the Spartan ethos. For the warrior, fit and formidable as he so clearly is, does not look remotely fierce or bloodthirsty. Instead he exudes an almost supernatural calm—a *cheerful* calm—a serenity and a deep self-command, trained, able, and ready to confront whatever terrors or difficulties might lie before him. And just that calm and self-possession, just that unfluttered and unflappable courage, that unswerving and unforced commitment to whatever grim task might lie to hand is what the whole Spartan program was designed to produce. More often than not, it succeeded. And that, perhaps, above all is what people have most admired about Sparta. Other Greek city-states, other *poleis*, produced splendid works of art and architecture, produced works of literature, of history, and of philosophy of profound and, indeed, of foundational and transformative importance to this day. Sparta pursued a different goal. Sparta produced men. Her citizens themselves were her work of art. And not only warriors, but their wives and mothers and daughters. For women in Sparta were important—to a degree other Greeks found at best unseemly and at



Detail relief of a Spartan Hoplite on the Vix krater, a bronze, burial good of a woman from a Celtic community in Hallstatt, Austria, ca. 500 BC, that was imported from Greece.

worst shocking. But here, as elsewhere, the Spartans simply proceeded on their way. They didn't much care what outsiders thought. Part and parcel, perhaps, of that unshakable, self-imposed calm.

But is that Spartan ethos, however powerful and evocative, a fair reflection of Sparta as she was or something more like a mirage, to the formation of which not only their admirers but the Spartans themselves more or less self-consciously contributed? No doubt to some degree both, but many contemporary scholars, following the lead of François Ollier's influential *Le mirage spartiate* (1933–43), have chosen to emphasize the degree to which our customary vision of Sparta and the Spartans is the construction of late antiquity, or, indeed, of times beyond. And, without doubt, despite the virtues of the *polis*, the Spartan legacy, taken as a whole, has come down to us as decidedly mixed. For beyond its polis-wide devotion to courage and discipline, beyond its self-imposed frugality and commitment to plain living, and beyond its superlative and well-practiced military skills, Sparta was likewise notorious for its willed narrowness of culture, for its pervasive mistrust of innovation and of foreign visitors and ideas, and, above all, for its thorough-going and systematic oppression of its vast Helot underclass, in effect the state serfs upon whose labor and produce Spartan society finally rested. The Spartans were free to devote themselves full-time to physical and military training and what they saw as the pursuit of virtue precisely because and to the extent that their Helot laborers were unfree.

In one sense—and this bears noting—the situation at Sparta was not all that different than in other contemporary *poleis* or city-states. All Hellenic polities depended to a very substantial extent upon slavery—the situation of the slaves who worked the state silver mines for Athens was particularly brutal and notorious. What set Sparta apart, then, was not the fact of slavery, or in the case of the Helots, of effective slavery. It was who the slaves were and how many of them there were. Elsewhere in Greece, slaves were ordinarily non-Hellenes, captured in war, bought from people who had captured them in war, or the descendants of people who had been captured in war. In Sparta, they were fellow Greeks, and this to other Greeks made a difference. Beyond that, the Helots outnumbered the Spartans by a factor of ten or more to one. The ratio between free and unfree in other Greek *poleis* is not easy to estimate, but a guess might be something like one-to-one rather than the Spartan ten-to-one or more. And while other slaves were often mistreated, above and beyond the mere fact of slavery, the Helots were more or less systematically mistreated as a matter of policy. Indeed, the most prominent and potentially threatening among them were at times simply killed. Other Greeks, to the extent that they were aware of the situation—the Spartans, again, seldom welcomed outsiders—tended to find such practices disturbing. And so—even more so—has posterity.

Despite that, though, both in later times and in her own time, Sparta has found a good many admirers, and, strangely enough, has found admirers, though for somewhat different reasons, both on the Left and on the Right. Thinkers on the Left, from the time of Rousseau, if not before that, have customarily admired the Spartans' near absolute commitment to the state and the all-pervasive control that the Spartan *polis* wielded over all aspects of

Laconian life, quite literally from cradle to grave. Leftist thinkers tend very much to prefer social solidarity to individual self-expression, and virtually no society on record was more committed to social solidarity and uniformity than the Spartan *homoioi* or “peers” or “equals.” Thinkers on the Right, by contrast, have tended instead to admire Spartan courage, Spartan discipline, and the Spartan commitment to “good order.” It was customary during the Cold War to read Thucydides’s account of the generation-long war between Athens and Sparta during the late fifth century BCE in terms of communist versus capitalist, or communist versus free world polarities, Sparta standing for the Soviet Union and Athens for America and the West. But on the other hand, Hitler was a great admirer of Sparta, and generations of German scholars before him had sought connections between the stern and warrior-like Dorian Spartans and the German master-race-to-be.

Others admired the Spartans on other grounds, Montaigne and many others, for instance, because of the self-sacrificing willingness of Leonidas and his companions to lay down their lives not just for Sparta or for honor, but, just that once at least, in substantial part for the welfare of Greece as a whole.

And one last legacy to which, albeit at some remove, I can myself testify firsthand. When during the Victorian era, under the guidance of Thomas Arnold at Rugby and others, the English public school or prep school assumed what became its distinctive shape, the rigors of the Spartan *agoge* or “up-bringing” were very much in the reformers’ minds. So too, in fact, with those who founded the American counterparts of such schools, likewise concerned to mold future leaders—and future gentlemen—by means of a stern and challenging regimen of social, intellectual, and physical discipline. For as the old Spartan king Archidamus observed, if we are to trust Thucydides, “superiority lies with him who is reared in the severest school” (1.84.4). Things have changed more than a bit since then, but as recently as a generation ago, there were those who still believed it and did their best to run their schools on such terms.

As I well remember.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What “art” is Sparta most noted for?
2. In what ways did Sparta differ from other Greek city-states?

Suggested Reading

Cartledge, Paul. *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece*. New York: Overlook, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Cartledge, Paul. *Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed the World*. New York: Random House, 2006.

Plutarch. *On Sparta*. Rev. ed. Trans. Richard J.A. Talbert. New York: Penguin, 2005.

Thucydides. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*. Ed. Robert B. Strassler. Trans. Richard Crawley. New York: Free Press, 1998.

Recorded Books

Shutt, Timothy B. *Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans: The Foundations of Western Civilization*. Prince Frederick, MD: Recorded Books, 2003. Unabridged. 7 hours.

Lecture 2: Geography and Origins

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge's *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300 to 362 BC*.



Greece is a mountainous land, and river valleys suitable for agriculture have long stood at a premium, highly valued and intensively cultivated. And few, if any, of them more so than the valley of the river Eurotas, the Spartan homeland of Laconia or Lacedaemon—and then, heading toward the Adriatic, the valley of the Pamisos in Messenia. Between the two stands Mt. Taygetos, which looms over Sparta just to the west, often snow-capped as late as early summer, and rising to some two thousand four hundred meters, or eight thousand or more feet. Taygetos is, in fact, more imposing and formidable than even those figures would suggest, for the floor of the valley of Laconia lies not too much over sea-level, and the rise to the mountain crests is strikingly steep, rugged, and abrupt. To the east, meanwhile, lies Mt. Parnon, stretching southward to Cape Malea and the island of Cythera, and along the Laconian Gulf between Malea and Cape Matapan, the southern extension of Taygetos, lies what in ancient times was known as the Plain of Helos and the Spartan port of Gytheum.

Far southern Spain aside, the Peloponnese is the southernmost portion of continental Europe, and the climate in the valley of Laconia is often mild enough to allow two crops per year, with summer high temperatures averaging in the mid-thirties on the Celsius scale or around 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and winter lows about 5 degrees C or 40 degrees F, with colder weather, of



Background © NASA. Satellite image taken in August 2007.

course, in the mountain heights. Nonetheless, from deep into prehistoric times, Laconian farmers were able to rely on the so-called “Mediterranean triad” of olives, grapes, and wheat, raising livestock as well, and making use of the rich game resources to be found, in particular, on the slopes of Taygetus and other highland areas nearby.

The early history of Laconia and Sparta, though, is no easy matter to unravel, for we have more or less connected historical records of the region extending back only to 550 BCE or so, and placing events—even reasonably well-attested events—from earlier than that time is difficult. Still more so is ascertaining what happened during the ages for which we have only tradition, legend, and the archaeological record to guide us. Nonetheless, the available evidence, scattered and patchy as it is, allows us to piece out at least some plausible guesses—at least a broad outline of what appears to have happened in those very early times. Our task is rendered more difficult, however, by the fact that throughout their history the Spartans chose not to write much about their own customs and their own polis—or, for that matter, about much of anything else—and we accordingly have to rely almost entirely upon the testimony of outsiders, some very perceptive and sympathetic, some, understandably enough, a good deal less so.

The Greeks themselves were well aware that they had predecessors in Hellas, who from the time of our earliest records on such matters the Greeks referred to as “Pelasgians.” It is not entirely clear who exactly the “Pelasgians” were in either ethnographical or linguistic terms, though surviving linguistic evidence, much in the form of place names, ending, like “Corinth,” with an “inth” diphthong, suggests that they did not speak an Indo-European language, certainly not Greek. When exactly it was that Greek-speakers, or proto-Greek-speakers, first arrived in mainland Greece is not a question at present that admits of a precise answer, but sometime early in the second millennium BCE seems to be at least a reasonable guess.

By that time, the first more or less full-scale European civilization was already well-established on the island of Crete, just to the south of the Peloponnese. The term “civilization” has in recent times become a bit controversial, but if, by a civilization one means a complex, stratified, at least partially urbanized culture, then the sophisticated Cretans clearly pass muster. This is the culture known to us particularly from Sir Arthur Evans’s excavations at Knossos and from a whole series of later excavations there and elsewhere on the island. In terms of legend, Crete is the land of King Minos and



Looking west over modern Sparta to the rugged Taygetus mountain range in late spring.

the Minotaur, and on the basis of the archaeological record, it was a vibrant, cheerful, and artistically gifted culture, committed to the sea and, evidently, to seaborne trade. The Cretans, or the scribes among them, were literate and employed a series of scripts, first a hieroglyphic script, then what is called “Linear A,” and finally “Linear B.” The first two remain undeciphered and seem at least to be based on a non-Indo-European language—as in the case of the “Pelasgians,” it is not entirely clear where the Cretans came from or just who they were. Linear B, however, is an early form of Greek, employed as well by the Mycenaeans on the Greek mainland, and its use in Crete seems to reflect a series of corresponding political changes. For after the mid-second century BCE, Minoan Crete began to decline. One factor contributing to the decline appears to have been the catastrophic volcanic eruption at nearby Santorini or Thera, evidently late in the sixteenth century, and a century or two later, Mycenaean culture came to dominate in Crete, only to fade in its turn two centuries or so later.

All of this is of relevance to Sparta in part because the Spartans themselves, so we are told, thought of at least some of their distinctive institutions as paralleling or, indeed, as in some sense deriving from those of Crete. There is archaeological evidence of early contact between Laconia, or, in any case, the offshore island of Cythera, and Crete. And the unusual prominence of women in historic Sparta, where Helen of Sparta (and later of Troy) was revered as a goddess, recalls the clear prominence of women—and goddesses in Cretan culture.

Things get at least a bit clearer when we get to Mycenaean times. Here too origins are murky, but by the 1600s and thereafter Mycenaean culture seems to have been well-established at many locations on the Greek mainland, Mycenae itself, nearby Tiryns, and Pylos, prominent among them. Laconia too has Mycenaean ruins, though not the extensive walled palace complexes that characterize other Mycenaean sites. Nonetheless, the site of the Menelaion, consecrated in later times to Menelaus and Helen, which lies today just outside of Sparta on the eastern side of the river of Eurotas, clearly dates to the Mycenaean era. This is, by the way, the world celebrated a few centuries later as a glorious past in the poems of Homer. Mycenae itself, in fact, is said to be the home of Homer’s Agamemnon, overlord of the Greek host besieging Troy, and the rich remains of Mycenaean culture have been discovered all over Greece.

The 1100s, though, saw a precipitous collapse, not just in the Mycenaean world, but all over the Eastern Mediterranean for reasons that remain unclear and controversial to this day. Contemporary Egyptian records speak of an attempted invasion by “Sea Peoples,” and urban complexes seem to have fallen to mayhem and fire throughout the wider region. In Laconia and neighboring Messenia the decline was as severe as anywhere, and judging by the material remains, it included a population crash of 90 percent or more, from which it took centuries to recover. The Dark Ages of Greece were indeed dark, far darker on the evidence, than the later “Dark Ages” in northwestern Europe following the collapse of the Western Roman empire. Though people still, evidently, spoke Greek, the craft literacy attained by means of Linear B seems to have been lost completely, and when the Greeks again learned to write, nearly half a millennium later, it was by means of the alphabet that they

reportedly borrowed from the Phoenicians—and thereafter perfected by introducing full alphabetization of vowels.

The Spartans themselves, however, seem to have had little doubt of their origins, and from the earliest times of which we have record, they characterized their arrival in the region as a “Dorian” invasion coupled with a “Return of the Heraclids.” Whether, as they claimed, the Spartan kings were direct descendents of Heracles, whose ancestors had returned to the Peloponnese to resume their historic sway may, of course, be doubted, but from at least the time of the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus (ca. 650), the notion was clearly important to the Spartans themselves.

The “Dorian” invasions are another matter. In historical times, the ancient Greek world was clearly divided into three major dialectal divisions, all mutually comprehensible, but each clearly different from the others. The Greeks themselves conceived these differences in semi-ethnographical terms—those who spoke alike to some degree thought and felt alike and were, in fact, in some sense related. The Ionian speakers, including the Athenians, were centered in and around the Aegean, in particular on the west coast of what is now Turkey opposite the islands of Chios and Samos. The Aeolians were centered in Thebes and in northern and western Greece with outliers on the island of Lesbos and onshore regions nearby. Dorian speakers included the Argives and the Corinthians in the Peloponnese as well as the Spartans, the Cretans, and the residents of the southernmost arc of Aegean islands. In cultural terms the difference between Ionic and Doric architecture suggests what the Greeks themselves perceived as differences in orientation and character—Doric columns are plain, strong, and unadorned, Ionic columns more graceful, delicate, and ornate. And the Spartans proudly considered themselves Dorian and believed that at some point in their past, around or shortly after what we think of as the beginning of the first millennium BCE, they “returned” to the Peloponnese, traveling across the Gulf of Corinth from regions further north and taking control of the Eurotas valley.

The Dorian invasions, like the incursions of the “Sea Peoples,” remain a controversial topic, but there is no doubt that Laconian Greek was Dorian and that the Spartans shared a variety of cultural continuities with Dorian speakers elsewhere, nor is there much doubt on archaeological grounds that things changed in Laconia at pretty much the time that the Spartans thought. In any case, the evidence suggests that by sometime around 800, the four adjoining villages of Pitana, Mesoa, Limnai, and Cynosura had loosely consolidated themselves into the Spartan polity, shortly thereafter absorbing the nearby village of Amyclae a bit to the south. Sparta, apparently more or less by design, never formed an impressive urban center like, above all, Athens and to some degree at least most other comparable city-states. Indeed, Thucydides famously predicts that visitors to Sparta in centuries to come would find it hard to believe that Sparta was as powerful as in fact she became, so unimpressive was Sparta herself, still little more than a collection of villages even in her heyday (1.10.2). And yet the power was real and formidable, as Sparta began to demonstrate in the century to follow and beyond, with the institution of helotage, first in Laconia, and then, on a wider scale, in the long, slow conquest of the Pamisos valley in neighboring Messenia.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why is it so difficult to unravel the early history of Sparta?
2. What is suggested by the differences between Ionic and Doric architecture?

Suggested Reading

Cartledge, Paul. *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300 to 362 BC*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2002.

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Forrest, W.G. *A History of Sparta*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1968.

Gerber, Douglas E., ed. and trans. *Greek Elegiac Poetry: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries B.C.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

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Lecture 3: Institutions: What Made the Spartans So Different?

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge's *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece*.



In one sense to answer the question “What was it that made the Spartans so strikingly different from the residents of other *poleis*?” is easy to answer. The difference lay in their relentless focus on military excellence and on all that focus entailed—a full-scale, state-sponsored devotion to the values of courage, discipline, and duty, and to the overcoming of fear. But it was, above all, the institutions devised to achieve those ends that made Spartan devotion to military virtues so effective, and those institutions were by Hellenic standards—and by pretty much any other standards—unusual.

Most controversial, most far-reaching, and, from most perspectives, far and away most deplorable, was the institution of *helotage*, the economic bedrock of the Spartan state. Few states—anywhere, anytime—have been more wholeheartedly or more systematically based upon oppression.

All Greek *poleis* countenanced slavery, and in most it was pervasive and important. Aristotle, for one, could not imagine an advanced society functioning without it. But elsewhere in Greece, slaves were ordinarily non-Hellenic captives or the descendents of non-Hellenic captives, and that, to the Greeks, as noted above, made a real difference. The *helots*, by contrast, were Greeks themselves, as much so as the Spartans, though in a sense the helots, too, were captives, neighbors overcome and subjugated in a bitter series of early wars. Indeed, by the best linguistic guess, the term “helot” effectively means “captive.” But other Greeks, to put the matter gently, were still made a bit uneasy by the spectacle of a vast population of fellow-Greeks enslaved by Hellenic overlords.

And the population of helots was, as already noted, vast, certainly in relative terms. They outnumbered Spartan citizens by a factor of at least ten to one, and as time passed and the number of Spartan citizens, for a variety of reasons, declined, the helots outnumbered them by an ever greater margin. Needless to say, they were not happy with their fate, though the intensity of their discontent seems to have varied, as might have been expected, both between individuals and over the course of time. Nonetheless, though, and from the outset, it was by universal consensus, the constant threat of a helot revolt that did most to make of Sparta the militarized state that it was.

Grim as their situation was, the condition of the helots differed from that of slaves elsewhere in several significant senses. First, they were in some sense not slaves of an individual, but slaves of the Spartan state. By all accounts individual Spartan citizens could not and did not buy them or sell them. Helots could own property, ordinarily had consistent tenure, if not ownership, of the land they farmed, and could and did marry. They were, in

effect, heavily taxed to support the Spartan elite, but even so were able to support themselves through their labor.

On the other hand, though, reports suggest that they were regularly and systematically humiliated by invidious distinctions of dress, by frequent beatings, and, at times, by enforced intoxication for the edification of Spartan youth—see what being drunk looks like? In order to avoid ritual pollution, Spartan magistrates annually declared war on the helots, so that killing or culling them would not, from their perspective at least, in a technical sense be an act of murder. And terrifyingly enough, at least after the great earthquake and ensuing helot revolt of 465, helots were indeed more or less systematically culled, by a group called the *krypteia*—the name means something like “secret service”—young men who had just completed their training and were sent out alone to live in the countryside by theft and by stealth, killing any helots who seemed to pose a potential threat, or by some accounts, any helots whom they could catch.



Helots are made to drink excessive amounts of alcohol by Spartan adults so their drunken behavior will serve as an object lesson for Spartan children.

It is, of course, this array of practices that more than anything else—and with good reason—has darkened the reputation of Sparta. It is a profoundly unsavory business, and there is no way around it. But even still, it was not all that went on in Laconia. Nor were all the non-Spartans in Laconia helots. Many were free non-citizens whom the Spartans termed “*perioeci*” or “dwellers about,” largely artisans and craftworkers and their families. As time passed, perioeci with increasing frequency served in battle side by side with the Spartans themselves. In fact, during the Peloponnesian War and afterward, as their own numbers continued to decline, the Spartans even called upon the services of “*neodamodoi*,” or “new citizens,” former helots who were enrolled in the army and who seem, perhaps surprisingly, to have fought very ably for Sparta and, more surprisingly still, with consistent loyalty. The Spartan system was complex.

And for centuries the Spartan army was unparalleled in its chosen specialty of heavy infantry warfare. Full Spartan citizens, indeed, had no other profession, the labor of the helots and the perioeci allowing them to train, in effect, full time. Their training paid off. The Spartan phalanx would customarily advance into battle marching slowly to the music of the *aulos*—often translated as “flute,” but closer in sound to the Scottish pipes—with measured, even cadence, in long lines, shoulder to shoulder, and in columns often eight men deep. Each soldier wore his helmet, each carried a shield on his left arm,

protecting not only himself, but his companion to the left. The Spartans customarily wore blood-red cloaks, and at least in later times, their shields bore the lambda—in effect, an upside down “V”—of Lacaedemon, the original, unformed “thin red line.” Each warrior in his right hand bore a spear, most often used in battle overhand, and for close-in work carried a characteristic short sword. Full Spartan citizens let their hair grow long and surviving figurines suggest that they generally wore it dressed and braided. They characteristically wore beards as well, but were careful to shave their upper lips. Their self-controlled, confident advance, we are told, was so utterly dispiriting to opponents that they often broke and fled before the Spartans even engaged. In that case, the Spartans would let them depart, and indeed, they most often refused to pursue a beaten enemy. Inflicting casualties was not the point—and casualties in hoplite warfare were inflicted overwhelmingly in pursuit and upon the side that had broken. Victory granted and dominance maintained, the Spartans felt they had done enough. No point, beyond that, in continuing the fight—and in that very process, showing your enemies how it was done.

To fight as the Spartans did, though, relying on conditioning, discipline, well-honed skills, and self-control rather than on inspiration and fury, took very nearly a lifetime of training, and that is precisely what the Spartan “*agoge*” or “upbringing” was designed to provide. The term itself is curious and in this context, distinctively Laconian. The customary Greek word for education was “*paideia*.” Spartan terminology seemed instead to recall livestock raising. And indeed, Spartan youths found themselves guided by a “boyherd” or “*paidonomos*” whose charge it was to keep them in order and well-disciplined.

The process began when a boy was seven, when he left home with his Spartan age-mates and began a communal life in barracks, a mode of living that would continue without interruption until he attained citizenship at age twenty, and would continue, in fact, in some guise, until he attained the age of thirty when he was at last allowed to spend entire nights at home. The emphasis, from first to last, was on physical conditioning, discipline, and, as the Spartans saw it, a competitive communal pursuit of virtue. Boys were taught to endure hunger and hardship, heat and cold, inclement weather and darkness, pain and humiliation. They were taught to defer to their elders, to speak briefly and to the point, and were encouraged at all times, under the closest supervision, to vie with one another and with other groups for honor. They were taught as well to read and write, though that was not a priority, and they devoted a great deal of time and energy, perhaps surprisingly, to choral singing and



Artist's re-creation of a fourth-century BCE hoplite

The Spartan hoplite, disciplined and trained to stand his ground in a fight, posed a formidable front on the battle line.

communal dance, both arts that were highly developed in Sparta and both arts the Spartans believed had direct relevance to hoplite warfare, which put a premium on morale and on effective, rhythmic communal action.

In one sense, or, perhaps, in more than one, it all sounds dreadful, and it surely appalled me when I first heard about it, at the age of seven myself. And yet it seems to have worked and to have worked for generations. It fostered, among other things, an intense sense of belonging, of fellow-feeling, which, as studies have repeatedly shown, is what keeps units together in battle and what motivates ordinary soldiers on a regular basis to lay down their lives for their friends when necessary. And, by report, it was not in practice as grim as it sounds, in part because the Spartans were, again surprisingly, devoted to laughter and deliberately cultivated, as a default psychic setting, a sort of calm, untroubled good humor. The atmosphere, I suspect, was from within most like that of a very hard-working, successful sports team, or perhaps more troublingly, an elite club. It is revealing, in that regard, that outsiders, Xenophon among them, sometimes sought and were granted admission to the *agoge* for their own sons.

In any case, after successfully completing the *agoge*, a Spartan youth faced one more hurdle before becoming a full Spartiate—one of the “*homoioi*,” or “peers” or “equals” as they called themselves. He had to gain admission to a “*syssetia*,” or communal mess. All Spartan citizens were expected, lifelong, to eat their evening meal with their mess, Spartan kings included (though they were granted a double portion), and to do that, you had to belong to a mess. Admission was by election, and a single negative vote was sufficient to exclude a candidate. Messes included citizens of all ages, by design, and boys still in training were often invited to dine with them, presumably in part to be vetted, and also—a very Spartan notion—to learn from their elders. The overriding idea, again, was to foster communal solidarity and fellow-feeling, and again, it appears to have worked. The messes seem also to have functioned to some extent as a safety valve if we are to believe that the customary rule was that speech was to be free within messes and not to be repeated outside.

The Spartans ate bread, vegetables, and cheese like other Greeks, but their signature dish, in which they appear to have taken pride, was the legendary Spartan “black broth,” a concoction of vinegar, pork, and pig’s blood that the Spartans themselves purportedly relished, and which—one assumes to their delight—outsiders seem generally to have found more or less inedible.

As much of the foregoing will have suggested, the Spartans self-consciously cultivated an ethos of frugality, deliberately, indeed, conspicuously *under* consuming, consuming less and living in all sorts of respects less comfortably than their material condition would have allowed. In this sense, though for profoundly different reasons, they recall some contemporary Greens, seeking to leave a minimal “footprint.” They were the first of the Greeks, so we are told, to embrace as a regular practice public nudity, and in their case, not only for male exercise, but on occasion, for female exercise as well. For the Spartans, as we will see in more detail a bit later on, regarded women differently and, from a contemporary perspective, a good deal more respectfully than did their Hellenic peers.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What were the major characteristics of the life of Sparta's helots?
2. What hurdles did a Spartan boy face before becoming a "homoioi"?

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Lecture 4: Government and Religion

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge's *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300 to 362 BC*.



The Spartans were widely respected for the “*eunomia*,” or “good order,” or “good laws or customs,” which seemed to characterize their state, and the Spartans themselves were inclined to attribute the distinctive features of their polis to the legendary lawgiver Lycurgus, who, according to the Delphic oracle—so Herodotus tells us—may in fact have been divine, as the oracle itself seems quite explicitly to suggest.

*You have come, Lykourgos, to my rich temple,
You are dear to Zeus and to all on Olympus;
Do I speak to a god or a man? I know not,
Yet, I rather think to a god, Lykourgos.* (1.65.3)

The Great Rhetra and Spartan Society

Be that as it may, the so-called “Great Rhetra,” supposedly authorized by the Delphic Oracle and a foundational document for Sparta, dates well back into the faction-ridden turmoil of the “era of tyrants,” from which Sparta was clearly among the first *poleis* to emerge. On linguistic grounds, scholars are inclined to accept “Great Rhetra” as a probably amended ancient document dating, at a guess, to about 650 BCE. It is, as it stands, rather cryptic. Here is the translation of celebrated Cambridge Spartanist, Paul Cartledge (italics from Cartledge).

Having established a cult of Syllanian Zeus and Athena, having done the “tribing and obing,” and having established a Gerousia of thirty members including the kings [here called poetically archagetai or “founder-leaders”], season in, season out they are to hold Apellai [festivals of Apollo] between Babyca and Cnaciôn; the Gerousia is both to introduce proposals and to stand aloof; the damos is to have power to “give a decisive verdict” [this is Plutarch’s gloss on a badly garbled phrase in Doric dialect in the original]; but if the damos speaks crookedly, the Gerousia and kings are to be removers. (65)

As I suggested, a bit cryptic. But the heart of the dictum seems to be a means of resolving power struggles. Spartan kings, if they ever did, no longer bear absolute power. But neither are they deposed. Instead, they function in conjunction with the “*Gerousia*,” or council of elders (the term precisely parallels our own “senate”), who have the power of introducing and vetoing proposals to be accepted by the “*damos*” or “people,” or, here more precisely, the “citizen assembly.” A power-sharing arrangement, in short, or as generations of ancient commentators put it, a “mixed constitution,” relatively stable—

and in the case of Sparta, very stable indeed—precisely because of its mixedness. In practice, something like an oligarchic gerontocracy, but still monarchical and still consultative, at least to a degree, and with regard to citizens, if not the populace at large. The only major later change in the system—and how much later is uncertain, but relatively early without doubt—was the introduction or rise to greater influence of the “ephorate,” a group of five citizens elected annually for once-in-a-lifetime single-year terms as “*ephors*” or “overseers.” In historical times, at least, the ephors served as the effective executive power in Sparta, and they had, and at times exercised, the right to call even kings to account.

Spartan kingship was in case unusual, not least because from very early times Sparta had two of them concurrently, one from the senior “Agiad” house, purportedly stemming from King Agis I, with a power base originally in the Spartan villages of Pitana and Mesoa, and one from the junior “Euryontid” house, purportedly stemming from King Eurypon, with a power base originally in the Spartan villages of Limnai and Cynosura. Authorities speculate that the dual kingship is a legacy from the original process by which the polis of Sparta was consolidated. In any case, it endured for centuries, and the role of the kings, who in historical times were often to some degree at odds with one another, was by no means entirely ceremonial. They served on the Gerousia, they had extensive ritual responsibilities, and most important, they led the Spartan forces in battle.

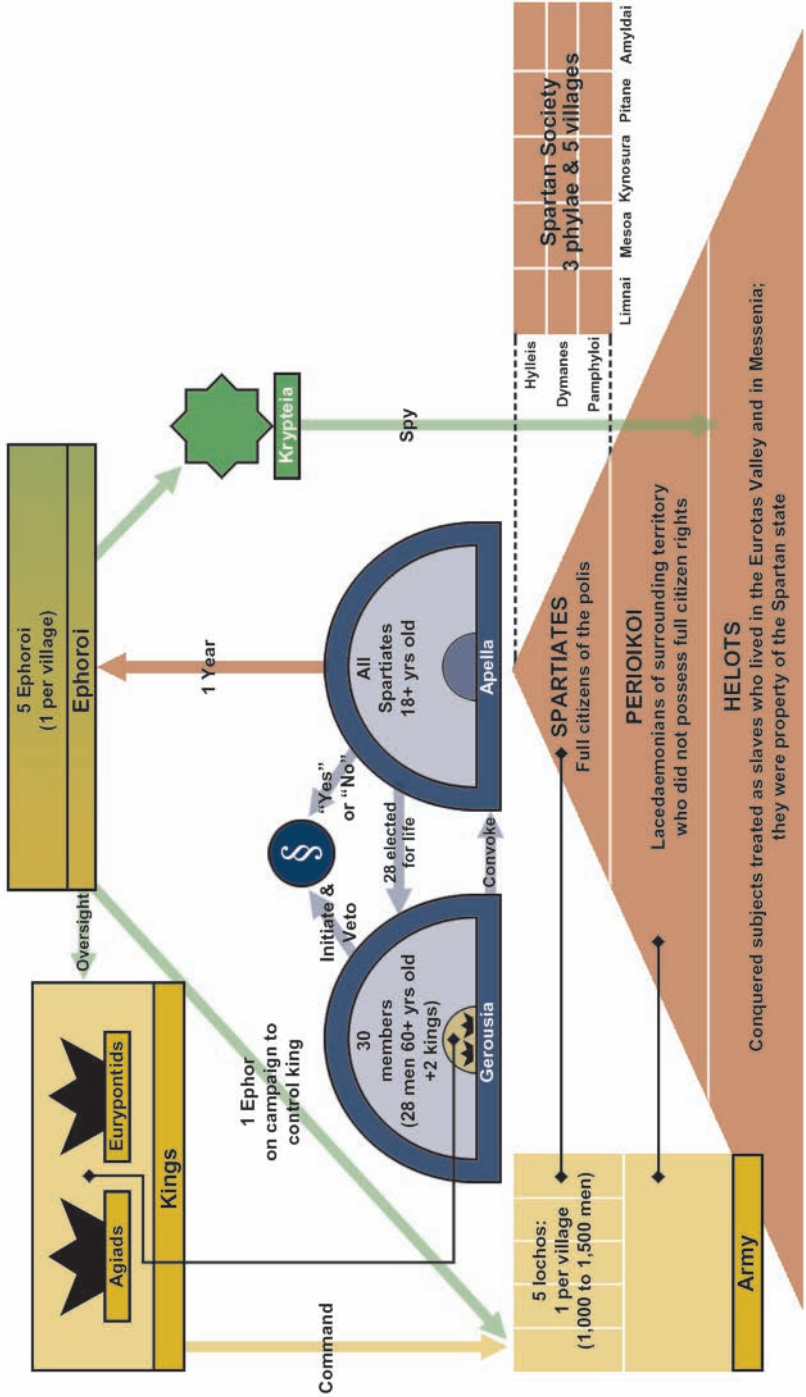
Kings aside, membership in the Gerousia was elective and for life, open only to those who, at age sixty, were no longer eligible for military service, having already passed, with unusual distinction, not only through the *agoge*, but through forty years in the hoplite phalanx. This extensive process of vetting in view—fifty-three years long, in effect, counting both the *agoge* and active service—it is perhaps not surprising that throughout Spartan history the integrity of the Gerousia was never called into question. Nor, for that matter, in any serious sense, was the integrity of the ephorate. Individual Spartans—kings among them—were corrupted. Spartan institutions, apparently, were not. As long as they remained in being, they maintained their integrity, and called even erring kings to account. It is a very impressive record. Spartan leaders, as a collective, made many unwise decisions, of course, over the centuries, but, so far as we know, they made them on the basis of misapprehension and faulty judgment, not because they had been bribed or bought.

Spartan Religion

The religious beliefs and practices of Sparta were, in broad outline at least, very much the same as those of other Hellenes, and more particularly, the same as those of other Dorians, with the salient exception that the Spartans were conceded on all sides to be unusually—and quite sincerely—pious and attentive to the gods. They took the will of the gods very seriously, to the extent that unfavorable omens were entirely capable of stopping a Spartan army in its tracks, whatever the apparent odds in its favor, or of keeping an army immobile, even under heavy attack. It was hard enough to fight against human rivals. The Spartans wanted no part of displeasing the gods.

And religious life in Sparta was distinctive in several other ways. We have already mentioned the Menelaion shrine to Menelaus and Helen, and

ORGANIZATION OF SPARTAN SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT



Herodotus tells a pretty story of a very plain girl taken by her nurse to the shrine for help who later, by Helen's bequest, became the most beautiful woman in Sparta and a Spartan queen in her own right (6.61.2–5). Helen's brothers, or half-brothers, the Dioscouri, or "divine youths," Pollux and Castor—commemorated, by the way, in the constellation of Gemini—were important throughout Greece, a good deal more important in cult, if physical remains are to be trusted, than they were in mythology. But as native Laconians, they were especially venerated in Sparta.

The official tutelary deities of Sparta were Zeus and Athena, "Poliouchos," the guardian of the city, whose "Bronze House" or temple lay on the Spartan acropolis—by no means as impressive as the acropolis at Athens, but even still, a bit more impressive than dismissive reports might lead one to expect. The most prominent religious festivals in Sparta, however, which they celebrated with exemplary seriousness, were devoted instead to the children of the goddess Leto—Apollo and Artemis. Most prominent of all were the three summer festivals devoted to Apollo, the Hyacinthia, the Gymnopaedia, and evidently most important of all, the Carneia, celebrated, we are told, by all Dorians, but kept by the Spartans with a special vigor and attentiveness which at times kept them from battle even when their very survival was at stake. The Spartans, again, wanted no part of displeasing the gods.

The summer cycle began with the Hyacinthia, celebrated at the outlying village of Amyclae and apparently dating, in some guise at least, to very early times indeed. The name "Hyacinthos" bears the tell-tale "inth" diphthong that testifies to pre-Hellenic origins, and the tale of the pretty young man inadvertently slain by his lover Apollo seems to recall a whole array of Near Eastern vegetation myths. Like many very old ritual practices, the Hyacinthia was encrusted with a finally incoherent array of tales suggesting what it was about, and the Spartans evidently conceived of Hyacinthos both as a young victim of Apollo and as an older man forced, like Agamemnon, to sacrifice his daughter. The festival evidently began in ritual sadness, mourning the death of Hyacinthos (or whomever) and only after became explicitly celebratory.

The Gymnopaedia, the festival of naked (or unarmed) boys, took place in the wearing heat of high summer, and involved, among other things, extended bouts of communal dancing as an endurance test. Here, as elsewhere in Sparta, dancing and choral singing were important, and outsiders were often invited to witness the activities, including a sort of choral contest between choirs of *paides*, or boys, singing about their prowess to come, and *andres*, or men, singing about their current prowess, and *gerontes*, or old men, singing about their great deeds in the past.

The Carneia, in late summer, seems to have been most important of all, so much so that celebrating the festival prevented the Spartans from fighting with the Athenians and Plataeans at Marathon in 480 and interfered significantly with the Thermopylae campaign ten years later. Some have looked skeptically at such tales, suspecting the Spartans of less admirable ulterior motives, but for my own part, I am inclined to take the Spartans' word for their motives here. Everything about them suggests that they really did respect the gods.

Michael Pettersson argues in his extensive 1992 monograph on the subject that the three-festival cycle in fact functioned as a polis-wide annual initiation festival, in the first instance for young men completing the *agoge*, but to some degree for young women about to be married as well. His argument depends heavily on patterns of interpretation derived from early-twentieth-century anthropological theorizing, but it may well be true even so.

One other Spartan festival attracted a good deal of attention, especially in later days, during the Roman imperium, long after the glory days of Sparta had passed. The sacred site devoted to the goddess Orthia near the banks of the Eurotas dates to very early times, and the Spartans built a temple there as early as the 700s and another, grander temple in the 570s. At some point early on, Orthia seems to have been conflated with Artemis, the hunt-loving, animal-loving, virgin sister of Apollo, and she was worshipped as Artemis Orthia. The rites devoted to her are peculiar, and in their later incarnation, indeed, notorious. The site has yielded a great deal of archaeological evidence, much in the form of votive offerings, and some of these are very striking. Most arresting are a series of grotesque masks, many on view in the Spartan museum, which to me at least recall the “false faces” of the Iroquois, another notably—and very effectively—warlike culture. In the heyday of Sparta the festival of Artemis Orthia seemed to involve a stealing ritual, in which mid-teenage classes in the *agoge* would attempt to steal cheeses from the altar of the goddess, while older youths defended the altar with whips, honor going to the teen who stole the most cheeses and endured the most whipping. Later on, in Roman times, the ordeal seems to have become a tourist attraction and something more like a straightforward whipping and pain-endurance contest in which the winners, so Plutarch informs us, sometimes allowed themselves to be beaten to death to ensure victory.

This sort of thing is not unprecedented in other cultures—tourism, perhaps aside. Frightening puberty rites, mutilations, trials of terror, and stoic endurance are in one sense or another fairly common currency. Self-inflicted and self-chosen piercings are, as a matter of fact, still with us. But the Spartans, it must be confessed, seem to have taken such things to unusual limits.



© National Archaeological Museum, Athens

A female figure, presumably Orthia, on a bone fibula (brooch) catchplate found at the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia near Sparta in the 1920s. The piece dates from approximately 660 BCE.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What function was served by the “ephorate”?
2. What is indicated by the “inth” diphthong?

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Lecture 5: Spartan Art and Culture

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge's *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300 to 362 BC*.



Sparta has in the past often been depicted as more or less an artistic and cultural wasteland—and beyond that, as a wasteland by design, devoted to the martial virtues and to nothing else. It is true that Sparta, in the classical age at least, did not devote anything like the cultural energy devoted elsewhere, most conspicuously at Athens, to pursuits such as literature, drama, philosophy, visual arts, or even monumental architecture.

Still less did the Spartans cultivate the artistry elsewhere devoted to jewelry-making, gold- and silverwork, splendid clothing, and the like. Full Spartan citizens were, of course, prohibited from engaging in craft work of any kind, and the needs of the polis in that regard were filled predominantly by perioeic laborers who were highly skilled in armor-making and in a variety of practical skills, but who were not encouraged to hone their abilities in the more strictly decorative arts. Sparta likewise sought, and in large measure achieved, economic self-sufficiency and discouraged trade in general, and, even more so luxury trade. That is not to say that as time passed, individual Spartans, when they gained the chance abroad or on the basis of contacts abroad, did not frequently develop a taste for luxury and wealth. It is, though, to suggest that the Spartan state did all it could to discourage such tendencies.

The Spartan ethos instead favored a kind of disciplined minimalism, devoted to people, or more properly, to the development of personal virtue, rather than to the production of artifacts. The Spartans themselves were, in a sense—at least in Spartan eyes—the noblest Spartan works of art. And rather surprisingly, their Greek contemporaries seem on the whole to have concurred in that judgment. In terms of self-discipline, physical condition, orderliness, and respectful behavior, and indeed, in terms of physical beauty, the Spartans seem to have set the standard so thoroughly that, save in individual cases, no one really disputed their preeminence. As Plutarch cites an old man at Olympia as observing, “All the Greeks know what is right and fair, but the Spartans alone practice it.”

Even in speaking the Spartans cultivated a certain pungent minimalism, trained, as they were, to “keep it short” and to the point. This too the citizens of other, more loquacious city-states found odd and admirable, so much so that some, at least, made collections of pithy, Laconic Spartanisms. Plutarch’s *Sayings of Spartans* and *Sayings of Spartan Women* enshrines quite literally hundreds of them. They often have in Greek a terseness that resists translation into English. King Leonidas’s forementioned response to Xerxes’ request that the Spartans lay down their arms at Thermopylae—“*molon labe*,” or “come and take them”—is perhaps the most famous, but there are many others. Here is another example from Plutarch, from the time

when Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, was gaining power. "When Philip of Macedon sent some orders to the Spartans by letter, they wrote in reply, 'What you wrote about, No.'" Another, very famous, from an anonymous Spartan woman as she handed her son his shield when he was going off to battle, "Either this or upon this," in effect, of course, "win or die." And finally, this one attributed, to King Agis II (reigned 427–401)—"Being asked how one could be a free man all his life, he said, 'By feeling contempt for death,'" in Greek, simply *"thantou kataphronon."*

Nonetheless, especially in early times, before 550 or so, the Spartans to some degree at least cultivated the arts as we more usually think of them. One doesn't often associate Sparta with poetry, but in the 600s, and to some degree later, the Spartan poetic tradition was relatively rich. Terpander of Lesbos is recorded as being the first victor in the poetry contest at the reorganized Carneia during the 670s, and Alcman flourished at Sparta during the late 600s. Stesichorus, most celebrated for his claim that Helen was not, in fact, at Troy, during the notorious war waged to secure her return to her husband in Laconia, evidently practiced his craft at Sparta about 550. And the Spartans of the era of the Persian Wars were glad to call upon the talents of Simonides. The most revered of Spartan poets, though, was Tyrtaeus, who flourished around 650, when the Spartans were engaged in a bitter war against the Messenians, and he became, in effect, the all-time Spartan poet laureate, whose works were memorized and recited in Sparta for centuries. Their character reveals the reason for their enduring regard. Here is a part of a poem by Tyrtaeus that suggests why the Spartans held him in such esteem.

*Come, you young men, stand fast at one another's side and fight,
and do not start shameful flight or panic, but make the spirit in your
heart strong and valiant, and do not be in love of life when you are
fighting men.*

This is why, according to Plutarch, the Spartans termed him a "good man to sharpen the spirits of youth."

At least early on, again up until the 500s more or less, Sparta likewise produced high-quality work in the visual and three-dimensional arts and crafts. Laconia produced pottery even for export during the period, and produced as well a variety of votive figurines that have proved very helpful to scholars trying to ascertain how Spartan men and women dressed and what they looked like. There are, unsurprisingly, a good many figurines of Spartan warriors, some bearing the distinctive Laconian long-braided locks and cloak (see Cartledge, *Spartans* 68), and a good many figurines of horses. Greece is not, on the whole, good horse country, and horses were accordingly cherished as, in effect, symbols of status, and here the Spartans were anything but immune. Indeed, after the mid-500s, when the Spartan minimalist ethos seems most securely to have taken hold, horses were something not far removed from the only prestige item open to ambitious Spartan wealth. The Spartans accordingly dominated (among others) the most high-prestige event in the ancient Olympics, the four-horse chariot race, in which, then as now on the track, the laurels went not so much to the jockey or driver as to the owner and breeder. Perhaps the most celebrated Spartan figurine was discovered in what is now

Serbia and depicts a Spartan girl engaged in running or, perhaps, a choral dance. She is fit, cheerful, and energetic, depicted in mid-stride, wearing a short-skirted sort of shift that leaves her right breast exposed, and she reflects for all time the attention which Sparta, all but uniquely, devoted to her women as well as her men (see Cartledge, *Spartans* 168).

The Spartans also, even more surprisingly, up until about 550, produced high-quality ivory work, a luxury item if there ever was one. And they produced as well the genuinely frightening grotesque masks since unearthed at the shrine of Artemis Orthia. The strongest argument, though, at least from my own perspective, for the continuing vibrancy of the Spartan artistic tradition is the celebrated “Leonidas” bust that I mentioned in an earlier lecture, which dates, we are told, to about 480, and which brilliantly encapsulates what was most admirable in the Spartan spirit. Spartan architecture too, based on the admittedly fragmentary and, more damagingly, predominantly Roman-era remains, was not quite the absolute artistic nonentity that we are led to believe.

Where the Spartans really excelled artistically, however, was not in poetry or literature, or even in the visual arts. Where they excelled was song and dance. If one wishes to establish an enduring reputation for artistic excellence, song and dance are not the ideal arts to cherish if one wishes for an enduring reputation, particularly in ages unblessed by the mnemonic powers of videotape and film. For dance and song are performative arts, by their very nature ephemeral, but here the Spartans really exerted themselves, and here, by all accounts, they excelled. Even the Athenians were impressed, and impressing the hyper-competitive Athenians was no easy task, whatever the venue of competition. The Spartans particularly valued dance and song because they felt that both bore an immediate and obvious relevance to skills in battle, where precise communal motions and reliable high spirits and morale stood at an absolute premium. Accordingly, they were deeply devoted to both arts, and in both arts achieved, again, if the records can be trusted, an unparalleled level of expertise.



Two terracotta masks believed to represent women. They were unearthed at the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia near Sparta in the 1920s and date from the fifth-century BCE.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What are some famous examples of Spartan minimalism in speech?
2. Why did the Spartans place such emphasis on song and dance?

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Lecture 6: Women in Sparta

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Sarah B. Pomeroy's *Spartan Women*.



Spartan women were different. And in many respects, Spartan women were the best. We find in antiquity an astonishing unanimity of opinion on the point. Many city-states hated and envied Sparta for perfectly understandable reasons, and many, Aristotle among them, disliked the “gynocracy” or “woman-ruled” polis that they thought they saw in Sparta. But no one in a position to know seems to have doubted that on the whole the women of Sparta were the most formidable in the world: the fittest, the most beautiful, the most self-confident, the most outspoken, the richest, the most powerful—all of the above. Other women were nothing like them, either in Greece or in “barbarian” realms. They stood by themselves, and stood by themselves with an insouciant, calm, settled pride that many observers—indeed, that the large majority of non-Spartan observers—found profoundly disturbing and unsettling. Women simply shouldn’t be like that. But the Spartan women were. It was, at least in my view, an enduring Spartan source of strength. As the most celebrated Spartan woman of them all put it, Gorgo, daughter of King Cleomenes and wife of King Leonidas—and, on the basis of the record, the most powerful intellect in Laconia during the time of the Persian wars and more or less recognized as such—Spartan women could rule men because they, and they alone, gave birth to men and were trained from birth to do so—and to keep them to their task. As she, among others, most authoritatively did.

It may be that the early influence of Crete, where on the basis of the archaeological record it appears that women were, in an ancient context at least, unusually prominent, had something to do with the position of women in Sparta. In other contexts the Spartans were quite clear about what they considered to be the Cretan origin of some of their customs. And the prominent cultural example of Helen clearly had some influence as well, celebrated in Sparta not so much as the erring wife of Menelaus and immediate cause of the Trojan War as, instead, a goddess in her own right. But for whatever set of reasons, the social position of Spartan women was distinctive. For one thing, women of the citizen class, unlike their counterparts elsewhere in Greece, were neither confined to the home nor confined by housework, or even by the daily tasks of child-rearing. Helot household workers took care of such duties, and indeed, Laconian nurses were highly valued elsewhere in Greece for their no-nonsense skill in raising fearless, well-behaved children. Middle and upper-class Greek women elsewhere—those, that is to say, who were not slaves or peasant women and were not involved in the flourishing, many-tiered “sex trade” that went on in places like Athens and Corinth—appeared in public, if at all, fully and carefully clothed and often veiled as

well, rather like many Muslim women at present. Spartan women were far less concerned about such things, and exercised regularly and publically, at least as girls and adolescents, in short shifts slit along the sides for ease of movement—which is why other Greeks called them “thigh-flashers”—or at times, entirely nude. Spartan sexual customs seem to have been relatively relaxed in other ways. We are told that an older man who was so inclined might lend out his younger wife to another promising young man in the hope of their producing excellent children and that the women involved were generally pleased with such arrangements, not least because of the power that ensued to them in two households rather than a single one.

Elsewhere in Greece, whatever education women gained was confined almost entirely to the home and household tasks. Very few women, even in Athens, were literate and very few men saw any reason for them to be so. Here again things were different in Sparta. Women did not undergo the full-scale, state-sponsored *agoge*, which shaped their brothers, and, until marriage, they continued to live at their natal homes. But they participated, even so, in a rigorous female version of the “up-bringing,” which included running, throwing, and wrestling—even at times we are told against boys and, again, in the nude—and a good deal of energetic dancing and choral work as well. Many women also were literate, and they were trained and expected to be self-confident and outspoken. Indeed, they were at times encouraged to taunt their young male counterparts, with a view toward spurring them toward greater efforts, and the Spartans were perfectly happy with the sexual undertow involved. Boys and girls were encouraged to assess each other, as potential sexual partners and on other grounds, on the probably well-founded theory that doing so would motivate both.

The purpose of this regimen was what the Spartans called “*teknoποιία*,” or “child-making.” Many male theorists elsewhere in Greece thought of women quite explicitly as merely the “receptacle” or “seed-bed” in which fathers sowed their children to be, but the Spartans assumed that in bearing strong, healthy children, strong mothers and fathers were both—and more or less equally—important, and the Spartans treated women accordingly. Indeed, the state went so far as officially to equate dying in war and dying in childbirth as a self-sacrificing act on behalf of Sparta. Men and women who so died, and they alone, outside of kings, bore names on their gravestones to honor their memory. Elsewhere in Greece women were generally kept on short rations, but again, Spartan ideas on such matters were different. Women were fed as well as men, indeed, very likely better than men, since men ate regularly in a mess where “Spartan rations” were the norm, and boys were deliberately kept a little hungry to encourage stealth and inventiveness in stealing to supplement their allotment.

All of this is, from some perspectives at least, a little surprising. One would not expect so strongly military and so stern a culture as Sparta to treat women in most respects better than the seemingly far more enlightened Athenians. But so, beyond question, it was, and so it has often been in other cultures devoted more or less wholeheartedly to war. Far and away the freest women in medieval Europe, a self-fashioning queen or two aside, were the Norse and Viking women of the far North, and a millennium before

that time, Tacitus wrote about the alarming respect with which the fierce Germanic warriors of the forests treated their sisters and mothers and daughters. So too in North America. The Iroquois and the various Algonquin nations of the eastern woodlands and northlands engaged in chronic warfare, before and after European contact. And yet, female captives in particular, after a year or two of adjustment, often proved most reluctant to return to their previous lives. It has been suggested that in such cultures the regular absence of men on raids and in campaign forced women to take control at home, and it may be so.

Spartan marriage customs were peculiar as well. Relations in fact seem to have been consensual for the most part, or as consensual as they were anywhere else, but in what appears to be a vestige of earlier customs, Spartan women were subjected to at least a sham marriage by capture, the details already worked out beforehand. And after marriage, or a first marriage, a wife ordinarily stayed in her new home while her husband continued, often for some years, to live in the barracks, sneaking in for marital relations by stealth at night, until at last, at about the age of thirty, he could join his wife at home full-time. The theory here was that making sex difficult would make it attractive, husband and wife both eager for contact and therefore all the more likely to produce vigorous children.

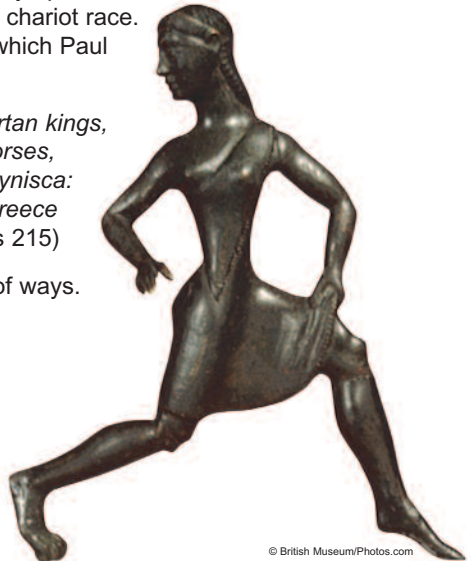
At home, by all accounts, women ruled, or so many anecdotes suggest, both from the perspective of disapproving outsiders and from within. And again, anecdotes and apothegms of Spartan women abound. We have already mentioned Gorgo, the daughter of Cleomenes and wife of Leonidas, who already as a young girl is on record giving her father diplomatic advice—which he welcomed and took—and who in later life is recorded as the only person in Sparta with the wit to figure out how to read a secret message from Persia. Noteworthy as well is Cynisca (her name, wonderfully, means “puppy”), the sister of king of Agesilaus II, famous as the first, and perhaps the only, female victor in the ancient Olympics, twice triumphant as owner in the four-horse chariot race. She set up a monument at Olympia, which Paul Cartledge translates as follows:

*My fathers and brothers were Spartan kings,
I won with a team of fast-footed horses,
and put up this monument: I am Cynisca:
I say I am the only woman in all Greece
to have won this wreath. (Spartans 215)*

Spartan women were unique in lots of ways.

Bronze Figure of a Running Girl

The figure was found at Prizren, Serbia, but is believed to have been made in or near Sparta between 520 and 500 BCE.



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FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What were the characteristics of the Spartan female's "up-bringing"?
2. Why were Spartan men and women housed separately during the first years of marriage?

Suggested Reading

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Other Books of Interest

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Lecture 7: The Early Days: Before the Persian Wars

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge's *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300 to 362 BC*.



In our second lecture we took a look at the very earliest days of Laconia and Sparta—at prehistoric times, the Mycenaean, the Greek dark ages, the arrival of the Dorians and the “Heraclids,” the consolidation of Sparta itself, and the incorporation of the nearby village of Amyclae. All this, it seems, had transpired by the early 700s. Shortly thereafter the Spartans came to dominate Helos Plain in southern Laconia, and the institution of helotage began. Some have wondered whether the very term “helot” is a derivative of “Helos,” and there have been scholars who thought so, but the consensus appears to be that the term derives, as suggested before, from “*heilotes*,” or “captive.” In any case, two generations or so later, by the late 700s, or thereabouts—accounts vary considerably—the Spartans undertook the conquest of Messenia, and full-scale helotage began in earnest. There seems, for as long as we have records, to have been a considerable difference in the situation of the Laconian and Messenian helots. In any case, for whatever reason, the Messenian helots were far more inclined to revolt than their Laconian counterparts and seem likewise to have been far more bitter in their resentment of their overlords. Whether the situation of the Laconians was in some sense better is hard to say, but beyond question they were more docile and on that basis it would appear more accepting of their lot.

The early 600s, or early seventh century, saw a whole series of developments that worked to make of Sparta the distinctive polis which she became. Around 700, the Spartans laid out their first temple to Orthia and worked as well on the Menelaion sanctuary. Our first records of the Spartan Carneia festival seemingly date from the 670s, traditionally 676. And at roughly the same time there appears to have been a distribution of land, giving rise to the helot-farmed “*kleroi*,” as the Spartans called them, which supported the Spartan warriors and provided them with the foodstuffs that they were required to contribute to their mess. More far-reaching still, it was at about this period that the Spartans began to fight in the heavy-armed phalanx, whose tactics they at last so thoroughly mastered. And, for the Spartans at least, well so, for at sometime around 670 the recently conquered Messenians revolted, and it took the Spartans nearly a generation to restore order to their own satisfaction. This “Second Messenian War” was in many respects a decisive and profoundly formative event for Sparta. Its sheer length testifies to its difficulty—this is the time when Tyrtaeus flourished with his poetic admonitions to courage and solidarity in battle—and my own suspicion is that it was the resulting trauma that crystallized what we now think of as the “Lycurgan” reforms. Sparta was, at the time, confronted by unprecedented challenges that threatened her very existence, and in response the Spartans devised unprecedented solutions.

The hard-won victory in Messenia seems to have fueled Spartan ambitions, and at about the same time or shortly thereafter the Spartans decided to confront the Argives to the north. Argos and nearby Mycenae had, clearly, flourished during the Mycenaean age (hence, of course, the name), and the Argives were to prove perennial and formidable foes to Spartan hegemony. The Spartans lost the ensuing battle of Hysiae, near Thyreatis, traditionally in 669, but it was only the first of many contests with their Argive rivals.

Sparta thereupon directed her attentions to Arcadia in the central Peloponnese, hoping to find more helots there. The result, sometime early in the 500s, as best as can be told—Herodotus gives no date here—was the so-called “Battle of the Fetters” fought near Tegea. The careful Spartans had consulted the Delphic oracle in advance of undertaking their expedition, and according to Herodotus, the oracle responded as follows.

*For Arcadia you ask me, you ask for much; I refuse to give it.
Eaters of acorns, and many of them, dwell in Arcadia,
And they will stop you. But not all will I grudge you,
Tegea I will give you, a dance floor to tread,
A beautiful plain to measure out with a line. (1.66)*

Thus encouraged, the Spartans took chains and fetters with them, the better to control their anticipated captives. But things didn’t work out as they expected—the Arcadians won, and it was the Spartans who found themselves “treading” the Tegean “dance floor” as captives. Herodotus himself, so he



The Ruins of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi

People from throughout Europe called on the Pythia (priestess) at the Oracle of Delphi on Mount Parnassus to ask questions about the future. The Pythia, a role filled by different women from about 1400 BCE to 381 CE, was the medium through which the god Apollo was said to speak.

The centerpiece of Delphi was the Temple of Apollo, built with donations from every Greek city-state and from abroad. The base of the temple still stands, with half a dozen of the original columns. On the outside of the base are over seven hundred inscriptions, most announcing the emancipation of slaves, which was considered a special act of piety to be performed at Delphi. At the far end of the temple is the altar, originally decorated with memorials, ex-votos, statues, and offerings.

tells us, saw the fetters enshrined as trophies at Tegea. The problem, as things turned out after a bit more consultation, was that the Spartans needed the bones of Agamemnon's son Orestes, and by cunning and stratagem, they got them—presumably the semi-fossilized bones of a mastodon or mammoth (the Greeks thought of their ancient heroes as big)—and then things began to go better for Laconia.

By the mid-500s the Spartans were clearly feeling their oats, their power recognized as far away as Lydia in what is now southwestern Turkey, where the proverbially rich king Croesus, threatened by the rise of Persia under the great king Cyrus, sought the Spartans as allies in their capacity as “leaders of Hellas” (1.69.2). The Spartans were glad to comply, and indeed, were busy preparing a mission in assistance of Croesus when word came that he had been conquered. Nothing daunted, the Spartans decided to warn off Cyrus lest he “inflict reckless damage on any city in Hellenic territory”—as some of Croesus's former Hellenic subjects on the Ionic coast of his realm in fact were—“since the Lacedaemonians would not tolerate it.” Cyrus's response was, in effect, “Who are the Lacedaemonians?” (1.152, 1.153.1), but soon enough that would become clearer as Hellenes and Persians came into ever-closer contact.

Meanwhile, Spartan rivalry with the Argives continued, around 545, in the so-called “Battle of the Champions,” again in or near Thyreatis—the Spartans and Argives were contesting the coastal region along the Argolic Gulf, which lay to the north for Sparta and to the south for the Argives. This time they decided to let three hundred “champions” on each side fight it out, with the result, at the end of the day, that two Argives and one Spartan remained standing. But the Argives went home and the Spartan stalwart, Othyrades by name, remained in possession of the field. Advantage Sparta. The Argives, understandably, contested this interpretation of events, but after further fighting it was confirmed.

The extension of helotry proving more difficult, perhaps, than had been anticipated, during the later 500s, the Spartans adopted another sort of tactics in pursuing foreign relations. They began to form alliances, a procedure that would, in the long run, immensely enhance their power and prestige. By 550 or so Sparta had allied with Tegea, by about 525 with the fellow Dorians at Corinth—who would prove perhaps the most durable and valuable of Sparta's allies—and a bit after that with Elis. By just before 500, the Peloponnesian League, or the “Lacedaemonians and their allies,” had crystallized as a political force that gave to Sparta unprecedented influence in the Hellenic world and beyond. As the latter designation suggests, this was an unequal alliance or set of alliances in which, though the allies played a consultative role and ultimately, at times, had something not far from veto power, the Spartans themselves took the lead. As they would throughout the coming Persian wars and beyond for a century or more.

It was likewise during this period that the Spartans first undertook significant overseas ventures, joining with the naval power of Corinth to oust the more or less pro-Persian Polycrates of Samos about 525. Persian power was already very much on the move and already of concern to Sparta, and this also marked a conspicuous opening phase in a long-term Spartan policy of intervening in other Greek city-states against “tyrants.” Greek local politics

were notoriously, often murderously, faction-ridden, and it was seldom difficult to find fierce local opposition groups ranged against virtually any existing government. The Spartans liked to think of themselves as “liberators of Hellas,” and were sometimes—indeed, more often than one would expect—taken at their word as they intervened, most often, in hopes of establishing a suitably Sparta-friendly oligarchy in other tyrant-ridden Greek states.

Meanwhile, the late 500s also saw the accession of two kings who, in their varied ways, would prove very influential: the Agaid, Cleomenes I, about 520, and his Eurypontid counterpart, Demaratus, about five years later. They would not get on well together.

In about 519, interestingly enough, Cleomenes turned down an offer of alliance from the small Boeotian polis of Plataea, and in a move pregnant with impact for the future, advised the Plataeans instead to ally themselves with Athens, on the grounds that Athens was closer, hoping thereby, so skeptical later critics have supposed, to foment discord between Athens and the dominant Boeotian polis of Thebes. And, as we shall see, Plataea proved to Athens a strikingly valuable and faithful ally.

It was not the last time Cleomenes concerned himself with Athenian affairs. Since about 560 Athens had been dominated, on and off, by the family of the colorful and energetic Peisistratus, fairly benign and more than fairly capable as tyrants go, but, in Hellenic eyes, at least, a tyrant nonetheless. After his death, his son Hippias succeeded him, and in 514, in a botched assassination attempt, a pair of aggrieved homosexual lovers, the “tyrannicides” Aristogeiton and Harmodius, assassinated not Hippias himself, but his brother Hipparchus, which had the effect of making Hippias a good deal less confident of his powers and a good deal more overbearing. This, in turn, prompted Cleomenes to intervene in Athens and to oust him, in substantial part, so we are told, because Cleomenes, with reason, suspected Hippias of pro-Persian leanings.

The departure of Hippias, in turn—who eventually found his way to Persia—opened the door to the leader of the rival Alcmaeonid clan, of whom we will hear a good deal more, a man named Cleisthenes. Cleisthenes, in order to consolidate his power, turned to the Athenian *demos*, or lower classes or common people, and established in Athens, in the year 508 or 507, the first democracy on record. This was not precisely what Cleomenes had in mind, and even less so since in 507 an Athenian embassy to the Persian great king—perhaps fully aware of what they were doing, perhaps not—had offered to him “earth and water,” symbolic of submission to Persian dominance. In 506, accordingly, Cleomenes led Sparta and her allies into Attica again, hoping to rectify matters by establishing instead of the nascent democracy and Cleisthenes another leader named Isagoras, who had, so hostile sources testify, among other attractions, a charming wife in whom Cleomenes was interested. Be that as it may, as he was about to work his will, Cleomenes’ fellow king Demaratus defaulted, taking the Corinthian allies with him, and the much aggrieved Cleomenes was forced to return home—and the Athenian democracy remained in place. Sparta, meanwhile, having learned her lesson, never thereafter sent two kings together out to do battle.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. In terms of foreign relations, what tactics did the Spartans adopt during the later 500s?
2. What impact was made by Cleomenes I and Demaratus in the late 500s?

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Lecture 8: The Ionian Revolt to Marathon, 490 BCE

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge's *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece*.



In 499 Aristagoras of Miletus, south of the island of Samos on the Ionian coast of what is now Turkey, came to Sparta looking for allies against Persian rule. Miletus was at the time an immensely sophisticated and prosperous city, and for generations Ionia—the coast of Anatolia and adjoining islands—had stood at the cultural forefront of the Hellenic world. Miletus, indeed, was the hometown of Thales, often designated as the first scientist or would-be scientist on record, and the Ionians, or some among them, had in recent years cultivated a new way of looking at the world, seeking to account for all phenomena through more or less systematically rational means. It was an intellectually vibrant time and place.

The Spartans were in a military and political, if not in a cultural sense, the acknowledged leaders of Greece, and their assistance would be most valuable in seeking to throw off Persian dominance, and Aristagoras seemed to be making headway in his discussions with King Cleomenes. His pitch ran into two snags, however. He had brought to Sparta technical innovation—a map—and attempted to allure Cleomenes with the prospect of an easy conquest. Cleomenes asked for a day to think things over, and on the following day asked how long the journey was to the Persian capital. Aristagoras replied, “three months.” The appalled Cleomenes, according to Herodotus, ordered him out of Sparta by sundown. Aristagoras then attempted bribery, upping his offer gradually from ten to fifty talents—thirty or forty million dollars in contemporary buying power. At which point, so we are told, Cleomenes’s daughter Gorgo piped up, “Father, your guest-friend is going to corrupt you unless you leave and stay away from him” (5.51). Cleomenes took her advice.

The Athenian assembly, however, proved easier to persuade, and “voted to dispatch twenty ships to help the Ionians.” And this, according to Herodotus, “turned out to be the beginning of evils for both Hellenes and barbarians” alike (5.97). In 498 the Athenians, along with five ships of hoplites from the city of Eretria on the island of Euboia, helped the Ionians to burn the local Persian regional capital of Sardis—and thereupon thought better of the matter and went home. The revolt, predictably, infuriated the Persian great king Darius when he came to hear of it, and still more the gratuitous assistance of the Athenians. He was at first not precisely sure who the upstarts were, but once he found out he vowed to punish them and supposedly appointed one of his attendants to remind him, “My lord, remember the Athenians,” on no less than three occasions every time his dinner was served (5.105). He did not, in fact, forget.

The Ionian revolt, meanwhile, continued, and came to a head in 494 in a naval battle near the small island of Lade offshore from Miletus. The Persians were in origin a land-bound people with no seafaring tradition whatsoever, but they had conquered Egypt, had conquered Ionia, of course, and, most important, had conquered Phoenicia, and the Phoenicians in particular, as even the Greeks conceded, were the most accomplished seafarers and naval warriors on earth. Taking them on was no easy task, and still less so with a coalition fleet of notably divided mind and loyalties. The Persian fleet, on the eve of the battle, numbered six hundred, so Herodotus tells us, and the Ionian fleet precisely three hundred fifty-three, eighty from Miletus, one hundred from Chios, seventy from Lesbos, and sixty from Samos with assorted smaller contingents, and the Persians made an offer. Anyone who defected from the Ionian coalition would be readmitted to the Persian empire on the same terms as before. Anyone who continued to resist, however, was to be enslaved, their sons castrated, their daughters trundled off to Persia. Once the battle started, the Samians and Lesbians took the bait, leaving the Chians and the Milesians to suffer the consequences—which they did. Miletus was conquered and destroyed with such exemplary thoroughness that the next year when Phrynichus, a rival of Aeschylus as a tragedian, mounted a production of his newly composed *The Fall of Miletus*, the horrified Athenians fined him and ordered that the play never be performed again. Thus ended the Ionian revolt.

And Darius, most assuredly, had not forgotten the Athenians, nor, for that matter, the rest of the yet-unconquered Greek world. He dispatched envoys more or less all across Hellas, asking for the earth and water, which was a sign of willing submission. A great many city-states complied. Not, however, either Athens or Sparta. The Athenians disposed of the Persian heralds in a pit reserved for the bodies of executed criminals, and the Spartans, with grim Laconism, suggested that they could find all the earth and water they wanted after the Spartans had thrown them into a well to drown. Neither course of action did much to placate Darius's wrath, and in 492, he accordingly dispatched a member of the Persian royal family, Mardonius, at the head of a punitive expedition that came to grief in bad weather while rounding Mt. Athos in the northern Aegean. Nothing deterred, Darius formulated alternative plans for his troops, this time venturing to strike not by coasting along the Aegean shore, but sailing more or less straight to Euboea and Attica, right across the Aegean itself.

Events in Laconia and elsewhere had been proceeding apace, however. As the Ionian revolt drew to its grim close, the Spartans found themselves, as so often in the past, engaged in hostilities against the Argives, their traditional rivalry intensified by Spartan disapproval of Argos's apparently pro-Persian sympathies. The result was a Spartan victory at the battle of Sepia, near Tiryns, after which, so we are told, some six thousand Argive warriors took refuge in a nearby sacred grove, which King Cleomenes impiously ordered the helots attending his army to set on fire—thereby, or so he evidently hoped, sparing the Spartans themselves from ritual pollution and likewise burning to death the Argives within. It was a generation before the Argives recovered their military strength, but some at least among the Spartans may well have had misgivings about Cleomenes's tactics, more on the ground of irreligion than inhumanity, which would only have intensified when it was

revealed a few years later that Cleomenes had bribed the Delphic Oracle to declare his Eurypontid rival King Demaratus illegitimate, and hence to secure the deposition of Demaratus in favor of the more pliable Leotychidas.

The crosscurrents at work here were complex. Demaratus had sabotaged Cleomenes's expedition in Attica some fifteen years before, and where Cleomenes, whatever his other failings, was adamantly anti-Persian, Demaratus clearly held different views, and indeed, after his deposition, went so far as to flee to Persia, where he seems at last to have become a trusted in-house Hellenic expert for the Persian great king. After his efforts at Delphi became known, however, Cleomenes himself became a *persona non grata* at Sparta and evidently took to the hinterlands, where he reportedly contented himself with fomenting trouble among the Arcadians until the Spartans called him home. The stories told of his last days are peculiar. Indeed, it is not easy to understand why, under suspicion as he was, he consented to come home to Sparta at all, and harder still to understand why, once home, he publically took to giving offense to Spartan citizens on the streets, supposedly by thrusting at their faces with his staff. In any case, we are told that the Spartans, who had long had doubts about his character and, increasingly, of his sanity, had him restrained and locked up in the stocks. Once there, we are told, he persuaded a helot attendant or guardian to give him a knife—presumably not too difficult a task for a Spartan king or former king—and thereupon cut himself to pieces, beginning with his legs and thighs and moving at last to more vital regions. Or so, in any case, Herodotus has it. Many have suspected, over the years, that the Spartan authorities had simply had enough of him, and one way or another, made away with him, but from this distance there is no way to know for sure. The record, such as it is, does seem, at least to me, to suggest an originally formidable and at first highly competent man gradually spinning out of control, but that being said, it is not clear precisely how he met his end.

What is clear, though, is who replaced him—his younger half-brother Leonidas, who had meanwhile conveniently married Cleomenes's only child, the precocious Gorgo, whom we met earlier giving her father foreign-policy advice. And Leonidas, who would become the hero of Thermopylae, was equally clearly a man of a different stamp. Heirs-apparent were exempt from the *agoge*, but their younger brothers and half-brothers were not. Leonidas had accordingly undergone the full Spartan treatment. It evidently took.

Mardonius having come to grief the last time around, royal family or no, Darius assigned his 490 punitive mission against Eritrea and Athens to other hands—Artaphrenes, another royal, and Datis, an experienced Median commander. They took care of Eritrea without any inordinate difficulty and sailed to Attica with high hopes, landing at Marathon, twenty-odd miles over the mountains from Athens itself, on the suggestion of the aged Hippias, who sought to regain with Persian backing the position at Athens, or something like it, which he had lost almost twenty years before. Marathon is remembered as a “plain,” a favorable place for the Persians to land because their strongest military arm was their cavalry—more specifically, in fact, their mounted archers—and cavalry are at their most effective in flat, open country and far less effective in woodland or hills. But the term “plain” in a

Hellenic context means something rather different than in Kansas or the Ukraine. The “plain of Marathon” is a small, mountain-bounded place, and the Athenians, once they had arrived to contest the landing, had no intention of coming down from the hills to give the Persian cavalry free play. Nevertheless, they faced very long odds, and they knew it.

No one knows for certain precisely how many men Datis and Artaphrenes had with them. Herodotus mentions six hundred triremes, which would suggest a very large force indeed, but even if, as most scholars believe, Herodotus is exaggerating—even wildly—the Persians far outnumbered the eight thousand or so Athenian hoplites present and the thousand or so Plataeans who loyally joined them.

The Spartans had promised, meanwhile, to help the Athenians in their hour of need, and when the Athenians realized that the Persian invasion was immanent, they dispatched a professional “all-day runner” named Philippides (or Pheidippides) to Sparta to request assistance. This was no easy run. The distance between Athens and Sparta was about one hundred fifty miles, over mountainous terrain and in high summer. He made it to Sparta in about thirty-six hours, meeting the god Pan along the way, so he said (near mount Parthenion, just outside of Laconia, as it happens), who promised to provide help of his own. The Spartans, however, were in high festival season, most likely celebrating the Carneia, and for religious reasons couldn’t leave until the full moon. Thus encouraged, Philippides presumably made it back to pass the rather discouraging news on to Athens.

The Athenians, meanwhile, stayed put. The Persians waited, presumably hoping for pro-Persian, pro-Peisistratid, anti-democratic factions in Athens to make their move. And the Athenians waited as well, hoping, among other things, that the Spartans would arrive in time to help. Finally, after some days, the Persians made a move, evidently detaching most of their cavalry by fleet on the way to Athens. And the Athenians moved as well.

As part and parcel of their democratic arrangements, the Athenians appointed a group of ten generals to command their forces, each of whom took command on his given day. This seems like a ridiculous arrangement and all the more so when, as at Marathon, the generals were divided in their counsel. The most experienced among them, however, Miltiades, who had already had some success dealing with Persian forces in northern Greece, persuaded a bare majority of others to fight, and on the fateful day, under the putative leadership of Callimachus, they did. With most at least of the Persian cavalry absent, they could descend from the hills to the plain without fatally risking their flanks, though they were still so severely outnumbered that they had to weaken their center in order to match the Persian line. They attacked, we are told, at a run, and though their overmatched center fell back, their powerful wings proved victorious and, in effect, flanked the Persian center. To their delighted amazement, they won, and won big. The Persians fled to their ships, and according to Herodotus lost six thousand four hundred of their troops in the process, to Athenian losses of one hundred ninety-two. These figures, by the way, are more or less plausible—the winning side in a hoplite engagement ordinarily suffered relatively few casualties. The slaughter came when one side broke.

The day was still young and the surviving Persians were at sea, presumably on the way to Athens, so the tired Athenians marched back, to encounter the Persian fleet—sure enough—anchored off the Athenian harbor at Phaleron. And there they remained. The Athenians—and Plataeans—had indeed triumphed. There is a wonderful story that the very tired Philippides ran back from the battle at maximum speed in the very first “marathon” (on top of the twelve, count the miles, he had run in effect on his way to Sparta and back) to announce, with his last breath, “Rejoice! We conquer!” Probably not true. But the Spartans, two thousand of them in full hoplite panoply, arrived in Athens after a three-day, one hundred fifty mile forced march, not in time to help in the battle, but in time to admire its result. They marched on to Marathon “to see the Medes,” and then, so Herodotus tells us, “praised the Athenians” and “went home” (6.120). Next time, as things turned out, they would be a good deal more intimately involved.



Twentieth-century illustration depicting Philippides declaring the Athenian victory at Marathon with his dying breath.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What was it that Darius vowed not to forget?
2. What was problematic about the Athenians' democratic arrangement to appoint a group of ten generals to command their forces?

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**Lecture 9:
Their Finest Hour:
Artemisium and Thermopylae, 490–480 BCE (Part I)**

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge's *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece*.



King Darius was understandably frustrated at the thwarting of his Athenian expedition. He was not a man accustomed to failure or prone to accept it when it came, and his next expedition against Hellas, it was decided, would be full-scale and conducted in person to put an end to the problem once and for all. Before he was able to bring his plans to fruition, however, King Darius died in 486, after a reign of thirty-six years, and his chosen son Xerxes (he had many) inherited the throne. Xerxes was just as determined to subdue the Greeks as his father had been—indeed, very likely more so, since his military reputation was yet to be established and his predecessors had established a glittering record. But before addressing such matters he had problems to attend to closer to home. Succession in the Persian empire was by no means always smooth, and soon enough both Egypt and Babylon were in revolt, demanding the close attention of Xerxes before he could turn his gaze to Athens and Sparta to the west.

By 484, however, he was ready to begin full-scale preparations, gathering supplies and forces from every corner of his empire—the biggest the world had ever seen. The expedition of Mardonius a decade or so before had come to grief rounding Mt. Athos, and in order to forestall such difficulties for the much larger fleet he was gathering, in 483 Xerxes ordered a canal across the narrow waist of the Athos peninsula in the three-pronged Chalcidice in northern Greece. In order to transport his vast host from Asia to Europe, he ordered the construction of a huge pair of pontoon bridges across the Hellespont at Abydos, and indeed, after storms destroyed the first two, he had the erring engineers executed and the unruly Hellespont itself flogged in order to teach it better manners, and then built two more in replacement. (Some have doubted Herodotus's tale of the flogging as propaganda, but why not? Herodotus's sources in the Hellespont area were evidently pretty good.)

Most Greeks, and most Athenians, perhaps, in particular, had evidently hoped that after the stirring triumph of the “*marathonomachoi*” or “Marathon-fighters”—celebrated in Athens for generations to come as the absolute best of men—the feared Medes and Persians had learned their lesson and would henceforward stay where they belonged, on the other side of the Aegean. Some, however, were more far-sighted, most notably the brilliant, shameless, and unscrupulous—and finally, indispensable—Themistocles of Athens, probably, though in a sense it pains me to admit it, the most effective and influential political leader that the ancient Hellenic world ever produced. The state-owned and slave-operated silver mines at Laurium, near Cape Sunium at the southern tip of Attica, hit an unexpectedly rich lode of ore, and the rising Themistocles persuaded the Athenian assembly to devote the proceeds not

to a citizen-by-citizen payout, as might have been expected, but rather to armaments and, in particular, to the cutting-edge wonder-weapons of the day—a fleet of triremes. The Phoeniceans and the Corinthians, not the Athenians, had taken the lead in naval innovation, and at the time Athens was not even the dominant naval power in the adjoining Saronic Gulf. That honor belonged to Athens's trading rival, the island of Aegina, visible from the Acropolis and just offshore. And it was, as a matter of fact, to counter the naval power of Aegina that Themistocles was able to persuade the Athenians to fund a new, state-of-the-art fleet. But the eyes of Themistocles were on Persia. And as events proved, presciently so.

By 481, however, even the most obtuse observer could no longer be in doubt about the shape of Persian intentions. Invasion was immanent and terrifying—on a heretofore unimaginable scale. The Greeks sent spies to inspect the preparations, and when they were discovered, rather than executing them, Xerxes had them given a full-guided tour and then sent home so the Greeks would know what they were up against. He sent heralds, again, far and wide seeking earth and water, to every relevant polis save Athens and Sparta, who had already placed themselves beyond the pale. And a large majority submitted, some with enthusiasm, some with reluctance, but virtually all in terror. The Spartans, indeed, were concerned about their earlier impiety. Heralds bore the protection of the gods, and having chosen to drown the previous Persian emissaries in a well, on further reflection, made the pious Spartans nervous. The authorities asked for volunteers to go to Persia in order to atone, and two high-prestige Spartans were forthcoming, willing to face certain death in expiation for the offense. When they arrived before Xerxes, however, he sent them too home, explaining that he, at least, respected the proprieties.

The Spartans, meanwhile, in accordance with their usual practice, consulted the oracle at Delphi about the most alarming situation confronting them. Delphi, for whatever reason, was consistently pro-Persian in its advice during the run-up to the Persian wars, and the response was not encouraging. Sparta was told to expect either a Persian victory or, at a minimum, the death of one of their own Spartan kings. The oracles granted to Athens, evidently a bit later, were grimmer still. "Why sit so idle, you poor wretched men? To the ends of the land you should flee," began the first oracle that the Athenians received, "shroud over your heart with the evils to come" (Herodotus 7.140). This was, in fact, so very disheartening that the Athenians tried again and gained a slightly more favorable response. "The rest will be taken," the Pythia suggested, but "a wall made of wood does farsighted Zeus . . . grant / Alone and unravaged, to help you and your children," for "Salamis Divine," the oracle concluded, would yet destroy "the children of women."

In 481, then, those few city-states that had chosen to resist decided to meet at the sanctuary of Poseidon at the isthmus of Corinth in order to consolidate their plans. The ensuing "Hellenic League," the core of which was Sparta and her allies, accordingly decided that Sparta should be their leader. This did not go entirely uncontested. The Argives and the Athenians wished for joint command, and when it was denied, the Argives withdrew from the alliance, deeply and understandably hostile to the Spartans as they were. For the good of

Greece, though, the Athenians decided to accept Spartan leadership, on the advice of Themistocles, even at sea, where Athens and her fleet were now predominant. The alliance also, at last unsuccessfully, sought help from Crete, from the island-polis of Corcyra (now Corfu), which effectively and cagily remained neutral, waiting to see who won before intervening, and from Gelon of Syracuse, who had formidable resources at his disposal, but who was also sorely threatened by the power of the Carthaginians, who may or may not have been working in loose cooperation with the Persians themselves.

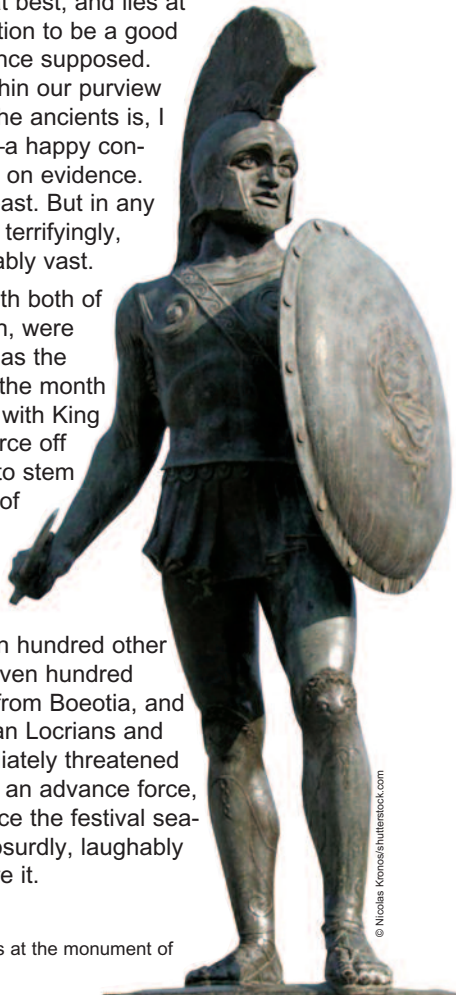
By 480, when Xerxes was on the march, the alliance was effectively in place to the extent that it was going to be in place, and the Greeks were actively seeking sites where they might mount effective resistance to the coming juggernaut. The majority of allied Hellenic states, and, of course, Sparta herself lay in the Peloponnese, and the temptation to fortify the isthmus at Corinth, only four miles or six kilometers wide at its narrowest point, and to hunker down behind it was accordingly strong, both then and later, but such a course would leave the allies lying to the north and to the east undefended, Athens prominent among them. Early on the alliance also had hopes of protecting Thessaly, further still to the north—and the best cavalry country in Greece. And so a substantial contingent, supposedly about ten thousand hoplites, was detached by sea to hold the Vale of Tempe, the narrow gorge between Mt. Olympus and Mt. Ossa in Thessaly, where the river Peneius made its way to the Thermaic Gulf. For reasons of supply as well as to counter the substantial Greek naval forces, Xerxes had mounted, in effect, an amphibious invasion force, and the Greeks needed to find a place to check his advance where land and sea forces could work in concert, and also, of course, a narrow pass that would minimize Xerxes's overwhelming advantage both in cavalry and in sheer numbers. Tempe looked promising on both counts, and under Euanetas of Sparta and Themistocles himself, the Greeks accordingly dispatched a would-be holding force. Once arrived, however, they quickly discovered that alternative routes were easily available by which the Tempe line could be turned, and so, metaphorical tail between their legs, they withdrew, and the Thessalians, under duress, promptly went over to the Persian side. Round one to Persia. Now what?

The next plausible line of defense lay a bit further to the south at Artemisium, on the northern tip of the long, narrow island of Euboia. Here the Persian fleet would have to decide whether to attempt the narrow interior landward passage between the island and the Greek mainland, the so-called "Euripus," relatively sheltered, but likewise relatively easy to defend, from which the Persian fleet could offer close support to the Persian land forces, or the unprotected seaward side. Inland, forty miles away or so on the Malian Gulf to the west, lay the fateful seaside pass at the "Hot Gates" of Thermopylae, named for the hot springs nearby, and just a few yards or meters wide at its narrowest point—water on one side, steep slopes on the other. Here the Greeks decided they could mount as effective a two-pronged defense as anywhere in northern or central Greece.

And an effective defense would most certainly be necessary. There is a good deal of dispute about the precise size of Xerxes's forces, but beyond question they were immense. To be sure, Herodotus gives precise figures.

The problem is, virtually no one takes him at his word. According to Herodotus, for what it is worth, the fighting force of Xerxes totaled 2,641,610 effectives, with an equal number of servants and camp-followers to make up, in sum, the daunting total of 5,283,220 (7.174, 176). And judging from surviving inscriptions, that is more or less what the Greeks themselves thought at the time. The problem, by the way, is not that Herodotus lacks persuasive detail. He goes on for pages describing the various contingents of Xerxes's army. The problem is that by contemporary estimates, Herodotus's figures represent a logistical impossibility. Some modern authorities, barely able to contain their distaste at what they take to be Herodotus's extravagance, would reduce the figure twenty-fold or more, to about one hundred twenty thousand effectives. That, from my own perspective, goes a good deal too far in the other direction. The Persians were masters at psychological warfare and intelligence, and Xerxes's forces, among other things, were clearly meant to overawe. Beyond that, archaeology has been kind to Herodotus. Many tales once considered implausible hearsay at best, and lies at worst, have proved on further examination to be a good deal more reliable than scholars had once supposed. And the happy conviction that feats within our purview were hopelessly beyond the scope of the ancients is, I think, in many respects precisely that—a happy conviction based more on self-flattery than on evidence. So let's say, a half million or more at least. But in any case, and by design, an army that was terrifyingly, unprecedentedly, and all but unimaginably vast.

Nonetheless, in August 480—the month both of the Olympics, which, amazingly enough, were celebrated more or less as usual even as the Persian invasion was in progress, and the month likewise of the Carneia—the Spartans, with King Leonidas in command, led a holding force off to Thermopylae to do what they could to stem the host. Beyond his own picked force of three hundred full Spartans—each, including Leonidas, by revealing design the father of at least a single living son—Leonidas led, according to Herodotus, roughly two thousand seven hundred other troops from the Peloponnese, some seven hundred Thespians and four hundred Thebans from Boeotia, and a considerable number of local Opuntian Locrians and Phocians whose homeland was immediately threatened (7.202–03). At least putatively this was an advance force, with other troops expected to follow once the festival season had passed. In any case, it was absurdly, laughably outnumbered for the task that lay before it.



Modern bronze statue of Leonidas at the monument of the Battle of Thermopylae.

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FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How might one describe the character of Themistocles?
2. What thwarted the Greek defense of Thessaly?

Suggested Reading

Cartledge, Paul. *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece*. New York: Overlook, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

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Lecture 10:
Their Finest Hour:
Artemisium and Thermopylae, 490–480 BCE (Part II)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge's *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece*.



The force led by Leonidas to Thermopylae was billed as an advance force or a holding force, but that is not, if surviving accounts are to be trusted, how the Spartans themselves thought of the matter. We are told that as Leonidas departed, he gave little indication of expecting to return home. Quite the contrary. His final advice to his wife Gorgo, according to Plutarch, was “marry a good man and bear good children.” And the fact that his chosen Spartan companions all left in Laconia living sons and heirs suggests they too were departing on what was conceived from the outset, at least in Sparta, as something not far from a suicide mission. What, then, was its purpose? Plutarch himself gives Leonidas an answer, supposedly granted to the ephors before his departure—“to die for the Greeks.” But the question remains, in what sense might “dying for the Greeks” be helpful?

Several answers might be proposed. In the first case, the traditional Spartan reluctance to fight outside of the Peloponnese, and indeed, to fight for anyone other than themselves and their traditional allies was well known, if not notorious. To fight to the death at Thermopylae, far beyond Sparta herself and at the very forefront of Greek resistance, would send the most powerful possible message as to the depth and wholeheartedness of Sparta's commitment to the anti-Persian Hellenic alliance, both to Sparta's Greek allies and to the Persians themselves. Second, the Spartans had every reason to believe that if the Athenians ten years before had been able to defeat Persian infantry, they would be able to do even better—that whatever the final outcome of the contest, they would be able so thoroughly to intimidate the Persian forces with their matchless expertise that the Persians would be cowed and reluctant at the prospect of any rematch, whatever the numerical odds. And third, hadn't the Delphic oracle prophesied that, in confronting Persia, Sparta must either suffer defeat or lose a king in battle? Much better—for Sparta, Laconia, and, indeed, for Greece—to lose the king. Which suggests in turn that from a Spartan perspective at least the doomed defense at Thermopylae was planned from the outset as a paradoxical self-sacrificing morale-builder, as an instance of psychological warfare. If so, it worked. The Greeks were inspired by the loss, and, in a sense, the inspiration endures even yet, nearly two thousand five hundred years after the event. And the Persians were correspondingly deflated. No one had expected that the Greeks, and the Spartans in particular, would fight like that. It was indeed their finest hour. Who were these people?

To answer that question, Herodotus makes use of the deposed Spartan king Demaratus, now employed as an unofficial Hellenic-affairs advisor in the entourage of the Persian king Xerxes. Xerxes finds it all but impossible to

believe that the tiny force arrayed at Thermopylae really intends to hold the position against him. He is all the more puzzled when a scout sent to spy on the defenders reports to him that in anticipation of the battle to come, the Spartans are exercising naked, as per Spartan custom, and carefully dressing their long hair. Not the actions of men scared witless, and a little baffling on the eve of battle in any event. What are they doing? Demaratus explains:

These men have come to fight us for control of the road, and that is really what they are preparing to do. For it is their tradition that they groom their hair whenever they are about to put their lives in danger. Now know this: if you subjugate these men and those who have remained behind in Sparta, there is no other race of human beings that will be left to raise their hands against. For you are now attacking the most noble kingdom of all the Hellenes, and the best of men. (7.209.3–4)

For as Demaratus had explained earlier:

Even if all the other Hellenes come to see things your way, the Spartans will certainly oppose you in battle. And you need not ask as to their number in order to consider how they could possibly do this, for if there are one thousand of them marching out, they will fight you, and if they number more or less than that—it makes no difference—they will fight you all the same. (7.102.2–3)

For when the Spartans:

Unite and fight together, they are the best warriors of all. For though they are free, they are not free in all respects, for they are actually ruled by a lord and master: law is their master, and it is the law that they inwardly fear. . . . They do whatever it commands, which is always the same: it forbids them to flee in battle, and no matter how many men they are fighting, it orders them to remain in their rank and either prevail or perish. (7.104.4–5)

And so, of course, things turned out. Xerxes waited four days, hoping that the Greeks would depart, and at last lost patience and sent his best troops against the Greek position, first the Medes and then the elite Persian “Immortals.” To no avail. The Greeks fought in relays, and all inflicted heavy casualties on their more lightly armored opponents. The Spartans, as might have been expected, fought particularly well, “proving that they were experts in battle who were fighting among men who were not” (7.211.3). And so it went for two days. On the third, however, one Ephialtes of Malis told Xerxes of a path over Mt. Anopaea by which the Greeks could be taken in the rear. Leonidas was aware of the pass and had in fact detached local Phocians to guard it, but when the Immortals marched through, they swept the Phocians aside, and at the beginning of day three, the Greek holding force found itself in a very dangerous situation.

Leonidas, accordingly, sent most of the defenders away in retreat, all but the Spartans themselves and their attendants, and also the Thebans and the Thespians, who opted to stay and fight to the end. Leonidas purportedly advised those who remained to breakfast well, for, come nightfall, they would be dining in Hades. They fought to the last, supposedly with hands and teeth

when they had nothing more, and the Persians backed off and relied on their slingers and archers to finish the job. The frustrated Xerxes had the corpse of Leonidas beheaded and impaled his head on a stake, but to no avail, after the fact, and at heavy cost the pass was cleared (7.238).

Herodotus reports that the Spartan Dienekes proved himself the bravest of all in the battle and attributes to him one of the most famous of all pointedly Laconic comments. Told that when the Persians loosed their arrows there were so many they blocked out the sun, Dienekes reportedly replied, all the better, we'll "fight in the shade" (7.226.2), and Steven Pressfield makes him the engaging hero of his excellent Spartan novel, *Gates of Fire*.

The Greeks themselves as well as the Persians were awed by the courage and determination of the Greek last stand, and revealed as much in the commemorative epitaphs that they erected on the site as soon as they were able to do so. To wit:

*Three million foes were once fought right here
By four thousand men from the Peloponnese. (7.227.1)*

And most evocative of all, purportedly composed for the Spartans by Simonides, and very likely the most famous epitaph of all time, as translated by Pressfield:

*Tell the Spartans, stranger passing by
That here obedient to their laws we lie. (440)*

Glorious as the defense at Thermopylae had been, however—and glorious it most assuredly was if any military action can be said to be such—it had ended in defeat for the Greeks, which meant that the naval position at Artemisium would have to be abandoned as well. Here, however, events had been proceeding apace even as Xerxes assaulted the Spartans and allies at Thermopylae, and here, so far, at least, as the immediate results were concerned, the Greeks had fared a little better.

Herodotus credits the Persian fleet with one thousand two hundred seven triremes and "uncountable" numbers of transports, supply ships, and lesser craft, and here authorities seem less inclined to skepticism than with regard to the size of his land

forces (7.89.1). Of Xerxes's warships, three hundred were reportedly Phoenician, the best sailors in the world, two hundred Egyptian, one hundred fifty Cypriot, one hundred Ionian, with assorted contingents from elsewhere. To counter this huge force the Greeks were able to dispatch two hundred seventy-one triremes, one hundred twenty-



A twentieth-century textbook illustration depicting the Battle of Thermopylae.

seven from Athens, forty from Corinth, ten from Laconia, and assorted contingents, again, from elsewhere. Themistocles led the Athenian contingent, nearly half the total force, but by the preference of the allies, Eurybiades of Sparta assumed at least nominal overall command. The outlook for the fleet was better than for the forces at Thermopylae, but still by no means rosy. A previous, seemingly discouraging oracle—not unlike many others in grim tone—had advised the Greeks to pray to the winds, and as the weather worsened, they did so, with apparently very good results.

For triremes, while highly maneuverable in relatively calm waters (if you had a highly trained crew), and deadly in fulfilling the task for which they were designed, were also spectacularly overmanned, top-heavy, and unseaworthy as real oceangoing craft. They had no on-board lodging facilities, no sanitation facilities save the open sea itself, no real facilities for cooking, and when in action, they were absolutely packed with rowers, three tiers deep on each side. They drew up to shore to spend the night and often even for midday meals—utterly unsuited for anything resembling long-term blue water sailing. Thus, when appropriate beaching or docking facilities were lacking, they were strikingly vulnerable to heavy weather—to the winds. And beaching and docking facilities were almost entirely lacking where the Persians found themselves anchored, for the most part, off the rocky coast of Magnesia north of Cape Sepias, across the strait from Artemisium, where the Greeks had easy access to more sheltered waters. And Boreas, the north wind, or in this case, the northeast wind, strikingly answered the Greeks' prayers, driving in a three-day blow some four hundred Persian warships ashore and wrecking them.

That did a good deal to even the odds at Artemisium even before the fighting began, but still the odds were long, and we are told that the residents of the island of Euboea, at whose northern tip the Greeks were stationed, feared that the fleet might depart without fighting, as indeed, many among them wished to do. Failing to persuade the overall commander Eurybiades to remain, they tried bribing Themistocles as second-in-command to the substantial tune of thirty talents, which according to Herodotus, he happily accepted, employing five talents to bribe Eurybiades himself, and another three talents to bribe the Corinthian commander, Adeimantus, keeping the remainder for himself (8.4–5). After which the Greeks did remain, at least until Leonidas was finally overcome at Thermopylae, and in the meanwhile, with a further assist from the weather, fought the now-diminished but still very formidable Persian forces to, in effect, a draw.

The Persians meanwhile had detached another two hundred warships around Euboea in hopes of making their way up the inshore channel to take the Greeks by surprise and in the rear, catching them in a pincer movement, but this fleet too came to grief, on the rocky coast of southern Euboea, in yet another storm. Another fifty-three ships from Attica had meanwhile arrived as reinforcements, so by the time the Greek fleet abandoned their position at Artemisium and retreated southward toward Athens, they were outnumbered, if Herodotus is to be trusted, by something like only two-to-one rather than four- or five-to-one as before (8.14.1). And well so, for once again the Persians were on the march.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What did it mean for Leonidas “to die for the Greeks”?
2. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the triremes?

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Lecture 11:
The Triumph of the Greeks:
Salamis and Plataea, 480–479 BCE

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge's *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece*.



The battles at Thermopylae and Artemisium, as best as can be told, took place in late August, 480 BCE. After the Greek fleet withdrew from northern waters and Leonidas and the Spartans and allies had fought their last at Thermopylae, there was nothing north of the isthmus of Corinth seriously to check the Persian advance, and by September, Xerxes and his troops were in Athens, where a few die-hards, convinced that the Delphic oracle's "wooden walls" referred to defenses thrown up on the Acropolis, attempted in vain to defend the heights, but the city was otherwise abandoned in anticipation of the Persian storm. The Athenians had decamped most military-age men to the island of Salamis, immediately offshore, and many women and children across the Saronic Gulf to Troizen, where they were most generously received. The Persians at last were able to wreak their revenge on the empty city while the Greeks watched, helpless and frustrated, from the Salamis roadstead and Salamis itself, where the Greek fleet remained intact. What to do next? That was the question.

As might be imagined, under the circumstances, opinions varied and tempers frayed. The Peloponnesians, by and large, understandably favored making a stand at the fortified isthmus line at Corinth, at the verge of the Peloponnese itself, pointing out rather tactlessly that the Athenians no longer had a city to defend. Themistocles, however, vehemently and tirelessly argued otherwise. He was convinced that the narrow waters between the mainland and Salamis offered a better chance of defeating the Persian fleet than anywhere nearer the isthmus, where open sea would offer to the allies a fatal chance to disperse (a difficult argument to make persuasively, presupposing, as it did, an insulting expectation of allied betrayal) and where the skilled Phoenician sailors in particular would find ample searoom for their skills and the Persian fleet could use its superior numbers to maximum advantage. He went so far, in fact, as to threaten that if the allies debouched, the Athenians would withdraw from the alliance and sail away—men, women, and children—to Italy to refound their city and start anew. The allies consented to his views—and then, as the threat continued, changed their minds. At last, Themistocles resorted to subterfuge to put an end to the debate, and sent a personal servant, his children's slave tutor, to the Persians with a message that the Greeks were about to depart the Salamis roadstead. If Xerxes wanted to catch them, he needed to move at once. And so Xerxes did, deploying the body of his fleet in the eastern channel between Salamis and the mainland, and dispatching his Egyptian ships on an overnight passage around the island to intercept the Greek forces should they attempt to depart through the western channel. A sort of naval Thermopylae pincer movement. This time, though, the odds were

much closer to even, and the narrow waters, as Themistocles had anticipated, would work to the advantage of the Greeks.

The whole situation is very interesting on several counts. First, in his message to Xerxes, Themistocles billed himself as a friend to Persia—of whom there were no shortage in Greece, and indeed, even in Athens, former Peisistratid supporters prominent among them. His message put Themistocles in an admirable situation, maximizing Greek chances for victory, but preparing a comfortable Persian berth for himself if, by chance, things should go wrong. The mere fact that Xerxes received the message suggests at least a measure of previous contact. Slaves making their way into enemy camps do not generally gain the ears of kings. To make matters explicit, I suspect that Themistocles was playing a very shrewd double game, doing his best to gain victory for the Greeks, but planning as well for the alternative should that be how things transpired. And indeed, though a good deal later, after the Athenians had tired of him, he did make his way to Persia, where he died in Persian service.

Nevertheless, at Salamis he and the Greeks proved victorious. The Athenians provided one hundred eighty ships, the Corinthians, again, forty, the Aeginetans thirty, and the land-bound Spartans sixteen. Adding other contingents, Herodotus enumerates a total of three hundred eighty Greek triremes (8.48; 8.82.2). The Persian fleet was, as before, substantially larger, and this time, unlike at Artemisium, Xerxes ensconced himself, secretaries beside him, where he could watch the action as it unfolded, to reward those who did well and to punish those who faltered.

Because of Themistocles's message, the Persian fleet had spent the night uncomfortably at sea, ready to move at first light. No doubt many among them could recall the Battle of Lade sixteen years before, which put an end to the Ionian revolt. At Lade, Persian victory was assured when a substantial portion of the Greek fleet fled and defected, and I suspect that in the first actions at Salamis, the Greeks sought to play on that expectation. In any case, during the first phase of the battle, the Corinthian contingent sailed westward, to all appearances in flight, a most encouraging sight to the Persians, who advanced all the more confidently in the narrows that in the event would become a deathtrap. Their flight evidently fooled even some of the Athenians, who with a low opinion of Corinth in general, were all too ready to believe in Corinthian treachery. But once the Persians were well in, the Corinthians heeled about and joined the fight, and by their own lights and on the testimony of the rest of the allies, fought very well. It looks very much like a successful ruse.

The battle proved a decisive Greek victory, as Themistocles had hoped and foreseen, with the Aeginetans and the Athenians particularly distinguishing themselves. Persian losses evidently totaled about two hundred ships, Greek



The Victory of Salamis
by Fernand Cormon, 1870

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losses about forty, but even so, the Persians seem still—even after the battle—to have significantly outnumbered their opponents. The Greek coalition forces, accordingly, were by no means certain the contest was over and stood prepared to renew the fighting on the morrow, if need be. Xerxes, however, had had enough. He left Mardonius with a substantial picked force for mop-up operations—Herodotus gives the figures of three hundred thousand troops (8.113), but again, contemporary authorities are skeptical—withdrawed the fleet, and departed for Persia. Themistocles reportedly advised sending the Greek sea forces to the Hellespont to destroy Xerxes’s pontoon bridges, but Eurybiades persuaded the allies that it would be best to let Xerxes depart. The ever-resourceful Themistocles then changed his tune, and indeed, sent a message to Xerxes that it had been he who, out of regard for the Persians, had persuaded the Greeks to allow them to depart unmolested.

The Greek response to victory is in several senses revealing. The leaders retired to the isthmus, where Herodotus tells us that, as they evaluated the recent battle, each commander voted for himself as the most valiant—the huge majority, however, naming Themistocles as second (8.123). The Spartans, in particular, feted him, though even then it appears that Themistocles was contemplating a double game where Sparta was concerned.

Mardonius, meanwhile, was wintering in Thessaly, and, sensibly enough, set about trying to break the Greek coalition by diplomatic means, focusing his attention, particularly, on Athens. His offer was attractive: to give the Athenians “back their land, and to let them have another land of their choice in addition”—and beyond that, to rebuild their sanctuaries at Persian expense (8.139.2) if they would defect. When they got wind of this offer, the Spartans were worried, and proposed, if necessary, to support the Athenian non-combatants at Spartan expense. The Athenians, though, showed no interest in Mardonius’s proposal, and proudly replied that they would never submit to Xerxes. They likewise declined the offer of the Spartans—but did, however, pointedly urge that as soon as feasible, once the new campaigning season started, the Spartans should send their forces north of the isthmus into Boeotia to forestall the expected Persian thrust into Attica and points south, with the implied threat that should the Spartans fail to do so, Athens might be forced to reconsider the Persian offer. In other words, to maintain the integrity of the alliance, so Athens suggested, the Spartans and their Peloponnesian allies would once again, as at Thermopylae, have to fight north of the isthmus line.

The Spartans complied, though not perhaps as quickly as Athens would have wished. Mardonius indeed marched south, again offered terms to Athens, and was again refused, as the Athenians again decamped to Salamis—and for a second time, he sacked the city. Nonetheless, the Athenians held firm, and after the Hyacinthia of 479, the Spartans did indeed come north and came north, in fact, in unparalleled force, with as full a levy as the Spartans had ever mustered outside of their Peloponnesian homeland. In command for Sparta was the fallen Leonidas’s first cousin, Pausanias, serving as regent for Leonidas’s and Gorgo’s underage son, Pleistarchus, while the Eurypontid king, Leotychidas, served with the allied fleet in the Aegean. Pausanias, in fact, ultimately commanded the largest Greek army yet assembled. It consisted, besides Pausanias’s own five thousand full

Spartans—and thirty-five thousand helot attendants (9.10.1)—of some thirty thousand to forty thousand allied troops, including eight thousand or so from Athens. Herodotus, perhaps unsurprisingly, gives the more generous figure of one hundred ten thousand for the total force (9.30).

Opposing them, under Mardonius, was an even greater force, of Persians and Medizing Greeks, very likely considerably greater (Herodotus suggests odds of three to one), though even so the allies now faced nothing like the numerical disadvantages they had confronted the year before at the Hot Gates. The Peloponnesians had been reluctant to engage the Persians beyond the isthmus in large part because they had no wish to confront the splendid Persian cavalry, for which, at this point at least, the Greeks had no effective answer, on an open field in which the Persian horsemen would have full opportunity to exercise their skills. For just the same reason, Mardonius was eager to draw the Greeks into open country, and with that end in view, he headed back northwest into the plains of Boeotia. These opposing imperatives led at first to a tactical stalemate. The two armies finally faced off near Plataea in Boeotia, the Persians ensconced in an extensive fortified camp on the banks of the Asopus River, with relatively open country surrounding, the Greeks encamped on the foothills of Mt. Cithaeron just to the south, where cavalry would be less effective. And there, in the high summer heat, for a good while they remained. Nearly two weeks passed, we are told. Neither side had an incentive to move—the Persians would be at a disadvantage in an assault on Mt. Cithaeron, the Greeks at a disadvantage in the flat lower country just below.

Finally, after a good deal of low-grade skirmishing, the Persians mounted a successful attack on Greek supply trains making their way over the Cithaeron pass, and succeeded in fouling the spring of Gargaphia, upon which the Greeks depended for water. This forced Pausanias's hand, and he planned a night march to rectify the situation. At which point accounts of the battle begin to get a bit confusing, not to say confused. Whatever happened, though—and precisely what took place is hard to say—things did not go quite as planned. There was talk of the Spartans and Athenians changing positions; one of the Spartan commanders, Amompharetos, for a good while refused to leave his position—Spartans don't retreat—and various other contingents wound up where they were not supposed to, but as the Persians attacked at daybreak, hoping to take advantage of the confusion, things did not work out as they had hoped. Mardonius himself was killed, and under heavy pressure, the Spartans in particular fought splendidly—and the victory, in the end, went to Sparta and the allies. A major Persian contingent, under the command of Artabazus, never even participated at all. When Artabazus saw how things were going, he led his troops at once into a retreat that reportedly did not stop until they reached the Hellespont.

The Greek victory was nearly total, and purportedly on the very same day on the other side of the Aegean the Spartan king Leotychidas and the Athenian Xanthippus, father of Pericles, won a combined land and sea victory over the Persian forces at Mycale on the Anatolian shore near the island of Samos. The Persian war, or, in any case, this phase of the Persian wars, was over; the Persian invasion of Greece was thwarted—and the united Hellenes had triumphed.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What “double game” was Themistocles attempting to play?
2. What Corinthian play helped to enable the Greek victory at Salamis?

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Lecture 12:
Earthquake, Revolt, Stormclouds Gathering:
The Peloponnesian War to the Peace of Nicias

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Nigel Bagnall's *The Peloponnesian War: Athens, Sparta, and the Struggle for Greece*.



Voicing an opinion that he fears, as he tells us explicitly, “will cause offense to many people,” Herodotus claims that it was above all the courage and determination of Athens that enabled the Greek alliance to overcome Persia (7.139). As the misgivings of Herodotus suggest, however, that was not the general view of Herodotus’s own contemporaries. After Plataea and Mycale most Greeks still thought of Sparta as the lynchpin of the Hellenic alliance and, in the end, the bulwark of Greece. And indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, the Spartans continued as leaders of the united Greeks. Not, however, by acclamation. Themistocles, for one, saw things in a strikingly different light. Even as the Persians were departing, he already was looking to Sparta as a future threat, not an ally.

After the Hellenic victories at Mycale and Plataea, the Spartans, in large part at the instigation of the other Greek allies, requested that the Athenians refrain from rebuilding their city walls, and indeed, join in a process of tearing down all other such fortifications outside of the Peloponnese. Such a move, the Peloponnesian allies argued, would prevent the Persians from making use of already existing strongpoints should they decide to invade again. Thucydides suggests, however, that the more compelling reason for the policy was allied fear of the growing power, and in particular, the growing naval power of Athens (1.90.1–2). The fears of the allies were by no means baseless, at least if Plutarch can be trusted, for Plutarch reports in his biography of Themistocles that Themistocles privately floated the notion of destroying all the other ships of the Greek alliance in a surprise attack on shore even as the Persians were retreating after Salamis (20). In any case, Themistocles wanted no part of the allied proposal to keep Athens unfortified, and by hemming, hawing, deception, and perhaps a little well-placed bribery, he managed to befuddle the Spartans until, in a rush job, the walls were rebuilt. This suggests a very long history for the tensions between Athens and Sparta, which would erupt nearly fifty years later in the Peloponnesian War.

During the first year or so after Plataea and Mycale, Pausanias continued as the leader of the Hellenic alliance that conducted successful operations against the Persians both in Cyprus and at Byzantium, but Pausanias’s overbearing manner, among other possible offenses, led to his recall to Sparta, where the Spartan authorities relieved him from command and shortly thereafter withdrew altogether from offensive operations against Persia, fearing with some reason that service abroad tended to weaken the discipline and character of those who undertook it, as they judged that it had in the case of Pausanias.

Pausanias thereupon went back to Byzantium on his own recognizance, where he reportedly began plotting with the Persian great king, and was again

recalled to Sparta, where, so we are told, he began plotting with the helots as well. The Spartans were reluctant to condemn any full citizen and all the more so a member of one of the royal families and a regent, but in the face of such repeated offenses, over the course, at last, of nearly ten years, the ephors decided to take action. Pausanias took refuge in the central Spartan temple of Athena where—his own mother reportedly beginning the process—he was at length walled in to starve, and taken out only as he was about to die to avoid ritual pollution of the sacred space. A sad end for the man who had commanded the forces that drove the Persian army from Greece.

Meanwhile, the Spartan withdrawal from offensive operations against Persia left the field open to the Athenians, who seized the opportunity with their customary energy and enthusiasm. The winter of 478–77 saw the formation of the so-called “Delian League.” This was in its origin an offensive alliance directed against Persia and dominated from the outset by Athens, with a common treasury established at the sacred Aegean island of Delos. Over the course of the decades to follow, however, it became with ever-increasing clarity a *de facto* Athenian Empire, with tribute provided by Athens’s predominantly Ionian allies—only a very few provided ships, ultimately only Lesbos and Chios—and naval power supplied by Athens, to be used as Athens saw fit, against Persia or against increasingly reluctant allies as the situation seemed to require. By 454–53, Athens had moved the League treasury from Delos to Athens, where the Athenians increasingly felt entitled to make use of League funds as they pleased, not least for local building programs designed to glorify Athens herself and to enrich her citizens in a series of vast, largely League-funded public-service projects. This made the Athenians prosperous and happy, helped to burnish the reputation of Pericles, and in large part funded the Parthenon and the artistic triumphs of Phidias. The benefits accruing to other members of the alliance are less easy to ascertain.

Nevertheless, at least early on, the Athenians really did mount substantial efforts against the Persians. In 467, under the leadership of Cimon, the son of Miltiades, victor at Marathon, the Athenian and allied forces won a substantial land and sea victory against the Persians at the river Eurymedon on the south coast of Anatolia between Rhodes and Cyprus. And during the 450s, Athens dispatched, and ultimately lost, a fleet of two hundred ships in support of an anti-Persian revolt in Egypt.

Meanwhile, Sparta by and large kept to herself, only to be visited, about 464, by a very costly natural calamity, from which in some senses at least, she never entirely recovered. A massive earthquake hit, which more or less leveled the city, killed a very substantial portion of the Spartan citizenry, and wiped out several age classes in Spartan *agoge* in a matter of moments (one very young class, we are told, escaped when a hare, presumably unsettled by subsonic pretremors, bolted through the indoor space in which they were training, leading all the boys out in pursuit just seconds before the first major tremor). More threatening still, from a Spartan perspective, the disastrous quake led immediately to a full-scale helot revolt. It was in this crisis, by report, that the young Eurypontid king, Archidamus II, showed his mettle. In any case, it took the Spartans years to subdue the helot insurgents, who particularly in Messenia, fought long and hard for their freedom,

finally entrenching themselves on the stronghold of Mt. Ithome, where the Spartans, unaccustomed to siege warfare, had very great difficulties in dislodging them.

This state of affairs ultimately, though indirectly, contributed to a significant rise in hostility between Athens and Sparta. Under the influence of the Spartanophile, Cimon, who espoused a distinctly pro-Spartan “dual hegemony” policy in Athens, Athens dispatched four thousand hoplites to help the Spartans in their plight, and, in particular, to contribute their facility in siege warfare. Once arrived, however, the conspicuously democratic Athenians inspired nervousness in the Spartan authorities, who feared that they might come to sympathize with, if not, indeed, to assist the helots rather than the Spartans. The Spartans accordingly sent them home. The Athenians, in their turn, were grievously insulted, ostracized Cimon, and soon found their way into the complicated series of conflicts subsequently designated the “first” Peloponnesian War, which came to an end in 446 or 445 with the so-called “Thirty Years’ Peace.”

The ensuing peace was, unsurprisingly, a good deal less than entirely peaceful. For as Thucydides famously observes, the “growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta” in the long run made war between the two “inevitable” (1.23.6). The fatal outbreak came in 431, and early on at least, Thucydides tells us, the general sentiment “inclined much more to the Spartans” than Athens, and all the more so because the Spartans “proclaimed themselves the liberators of Hellas”—so “general,” he continues, “was the indignation felt against Athens,” both on the part of “those who wished to escape from empire” and on the part of those who “were apprehensive of being absorbed by it” (2.9.4, 5).

Nonetheless, the first years of the war were inconclusive. Sparta dominated by land and Athens by sea and neither could find any very direct way to bring decisive power to bear on the other. The Spartans invaded Attica on an annual basis and laid waste to the countryside, to the extent, at least, that they could—olive trees are hard to kill—hoping to draw the Athenian hoplites out to battle. But the Athenians lay secure, if crowded, behind their walls, which extended from the city itself, by virtue of the so-called “Long Walls,” to the Athenian port areas at Phalaron and the Piraeus. As long as the walls remained unbreached and the Athenian war fleet reigned supreme, Athens was more or less invulnerable. The city depended for food not so much on produce from the local countryside as upon grain imported through the Hellespont from what is now Russia and the Ukraine on the north shore of the Black Sea.

By the same token, Athens mounted a series of seaborne raids on the Peloponnese that were annoying to the Spartans but hardly threatened Sparta’s existence. The greatest threat that Athens encountered during the first years of the war was in fact a plague which broke out in the crowded city during the second summer of the war in 430 and ultimately cost Athenians the guidance of their great (and firmly anti-Spartan) leader Pericles. Thereafter, other far less circumspect and self-controlled leaders took the reins, and, in the long run, Athens suffered accordingly.

More immediately, however, events turned strongly Athens's way. In 425, in large part by virtue of the initiative of the Athenian commander Demosthenes (not, by the way, the Demosthenes later celebrated as an orator against Philip of Macedon during the following century), the Athenians established a beachhead at Pylos, the home of the Homeric Nestor, in the Peloponnese. Pylos, or "Coraphasium," as the Spartans called it, lies on the Adriatic shore of the helot heartland of Messenia, and that in and of itself made an Athenian presence there threatening to Sparta. Just offshore from Pylos, blocking off what is now called Navarino Bay, lies the smallish island of Sphacteria, and here during the course of operations designed to force the Athenians to retire, a detachment of Laconian hoplites was, in effect, marooned, once the Athenians asserted their naval predominance in the area. Among those caught on the island were a substantial number of full Spartans, many, so we are told, members of the most prominent families in Laconia. This posed a very grave problem for the Spartan authorities, and all the more so since the devastating earthquake a generation before had only worsened an already troubling shortage of full Spartan manpower. The Spartans decided to negotiate for peace, but the Athenians, feeling their advantage, turned the Spartan offers down, and thereafter even managed to secure the surrender of the Laconian forces on Sphacteria, of whom, Thucydides tells us, precisely two hundred ninety-two were taken as prisoners to Athens, about one hundred twenty of them full Spartans (4.38.5).

The Greek world was appalled and amazed. "Nothing that happened in the war surprised the Hellenes so much as this" (4.40). Spartans were supposed to fight and die, they were supposed never to surrender. And now, there they were, imprisoned in Athens. Spartan invasions of Attica stopped forthwith. But with so many hostages ready to hand, the Athenians proved even less willing to negotiate a peace than before, and Sparta would have found herself in a perilous state indeed were it not for operations elsewhere, further to the north, that threatened Athens's own vital interests.

This brings us to the career of one of the most able and appealing of the Spartans, the commander Brasidas, who had fought with distinction in the early phases of the strife at Pylos, and who now led a force composed largely of "*neodamodais*," or freed helots serving as soldiers—the first time we hear of such a thing—into Thessaly and Thrace beyond in order to detach the Athenian colonies in that region, a course of action which, if successful, would have the effect of threatening Athens's seaborne grain supply. And Brasidas succeeded beyond hope. He was, so Thucydides tells us, not "a bad speaker for a Spartan" (4.84.2), but it was, beyond that, "his just and moderate conduct" and "present valor" which persuaded so many cities in the region to revolt from Athens. The mere presence of freed helots among his troops suggests that Brasidas may have been a Spartan of unusual ability and, perhaps, of unusual and far-sighted views, but in any case, his success in the region was such that, even after his death in battle at Amphipolis (where the Amphipolitans "ever afterwards" sacrificed "to him as a hero" [5.11.1]), the Athenians were willing to negotiate, and in the winter of 422–21 concluded the so called "Peace of Nicias," bringing to an end the first phase in the hostilities.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What were the possible reasons for the Greek allies to request that Athens refrain from rebuilding its city walls?
2. What effect did the Spartans' surrender at Sphacteria have on the Greek world?

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Lecture 13: Sparta Triumphant: From the Peace of Nicias to Aegospotami

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Nigel Bagnall's *The Peloponnesian War: Athens, Sparta, and the Struggle for Greece*.



The Peace of Nicias by no means put an end to the rivalry and ill-feeling between Athens and Sparta, and in retrospect Thucydides considered it no more than a truce in a war that would last in one guise or another for a generation and more. Indeed, as early as 420, the dazzling and utterly unscrupulous young Athenian politician Alcibiades was working to foment trouble for Sparta, in large part to gain political influence at the expense of the older and far more pacific Nicias himself. Even in an Athenian context, Alcibiades was conspicuous for brilliance and talent—and for ruthlessness. Raised as the ward of Pericles, he was, as Plato testifies, one of Socrates's favorite pupils—and something not far from “Exhibit A” when Socrates was ultimately condemned to death for, among other charges, corrupting the young. Alcibiades was, by report, all but irresistibly attractive, rich, well-born, wealthy, and eloquent, an Olympic victor of unprecedented magnificence in that most prestigious of events, the four-horse chariot race, and, as things turned out, more or less undefeated for life in battle. He was also, again as things turned out, somewhere between three and five times a traitor depending upon which particular instances of side-switching one considers as traitorous.

Since under the Peace of Nicias overt hostilities against Sparta were off limits for Athenians, Alcibiades at first contented himself with working more or less covertly in favor of alliances between Sparta's enemies, or potential enemies, in the Peloponnese—Argos, Mantinea, and Elis, among others. These operations came to a head in 418 at Mantinea, where King Agis of Sparta won a hard-fought victory against a coalition containing representatives from all of the above, and a smallish contingent from Athens as well. The Spartans, we are told, advanced “slowly and to the music of many flute players,” masterly in their self-control

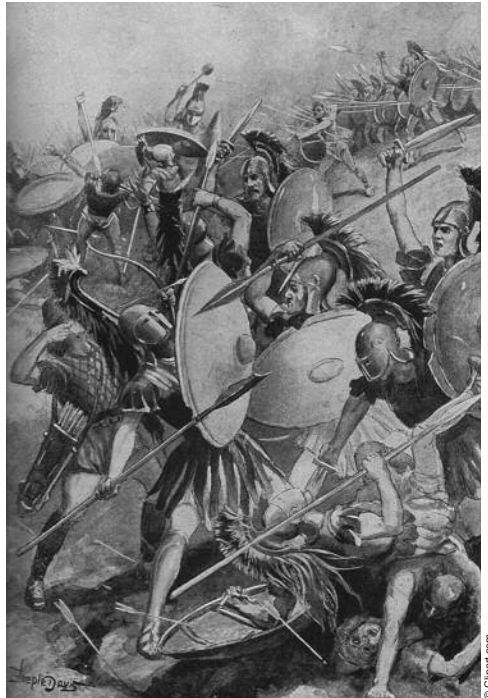


The bust of the “ideal male” called “Alcibades” by an unknown Roman sculptor who made the copy after a Greek original of the fourth century BCE. The hermaic pillar and the inscription, “Alcibiades, son of Cleinias, Athenian,” are modern additions.

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and courage—if not, on this occasion, in their tactical acumen and dexterity—and their victory, according to Thucydides, erased the “imputations cast upon them by the Hellenes” on “account of the disaster” at Sphacteria. Fortune, “it was thought, might have humbled” the Spartans, “but the men themselves were the same as before” (5.70, 75). The Peace of Nicias, however, remained at least nominally in force, and inspired by Alcibiades, the Athenians directed their attentions elsewhere, most conspicuously to Sicily.

The Athenian expedition to Sicily (416–13) led, in the end, to something close to total disaster so far as Athens was concerned. The Athenians, as Thucydides puts it, “were beaten at all points and altogether; all that they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army—everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned home” (7.87.5, 6). Things looked a great deal more promising, though, at the outset, and the expedition departed with high hopes, not only of overcoming the Greek-speaking metropolis of Syracuse—originally a colony of Corinth, more or less the size of Athens herself, and a fellow-democracy—but of overcoming all Sicily as well, and indeed, if things went well, perhaps Italy and Carthage, and in the end, the whole western Mediterranean longer term. Athenian ambition, and, perhaps more to the point, the ambition of Alcibiades were boundless.



Destruction of the Athenian army at Syracuse.

Before the expedition was well started, however, Alcibiades was recalled from co-command to Athens in order to stand trial for his life on a variety of charges, mostly ill-founded, and stemming ultimately from the ill will inspired by the unparalleled and envy-inspiring extravagance of virtually every aspect of his life. Alcibiades knew a show trial when he saw one in prospect, and declined to play the victim. In relatively short order, he escaped and made his way to Sparta, where, plausibly enough, he argued to the Spartans that if they wanted to thwart Athenian plans no one could better advise them than the man who had in large part devised them. His advice was, in effect, twofold. First, help Syracuse—which the Spartans did, sending a small contingent under the Spartiate Gyllipus to take command and to stiffen Syracusan resolve. This Gyllipus did with exemplary thoroughness, as Thucydides’s rueful comments on the final result of the expedition reveal. And second, take and fortify a stronghold in Attica analogous to that which the

Athenians had enjoyed in Messenia at Pylos. This would achieve two important objectives. First, it would severely limit military operations on what amounted to the Athenian home front, since Sparta would begin always with a force in being and in place to threaten any Athenian plans. And second, it would provide a focal point for the disaffection of Athens's own slaves. Athens had no helots, of course, but that most emphatically did not mean that Athens had no servile population. Ultimately, we are told, some twenty thousand Athenian slaves made their way to the Spartan stronghold in Decelea (where the Spartans, none too kindly, if, perhaps, predictably, resold a good many of them to their own allies).

Despite such services, however, Alcibiades soon wore out his welcome in Sparta, not least because, as Plutarch puts it in his life of Alcibiades, while “King Agis was away” on campaign, Alcibiades seduced and impregnated “his wife Timaea,” in order—as he “himself said, in his mocking fashion”—to ensure that Alcibiades's own “descendants would one day rule over the Spartans” (23). Soon enough, Alcibiades decamped and was advising the Persian satrap, Tissaphernes, that the best Persian response to hostilities between Athens and Sparta was simply to let the two fight each other to a standstill, helping either, neither, or both as necessary to keep the draining conflict going. Good advice, as usual.

At this point, after the Sicilian disaster, Athens found herself in very grim straits indeed, her naval and manpower resources alike sorely depleted by her losses—her morale and self-confidence depleted as well—and her unwilling allies scenting a chance at last to break away from what they now all too often perceived as their fetters. It is astonishing, under the circumstances, that Athens was able to keep on fighting, but fight on she did, against the odds and, indeed, all but against hope. Alcibiades, meanwhile, found he wanted to go home, a difficult matter because the Athenians had long ago condemned him to death *in absentia*, and by this time the Spartans had condemned him to death as well. The battered Athenian fleet at Samos, however, doing its best to keep the allies in line, proved somewhat easier to charm, and, astonishingly, in a complicated series of maneuvers, he persuaded the sailors in the fleet to take him back as their commander. More astonishing still, in relatively short order, over the course of the next two years, he turned the tide of the war itself in a stunning series of naval victories in and around the vital narrows between the Aegean and the grain-rich Black Sea northlands upon which Athens depended for food. One such victory, the Battle of Cyzicus, in the Sea of Marmara between the Hellespont and the Bosphorus in 410, prompted one of the most famous “Laconic” messages of all time, as the surviving Spartan commander, Hippocrates, reported his plight to the Spartan authorities in a message that, according to Xenophon, ran in its entirety as follows: “Ships lost. Mindarus dead. Men starving. Don't know what to do” (*Hellenica* 1.23).

The fortunes of Sparta, however, were about to turn very much to the better. The Spartans had concluded an alliance of sorts with Tissaphernes in 412, but Tissaphernes had been less than generous in his support, still mindful, perhaps, of Alcibiades's advice. The situation changed dramatically when the Spartans appointed Lysander as “*navarch*,” or naval commander, in 408, and

when the Persian king, Darius II, dispatched his sixteen-year-old son Cyrus to take command of Persian operation on the Ionic, Anatolian coast shortly thereafter. Lysander and Cyrus hit it off famously, and Lysander sharply upgraded his home base at Ephesus, and, more important still, persuaded Cyrus to give him enough money to enable him to offer to rowers a rate of pay well beyond what the forces of Athens could match. He thereupon devoted himself to training his fleet.

Alcibiades, meanwhile, found himself sorely strapped for cash and had to devote a good deal of time to shakedown missions designed to wring resources from various more or less unwilling allies. During one such, he ill-advisedly left his own helmsman, rather than any of the elected sub-generals, in overall command, leaving instructions that Antiochus, the helmsman, was under no circumstances to engage Lysander's fleet, which had, in any case, heretofore been most reluctant to engage the Athenians under Alcibiades himself. Antiochus ignored orders and set off to taunt Lysander's fleet, prompting an engagement in which he himself was killed and the Athenians lost some fifteen triremes. That was the end for Alcibiades, who, as might be imagined, had plenty of enemies waiting for his first misstep to pounce. On his return to the fleet, Alcibiades attempted to goad Lysander into a rematch engagement, but Lysander refused to take the bait, and soon enough Alcibiades was, one last time, cashiered, and made his way to a private "castle" that he had been foresightful enough to provide himself near the Hellespont lest things should suddenly go sour for him.

Spartan law allowed a *navarch* to serve but a single year in a lifetime, and Lysander was shortly replaced by a much different Spartan named Callicratidas. Lysander was nothing if not ambitious, and deliberately decided to make things difficult for his successor, returning to Cyrus all the funds that he had been granted and that remained unused, hence forcing Callicratidas to negotiate on his own behalf. Callicratidas found the task profoundly uncongenial and had no taste for, as he saw it, paying court to adolescent barbarian functionaries. He vowed that he would do his best, if he could, to put an end to the war so that Athens and Sparta together could fight the real, Persian enemy. But he never got the chance. In a last, near super-human effort, the Athenians, despite their losses, dispatched a final, ill-trained fleet, crewed by, among others, freed slaves and the leavings of the dockyards. Nonetheless, one final time, they managed to defeat Callicratidas and the Spartans at the Battle of Arginusae in August 406. Callicratidas himself was killed in the course of the fighting, but the Athenians gained little, seeing fit to execute six of the eight victorious Athenian commanders unwise enough to return home on the grounds that they had failed to rescue the Athenian survivors of the battle. As it happened, a storm had blown up, rendering the task nearly impossible, but the Athenians, at that point, were in no mood for excuses, even perfectly reasonable excuses. The Athenian command structure suffered accordingly.

Prohibited by law from officially naming Lysander as *navarch* again, the Spartans compromised by appointing him, at least nominally, only second in command to replace Callicratidas, and the following summer he caught almost the entire Athenian fleet on the beach at Aegospotami in the

Hellespont and captured or destroyed it. Only a small detachment under the Athenian commander Conon, and the official state galley, *Paralus*, managed to escape, and Conon wisely made his way not home to Athens, but rather to Cyprus, seeking to avoid the wrath of his countrymen. Astonishingly enough, just before the battle, Alcibiades himself had come down to the beach to suggest to the Athenian commanders their danger, but he was scornfully dismissed, and within a year or so was assassinated, in accordance with the wishes of many, but evidently at the particular behest of the Spartans.

Athens was now effectively defenseless—the fleet was no more and the Black Sea grain route was authoritatively cut—and Lysander systematically intensified Athens's problems by sending every exile or Athenian he could find (other than the sailors executed in the immediate aftermath of the battle) back to Athens as another mouth to feed. By mid-spring of the following year, 404, Athens was forced to surrender. Readers of Thucydides will remember that the Athenians had treated, among others, the residents of the island of Melos with pitiless harshness when Athens was victorious, executing the adult men and enslaving the women and children. Many of Sparta's allies, the Corinthians and Thebans notable among them, thought that Athens deserved the same treatment. But the Spartans refused to allow such tactics. As Xenophon puts it, "they would not enslave a Greek city which had done such great things for Greece at the time of her supreme danger" (2.2.20). Which is not to say that Athens got off lightly. The Spartans installed a small, and as things turned out, a remarkably bloodthirsty ruling junta, though the bloodthirst, to be fair, may not have been part of Sparta's design. In any case, Sparta consented when shortly thereafter it was overthrown. Athens was confined to a fleet of merely twelve triremes, and forced to ally herself with Sparta. And, so we are told, "to the music of flute girls" a mile or so of the Long Walls were torn down. "It was thought," so Xenophon tells us, "that this day was the beginning of freedom for Greece" (2.2.23). Needless to say, that is not the way that things turned out.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Where did the Spartans erase the “imputations cast upon them” at Sphacteria?
2. What undercut the Athenian command structure after the Battle of Arginusae?

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Lecture 14: Triumph and Nemesis: From the Destruction of the Long Walls at Athens to Leuctra and Beyond

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Paul Cartledge's *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300 to 362 BC*.



At the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War, Sparta found herself not only dominant in the Peloponnese and on the Greek mainland, but *de facto* successor to Athens as the dominant power in the Aegean as well. Lysander had proved immensely successful, not only as a military commander, but as a hands-on, local politician, building networks of sympathetic oligarchs all over Ionia, and these he did his capable best to install in power, where in relatively short order they proved themselves, on the whole, a good deal more objectionable and more burdensome than their Athenian predecessors. The Spartan “liberation” of Aegean Greece proved significantly more appealing in prospect than in performance. Spartan dominance in general tended toward harshness, and Lysander himself was harsh and ruthless even by exacting Spartan standards. The predictable result was disaffection, which the Persians did their best to foment in order to curb Laconian power.

Persia was all the more willing to work against Spartan interests after young Cyrus, who had proved so helpful to Lysander, decided to contest the accession to the throne of his brother, Artaxerxes II. He launched an expedition in 401 with substantial, if more or less unofficial, Spartan assistance, which, in large part because of the excellence of his substantially Spartan Greek mercenaries, was able to win at Cunaxa near Babylon. Cyrus himself, in his enthusiasm, got himself killed in the battle, however, and Artaxerxes retained his throne, where he ruled for many years to come. Cyrus’s Greek mercenaries, meanwhile, found themselves in a very dangerous situation, from which they managed to extract themselves only by virtue of the exertions chronicled in Xenophon’s memorably firsthand *Anabasis*.

Meanwhile, about 400, Lysander intervened to have his one-time lover, Agesilaus (such relationships, let us recall, were a matter of routine during the *agoge*), named to the Eurypontid throne in Sparta in succession to Agesilaus’s half-brother, Agis II—and in preference to Agis’s own son, Leotychidas. Or at least purportedly Agis’s own son, for Leotychidas was born shortly after his royal mother’s dalliance with Alcibiades. An oracle in circulation at Sparta warned of disaster should Sparta crown a king who was lame—and Agesilaus, despite his exemplary performance in the *agoge*, was in fact lame. Lysander successfully argued, however, that the “lameness” in question was better interpreted metaphorically as a warning against Leotychidas’s potential illegitimacy. Agesilaus II ascended the throne, and before too long made his way to Anatolia in hopes of further “liberating” the Ionians and, perhaps, of extending his conquests further still at the expense of the Persian great king.

Once arrived, however, he found to his annoyance that the locals were far more impressed by his erstwhile lover, Lysander, than they were by Agesilaus himself, and Agesilaus set to work doing what he could to establish his own authority, ultimately making of Lysander his personal carver at the dinner table. Lysander got the message, and requested transfer elsewhere, only to die at last in Boeotia during the first phase of the “Corinthian War” in 395. The career of Lysander brought unparalleled wealth to Sparta, which on most accounts of the matter had a vitiating effect on Spartan culture, heretofore committed, as it had been, to frugality and austerity. Lysander himself, though, remained uncorrupted in any financial sense. His avarice was for power and honors, and indeed, after he died his effects were reported to include a proposal that, if enacted, would have enabled Lysander himself to become king. Even as it was, at the height of his power Lysander probably wielded greater influence than any Spartan before him.

The Corinthian War, meanwhile, had arisen more or less directly at Persian instigation as a means of confining Sparta’s energies, in effect, to Sparta’s backyard. The Persians were past masters of diplomacy and bribery—they had, let us recall, come within sight of turning even Athens during the Persian Wars—and fomenting an alliance against overbearing Sparta proved well within Persia’s capabilities. Boeotia and Corinth were still annoyed with Sparta for failing to destroy Athens altogether; Athens, as might be expected, very much resented her defeat; and the Argives, in their turn, had hated Sparta for generations. The result was that in 394 the Spartan authorities requested that King Agesilaus return to Greece, which he did with considerable reluctance, winning a substantial victory, meanwhile, over the anti-Spartan coalition at Coronea in Boeotia. Agesilaus reportedly brought home with him from Asia booty to the value of one thousand talents, putting further strain on Spartan customs, and evidently corrupting the one-time victor at Syracuse, Gylippus, who found himself in a position to skim thirty talents or so off the top—and found himself disgraced as a result.

Still following the advice of Alcibiades, from a generation or so before, the Persians still sought to divide and conquer, and now began supporting Sparta in the person of the current *navarch* Antalcidas, who gained control of the Hellespont and helped at last to put an end to the war, negotiating the so-called “King’s Peace” or “Peace of Antalcidas” in 386, which ceded control of the Anatolian coast back to the Persians—more than a turbulent century after the original Ionian revolt had first called their control into question.

Sparta’s own days as hegemon and great power were numbered, however, and a nemesis came not from Persia or from Athens, where it might have been expected, but rather from Sparta’s erstwhile ally of Thebes. In 382, the Spartans had occupied Thebes and seized the small Theban acropolis or “Cadmea,” thereafter installing a Spartan “*harmost*” or military overseer. As the result of a complicated series of machinations on the part of Spartans, Athenians, and Thebans alike, Thebes was liberated in 379–78 under the influence of two exceedingly capable and charismatic leaders, Pelopidas and—the greater of the two—Epaminondas, the latter as able a military leader as Greece produced before Philip of Macedon and Alexander. The Athenians founded a second “Athenian league,” based as might be expected

on sea power, and the Thebans a confederacy whose corresponding strength was warfare on land. The cutting edge of Theban power was their newly established “Sacred Band,” an elite hoplite unit of one hundred fifty homosexual lovers, who dominated the battlefield until they were at last obliterated, reportedly fighting to the last man, by the forces of Philip of Macedon at Chaeronea in 338.

Under the leadership of Epaminondas, who lived the relatively ascetic life of a Pythagorean philosopher as well as a warrior, the Thebans, to the amazement of the Hellenic world, broke Spartan power more or less once and for all at the battle of Leuctra in Boeotia in 371. Epaminondas evidently departed from tradition by ranging his hoplites fifty deep on his left flank, rather than the usual eight to twelve or so, and, by “refusing” them on the other, so his forces advanced, in effect, in echelon. In so doing, he at last broke the elite troops on the Spartan right and won a smashing victory from which Sparta never really recovered. There were at that point, so we are told, only just above one thousand full Spartan citizens. Sparta had suffered for years from what was termed the problem of “*oliganthropia*,” or having too few men. By all reports, the Spartans did not themselves understand the reasons for the problem, but my own guess, for what it is worth, is that the decline stemmed directly, and indeed, predictably from their social and agricultural policies. Any landed elite closed to outsiders is going to decline in numbers as from generation to generation certain families simply die out for lack of heirs, and an elite as warlike as the Spartans was likely to decline all the faster, particularly, as was the case in Sparta, because they were unwilling to supplement their numbers as, for example, the British did, by admitting prosperous merchants. In any event, of the seven hundred full Spartans at Leuctra, roughly four hundred were killed, forcing King Agesilaus at least momentarily to relax the Spartan customs about those who shamefully survived a defeat. His solution was not to change the laws, but, as he suggested, for one day to hold them in abeyance. It was not enough.

In 370–69, Epaminondas led an invasion of Laconia—untouched by invaders for generations—and liberated the Messenian helots, helping to found for them the fortress of Messene on their traditional stronghold, Mt. Ithome. Shortly thereafter he oversaw the foundation of the new city Megalopolis in Arcadia. The fatal decline in Spartan power led in turn to the defection of Sparta’s long-time allies, and by the time that Epaminondas himself was killed at the Battle of Mantinea in 362, Sparta was finished as a major power. The following funerary epigram in honor of Epaminondas tells the story:

This came from my counsel:

Sparta has cut the hair of its glory:

Messene takes her children in:

a wreath of the spears of Thebe

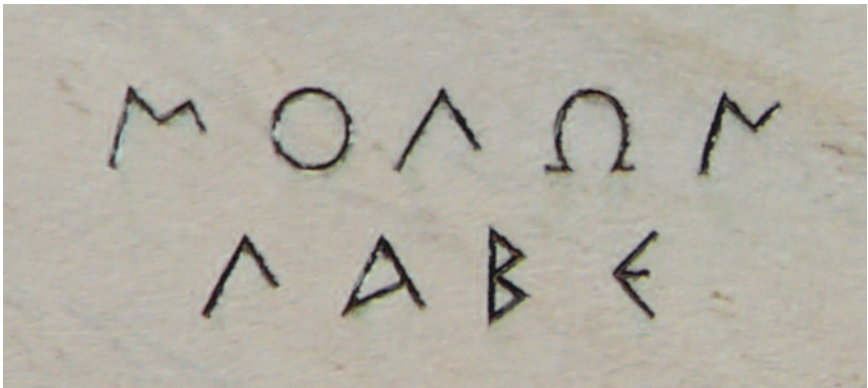
has crowned Megalopolis:

Greece is free. (Pausanias, cited in Cartledge, *Spartans*, 233)

Sparta survived after a fashion through the conquests of Alexander and the Hellenistic era, survived as well under Roman power, and, indeed, under Agis IV and Cleomenes III during the later third century BCE, mounted a brief revival of sorts. Centuries later, in the time of Plutarch and Pausanias

during the high noon of the Roman *imperium* in the late first and second centuries of the common era, Sparta lived on as a tourist attraction, a sort of “living history” museum to its own glorious past, rather on the model of contemporary Venice or Colonial Williamsburg, and the beatings at the shrine of Artemis Orthia continued as impressive and bloody as ever. But the military might and political power that had for centuries made ancient Sparta a force to be reckoned with were long departed.

Any student of Sparta must, of course, find a good deal in Sparta to deplore, the systematic enslavement and mistreatment of the helots, of course, above all. To say that every polis in Greece at the time kept slaves—the Thebes of Pelopidas and Epaminondas and the Athens of Pericles as well as Sparta—may be to some degree a mitigation. But only to some degree. The Spartans were noted for their rigor, in this respect as in all others. But that is not, I think, the whole story, not nearly. Cruelty and mistreatment can be found for the looking in virtually every society on record, but one must look long and hard to find any society that equaled ancient Sparta in its cultivation of courage, discipline, and uncomplaining self-control. Those are not values that any culture can long afford to hold lightly, and as long as any culture values them, the Spartans will find their admirers. And rightly so, at least from my own admittedly Spartanophile perspective.



The words “MOLON LABE” (ΜΟΛΩΝ ΛΑΒΕ) in Greek as they are inscribed on the marble of the modern era monument at Thermopylae.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What led to the Corinthian War?
2. Why did King Agesilaus “relax” Spartan custom after the defeat of Levetra?

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