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Inequality of Archaic Spartan Government

Hollywood plays in to the Spartan mirage, portraying archaic Sparta as a ruthless and lawless place where the only goal is military conquest. They portray Sparta as if all the men who lived there were fearsome bloodthirsty warriors. For the time, Sparta was a well-organized polis with well-defined classes and government. Many of the reforms in archaic Sparta are accredited to a man named Lykourgos. The assembly government and reforms Lycurgus made in Sparta did not benefit the lower classes and only helped the minority upper class, the Spartiate.

The Spartiate, sometimes called Lacedaemonians, originated from a coastal area in Greece called Laconia. Like Athens, the terrain in Laconia was rocky and unfertile. Contrary to Athens, Sparta's solution to the lack of resources was military conquest instead of colonization. The Lacedaemonians conquered the more fertile neighboring areas of Messenia and Kynouria. The people the Spartiates conquered became helots and perioikoi. Under 10,000 Spartiate controlled hundreds of thousands of helots and perioikoi with wealth, military power, and fear.

Helots were the lowest class in Spartan society, they were slaves of the state and could be killed at any time for any reason. Ritual killings happened once a year to control the helot population and instill fear that kept them from revolting. Helots were farmers and menial laborers, not warriors. Perioikoi were slightly better off than helots, though they still had nowhere near the same freedoms as the Spartiate. The closest they got to being warriors was assisting Spartiate fighters and hunters. Only people from Kynouria could be elevated to perioikoi, all the conquered people from Messenia were helots.

Lykourgos was presumably a high class Spartiate but “in general nothing can be said concerning Lykourgos the law-giver that is not disputed, since there are different versions of his birth, travels abroad, death and above all his work on the laws and constitution, and least of all is there agreement about the times in which the man lived.” (Dillon 2010, pg. 1). His policies favoring the high class would make the most sense if he himself were in said class. It would make sense if a lawmaker from the upper class encouraged policies that continued to increase the power of the upper class.

Just like the people of Sparta, Lykourgos’s government system was divided into layers. “[he] established the ephors and the council of elders as well” (Herodotus. pg. 28). In total the government consisted of four main parts; the assembly, the ephors, the gerousia, and the kings. Any person who had any governmental power was Spartiate, helots and perioikoi had no political power. The effects on them were given very little to no consideration.

The assembly consisted of anyone who was a Spartiate man. They could vote on public policies but could not make proposals. “Lykourgos allowed no one except the elders and

the kings to put forward a proposal but the [assembly] had the supreme authority to decide upon one which these laid before them” (Dillon 2010, pg. 1). The Spartiate men oversaw settlements of helots and perioikoi divided by phylae and villages across the area. The limitations of who they could do to the people they oversaw is mostly known. They were also warriors who went into battle to gain honor.

The ephors were an inner council made up of 5 honored Spartiate elected to the position. Ephors had the most political power in Sparta. Elections happened every year and, to limit the power of a single person, service was limited to a single term. The ephors oversaw the assembly and the kings. Two out of the five accompanied kings on military expeditions to monitor them for cowardice. If they thought the king was unfit or a coward, they could petition for the deposition of the king. The most dangerous part of an ephors power was their veto power. They could veto motions in the assembly.

The Gerousia was a council of 28 elder Spartiate over the age of 60 elected to the position. The two kings are also part of the Gerousia, for a total of 30 members. Unlike ephors, the Gerousia served life terms. The Gerousia dealt with Spartiate criminals and their trials in Sparta. Unlike Athens, where the general population formed juries to oversee criminal trials “one which is said particularly to have contributed to the power of the masses, the right of appeal to the jury-court.” (Rhodes 2019. pg. 2). The Athenian system gave more power to the common people whereas the Gerousia made up of people who already had power. The court system likely did not favor helots and perioikoi, if they could even bring issue to it in the first place. Gerousia were also responsible for making proposals to the assembly to be voted on.

There were two Spartiate kings, descended from Agaiids and Eurypontids, powerful families in Sparta before Lycurgus. One king always went on military expedition, acting as a figurehead, and was overseen by two ephors. Kings had many responsibilities but their power “do not exceed by much those of private citizens” (Dillion 2010, pg. 6). The kings acted more like symbols of Spartan power than powerful political figures. The Spartan kings were particularly powerless compared to the King of Persia who claimed power given from Ahuramazda and “Whatsoever commands have been laid on [the people] by [the king], by night or by day, have been performed by them” (L.W. King 1907, pg. 1). Kings served life terms and when a king passed away a new one was elected by the shouts of the Spartiate. “This new king frees any Spartiate who was in debt to king or state.” (Herodotus, pg.372). This policy only applied to the Spartiate. The helots owned by the state and perioikoi in debt to the state would not be forgiven when a new king was appointed.

One of Lycurgus’s largest reforms was his land redistribution policy. The policy was meant to lessen the wealth gap in Sparta. Of course, that meant only within the Spartiate. The policy ended up taking land from perioikoi who had managed to gain wealth and gave it back to the Spartiate. It also unfairly divided the land between Spartiate; giving more to honored elders and less to the young men who had not yet had a chance to gain honor.

Lycurgus’s treatment of young men in Sparta was rather abysmal. “he wanted to make the boys more resourceful in their efforts to procure food, and at the same time he managed to fit them better for war” (Dillon 2010, 6.41). They had to contribute to the communal meal but received less food than honored elders. Young men often formed hunting parties to acquire food.

Lycurgus's policies are an improvement from the wild and rabid Spartan mirage portrayed by Hollywood, but they still had many flaws. The government increased the power of those who were already powerful, and the redistribution of wealth gave more to the wealthy. In modern times, taxes help maintain infrastructure and redistribute wealth, but they are not too different from Lycurgus's policies. The current president has promised tax breaks for the wealthy, ensuring that they stay richer. Our assembly government also has its checks and balances, but it does not always stop people from using their political power to gain more power.

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