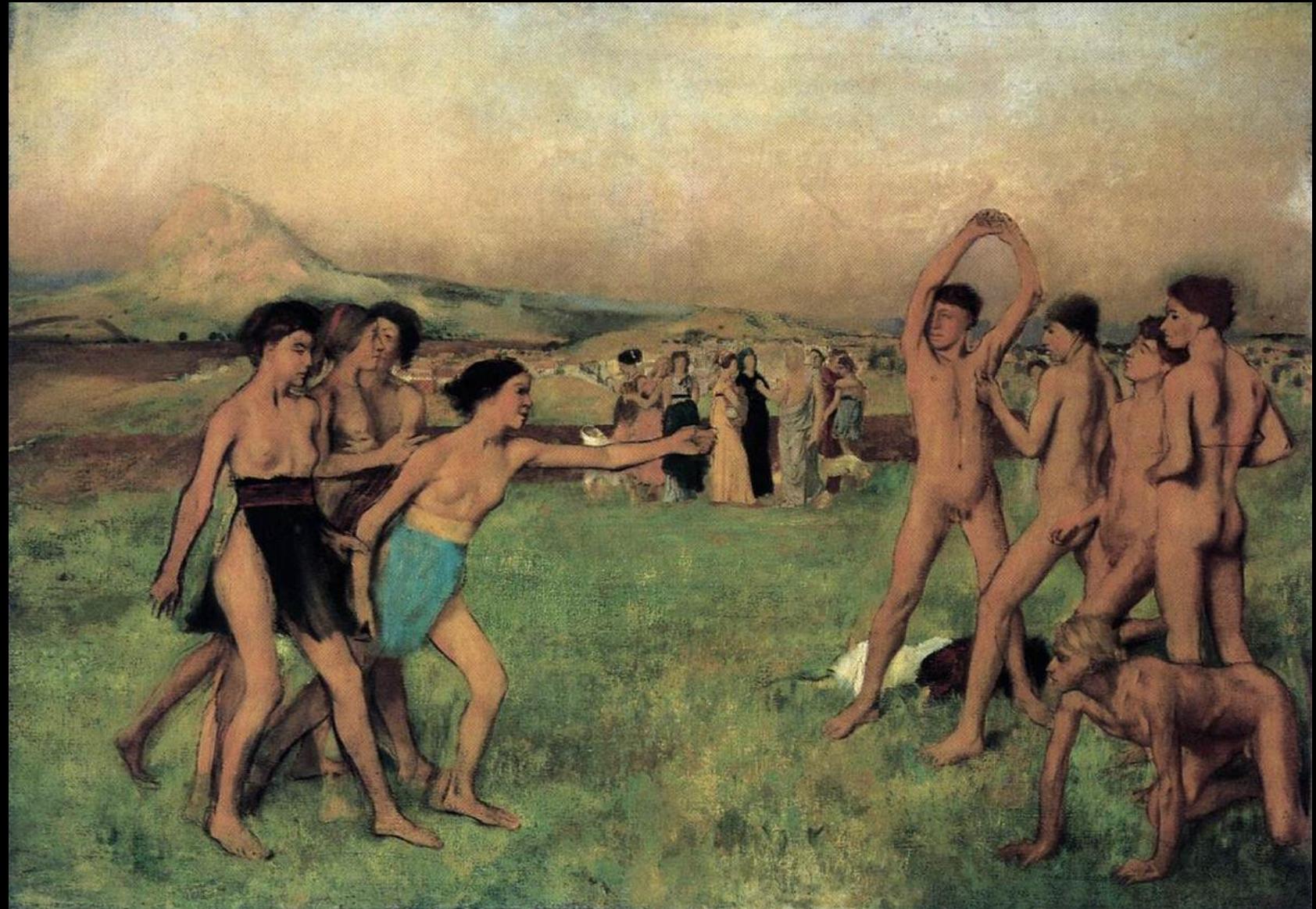


# THE (STRANGE?) CASE of SPARTA



Edgar Degas  
*Young Spartans Exercising, 1860*

# Archaic Age or Period: Roughly 750/700 – 480 BCE

- Bronze Age
- Iron Age
- Archaic Age
- (Classical Age)



# Sparta, in Lakonia, on the Peloponnesus

other name for Spartans:  
*Lacedaemonians*





“If Sparta were to be deserted and only the temples and foundations of the buildings remained, I imagine that people in the distant future would seriously doubt that Sparta’s power ever approached its fame.”



- Thucydides (late 5<sup>th</sup> C),  
*History of the  
Peloponnesian War*, 1.10

# “The Spartan Mirage”: Seeing What One Wants to See?

- Sources for Sparta include:
  - Herodotus (ca. 430 BCE)
  - Thucydides (end of the 400s BCE)
  - \*Xenophon\* (b. Athens ca. 430 BCE)
    - *The Spartan Constitution*
  - Plutarch (46 to 126 CE)
    - Biographer and ethical philosopher, not historian
    - Lives include that of Lycurgus/Lykourgos
    - *Sayings of the Spartans*
    - *Sayings of the Spartan Women*

# Latter-Day Claims to Sparta

ANCIENT VS MODERN RECEPTION METASCHOLARSHIP EDITORIAL REVIEW PEDAGOGY LEVITY

## This Is Not Sparta

Why the Modern Romance With Sparta Is a Bad One

Sarah E. Bond Follow May 7, 2018 · 10 min read



• *Molôn labe* (“Come and take it”)

- NRA
- US Capitol rioters

→ But also: Women in Texas defending abortion rights

[“This is Not Sparta,” by Sarah Bond](#)

# Joseph T. Wilson (1836-91)

U.S. Civil War veteran of the Union Army, author of *Emancipation: Its Course and Progress from 1481 BC to 1875 AD* (1882)

Wilson describes what he called a “Black phalanx” of soldiers in the Union Army, “dying with Spartan courage” (p. 141).



JOSEPH T. WILSON,  
Of 2d Reg't. La. N. G. Vols., also 54th Mass. Vols.

# The Mirage is Old: Plutarch's *Life of Lykourgos* (legendary founder of Sparta)

“But it was not Lykourgos’ chief purpose to leave his city in command of a great many others; he thought rather that the happiness of an entire city, like that of an individual, depends on moral excellence and inner harmony ... Lykourgos, because he produced not letters and speeches but an inimitable polity, ... an example of an entire city in love with wisdom, has fairly surpassed in renown all who have ever created polities among the Greeks.” (31)

## Later “Evidence”?

### *Plutarch’s Customs and Sayings of the Spartans*

- When someone saw almonds of the hard sort selling at double the price of others, he said, “Are stones so scarce?”
- When their king promised to wipe out completely another city that had given Sparta trouble, the Ephors [magistrates] would not allow it: “You must not abolish the training ground of our youth.”

# Contemporary “Evidence”?

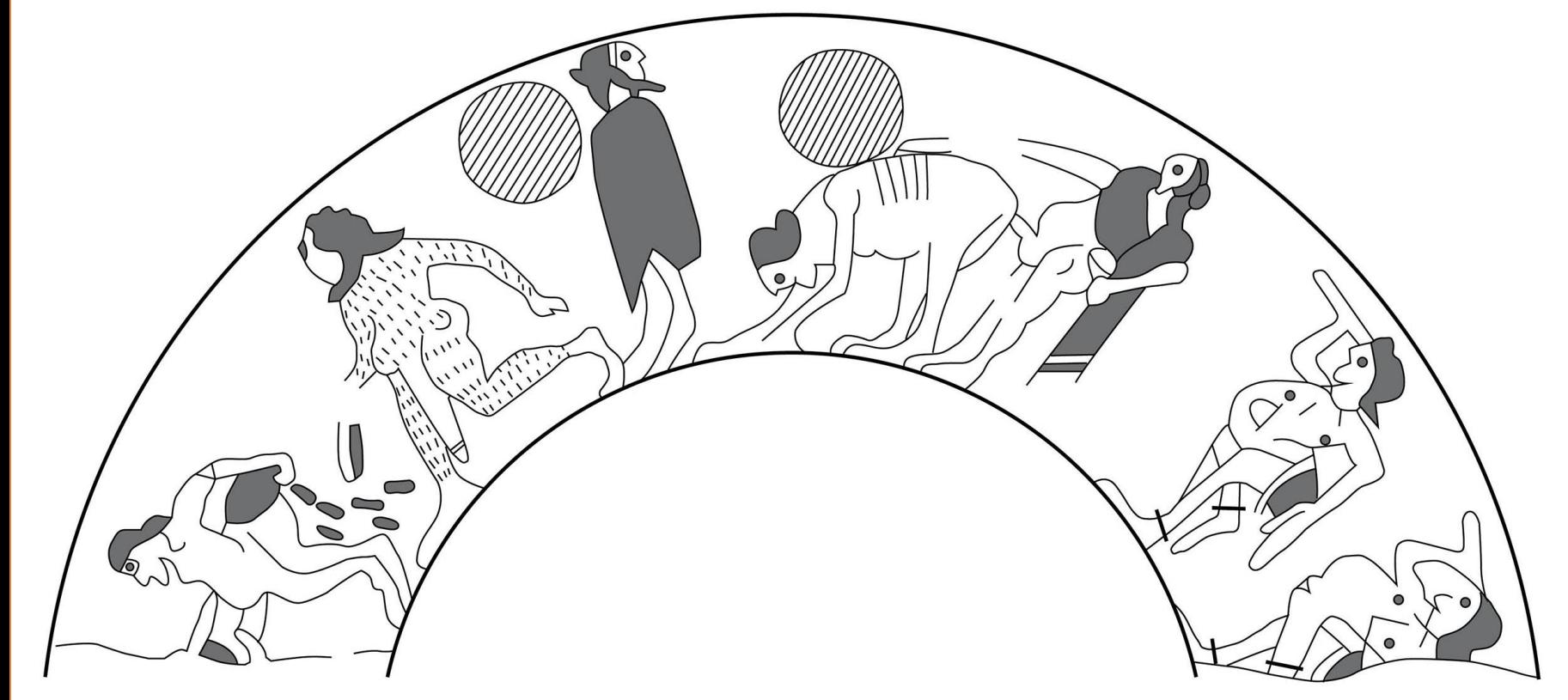
## Tyrtaeus (late 7<sup>th</sup> C)

### poem no. 10

To fall and die among the fore-fighters is a beautiful thing  
for a brave man who is doing battle on behalf of his country ...  
Do battle, young men, standing firm one beside the other,





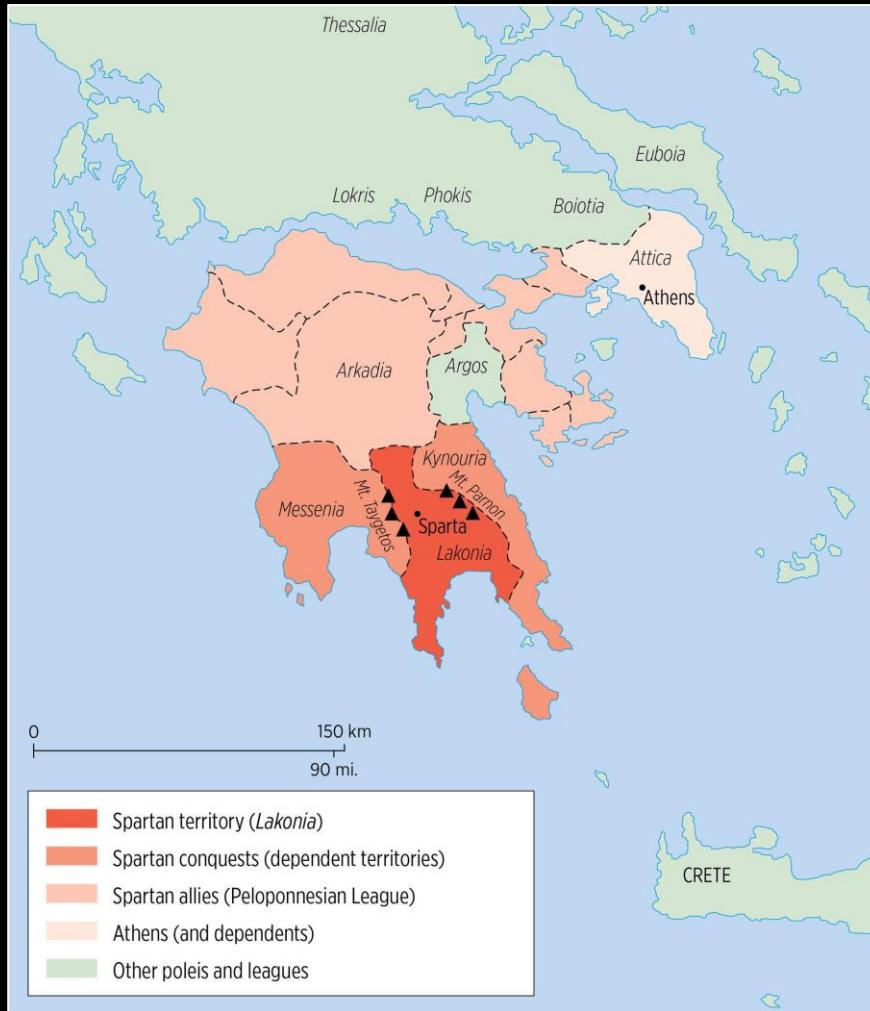


Rituals Connected to Artemis Orthia

# Spartan Domination

**Helots** – serfs or slaves of the Spartan state, including subjugated peoples of Messenia

**Perioeci** (“people who lived around” Sparta); sometimes called Laconians; served in Spartan army



# What (Else) Makes Sparta Unique?

- Treatment of children and male youths (“Ephēbes”)
  - → System of military training called *agoge*
- *Syssitia* (mess-hall groups; dining groups)



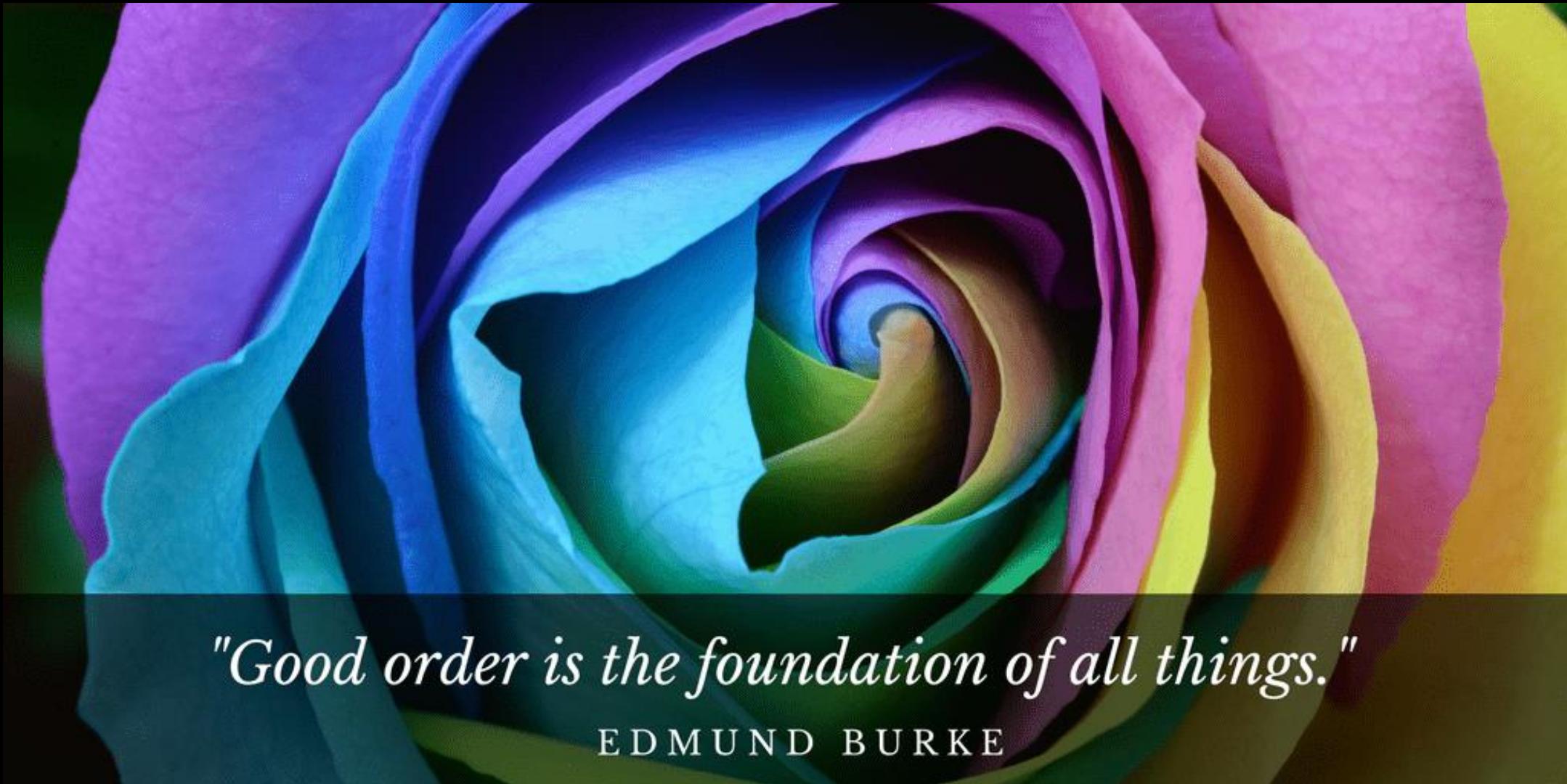
Spartiate *Homoioi* (“equals”) + Others

*Hypomeiones* (“Inferiors”)

*Krypteia*

*Xenelasia*

# Spartan Government and *Eunomia*?



*"Good order is the foundation of all things."*

EDMUND BURKE

# Spartan Government: *Misotyrannos?*

- Dual Kingship (*basileis*, plural of *basileus*)
- *Gerousia* – council of elders
- *Ephors* – judicial overseers/magistrates; inspectors of youth
- Assembly – *ekklesia*

# Women in Sparta

*polyandry*



# *Plutarch's Sayings of Spartan Women*

- (a woman hears of her five sons' deaths in war) “But how fares our city?” “Victorious!” **“Then I gladly accept my sons’ deaths.”**
- Another, asked by a man if she would be good if he bought her, said, **“Yes, and if you do not buy me.”**
- Another woman, as she handed her son his shield, exhorted him, saying, **“Either this or upon this.”**

# Plutarch, *Life of Lykourgos*, ch. 14

“Sometimes the girls would make fun of individual young men, **helpfully criticizing their mistakes**. On other occasions they would sing the praises **they had composed** about those deserving them, so that they inspired them with enthusiasm and great love of glory” (14).

# Alkman (late 7<sup>th</sup>, early 6<sup>th</sup> C BCE), lyric poet

*Partheneion* (*partheneia*, pl.) – “maiden-song”

Fr. 3: “But Astymeloisa offers me no answer:  
Rather, holding the garland,  
**Like a star flashing through**  
**The radiant heavens,**  
**Or a golden sapling, or soft down ...**  
She stepped through on tapered feet,  
Making her locks beautiful ...”



Vix Krater





# Thucydides, History 1.77.6

The Athenians, addressing the Spartans:

“Not only is your life at home regulated by rules and institutions incompatible with those of others, but your citizens abroad act neither on these rules **nor on those which are recognized by the rest of Hellas.**”