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From Thermopylae to Leuctra:
The Evolution of the Spartan Military Ethos

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Throughout history few nations have possessed a fiercer military reputation than Sparta. The glorious stand at Thermopylae in 480 BCE still enchants people millennia after it was fought. Films, football teams, and clothing brands all pay homage to Spartan bravery and toughness. However, most are unaware of Spartan history outside the events of this battle. History enthusiasts revere the Spartans as strong, valiant, and morbidly witty men but this is not the entirety of their story. Spartan military ethos and methods did not remain stagnant after Thermopylae. However, strict adherence to the Spartan military culture increasingly eroded the very principles it sought to uphold. By the time Sparta succumbed to Theban military prowess, it had already abandoned the spirit of Thermopylae. From Thermopylae, to Sphacteria, to the Battle of Leuctra, each period experienced a unique shift in the military culture. Thermopylae stood as the high point of Spartan military ethos, Sphacteria the low point, and Leuctra as its last gasp; ultimately, Spartan military ethos destroyed itself because the traditional warrior society was incompatible with necessary innovation.

The events leading up to Thermopylae demonstrate important aspects of the Spartan military culture. The Spartans took war very seriously, but they were also a highly religious people. Earlier in the Persian Wars, the Athenians requested Spartan help at Marathon. However, the extremely religious Spartans refused to provide aid until the moon was full. This was partially out of religious reverence and partially because they needed to guard their helots.¹ Therefore, when the Greeks were devising their strategies of defense, it was no surprise that the Spartans wished to fortify the Isthmus of Corinth which most directly protected their homeland.² The consensus among the Hellenic League only came when the Thessalians threatened to surrender if their land was not protected.³ The Spartans agreed to defend the Thessalians, contributing their own soldiers to the Hellenic League's defense force of 10,000 men. Although this Spartan sally seems to contradict their homebound nature, Paul A. Rahe makes an astute observation. The Spartan commander sent to help the Thessalians, Eurybiades, son of Karenos, was not of royal blood, indicating that the Spartans were not fully invested in the campaign.⁴ This aligns more with the Spartan tendency to remain close to home and guard their helots. Since many of the Spartan's Peloponnesian allies were farmers, this was further motivation to stay close to home.⁵ Herodotus (c. 484-425 BCE) explains that even the prospect of conquest could not stir the Spartans from their homeland. When Aristagoras (d. 497 BCE) tried to convince Cleomenes (d. 490 BCE) to invade Persian land, the Spartan king refused his plea. Cleomenes dismissed the lavish promises of victory and plunder when he discovered the long distance

¹ Alfred S. Bradford, *Leonidas and The Kings of Sparta: The Mightiest Warriors, Fairest Kingdom* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 84.

² Bradford, 86.

³ Herodotus, *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*. Edited by Robert B. Strassler, translated by Andrea L. Purvis (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 7.172.

⁴ Paul Anthony Rahe, *The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta: The Persian Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 206.

⁵ Rahe, 205-206.

between Sparta and Asia.⁶ Around the time of Thermopylae, the Spartans were valiant in war, deeply religious, and homebodies by nature.

After the plan to fortify a pass in Thessaly failed, the Greeks decided to stop the Persians at Thermopylae and send their fleet to Artemision. At this point many Greeks had already medized or remained neutral, but the Spartans still decided to send their forces against the massive Persian army.⁷ Despite the Spartans' commitment to the endeavor, they were initially unable to send their entire army as most of Sparta was celebrating the festival of the Karneia. However, fearing that the others would medize due to Spartan inaction, the Spartans sent their king, Leonidas (c. 540-480 BCE), with 300 Spartan soldiers. As Bradford points out, even before the battle commenced, the Spartan king recognized that the likelihood of death of was high.⁸ Leonidas was a highly admired Greek leader, and he only chose men who already had sons so that their lineage would not be cut off in battle.⁹ Furthermore, an oracle predicted that the death of a king would save Sparta.¹⁰ To protect Greece and save his beloved homeland, Leonidas was willing to die. With this in mind, the Spartans and their allies marched to hold the pass until reinforcements could arrive. After Xerxes' (c. 518-465 BCE) army had come to the pass, he was astonished at the Greek bravery, which to him seemed foolhardy. He could not understand that, when the Spartans were combing their hair, they were preparing to kill and to be killed.¹¹ The Spartans were vastly outnumbered and all circumstances indicated that they would die, but they still stood strong.

⁶ Herodotus, 5.49-51.

⁷ Bradford, 86.

⁸ Bradford, 87.

⁹ Herodotus, 7.206.

¹⁰ Herodotus, 7.220.

¹¹ Herodotus, 7.207-209.

Xerxes waited four days for the Spartans to withdraw. After this he began the attack. The Persians fell on the Spartans and their allies in waves, but the defenders remained unmoved.¹² As Bradford aptly states, the Spartans “made it clear to everyone, and, most of all, to the king [Xerxes], that he may have massive numbers, but very few soldiers.”¹³ Even as he was outflanking the Spartans, the Persian commander Hydarnes initially delayed attacking the Phocians guarding the path, fearing that they were Spartans.¹⁴ Their tenacity and skill instilled immense fear into the enemy. Despite being outflanked, Leonidas and his men remained to fight.¹⁵ Knowing that they would die, the Spartans and the Thespians began to fight with heightened ferocity. The Spartans routed the Persian onslaught four times, continuing the battle even after the death of Leonidas. They were so determined and savage in their fighting that the Persians opted to kill the remainder with missiles. As they were shot down the remaining Spartans gathered for a last stand, preparing to fight with daggers, hands, and teeth.¹⁶

After the Battle of Thermopylae, Spartan military ethos gained renown. Epitaphs were even made to glorify those who had died there. While the fame and virtue of those who perished were elevated, those who escaped death at Thermopylae were reviled. Leonidas had ordered two men suffering from an eye disease to depart from the battle. Guided by a helot, one named Eurytos (d. 480 BCE) returned to battle and died with the others. However, the other, Aristodemos (d. 479 BCE), survived and returned home to Sparta. Aristodemos’ countrymen were disgusted that he had survived when Eurytos had sacrificed himself. He was labeled as “Aristodemos the Trembler” and no Spartan would speak to him or give him fire.¹⁷ Deeming his

¹² Herodotus, 7.211-7.212

¹³ Bradford, 90.

¹⁴ Herodotus, 7.218.

¹⁵ Herodotus, 7.220.

¹⁶ Herodotus, 7.223-225.

¹⁷ Herodotus, 7.229-7.231.

life was not worth living, he purposely threw himself onto the enemy spears at the Battle of Plataea.¹⁸ Another Spartan named Pantites (d. 480 BCE) survived because he was sent as a messenger to Thessaly. When he returned to Sparta, he faced such great dishonor that he hanged himself.¹⁹ Every Spartan who survived Thermopylae committed suicide out of dishonor. In many ways, Thermopylae and the events surrounding it personify the height of Spartan military ethos. They often remained close to their homeland and were deeply religious, but they were ferocious in battle. The Spartans were so dedicated to battlefield honor, that they willingly marched to their deaths and fought to the last man. Those who failed to fight to the death, even for excusable reasons, were shamed into suicide. These things epitomized the Spartan military ethos.

While Thermopylae was the high point of Spartan military ethos, Sphacteria was a clear example of its decline. When Demosthenes (384-322 BCE) and the Athenian forces landed at Pylos and began to construct fortifications, the Spartans were largely unconcerned.²⁰ Once again, the Spartans were delayed because they were celebrating a festival. Even if the Athenians intended to stay, the Spartans were confident that they could defeat them.²¹ By the time Agis (d. 399 BCE) scrambled back to defend Attica, the Athenians had already fortified themselves.²² The Spartans launched an attack by land and sea, but they were unable to take Pylos from Demosthenes' men. Their naval inferiority turned out to be their downfall at Pylos. Demosthenes knew this and was able to defend isolated areas effectively. If the Spartans had been able to make a strong landing, they would have certainly killed the Athenians.²³ However, the Spartans were limited both by the terrain and their navy. In a reversal of Thermopylae, the Athenians created a

¹⁸ Rahe, 239.

¹⁹ Herodotus, 7.232.

²⁰ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to The Peloponnesian War*, edited by Robert B. Strassler (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 4.5.

²¹ Donald Kagan, *The Archidamian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 223.

²² Thucydides, 4.6.

²³ Kagan, 228.

bottleneck for the Spartans, and pushed them back with a smaller and inferior force.²⁴ After two more days of fighting at Pylos the Athenian fleet from Zacynthus routed the Spartan fleet. This left the troops stationed on Sphacteria isolated and cut off by the Athenian forces.²⁵ Now the Spartans became the besieged, causing consternation among their leadership. Because of their eugenics and barracks culture, the contingent of 420 hoplites on Sphacteria was a full tenth of their entire army. The practices of killing imperfect infants, strict treatment of its soldiers, and separating its men and women during the height of their fertility had deleterious effects on the Spartan population.²⁶ With this concern looming large, the two sides made an armistice.²⁷ Ultimately, they did not conclude a peace treaty and hostilities resumed at Pylos. Citing a supposed violation of the armistice, the Athenians refused to return the Spartan ships they had captured, and they continued the blockade of Sphacteria.²⁸ Despite being isolated on a desert island, the Spartans still resisted surrender. They partially accomplished this by promising helots their freedom if they could smuggle provisions to their besieged troops.²⁹ Eventually Demosthenes and Cleon (d. 422 BCE) launched an attack and caught the Spartans by surprise. The defenders attempted to fight well but they were hindered by Demosthenes' tactics. Although his forces vastly outnumbered the Spartans, he ordered them to hold back. Meanwhile, the peltasts and archers rained death and confusion upon the frustrated Spartans.³⁰ Nightmares from Thermopylae returned. This time it was Athenian archers who shot down the superior Spartan infantry. However, unlike the men at Thermopylae, the Spartans at Sphacteria fled to a fort where

²⁴ Kagan, 229.

²⁵ Thucydides, 4.13-14.

²⁶ Kagan, 230.

²⁷ Thucydides, 4.15.

²⁸ Thucydides, 4.23.

²⁹ Thucydides, 4.26.

³⁰ Thucydides, 4.31-4.33.

they took a defensive position.³¹ Outflanked by Messenian troops, the Spartans received Demosthenes' and Cleon's offer of surrender.³² The Spartan Hippagretas spoke for the men at Sphacteria since their commander had been killed in the slaughter. They appealed to their authorities back in the homeland, asking whether they should surrender. These authorities did not want the shame of surrendering, so they left the task to the troops on the ground.³³ The Greek world was dumbfounded. No one thought that Sparta would ever capitulate to an enemy force. The main result was the decline of Spartan power. The helots began to desert, and the Athenians had a tenth of the Spartan army hostage.³⁴ This battle showed the Greek world that the Spartans were not invincible and pointed out some key weaknesses within their military system.

Although these weaknesses in Spartan culture had been worsening for some time, Sphacteria exposed the mortality of the Spartan military ethos for all to see. Firstly, the Spartans' strict adherence to religious festivals had endangered their interests during the Persian Wars, but finally came to harm them at Pylos. Because of the passive and religiously scrupulous Spartan attitude, Demosthenes had enough time to fortify the island. Additionally, the lack of military diversification within the Spartan army gravely harmed them at Sphacteria. Their lifestyle of infantry training and their lack of archers or peltasts contributed to their defeat. If they had their own missile troops to counter the Athenians, they may have had a better chance at prevailing. Spartan vulnerability to missiles is a theme that is continuous throughout its history, from Thermopylae to the Theban Ascendancy. Furthermore, as Kagan points out, Spartan naval weakness allowed the Athenians to fight Pylos and Sphacteria on their terms. The weakness of the Spartan helot system, eugenics, and barracks culture pervaded this narrative. Strategically,

³¹ Thucydides, 4.35.

³² Thucydides, 4.37.

³³ Kagan, 247.

³⁴ Kagan, 248.

the Spartans at Sphacteria could not afford to fight to the death; they were a large portion of the military and could not be quickly replaced. This dilemma was primarily caused by a population shortage resulting from eugenics practices and the low birth rates connected to a barracks lifestyle. Both factors prevented the Spartans from reproducing at a sustainable rate for effective long-term warfare. Therefore, it was vital for Sparta to recover these men, even at the cost of its national honor. Even so there is a distinct difference between the morale during the time of Thermopylae and at Sphacteria. At Thermopylae the Spartans were willing to lose their beloved king in battle and sallied out even during the festival of the Karneia. On the other hand, the Spartans at Sphacteria were unwilling to sacrifice themselves for a lost cause. Their martial honor was not paramount. Similarly, the survivors of Thermopylae and Sphacteria faced very different fates. While the two survivors of Thermopylae were shamed into suicide, the survivors of Sphacteria received lighter treatment. Once the hostages were returned, their full civil rights were taken away from them. However, the Spartans did this out of fear that they would revolt, not entirely because their deeds were considered shameful. Later their rights were restored.³⁵ The Spartan military ethos did not adapt aspects of their culture requisite for maintaining a sizable force of soldiers. Therefore, at Sphacteria they were forced to abandon certain elements of the Spartan military ethos by surrendering. Sphacteria clearly illustrates the self-destruction of the Spartan military ethos.

After the Peloponnesian War, some aspects of the Spartan military ethos remained, but many had been changed. In fact, as the Spartans straddled the line between tradition and innovation, they found that they favored the latter. Even so, by embracing some innovation, they failed to implement it fully enough, and thus fell, clasping the sad remnants of their old ways.

³⁵ Thucydides, 5.34.

The reign of Agesilaus (c. 400-360 BCE) and the Spartan defeat at Leuctra marked the final decline of traditional Spartan military ethos.

During the reign of Agesilaus much of the Spartan attitude changed. Previously Spartans had always been reluctant to go abroad and preferred to stay close to their homeland. This changed greatly under Agesilaus. Sparta began to seek new conquests, wishing to establish its own oligarchic puppet states. After freeing Ionian city states, Agesilaus also launched a campaign into Asia Minor to invade Persian territory.³⁶ While Cleomenes refused to risk such distant expeditions, Agesilaus fully embraced them. Later in his reign Agesilaus even offered his services as a mercenary to Egyptian rebels.³⁷ This was considered a great disgrace. Compared to previous kings, Agesilaus was quite averse to Spartan tradition. However, this was not the only deviation from tradition under his reign. Agesilaus incorporated mercenaries and cavalry into the Spartan military.³⁸ Sparta's past refusal to adopt these kinds of soldiers had hurt them, particularly at Sphacteria. Nevertheless, they were completely counter to the old Spartan military ethos. After the Peloponnesian War, the Spartans had to remodel their military system, mainly due to a decline in Spartan citizens. These Spartan citizens had served as the backbone of the military in the past, but now the Spartans had to bring in foreign soldiers.³⁹ This decline of Spartan citizens was directly parallel to the general population decline of Sparta. The Peloponnesian War and a massive earthquake had taken many lives, lives that the Spartans were unable to quickly replace.⁴⁰ As previously, the Spartan system of eugenics and barrack living had made consistent reproduction challenging. This is another example of how the Spartan military

³⁶ John Gibson Warry, *Warfare in The Classical World* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2000), 73-74.

³⁷ Plutarch, *On Sparta* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 75.

³⁸ Warry, 77-78.

³⁹ Warry, 80.

⁴⁰ Warry, 80.

ethos destroyed itself. Because of the strict adherence to barracks living and exclusion of non-citizens from combat, Agesilaus and others were forced to resort to mercenaries. At this point the Spartans had mixed some innovation with a now old and sickly military tradition. This only delayed their demise.

The Battle of Leuctra was a clear example of Sparta's failure to successfully mix innovation and tradition. During the Boeotian War, king Cleombrotus of Sparta (d. 371 BCE) led his men against the Theban forces.⁴¹ Determined to avoid accusations of cowardice, he drove his men to join in battle.⁴² As the two sides prepared to fight, mercenaries under Hiero attacked members of the Theban baggage train.⁴³ In doing so, these troops pushed the Thebans back into their own ranks and condensed their formation.⁴⁴ The Spartans kept their horses in front of their squares of infantry. During this time their cavalry was inferior to the Thebans'. Spartans did not invest much effort into their cavalry, and they tended to be the most inexperienced men in the army. Additionally, the Spartan heavily infantry was lined up with a depth of no more than twelve men, while the Thebans formed a close formation of fifty on their own left flank.⁴⁵ With this formation, the Thebans would overwhelm Cleombrotus' right flank, and then the rest of the army.⁴⁶ The Thebans caught the Spartans by surprise. Before Cleombrotus was able to properly position his troops, the lackluster Spartan cavalry had already been thrashed by the Thebans. The fleeing Spartan cavalry ran through their own ranks, causing discord. This occurred just as the Thebans launched a ferocious attack. Despite holding out initially, Cleombrotus and his army

⁴¹ Xenophon, *Hellenica*. Translated by H.G. Dakyns (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2014), 6.4.555.

⁴² Xenophon, 6.4.555.

⁴³ Xenophon, 6.4.560.

⁴⁴ Xenophon, 6.4.561.

⁴⁵ Warry, 83.

⁴⁶ Xenophon, 6.4.562-64.

were bested by the assault.⁴⁷ When necessity overruled their hesitance, the Spartans requested a truce so that they could gather their dead.⁴⁸ The events of Leuctra show the weakness of the mixed Spartan system. In an effort to remain powerful, the Spartans adopted cavalry and used mercenaries. However, still prioritizing their heavy infantry, the Spartans used their innovations poorly. Furthermore, despite their strong reputation for elite infantry, they were defeated by Theban innovation in hoplite strategy.⁴⁹ Leuctra demonstrates a notable change in Spartan military ethos, yet Sparta's modernization still lacked sufficient adjustment for the times.

While the battle itself shows much about Spartan military innovation, the aftermath of Leuctra conveys important changes in Spartan attitudes. When the messengers returned to Sparta with news of the battle, the people were celebrating the Gymnopaediae. Rather than interrupt the last day of the festival, the ephors decided to not make a public calamity. They secretly informed the bereaved families, warning the women to not make their sorrow heard. However, the next day, all those who had lost family at Leuctra were radiant while those whose family had survived mourned as though their kin had died instead.⁵⁰ In this way the strict Spartan mindset remained intact. The glory of the slain and the shame of the survivors was one aspect of Spartan military ethos that remained during this time. The ephors' behavior during the festival was also significant. Despite the calamity at Leuctra, the ephors still insisted that the proper rites should be observed. Nevertheless, present necessity still prevailed over the old Spartan way. Although their families mourned their survival, the soldiers were still granted clemency. Such mercy would not have been extended in the past, and even surpassed the forgiveness shown to the hostages at

⁴⁷ Xenophon, 6.4.564.

⁴⁸ Xenophon, 6.4.564-69.

⁴⁹ Warry, 83.

⁵⁰ Xenophon, 6.4.569-70.

Sphacteria. As was the case at Sphacteria, this clemency was primarily motivated by the shortage of soldiers. Many Spartans had fled during Leuctra, and the ephors wanted to find some way around the laws that mandated a loss of status for cowardice. Therefore, they chose Agesilaus to act as lawgiver. Giving a public statement, Agesilaus said, “I would not become a lawgiver to make the laws different from the present ones, nor would I add, subtract, or alter anything. On the contrary, it is fine for these current laws of ours to be valid – from tomorrow.”⁵¹ This demonstrates the deterioration of Spartan military discipline since Sphacteria. At least the soldiers at Sphacteria received some kind of temporary punishment. After Leuctra the Spartans simply ignored their laws for pragmatic reasons. This stands in stark contrast to the military ethos displayed during Thermopylae. Leuctra and its aftermath vividly demonstrate how the Spartan military ethos destroyed itself. Sparta’s eugenics, barracks culture, and failure to effectively diversify its military all eroded its military ethos. Innovation and compromise came too late to save a dying system.

Throughout history, the Spartans have been lauded for their military discipline. Their unique military-centered culture has fascinated and inspired many throughout the ages. Nevertheless, as time progressed and military conventions shifted, the Spartans began to lose the past potency of their military ethos. Traditionally Spartan heroism was most gloriously displayed at Thermopylae, but as time went on Sparta lost the spirit of the 300. The military spirit that they took such pains to cultivate eventually cannibalized itself. The necessity of replenishing their lost soldiers eroded their discipline, while their attempts to mix military innovation with their old military system failed. Sparta’s effort to compromise contributed to its demise; elements of its military ethos made it unsustainable in the long run. Tragically Sparta was killed by the very

⁵¹ Plutarch, 144.

thing that made it such a glorious nation. However, its legacy still stands as an example of heroism and strength to the world.

About the author

Evan Smith is a junior at Patrick Henry College where he is pursuing a degree in history. From a young age, academics have inspired Evan. After graduating, he plans to pursue post-graduate studies in history and become a college professor.

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