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PLUTARCH

Greek Lives

A selection of nine Greek Lives



Translated by

ROBIN WATERFIELD

With Introductions and Notes by

PHILIP A. STADTER

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Of all the ancient writers, Plutarch is in many ways the most accessible. Readers as diverse as Beethoven, Rousseau, and Harry Truman have admired the vividness of his narrative and the immediacy of his anecdotes in the *Parallel Lives*. When he wrote in the first decades of the second century AD, the Roman empire was in its most prosperous and peaceful period. While the emperor Trajan drove back the barbarian tribes of eastern Europe and the Parthians in Asia, expanding the empire to its greatest extent, Plutarch and his friends in Athens, Corinth, and his home town of Chaeronea met, dined, discussed philosophy, and considered the lessons of history. Yet the edge of chaos was not far off. Plutarch was about 23 in 68, when insurrection and civil war ended the reign of Nero; three emperors whirled on and off stage in one year before Vespasian established himself upon the throne. Plutarch later toured the battlefield of Bedriacum in northern Italy with a Roman friend who had fought there, and was told of piles of corpses higher than the tops of the eagle standards; in civil wars no prisoners are taken (*Oaho* 14). Some twenty years later, the emperor Domitian became afraid that philosophers teaching in Rome might encourage tyrannicides, and expelled them all from the city. Plutarch may well have been among their number. Domitian raged against senators, authors, and others who might oppose him, until he was assassinated in 96. The short reign of Nerva which followed prepared for the twenty-year rule of Trajan (98–118).

In this time of recently acquired and still insecure serenity Plutarch lived in Chaeronea and Athens (of which he was also a citizen), teaching philosophy to a small group of young men and writing an enormous volume of work, of which we possess perhaps half. His family wealth and education set him among the élite of Greece, and he regularly entertained powerful and cultured friends, both Greeks and Romans. Since his youth he had served on commissions to meet with the Roman governor, and he was on good terms with Romans of the highest rank. His culture and heritage was fully and proudly Greek, but he like other members of his class accepted the Roman imperial system and worked within it. The nearby sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, of which he was priest for many years, gave him another

The Parallel Lives: Scope and Purpose

His major work, a series of parallel biographies which gradually grew to 48, of which we possess 46,¹ probably was begun early in the reign of Trajan, and continued until Plutarch's death c.120–5.² Prior to the biographies, and continuing alongside them, Plutarch wrote a large number of short essays and some larger collections, which we now subsume under the title of *Moralia*, or *Moral Essays*. The title is indeed appropriate to some, such as *Control of Anger, Quiet of Mind, Brotherly Love, and Talkativeness*, which present philosophical and ethical truths in a charming and thoughtful format.³ Others explore religious and theological topics dear to the author: several 'Pythian' dialogues on the sanctuary at Delphi and its oracles, and others on *Superstition, Isis and Osiris, the Face in the Moon, and Socrates' Sign*. A third category encompasses contemporary politics and the role of the philosopher in them. Most interesting of these is the *Advice on Public Life*, addressed to a young aristocrat of Sardis who wished to play a major role in the life of his city, and perhaps beyond. The nine books of *Table Talk* show the philosopher chatting with his friends at dinner, on topics ranging from the effect of old age on sight to the proper time for sex, with special attention to the best customs for a dinner party. Such a list is only a sampling of the riches to be found

¹ The first two Lives, *Scipio* and *Epinomidas*, have been lost. Four other extant Lives do not belong to the *Parallel Lives*: *Galla* and *Otha*, part of a series of Lives of the emperors, and *Aratus* and *Artaxerxes*, were written independently, as were other lost Lives.

² Cf. C. P. Jones, 'Towards a Chronology of Plutarch's Works', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 56 (1966), 61–74, repr. in B. Scardigli, *Essays on Plutarch's Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 95–123.

³ I use the English titles given by D. A. Russell in his listing of the *Moralia* in *Plutarch (London: Duckworth, 1973), 164–72* and *Plutarch: Selected Essays and Dialogues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. xxiii–xxvii. The titles vary slightly among translators. Russell's *Plutarch* provides an excellent general introduction to Plutarch.

in this marvellously varied collection, a delight and inspiration for Montaigne and Emerson.⁴

The *Parallel Lives* represent a new initiative, which nevertheless grows naturally out of the earlier essays. A major feature of the essays had been Plutarch's effort to encourage his readers to allow the effect of philosophy to penetrate their daily lives and their way of thinking about the world, whether in shaping their own character and behaviour, or in considering the workings of the gods and the after-life. Over time, however, he seems to have become dissatisfied with this format, and decided to turn to biography. In the series of *Lives* of the Roman emperors from Augustus to Vitellius, written perhaps shortly after Domitian's death, of which only *Gallia* and *Otho* survive, he seems to have tested his skill at writing historical narrative from a philosophical perspective.⁵ With the *Parallel Lives* he undertakes a grand project to explore, in the lives of famous statesmen and commanders, all major historical figures, the interplay of character and political action. In the premon to his Life of Nicias, whose defeat in Sicily had been the focus of some of the most memorable pages of Thucydides' history, Plutarch writes,

I have touched briefly on the essentials [from Thucydides and Philistus, another historian]—enough to avoid gaining a reputation for carelessness and indolence—while trying to collect the facts which may have been mentioned here and there by other writers or which can be found recorded on ancient votive offerings or in decrees, but are unnoticed by most people. My purpose was not to gather meaningless historical data, but to record data which promote the understanding of character and personality. (*Nic.* 1)

In *Alexander*, in a frequently quoted passage, he asserts,

I am not writing history but biography, and the most outstanding exploits do not always have the property of revealing the goodness or badness of the agent; often in fact, a casual action, the odd phrase, or a jest reveals character better than battles involving the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives, huge troop movements, and whole cities besieged. . . . I must be allowed to devote more time to those aspects which indicate a person's mind and to use these to portray the life of each of my subjects. (*Alex.* 1)

Exactly this focus on character sets the *Lives* apart from military and political histories and gives them their interest, charm, and usefulness.

⁴ See the essays translated in the World's Classics by Russell, *Plutarch: Selected Essays and Dialogues* and by Robin Waterfield, *Plutarch: Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

⁵ Cf. A. Georgiadou, 'The Lives of the Caesars and Plutarch's Other Lives', *Illinois Classical Studies*, 13 (1988), 349–56.

Nevertheless, a tension exists between Plutarch's professed aim—to treat character—and the subjects he chose for his biographies, all of whom are statesmen, and most are generals who commanded large armies and won or lost great battles. Earlier authors interested in ethics had written the lives of philosophers or lawgivers. By turning to lives of statesmen, Plutarch changes the nature of the inquiry, which becomes not what is the best way to live, but how have real men of influence, acting in real situations, brought their lives to a successful conclusion, or failed to do so. Once it was believed that Plutarch regularly depended on earlier biographies for his *Lives*; now it has been established that his major sources for most if not all of the *Lives* were histories. Plutarch's project thus involved a massive rethinking of this historical material in terms of his philosophical understanding of character and moral behaviour.

The *Parallel Lives* set a Greek and a Roman biography side by side, each pair making a single unit. The modern practice of dividing the *Lives* into two series, one Greek and one Roman—followed also in the present collection—is based on our historical interests, a natural result of our distance from the ancient world. Since the *Lives* are such an important source for our knowledge of leaders and of events, it is useful, clearer, and more accessible to treat the course of Greek and Roman history separately. Plutarch, who presumed that his readers would be familiar with their own history and would have access to full histories of both countries, found several advantages in a parallel presentation. First of all, the comparison between Greek and Roman statesmen, at a time when Greece itself was under Roman rule, asserted the dignity and long tradition of Greece, and suggested the idea of a close collaboration in government based on that tradition. Second, Plutarch knew from his rhetorical training that comparison was a powerful means of analysis and instruction. Comparison of the lives of two men would reveal the underlying qualities of each, and highlight their similarities and differences.⁶ One of the most important results of the scholarship of the last twenty-five years has been the

⁶ Cf. *Virtues in Women* 243b–d: 'There is no way of understanding the similarities and differences between virtue in women and virtue in men, other than by comparing life with life, action with action, as works of a great craft . . . Virtues do, of course, acquire differences—peculiar colours, as it were—because of the nature of the persons, and are assimilated to their underlying habits, physical temperaments, diet, and way of life. Achilles was brave in a different way from Ajax. Odysseus' wisdom was not like Nestor's. Cato and Agesilaus were not just in the same way.' (Trans. Russell, *Plutarch: Selected Essays and Dialogues*, 397.)

recognition that Plutarch thought of each pair as a single work, developing a single overall impression, and linking the two lives not only in external features or accidents, but in many small ways regarding both events and traits of character. Thus, while the modern reader will usually approach each life individually, it is useful to keep the other member of the pair constantly in mind, as an aid to recognizing the features which Plutarch finds significant in the life. For this reason, in the introductions to the individual Lives in this book, special attention is given to the relation of each to its pair.

The individual books of the *Parallel Lives* (i.e. each pair of biographies) follow a standard pattern. Most often there is a poem, which serves as introduction to the pair. This may discuss the reasons for coupling these two men, or Plutarch's sentiments behind writing these biographies, or other features of interest. Where a clearly defined poem is lacking, the function of the poem is served by the opening chapters of the first life (e.g. in *Lysander* or *Solon*, where Plutarch's discussion of problems of chronology and sources leads into the pair).⁷ The two biographies follow, first the Greek, then the Roman, with three exceptions.⁸ Finally, most of the pairs add on a *synthesis* or 'Comparison' which reviews certain major elements of the two lives in an overtly comparative form, often drawing conclusions or expressing opinions different from the narratives themselves.⁹ Since the two lives form one book, there is often a development of thought and analysis not only within each life, but from one life to another, so that the first life regularly serves as a kind of introduction to the second.¹⁰ As a result, the Greek lives sometimes present in a simpler fashion character traits which appear more complex or extreme in the Roman lives, many of which are significantly longer than their Greek counterparts. In *Agesilaus*, for example, we see a leader both friendly and able to relate well with others, yet aggressive in pursuing his own

⁷ See in general P. A. Stader, 'The Poems of Plutarch's Lives', *Illinois Classical Studies*, 13 (1988), 275–95; for a different approach, T. G. Rosenmeyer, 'Beginnings in Plutarch's Lives', *Yale Classical Studies*, 29 (1992), 205–30.

⁸ *Coriolanus–Alcibiades*, *Aemilius Paulus–Timoleon*, *Sertorius–Eumenes*. Some editions reverse these to make the Romans follow.

⁹ There are no comparisons for four pairs, *Themistocles–Camillos*, *Pyrrhus–Marius*, *Phocion–Cato Minor*, and *Alexander–Caesar*.

¹⁰ Cf. C. Pelling, 'Synopsis in Plutarch's Lives', in F. Brenk and I. Gallo (eds.), *Miscellanea Plutarchea (Quaderini del giornale filologico ferrarese* 8; Ferrara, 1986), 83–96. This feature seems to explain why in certain pairs Plutarch has the Roman Life precede the Greek.

honour and military success, to the extent that he creates enemies for Sparta and ultimately presides over its collapse as a major power. The corresponding life, *Pompey*, is almost twice as long, and shows a man of similar characteristics, whose pursuit of his honour and susceptibility to his friends leads to civil war at Rome, and finally to his own death and the end of the Roman republic.

Plutarch expected both his readers and himself to benefit from the *Parallel Lives*. In the poem of *Aemilius*, he writes:

Although I originally took up the writing of Lives for others, I find that the task has grown on me and I continue with it for my own sake too, in the sense that I treat the narrative as a kind of mirror and try to find a way to arrange my life and assimilate it to the virtues of my subjects. The experience is like nothing so much as spending time in their company and living with them: I receive and welcome each of them in turn as my guest, so to speak, observe 'his stature and his qualities', and choose from his achievements those which it is particularly important and valuable for me to know. 'And oh, what greater delight could one find than this?' And could one find a more effective means of moral improvement either? (*Aem.* 1. 1–3)

It is worth exploring more exactly how Plutarch expected this 'moral improvement' to occur. Plutarch's readership most likely was that same circle of Greek and Roman friends to whom he dedicated his other works and whom we meet in the conversations of *Table Talk* and other dialogues. Comments in Plutarch's works and inscriptions and literary evidence allow us to identify many of these people as members of the ruling class in Greece and in the Roman empire.¹¹ The Greeks were among the wealthiest in the province, and held major offices in Athens, Sparta, and elsewhere. Among the Romans, no less than nine had held the consulship, a mark of special honour even at this time. Q. Sosius Senecio, the close friend to whom he dedicated the *Parallel Lives*, *Table Talk*, and *Progress in Virtue*, was a lead consul (*consul ordinarius*) in 99, the first full year of Trajan's reign, and again in 107, and held a high command during Trajan's wars in Dacia (modern Romania), for which he was awarded special honours and a public statue by Trajan. He clearly was a close associate of the emperor. Other friends held the important posts of proconsul in Asia or Africa. One friend, Antiochus Philopappus, grandson of the last king of

¹¹ See B. Puech, 'Prosopographie des amis de Plutarque', *ANRW* II.33:6 (1992), 4831–93 and C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 39–64.

Commagene, was consul in 109 (the first Athenian to become consul) as well as a fellow citizen of Athens: his grandiose monument stands opposite the Acropolis on the hill of the Muses. Plutarch's friends and readers, then, were not apolitical provincials, dabbling in philosophy or history to while away their time, but men with responsibilities and obligations, active in imperial and provincial polities, some of them in close contact with the emperor.

Plutarch's biography project needs to be seen in the context of this audience. The conversations which Plutarch reports show that these men were trained in basic philosophy and history. The *Moral Essays* of Plutarch were written to give them more specific guidance on particular points, often in response to a request of a friend. But the *Parallel Lives* reveal that Plutarch found these works unsatisfactory in responding to the ethical needs of men active in public life, and sought a different solution. A century and a half before, Cicero had complained that philosophers did not provide clear guidelines on making choices in business or political contexts. When the stakes were high, many respectable men chose something advantageous to themselves over a higher good. He cites as examples the actions of Pompey and Caesar, each fighting for his own honour rather than the good of Rome.¹² Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* are an attempt to fill that gap, and to provide the material which will allow men in power, statesmen and commanders themselves, to become aware of results of personal choices, and the moral decisions—and often ambiguities—inherent in political action.

In aiming at this audience of politically involved readers, Plutarch follows his own advice in such works as *Philosophers and Princes* and *Old Men in Politics*, that a philosopher should not hold back from attempting to influence public affairs. Throughout the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch is fascinated by the figure of the wise adviser in politics, of which the model might be Solon, advising successively the Athenian people, Croesus and other foreign kings, and the tyrant Pisistratus. Legislators, such as Lycurgus and Numa, fit this role, and the very limited number of philosopher-statesmen who are protagonists of Lives: Dion, Phocion, Cato the Younger, Brutus. More often the adviser is an important influence on the protagonist: Anaxagoras for Pericles, Socrates for Alcibiades, Aristotle for Alexander. Romans tend

to be influenced by Greek culture and philosophy in general, not a particular adviser, as in the case of Aemilius Paulus, Cicero, or Caesar. Plutarch undoubtedly saw himself in the role of adviser to his political friends and readers, helping them take a philosophical view of their situations and actions.¹³

In perusing one of Plutarch's *Lives*, the reader encounters a major statesman, one well known in history and admired for his achievements, seen not through a single witty anecdote, or a short speech in a history book, but through the whole course of his life. In the beginning the reader is introduced to the subject's family, major personality traits, and intellectual influences, as far as they are known. Then he or she is led through the statesman's life, with a focus on major turning points and crises, until his death. Along the way Plutarch offers comments, interpretations, and especially anecdotes which can suggest the character (*Ethos*) which underlies the statesman's actions.

Plutarch, although generally a Platonist, took his basic philosophy of ethics from Aristotle. He believed that it was possible by constant practice to progress step by step in virtue. In *Control of Anger*, he presents one of his friends, Minucius Fundanus, explaining how he learned to control his temper. Fundanus describes himself as actively taking command of his temper, first by making himself sensitive to its effects, then by conscious, well-prepared effort to subject it more and more to his rational control. Little is said about rules or precepts: rather the emphasis is on sensitizing oneself to the nature of anger, its effects, and the circumstances which produce it, then working carefully to strengthen oneself in these areas. Of major importance is the observation in others of the fault you are trying to correct, noting especially the effects of the fault on their friends, wives, and families, and the subsequent realization that the same thing is happening to you. Such observation, Fundanus affirms, is like having someone hold up a mirror to you during your moments of rage.¹⁴ Observation also allows us to understand the general nature of vice and virtue, and of the emotions and passions which lead to vice—knowledge learned only

¹² Cf. A. Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives* (London: Elek, 1974), 211–20; S. Swain, 'Hellenic Culture and the Roman Heroes of Plutarch', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 110 (1990), 126–45 (= Scardigli, *Essays on Plutarch's Lives*, 229–64); and C. Pelling, 'Plutarch: Roman Heroes and Greek Culture', in M. Griffith and J. Barnes (eds.), *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society* (Oxford, 1989), 199–232.

¹³ *Control of Anger* 455c–456b.

¹⁴ See Cicero, *On Duties*, book 3, esp. 3.73–88.

abstractly in philosophy lessons. The same is true of good qualities as of bad, of virtue as of vice. We can learn by observing in others not only given qualities, but the effects that they have on the men involved, their families, and their states.

When in *Aenilius* Plutarch speaks of meeting the men whose biographies he writes, of inviting them into his house, and considering them at close range, he describes exactly this process of observation. Like Fundanus, he compares such inspection to holding up a mirror before oneself. A mirror enables us to see ourselves as others see us, and to approve or correct our appearance as needed. Plutarch wished his *Parallel Lives* to serve this function, not in some abstract forum, but for men who wished and were able, like his statesmen and commanders, to have some effect in the larger affairs of Greece and of the Roman empire. The statesmen of the *Lives*, then, are not simply models to be imitated, or paradigms of virtue—many in fact are unsavoury types, or at the best unsatisfactory models—but case studies in political behaviour, set out to be considered and evaluated by the reader. Although Plutarch often points the way to the interpretation of an action which he considers preferable, the reader is encouraged to work actively in evaluating the behaviour and choices of the heroes, forming his own judgement as to their value and effect. Plutarch invites his readers to observe, then fashion their own lives based on what they have learned.

Furthermore, as Plutarch notes elsewhere, observation of behaviour in one area can be applied in other contexts. In the last book of the *Iliad*, Achilles receives Priam in his tent, has pity on him, and determines to give back Hector's body to his father. But he wisely decides not to bring the mutilated and disfigured body into Priam's sight before carefully washing and preparing it, lest Priam become angry, and Achilles end up killing him. Plutarch approves of Achilles' foresight concerning his own emotions, and the use of reason to guard against his irrational passion. But Plutarch goes on to assert that this lesson can be generalized, and be applied in different contexts: in the same way, one who is given to drink should be wary of drunkenness, or one given to love be wary of love, as was Agesilaus with the kiss of the beautiful boy.¹⁵

Each individual Life, while presenting a vivid portrait of an ancient statesman in action, invites moral reflection. As has been noted, this process is enriched by the technique of presenting the Lives in pairs: the reader is induced to shift focus back and forth between the two, comparing, changing perspective, re-evaluating. The formal syncrisis repeats this process, again shifting perspective, refocusing the elements of comparison. Both techniques prepare readers to use the pair as a double mirror for their own lives. The *Lives* acts as a powerful imaginative tool, recreating with extraordinary vividness the characteristics of statesmen of the past, and bringing them alive in the readers' minds.

The understanding of the human self implied in Plutarch's biographies differs from that of many modern thinkers. Although he treats major historical figures, his general rule is not to glorify them as independent spirits, breaking away from their social world by an act of will to create an autonomous self. Nor does he see them as unique personalities, unparalleled in the particular conglomeration of environmental influences and personal drives at the basis of their personality, which create strong tensions pulling them in different directions. Greek thinkers thought of the human person first of all as a rational animal, able to act on the basis of reasoning which was generally available to other humans as well. This thinking, as developed by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics in different ways, argued that it was theoretically possible for a person, in active co-operation with other persons, to arrive at '(a) objective knowledge of what constitutes the best in human life and (b) a corresponding character and way of life'.¹⁶ In addition, an individual who was acting like a human being (i.e. reasonably) would attempt to shape his life according to that knowledge. In this conception, the individual could and would want to form his own life according to objective criteria of behaviour, rather than follow spontaneous responses to the situation of the moment, or a set of moral principles established solely by oneself, and subject to change based on new experience. This is the basis for the moral thinking which pervades the *Lives*, and which modern readers sometimes find intrusive or gratuitous. Plutarch as a Platonist accepts that there are moral truths which, at least in theory, can be established by reason, to which any

¹⁵ On *Reading the Poets* 31bc, referring to Homer, *Iliad* 24, 560–86. The story of Agesilaus and the kiss is found in *Ages* 11.

¹⁶ The formulation is that of C. Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 12.

sensible person would wish to subscribe, and according to which he would shape his behaviour. From this standpoint Plutarch is able to evaluate the behaviour of his heroes, offer judgements and criticisms, and suggest alternative behaviour. Moreover, this is precisely the perspective from which Plutarch is able to use his heroes as mirrors for himself and his readers, presuming that they, like him, wish to shape their lives by reason in the most suitable way.

However, Plutarch's Platonism was strongly tinged with scepticism, the philosophical notion that many truths were in fact not knowable, so that one may have to hold back from a final decision in individual cases. This awareness of the difficulty of certitude allows Plutarch to be unusually flexible and even tolerant in his judgements, or to leave questions in abeyance. To take an example: Pericles' refusal to back down from a confrontation with Sparta precipitated the Peloponnesian War, a war between Greeks of which Plutarch could not approve. The decision could be a major black mark against Pericles, and Plutarch initially treats it that way. As his discussion proceeds, however, and he examines various reasons Pericles may have had, he ends up without holding judgement: 'So these are the reasons given by my sources to explain why he did not allow the people to yield to the Spartans; the truth is, however, uncertain.'¹⁷ For this reason also the formal comparison often presents a different evaluation of an action from the narrative, or there are different evaluations in different Lives. While moralist in theory, Plutarch's sensitivity to human motives and circumstances creates a vivid picture of the dynamics of moral decision, and in the last resort transfers to the reader the final judgement on his hero's behaviour.

Another aspect of the ancient view of character was that a number of traits tend to cluster in one type of character: an early philosophical example is Plato's descriptions of the different kinds of lives associated with different regimes in *Republic* books 8 and 9. Whereas moderns tend to emphasize the complexity of character, looking for those unexpected traits or quirks which make each individual unique, Plutarch tends to search for unifying factors. This results in what have been called 'integrated' characters:

a man's qualities are brought into some sort of relation with one another, and every trait goes closely with the next. We are unsurprised if Antony

is simple, passive, ingenuous, susceptible, soldierly, boisterous, yet also noble and often brilliant; or the younger Cato is high-principled and determined, rigid in his philosophy, scruffy (as philosophical beings often are), strange but bizarrely logical in the way he treats his women, and dismally inflexible and insensitive in public life.¹⁸

In this kind of integrated character-portrayal, the different traits of character are seen as naturally cohering facets of a given combination of inborn qualities, education, and mind-set. Antony's or Cato's characters are unique, yet in a certain sense expected, because the different elements which might seem contradictory in fact complement each other so well. Thus the deceptive simplicity of Plutarchan character-drawing hides an exceptional sensitivity to the variety and complexity of human behaviour. The reader is not shocked by startling quirks or unexplained outbursts of genius, but gradually led to see, in the course of the biography, the complex and often surprising results of traits already visible in childhood or at the beginning of a political career.

Biographical Method

Plutarch's method is generally to set out at the beginning basic features of his subject's nature and the influences which affected it: thus we learn in the first chapters of the respective Lives of Agesilaus' training in the Spartan educational system and his ambitious competitiveness, and of Antony's tendency to let others set his agenda and susceptibility to women. Physical appearance, when it is reported, often provides a clue to character: Sulla's blotted face and intimidating eyes point to the harshness of the later tyrant. This preliminary sketch prepares for the statesman's political career, which usually proceeds in a series of stages, with one or two major peaks. The Life ends with the subject's death, though often Plutarch chooses to follow out some narrative thread—the fate of his children, or of his murderers, or his successors—to reach an effective closure.

This basic outline, which implies that the structure is straightforwardly chronological, is deceptive. Writing in an age when rhetoric

¹⁷ *Per.* 32. The whole discussion is at 30–2.

¹⁸ C. Pelling, 'Aspects of Plutarch's Characterization', *Illinois Classical Studies*, 13 (1988), 256–74 at 262; cf. also his 'Childhood and Personality in Greek Biography', in Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 213–44.

formed the basis of education, Plutarch carefully shapes his presentation for maximum effectiveness. Each Life is thought out in terms of the problems which it presents, the features which Plutarch wishes to highlight, and the material available. The resulting organization therefore combines chronological, thematic, and rhetorical principles. While maintaining for clarity a basic chronological scheme, Plutarch uses flashbacks and future references to call attention to continuing traits or explain particular incidents. Moreover, he regularly introduces anecdotal material from all periods of the life to exemplify traits which he treats in connection with a given event.

Anecdotes are frequently clustered at major points in the subject's life, e.g. in *Themistocles* 18, just after the victory at Salamis; in *Alexander* 21–3, after the victory at Issus. The first sixteen chapters of *Alcibiades* are almost continuous anecdotes, which gradually lead from Alcibiades' youth to his relations with his lovers and with Socrates to the beginnings of his political career.¹⁹ The anecdotes may be taken from every sort of source, historical, philosophical, or rhetorical, and can be combined in different lengths and degree of elaboration. 'They need not be correctly placed in date in relation to their neighbours,'²⁰ so that extreme caution is needed in trying to fit them into a chronological sequence. While all anecdotes assist in portraying *ēthos*, Plutarch's method of employment can be extremely flexible. *Alexander* provides numerous examples. Alexander's taming of Bucephalus (*Alex.* 6) seems to be especially significant, raising the question of mastery and training of genius. The sequence which forms the account of naphtha in *Alex.* 35 falls immediately after the battle of Gaugamela and is often considered a digression, but in fact comments on *ēthos*, exploring Alexander's own dangerous fieriness. Sequences of anecdotes build up a larger picture: after Alexander wins the battle of Issus, three chapters of anecdotes show his idea of kingship and his self-restraint (*Alex.* 21–3). They can also create a sense of false continuity, when a series of anecdotes serves in place of historical narrative, as at *Alex.* 25–6 and 45–56. Finally, Plutarch can use a sequence of anecdotes as a technique to comment on and interpret his subject's behaviour, as he does in *Alex.* 45–56. In presenting the most scandalous actions of Alexander's career, anecdotes are able

to suggest that Alexander was not completely guilty and that the Macedonians also had some responsibility in the events.²¹

The whole is united by a remarkably facile style: 'learned and allusive, imaginative and metaphorical, exuberant and abundant.'²² Strongly influenced by classical models, he fashioned a literary language for his own day, a varied and rich instrument to express his thinking on everything from philosophy and medicine to vegetarianism and astronomy. His style tends to be generous rather than spare: he regularly doubles synonyms, and employs amplification, in the form of examples, general thoughts, and anecdotes, to enlarge on a topic. Frequent poetic quotations give authoritative support to an argument as well as a cultured flavour. When he wishes a higher style, the sentences can become quite long, built up carefully from subordinate clauses, creating luxuriant accumulation of words and ideas. Throughout, the range and aptness of examples and metaphors delights and instructs, while the vividness of the narrative charms the imagination.

Historical Value

The *Parallel Lives*, however, are most often read as historical sources for the periods which he treats. They are in fact extraordinarily valuable as sources, both because they give us Plutarch's insight into the men he treats and because they preserve a vast spectrum of evidence which otherwise would have been lost, collected in the course of Plutarch's omnivorous reading and his special research for the *Lives*. His historical contribution came under severe scrutiny from positivist historians in the nineteenth century, but in the latter half of the twentieth century, as we have learned more of his method and his purpose, a clearer picture has emerged of his value to the historian. Although he famously protests that he is a biographer, not a historian (*Alex.* 1), historical narratives provide the base for his biographies. Political biography before Plutarch was not a common genre. The only example we possess is a Latin writer and contemporary of Cicero,

²¹ Cf. P. A. Stadter, 'Anecdotes and the Thematic Structure of Plutarchean Biographies', in J. A. Fernández Delgado and F. Pordomino Pardo (eds.), *Estudios sobre Plutarco: Aspectos formales* (Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, 1996), 291–303.

²² Russell, *Plutarch*, 20. The whole chapter, 18–41, is an excellent study of his style, to which this paragraph is indebted.

¹⁹ See D. A. Russell, 'Plutarch Alcibiades 1–16', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* (1966), 37–47 (= Scardigli, *Essays on Plutarch's Lives*, 191–207).

²⁰ Russell in Scardigli (above n. 19), 206.

Cornelius Nepos, and his biographies, though they treat many of the same Greek figures as Plutarch, have a much more limited scope.²³ There do not seem to have been biographies in any way similar to Plutarch's before he wrote the *Lives*.

Plutarch was one of the most educated men of antiquity. His reading from childhood on provided him a comfortable background in the history of Greece. Latin, however, he admits to learning late and imperfectly (*Dem.* 2). He cites many fewer Latin authors than Greek, and does not cite passages from Latin poets, though he frequently quotes from Greek poets. He knows and quotes all the major Greek historians—Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius—and many historians and antiquarians now lost to us. But these historical narratives are supplemented with information from contemporary letters and poetry, inscriptions and public documents, philosophical authors, and his own autopsy and conversations with knowledgeable friends.²⁴

A clearer idea of Plutarch's method of using these sources emerges when we compare his account against an extant source, as we can in many Lives, or when we compare two accounts of the same events in two Lives. Particularly instructive are the Lives of the late republic at Rome, six of which apparently were written at about the same time and used many of the same sources (*Crassus*, *Pompey*, *Caesar*, *Cato*, *Brutus*, *Antony*).²⁵ For these lives he used first-hand sources, probably Pollio for the Civil Wars and Dellius for the Parthian War of Antony, memoirs, Cicero's *Second Philippic*, Livy, Sallust, and other writers. In addition he used oral tradition, both Greek and Roman. We can identify two stages of composition, an initial reading of sources (undoubtedly less necessary for the Greek lives than for the Roman) and preparation of detailed notes, before the final draft or drafts.

In adapting the historical material, Plutarch took several steps to focus attention on his protagonist. Thus he may abridge his source by simplifying it, either conflating several similar incidents into one (e.g. meetings of the senate), by chronological compression (making two items seem to follow closely which in fact were separated by a period of time), or reorganizing events in non-chronological order, especially to bring out causal or logical connections. Occasionally he may even transfer an item from one character to another, whether consciously or not. More commonly, he may attribute to his protagonist an action which might be generally ascribed to a group (the senate, the city) in his source, personalizing an impersonal action. On the other hand, he will expand inadequate material, not by free invention but by a visualization of what must have been the case, what antecedents would naturally precede an action, or what context seems to be implied by a historical notice.²⁶

His interpretations of his characters' motives are not fixed, but can vary depending on the biography in which they are given. Naturally, more complex motives are likely to appear when the actor is protagonist of a Life. Moreover, generally Plutarch tends to view his protagonist more favourably than other characters in a Life, and to adopt the protagonist's perspective on the events of which he takes part. This focalization via the protagonist of a Life, and therefore on multiple protagonists in several Lives dealing with the same events is a significant aspect of Plutarch's metamorphosis of history into biography, and supported his philosophical purpose by permitting his readers to identify individually with each protagonist, moving, for instance, from Pompey to Cato to Caesar in different pairs of Lives. Again, different Lives will emphasize different aspects of the protagonist: some will concentrate on historical incident (e.g. *Caesar*, others will be more philosophical or personal, such as *Cato the Younger* or *Pompey*.

Of course, the effort to bring out parallel aspects of Lives which form a pair has a significant effect on choice of detail and overall presentation, and sometimes on the interpretation of particular incidents. Plutarch might have passed over as insignificant Pericles' offer to give his land to the city if it were not ravaged in the war, though it is

²³ Cf. J. Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography* (*Historia Einzelschriften* 47; Stuttgart, 1985).

²⁴ Cf. e.g. B. X. de Wet, 'Plutarch's Use of the Poets', *Antiquité Classique*, 31 (1988), 13–25; F. Frost, 'Some documents in Plutarch's Lives', *Classica et mediaevalia*, 22 (1961), 182–94; P. Desideri, 'I documenti di Plutarco', *ANRW* II, 33, 6 (1992), 4536–67; J. Buckler, 'Plutarch and Autopsy', *ANRW* II, 33, 6 (1992), 4788–830.

²⁵ Cf. C. C. Pelling, 'Plutarch's Method of Work in the Roman Lives', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 99 (1979), 74–96 and 'Plutarch's Adaptation of his Source Material', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 100 (1980), 127–40 (= Scardigli, *Essays on Plutarch's Lives*, 253–318 (with postscript) and 125–54 respectively), to which the following paragraph is indebted. *Cicero* and *Laelius* were written earlier.

²⁶ Cf. C. C. Pelling, 'Truth and Fiction in Plutarch's Lives', in D. A. Russell (ed.), *Antonine Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 19–52.

recorded in Thucydides, if he had not known that Hannibal caused difficulties at Rome to Pericles' parallel figure, Fabius, by sparing Fabius' land.²⁷

Viewed from a historical perspective, Plutarch's work has a number of limitations, many tied to his biographical purpose, others reflecting the views of his class and his society, others still his Platonism. Although more familiar than most men of his time with the society of classical Greece, he is not always able to abandon a somewhat idealized picture of the great age of Greece. His basic political scheme, seen again and again in both Greek and Roman lives, is set in terms of a conflict between élite and populace, where the élite may be land-owning Athenians, leading Spartans, or the Roman senate. Within the élite struggles will occur, and some men will appeal to the emotions of the crowd. This scheme glides over the marked differences between different systems of government, and the nature of practical politics at different times. Plutarch rarely takes a larger view of his protagonist's actions, and generally refrains from commenting on their effect in the history of their city or of world affairs: he clearly expects his readers already to have some idea of the importance of these figures on the stage of history. Finally, given the fact that our historical sources are often so meagre, the potential misunderstandings and distortions introduced by Plutarch's biographical technique can offer frustrating barriers to modern efforts at historical reconstruction and interpretation. Nevertheless, it is hard for the historian to imagine ancient history without him: his contribution to our understanding is invaluable.

Plutarch encapsulates the greatness of Greece and Rome, and brings alive the great moments of history as lived by their protagonists. The range of his sources is immense, and he regularly uses contemporary materials otherwise not available to us. To these he adds his own narrative gift and insight into the dynamics of character,²⁸ which bring

alive in a uniquely vivid presentation scores of figures from classical antiquity. It was this drama of living which Shakespeare recognized in Plutarch, from whom he drew not just the plot, but many of the scenes and the dynamics of action for *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The liveliness, intimacy, and imagination of Plutarch's vision of his heroes has moulded our modern understanding of classical antiquity.

This Selection of Greek Lives

The nine Lives in this collection have been selected to allow a synoptic view of the major figures and periods of classical Greece. They are the most fascinating from the point of view of the modern reader, and the most useful for gaining an understanding of Athenian democracy, the Spartan military state, and the excitement of Alexander's conquests. The legislators responsible for the political and social structure of the major states, Athens and Sparta, lead the parade. The two Lives take strikingly different views of the lawgiver's work: *Lycurgus* presents an idealized picture of an ordered society, a living model of the Platonic *Republic*, one which certainly never existed at Sparta. *Solon* shows the sage trying to create a constitution which his city will accept, working through compromise, and only partially successful. *Themistocles* shows us the brilliant Athenian general in the Persian Wars, taking us through his rise, outstanding naval victory at Salamis, and rejection by Athens. The next four follow the history of Athens after the Persian wars, down to their defeat by the Spartans in 404. Cimon and Pericles were political opponents, one appealing to aristocratic sentiment, the other able to win more popular support. *Cimon* supplies historical information on the middle of the fifth century which helps fill the gap between the narratives of Herodotus and Thucydides; *Pericles* fleshes out Thucydides' brief account with Pericles' decrees and especially with the attacks made on him by the comic poets. The two are invaluable for understanding Athenian politics under the democracy. *Nicias* and *Alcibiades* again present a pair of opponents, Nicias the more conservative and sensible, Alcibiades an outrageous aristocrat who played to the crowd. Once more Plutarch supplements Thucydides, describing Nicias' magnificent religious mission to Delos, or including the indictment made against Alcibiades which drove him into exile. The lives also show us unattractive sides

²⁷ *Per.* 33, cf. *Fab.* 7. On such parallels, see e.g. P. Stadler, 'Plutarch's Comparison of Pericles and Fabius Maximus', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 16 (1975), 77–85 (= Seardiggi, *Essays on Plutarch's Lives*, 155–64), and id., 'Paradoxical Paradigms: Lysander and Sulla' and A. B. Bosworth, 'History and Artifice in Plutarch's *Eumenenes*', in P. Stadler (ed.), *Plutarch and the Historical Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1992), 41–55 and 56–89.

²⁸ Cf. e.g. C. Pelling, 'Plutarch and Thucydides', in *Plutarch and the Historical Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1992), 10–40, noting that Plutarch's comments on character can be more perceptive than Thucydides'.

of democracy: Nicias' fear of an arbitrary and irrational popular assembly; Alcibiades' ability, thanks to his brilliance and rhetorical skill, to change tack with the shifting winds of popular feeling, but ultimate failure to avoid the storms which he himself had stirred up. *Agesilaus* takes us to the Spartan dominance of the fourth century, in which the lame king played a major role for over forty years. At its height in the years immediately following its defeat of Athens, Sparta saw its power rapidly decline, in part because of Agesilaus' policies. Finally *Alexander* traces the world-shaking career of the conqueror who brought into the Greek sphere lands from the Danube to the Indus and Nile. Plutarch, however, prefers to focus on Alexander's character, and especially the question whether he was able to master himself as he could master his enemies.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The Greek text used as the basis for this translation is the Teubner edition. Any places where I have adopted a text different from that of the Teubner have been marked in the translation with an obelus, which refers the interested reader to a note in the Textual Notes section at the back of the book. The Teubner editions of Plutarch's Lives are currently (1997) in the process of being updated, but this process is not complete. To be precise, therefore, I have used the following editions:

- For Solon, Themistocles, and Cimon: *Plutarchus, Vitae Parallelae*, I.1, ed. K. Ziegler (1969).
- For Pericles, Nicias, and Alcibiades: *Plutarchus, Vitae Parallelae*, I.2, ed. K. Ziegler, addenda by H. Gärtner (1994).
- For Alexander: *Plutarchus, Vitae Parallelae*, II.2, ed. K. Ziegler, addenda by H. Gärtner (1994).
- For Lycurgus and Agesilaus: *Plutarchus, Vitae Parallelae*, III.2, ed. K. Ziegler (1973).

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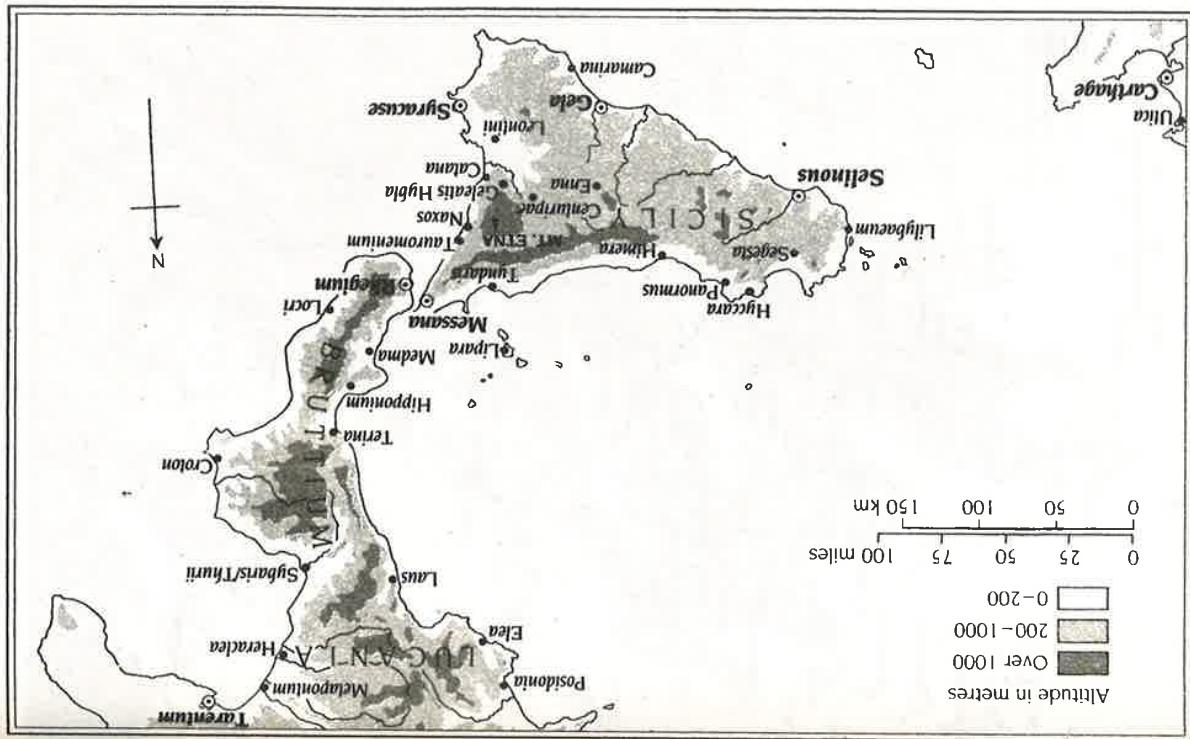
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CHRONOLOGY

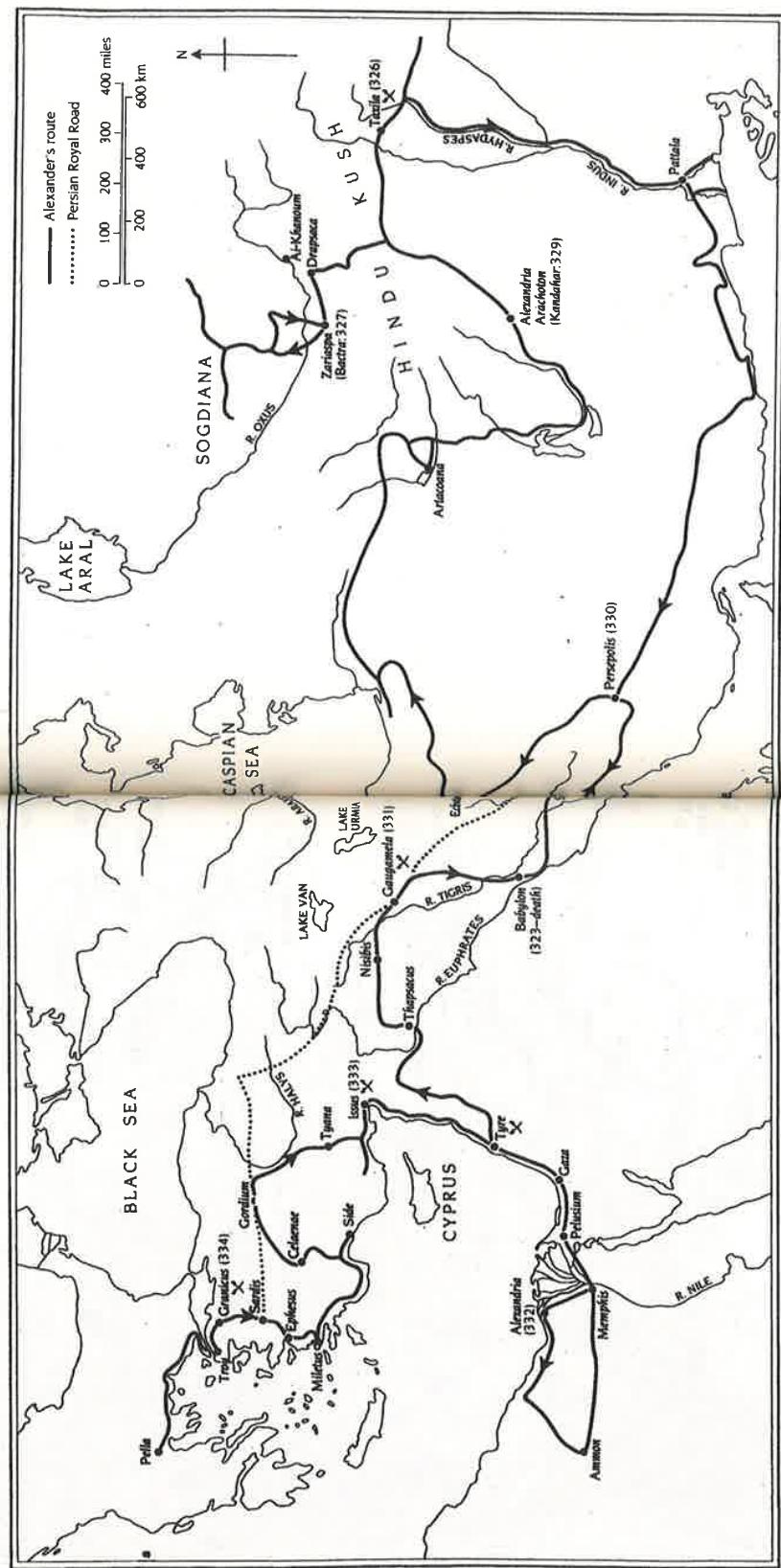
<i>Lives:</i>		Dates with ? are approximate.
	776	Traditional foundation date of the Olympic games
	594/3	Spartan conquest of Messenia
		Traditional date of Solon's archonship and constitutional reform
	561/0	Pisistratus' first attempt at tyranny at Athens
	544?	Croesus of Lydia defeated by Cyrus the Great of Persia
	528/7	Death of Pisistratus at Athens
	510	Expulsion of tyrants from Athens
	490	Athenians defeat Persian army at Marathon
	480	Persian victories at Thermopylae and Artemisium
		Persian defeat in naval battle at Salamis
		Greek victory over Persians at Plataea
	479	Athenians establishes Delian league in the Aegean
	478	Ostracism of Themistocles
	471?	Cimon's victory at Erymmedon
	468?	Ephialtes' and Pericles' reform of the Areopagus court
	462	Ostracism of Cimon
	461	Battle of Tanagra
	458?	Death of Cimon at Cyprus
	450?	Spartan invasion of Attica; thirty-year peace treaty
	446	Ostracism of Thucydides son of Melesias
	443?	Spring: outbreak of Peloponnesian War
	431	Spring: plague strikes Athens
	430	Autumn: death of Pericles
	429	Athenians under Cleon capture Spartans at Sphaeraria
	425	April: peace of Nicias between Athens and Sparta
	421	Ostracism of Hyperbolus
	416?	Athenian expedition to Sicily
	415–413	Alcibiades called back for trial, flees to Sparta
	415	Death of Nicias
	413	Alcibiades returns to Athens
	407	Athenians surrenders to Sparta, end of Peloponnesian War
	404	Agesilaus becomes one of Spartan kings
	400	

MAP I. SICILY AND SOUTH ITALY



Chronology

xxxii	Death of Socrates
399	Agesilaus in Asia Minor
396-395	Corinthian War
395-386	Agesilaus recalled, battle of Coronea
394	Peace of Antalcidas, dictated by Persia
386	Thebes and its allies defeat Spartans at Leuctra
371	Creation of an independent Messenian state
369	Theban victory at Mantinea, Epaminondas dies
362	Agesilaus' expedition to Egypt and death
360	Alexander the Great born
356	Death of Plato
347	Philip II and Alexander defeat Greeks at Chaeronea
338	Philip II assassinated, Alexander takes throne
336	Spring: Alexander crosses to Asia, battle of Granicus
334	November: battle of Issus
333	1 Oct. (?): battle of Gaugamela
331	Death of Philotas
330	Battle against Porus at the Hydaspes
326	Alexander at the mouth of the Indus
325	13 June: death of Alexander in Babylon



MAP 3. ALEXANDER'S ROUTE

GREEK LIVES



LYCURGUS

INTRODUCTION

... the point of all his arrangements and institutions had been to enable the Spartans to be free, autonomous, and self-disciplined for as long as possible. This political scheme has been taken over by everyone who has come to be admired for attempting to address these issues, including Plato, Diogenes, and Zeno, even though they left to posterity nothing but words and ideas. Lycurgus, however, left no mere words and ideas, but created an actual and unrivalled system of government.

(*Lyc.* 31)

Lycurgus is not so much a biography as the account of a way of life, the Spartan regime and social system (*agoge*) which was ascribed to Lycurgus and which set Sparta apart from the other cities of classical Greece. As in *Numa* (with which it is paired) and *Solon*, the protagonist is thought of as a legislator whose fundamental purpose is education, a man who has tried, in Plato's phrase, 'to make his fellow citizens better'. Solon, however, is clearly a historical figure as well as a major poet, and Numa, while semi-legendary, is firmly anchored in the list of the early Roman kings, immediately after Romulus. Lycurgus, on the other hand, is a legendary figure about whom Plutarch admits, 'there is nothing indisputable to be said' (1). We are no better off. The Life is of necessity different from the others in this collection. Plutarch nevertheless undertakes to 'follow those accounts which have attracted the least controversy and have the most distinguished witnesses on their side' (1).

Sparta was an amalgam of four villages in the fertile Eurotas valley of the south-eastern Peloponnese. At some time, probably in the late eighth century, the Spartans had extended their control west across the Taygetus mountains, doubling their territory by conquering Messenia, and establishing their dominion over the whole of the southern Peloponnesus, from the Aegean on the east coast to the Ionian Sea on the west. During the sixth century the immense effort of holding this land against revolts from the subject Messenians or attacks from outside, especially from Argos, forced a restructuring of Spartan society which gave it the severe and military character, unique in Greece, by which it was known in classical Greece and ever since. This was the social framework which in the fifth century made the Spartans the leaders of the Greeks in the Persian Wars and permitted them to defeat the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War (cf. Plutarch's

Themistocles, Pericles, Nicias, and Alcibiades). Even after the loss of Messenia following the Theban victory at Leuctra in 371 (cf. *Agesilaus*), the Spartan state kept something of its basic structure, and was spoken of with admiration by Plato and Aristotle.

Substantial reforms were made by the kings Agis and Cleomenes in the late third century (Plutarch wrote Lives of these men as well), and more were made under Roman rule. Under Agis and Cleomenes especially, an effort was made to restore the original Lycurgan constitution, so that some features ascribed to Lycurgus may in fact belong to that period. The Stoic philosopher Sphaerius, author of a book on the Lycurgan constitution, was instrumental in helping Cleomenes restore the traditional system (cf. *Cleomenes* 11, and N. M. Kennell, *The Gymnasium of Virtue* (Chapel Hill, 1995), 11–12, 98–101). In Plutarch's day, the current version of the Lycurgan system attracted young men from all over Greece who wished to participate in the revived training regime. Sparta became also an important tourist city, putting on regular shows and festivals for large crowds (cf. P. Cartledge and A. Spawforth, *Hellenistic and Roman Sparta* (London and New York, 1989), 197–211). Thus when Plutarch mentions being present at a ritual, when many young men were 'dying under the lash at the altar of Artemis Orthia' (18) this does not represent a tradition continuously preserved, but a revival created in a later period.

Although modern scholars usually place the 'Lycurgan' reforms (though usually not Lycurgus) in the sixth century BC, there were strong traditions which place him and his reforms much earlier. Herodotus does not give specific dates, but seems to set Lycurgus' reforms several generations before Croesus, that is at the end of the seventh century (Hdt. I. 65–6), and other authors place him even earlier. Plutarch vacillates (cf. 1, 23, 29) between assigning him to the time of the founding of the Olympic Games (traditionally dated to 776 BC) and to 500 years before King Agis, the son of Archidamus (427–400), that is, to c.925–900. Unfortunately, we are not able to give a historical account for these centuries. We must remain in doubt whether a single major legislator existed, or whether in later times a pattern of unwritten traditions was ascribed to this semi-legendary figure. It is unlikely that the whole body of Spartan social and educational practices described by Plutarch goes back to one legislator, however influential. More important is that Plutarch gives us our best synthesis of the developed Spartan social system as it was understood in ancient times. He tries to give the original political and training system of Lycurgus, although, as has been said, he may in fact be including some features of the system as it was later reconstituted.

The treatment of the actual life of Lycurgus is confined chiefly to the first part of the Life, cc. 1–5. Here Plutarch discusses his date, the

various accounts of his family which place him at different points in the Spartan king lists, his accession to the throne after his brother's death and his surrender of the throne to his posthumously born nephew, his extended stay abroad in Crete, Ionia, and Egypt until his nephew came of age, and his return, seizure of power, and implementation of his reforms. The body of the Life describes those reforms (5–28). The final section (29–31) describes the oath of the elders to maintain the laws, Lycurgus' trip to Delphi, his death, and the honours he was given. Lycurgus' reforms as discussed by Plutarch can be gathered under the following headings:

The Fundamental Institutions

1. The Council of Elders, the *gerousia* (5–17). (The Great Rhetra mentions this council, and refers also to divisions of the people. The Board of Ephors is a later development.)
2. Redistribution of land (8; this was accompanied by monetary reform and the expulsion of crafts, 9).
3. Institution of a common mess (10–12).
4. Three rhetras (unwritten laws): (a) there is to be no written law, (b) only axes and saws are to be used in constructing a house, (c) there is a ban on frequent campaigns against the same foes (13).

*The System of Training (*agoge*)*

1. Marriage and infant regulations (including raising of girls, female nudity, and children, 14–16).
2. Training of boys from age 7 to 20 (16–18), followed by comments on this training: the use of laconic speech (19–20), the use of poetry (21), practices in warfare (22), and Lycurgus' own peaceful disposition (23).
3. Adult life at Sparta (24–5).
4. The election of the elders (26).
5. Funerals and treatment of foreigners (27).
6. Treatment of helots (28).

In this central section, each item is accompanied by Plutarch's own interpretation and evaluation of the practice. Plutarch reflects earlier Greek tradition in treating the 'Lycurgan constitution' more as a philosophical than a historical problem. The ancient legislator was thought to be responsible for the entire life of the city. Thus the rules which govern a city, its 'constitution' (*politeia*), form a statement on the good life and how to achieve it in a community. Philosophers, most notably Plato in his *Republic* and *Laws*, wrote books outlining the principles and laws of the ideal state. The Spartan model, attributed to Lycurgus, became central to this discussion (cf. on Plato, E. N. Tigerstedt, *The Legend of Sparta in Classical Antiquity* (Stockholm and Uppsala, 1965–78), i. 244–76).

Here, as in his *Solon*, Plutarch places himself in this tradition, showing himself more interested in the ideas behind the customs than in their historicity. In particular, he examines how Lycurgus aimed at the best education for a citizen, training the passions and giving command to the noblest parts of the soul. Plutarch evaluates the Spartan traditional system according to his own Platonic psychology, which divided the soul into three parts, the rational intellect, an irrational but potentially noble 'spirited' part, and the irrational and potentially destructive passions. Throughout he stresses the formative nature of the Lycurgan system, with its holistic approach, appreciation of intelligence and music, and communitarian values. The moral aspect of this training is noted by Plutarch especially in the chapters on physical training of both males and females (14–17). His rather paradoxical conclusion (31, quoted above) is that Lycurgus had been able to construct the ideal 'philosophic' city, better even than the one envisioned in Plato's *Republic*, because it existed in reality and not in theory.

Numa Pompilius, the Roman king and lawgiver, and the legislator paired with Lycurgus, makes a good foil to him. There were a number of obvious parallels between Rome and Sparta: the two consuls and the two kings, the senate and the council of elders, the military success of both cities. Although both Rome and Sparta were famous for their achievements in war, Plutarch presents both lawgivers as peaceful men with philosophical goals. Numa in the ancient tradition was regularly seen as a religious man, author of laws regulating cult and ritual, and one dedicated to peace in contrast to the two kings who preceded and followed him, Romulus and Hostilius Tullus, both very active in war. Plutarch describes at length his religious institutions and the peace which endured throughout the forty-three years of his reign, comparing him to Plato's ideal philosopher-king (*Numa* 20). However, Plutarch notes that he established no rules for raising children, so that the peace of his reign died with him, whereas Lycurgus was able by his system of training, which changed the inner disposition of the people, to maintain his reforms for many generations.

Our information on Lycurgus begins with Herodotus, who gives the earliest extant account (1. 65). He speaks of the favour of Apollo at Delphi and notes that Sparta became well governed and militarily successful after Lycurgus' reforms, among which he mentions the establishment of military units, the council of elders, and the ephors. In the early fourth century Xenophon's *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* glorified the ancient system of Sparta, while noting how far the Spartans fell short of its moral code in his own day. This work is the only extant example of the many accounts of the Spartan system written in antiquity.

Plutarch cites Xenophon in c. 1, and clearly uses him in other sections. He also mentions the lost *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* by Aristotle

in cc. 1, 5, 6, 28, and 31. He found the *Constitution of the Athenians* extremely useful in his *Solon*, and he undoubtedly used Aristotle heavily for *Lycurgus* as well. Although Aristotle's *Constitution* is lost, it probably served as a basis for Aristotle's observations on Sparta in his *Politics* (1260²⁹–1271^b19), and a brief summary is preserved by Heraclides Lembos. Plutarch cites other ancient accounts of the Spartan constitution as well: Sphaerius (5), Critias (9), and Diocles (11). Historians who spoke of Lycurgus, such as Ephorus and Polybius, probably were used as well. Frequent poetic citations and references to historians, both well known (Thucydides, Timaeus) and obscure, enrich the discussion.

A difficult source problem is raised by several collections found in the Plutarchan corpus, gathered under the title *Spartan Sayings*, 208b–242d. This contains first, a collection of sayings attributed to different named Spartans, including 31 of Lycurgus, and arranged in alphabetical order by speakers, with anonymous sayings at the end (208b–230e); second, a series of short notices on Spartan institutions (236f–240b); and third, a collection of sayings of Spartan women, also in alphabetical order (240c–242d). Both the sayings and the institutions have a close connection with *Lycurgus*: those found also in *Lycurgus* are in much the same order as in the life. This has led scholars to argue that these works are a major source for the life, especially the section on institutions. Recently, moreover, Kennell has argued that the institutions section reflects very closely the work of Sphaerius on the Spartan constitution in the third century BC. However, our current knowledge of Plutarch's process of selection and rethinking in creating a Life make it most improbable that he would simply follow the order of a pre-existing collection in arranging his own account. Therefore it is more likely that the *Spartan Sayings*, including the section on institutions, represents an earlier stage of Plutarch's own literary activity, which in turn used earlier accounts. Combining as it does so many sources now lost to us, *Lycurgus* is a precious source for the structure and training programme of the early Spartan state, despite the fact that many details may reflect later reshaping of the tradition.

Plutarch in this Life does not simply reflect tradition, but builds his own philosophical account of Lycurgus' laws, and selects only those elements which fit his purpose. Xenophon's account, for example, has more to say on the military organization of the Spartans. Plutarch, living under the Roman empire, contrasts Spartan simplicity to luxuries (9) and to expensive furniture, hot baths, and gluttonous eating (10), which while present at all times, were especially accessible to the super-rich élite of his own day. In the end, Plutarch's conception of the Lycurgan constitution must be treated on its own terms. *Lycurgus* is not just history, but a statement of the value of the simple, disciplined, communitarian life against the individualist pursuit of pleasure.

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[1] Even allowing for the fact that there is nothing indisputable to be said about Lycurgus the legislator, since there are divergent accounts of his family, his travels abroad, his death, and above all precisely what he achieved with regard to the laws and the constitution, there is particularly little agreement about when the man lived. Some people, including the philosopher Aristotle, say that he was contemporary with Iphitus and helped him arrange the Olympic truce,* to corroborate this, Aristotle adduces the discus preserved at Olympia which has Lycurgus’ name inscribed on it.* Others, however, such as Eratosthenes and Apollodorus, use the list of successive Spartan kings to work out when he lived, and demonstrate that he preceded the first Olympiad by quite a few years. Then again, Timaeus suggests that there might have been two Lycurguses in Sparta at different times, one of whom became so famous that both of their achievements came to be attributed to him; he conjectures that the elder Lycurgus lived close to Homer’s time, and others claim that he actually met Homer face to face. Xenophon too gives an impression of antiquity in the passage where he says that the man lived at the time of the Heraclidae,* since although the latest Spartan kings were of course Heraclidae, Xenophon was apparently meaning to use the name ‘Heraclidae’ of the original ones, the immediate descendants of Heracles. Nevertheless, in spite of such a confused record, I shall try, in the course of my narrative of the man, to follow those accounts which have attracted the least controversy and have the most distinguished witnesses on their side.*

<...>† After all, even the poet Simonides does not make Lycurgus’ father Eunomus, but has both Lycurgus and Eunomus as sons of Prytanis, whereas almost no one else gives this account of his lineage. They say, on the contrary, that his lineage runs as follows: Procles the son of Aristodamus, then Soüs, then Eurypon, then Prytanis, then Eunomus, whose sons were Polydectes by his first wife and—the younger son—Lycurgus by Dionassa. This is the account given by Diptychidas, which makes Lycurgus a sixth-generation descendant of Procles and an eleventh-generation descendant of Heracles.*

[2]

[2] Among these ancestors of his, Soüs was particularly admired. It was during his reign that the Spartiates* enslaved the helots,* took over a great deal of Arcadian territory, and made it their own. There is a story that once Soüs was trapped by the Cleitorians in a harsh, waterless spot, and he agreed to surrender the land he had captured if he and all his men could drink from the nearby spring. Once the two sides had pledged themselves to honour these terms, he gathered his men together and offered his kingdom to anyone who would not take a drink. None of them could resist, however: they all drank from the spring. He was the last to go down, and when he did so, he splashed water on to himself in front of the enemy, who were still there, and then left—and kept the land, on the grounds that not all of them had taken a drink. However, although he was respected for his achievements, his family—the Euryponidae—was named after his son rather than him, because Eurypon, in his pursuit of popularity and favour with the common people, was apparently the first to relax the excessively autocratic nature of the kingship. But this led to the people becoming presumptuous, and later kings either became hated for trying to put pressure on the masses, or won tolerance at the price of flattery or weakness. Lawlessness and disorder prevailed in Sparta for a long time, and it was as a result of this that Lycurgus' father came to lose his life while he was king. He was trying to prevent a brawl when he was fatally struck with a meat-cleaver, leaving the kingdom to his eldest son, Polydectes.

[3] Not long afterwards, however, Polydectes died as well, and the kingdom devolved by right on to Lycurgus—or so everyone thought. In fact, he did rule, but only until it was obvious that his brother's wife was pregnant. As soon as he noticed this, he declared that the kingdom belonged to the child, if it was male, and that he was looking after the kingdom merely as guardian, or ‘representative’, as the Lacedaemonians calls the guardians of royal orphans. The woman, however, entered into secret communication with him, saying that she was willing to kill the baby provided that he would marry her when he was king of Sparta. Although he found her immorality abhorrent, he raised no objection to the actual proposal, but pretended to approve of it and welcome it. He said that there was no need for her to abuse her body and endanger her life by taking drugs to abort the foetus, because he would see to it that the baby was got rid of as soon as it was born. With this argument he succeeded in tricking the woman

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for the whole period of her pregnancy. When he saw that her time had come, he sent some of his men to sit beside her and watch over her during her labour, with instructions to hand the child over to the womenfolk if it was a girl, but if it was a boy to bring it to him, no matter what he was doing. As a matter of fact he was dining with the magistrates when his servants arrived, bringing him the baby boy that had been born. The story goes that he took the child in his arms and said to the assembled company, ‘Spartiates, a king has been born for you.’ Then he laid him in the king’s place and named him Charilaus because all the people there were delighted,* as well as being very impressed by his high-mindedness and justice. He had reigned for eight months altogether.

This was not the only thing that made his fellow citizens admire him, and those who stood by him and were ready to carry out his commands because of his excellent qualities outnumbered those who obeyed him because he was the king’s guardian and had a king’s power. However, there was also some disaffection and an attempt to impede the rise to power of one who was so young, especially from the relatives and friends of the king’s mother, who felt that she had been treated with disrespect. On one occasion, in fact, her brother Leonidas was quite outspokenly rude to Lycurgus, and added that he knew perfectly well that Lycurgus intended to be king. This lie made Lycurgus an object of suspicion and ensured in advance that if anything did happen to the king, he would be accused of having plotted against him. Similar slanderous rumours were also spread around by the king’s mother. All this made Lycurgus angry and afraid of what might happen, so he decided to avoid suspicion by leaving the country and travelling abroad until his nephew was grown up and had fathered an heir apparent for the throne.

[4] After leaving Sparta, the first place he visited was Crete, where he studied the various types of government and spent time with the most distinguished men of the island.* He admired some of their customs, but did not think much of the rest; the ones he admired he appreciated, with the intention of taking them back home and putting them into practice. Moreover, he got on close and friendly enough terms with one of the men there who had a name for wisdom and statesmanship to send him to Sparta. This was Thales,* who had a reputation as a composer of lyric verse and used this art to cloak his true activities, which were those of any powerful legislator, in the sense

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[5] that his songs were actually arguments in favour of obedience and political concord. This aspect of his songs was enhanced by the music and rhythm, which were so orderly and soothing that anyone listening to them became, without being aware of it, a more even-tempered person and learnt to replace the mutual hostility which prevailed there at the time with an admiration for noble qualities. And so in a sense Thales was a forerunner for Lycurgus' famous programme for educating his people.

From Crete Lycurgus sailed over to Asia because, we are told, like a doctor who compares unsound and sickly bodies with healthy ones, he wanted to compare the frugality and severity of the Cretan way of life with Ionian extravagance and luxury, and observe the differences between their lives and political systems. It was while he was in Asia that he first came across the Homeric poems, which were apparently preserved by the descendants of Creophylus.* When he noticed that the poems contained, interspersed among the passages designed to promote pleasure and self-indulgence, a political and educational element which called for at least as much serious attention, he became very excited by them, and had them written down and collected so that he could bring them here to Greece. Homer's epics already had a vague reputation among the Greeks, and a few people had managed to get hold of certain parts of them thanks to the chance distribution of the poetry here and there, but their fame is due above all to Lycurgus, who was the first to make them known here.

The Egyptians think that Lycurgus visited them as well, and was so highly impressed with their separation of the warrior castes from all the others* that he transferred the system to Sparta and made the constitution there one of genuine refinement and purity by allowing the artisans and craftsmen no part in it.* This claim by the Egyptians is in fact supported by some Greek writers, but the story that Lycurgus also went to Libya and Iberia, and even travelled to India and spent time with the Gymnosophists, has to my knowledge the authority of no one except the Spartan Aristocrates the son of Hipparchus.*

[5] The Lacedaemonians missed Lycurgus while he was away and often asked him to return, because for them it was only the title and the prestige that distinguished their kings from the masses, whereas Lycurgus, they could see, was a natural leader with the power to get people to follow him. In fact, however, even the kings wanted him

back, in the hope of receiving less disrespectful treatment from the masses when he was there. As soon as Lycurgus returned, then, to find them in this frame of mind, he set in motion a plan to effect a revolution and bring about constitutional change, because he could see no point or benefit in piecemeal legislation rather than a fresh start, just as in dealing with a body which was in a terrible state, riddled with all kinds of diseases, one would first eliminate and alter the current blend of the humours by means of drugs and purgatives and then begin on a new regimen. Once he had made up his mind that this was the way to proceed, he first made a trip to Delphi. After sacrificing and consulting the god, he returned to Sparta with the famous oracle in which the Pythia called him 'beloved of the gods' and 'a god rather than a man'.* He claimed that when he had asked for lawfulness the god had granted and promised him a political system of such quality that it would leave all the rest far behind.

Encouraged by this, he set about winning over the best Spartiates and inviting them to help him do what had to be done. He began by entering into secret negotiations with his friends, and then he gradually approached more and more people in the same way until he had formed a group of conspirators. At the opportune moment he ordered the thirty leaders of his party to advance at dawn under arms into the city square, so as to terrify and intimidate his opponents. Herippus has provided us with a list of the twenty most distinguished men on Lycurgus' side, and Arthmiadas is generally named as Lycurgus' main associate in all his enterprises and as the one who particularly supported his constitutional reforms.

At the beginning of the disturbance, King Charilaus became frightened, imagining that the whole business was a plot directed against him, and took refuge in the Bronze House.* Later, when he became convinced of the truth and had received pledges guaranteeing his safety, he emerged from there and played a part in the proceedings, since he was an even-tempered person—which is the context of the story that his fellow king Archelaus once remarked to those who were praising the young man, 'Of course Charilaus isn't a good man: he doesn't even get cross with bad people.'

Among Lycurgus' many reforms, the first and most important was the institution of the elders, who were, as Plato says, a source of security and restraint since they tempered the 'feverish' rule of the kings and had 'an equal voice in affairs of moment'.* The political

system had previously been unstable, with a tendency to come down at one time on the side of the kings and to veer towards tyranny, and at another on the side of the masses and democracy; but the ballast provided by the government of the elders restored the ship of state to an even keel and enabled the constitution to find the safest possible arrangement and condition for itself, as the twenty-eight elders periodically sided with the kings when it was a matter of resisting democracy, but then supported the people to prevent the occurrence of tyranny. Aristotle says that the reason for there being this number of elders was that two of the thirty leaders of Lycurgus' party abandoned the enterprise out of cowardice, but Sphaerus* says that there had been twenty-eight conspirators in on the plot from the start. It may also be relevant that 28 is the product of 4 and 7, and that since it is equal to the sum of its parts, it is a perfect number (the next in the sequence after 6), but I think that the main reason Lycurgus instituted this number of elders was to reach a total of thirty when the two kings were added to the twenty-eight elders.*

[6] Lycurgus took the government of the elders so seriously that he brought an oracle back from Delphi about it, which they call a 'rhetra'. It runs as follows: 'Found a sanctuary of Zeus Scyllanius and Athena Scyllania, form tribes and septs, establish a Council of Elders consisting of thirty men including the leaders, and then from time to time hold an apella between Babyca and Gnaicum, and so make your proposals and vetos. But power and authority is to rest with the people.'*† In these words 'form tribes and septs' refers to the division and distribution of the population into groups, which he calls 'tribes' and 'septs', 'leaders' refers to the kings, and to 'hold an apella' is to hold a general assembly, because he took Apollo to be the origin and instigator of the constitution. The modern name for Babyca is Λέσβος and for Gnaicum is Οίνοος. Aristotle says that Cnacium is a river and Babyca a bridge. They used to hold their assemblies between these two places, even though there were no halls or structures of any kind there, because he thought that these things made no contribution at all towards the process of sound deliberation, and even hindered it by making the minds of the people gathered there for the assembly foolish and vacuous with inane thoughts brought on by gazing at statues and inscriptions, or at the stage in a theatre, or at the overornate roof of a council-hall.* Once the general populace had gathered there, on Lycurgus' system no one was allowed to express an opinion

except the elders and the kings, but the people did have the authority to decide about the measures proposed by the elders and the kings. Later, however, when the masses had started distorting and warping proposals by their additions and subtractions, the kings Polydorus and Theopompus* added a rider to the rhetra, as follows: 'However, if the people vote in favour of a deformed motion, the elders and leaders are to wield a veto'—which is to say that they were not to ratify it, but to veto it altogether and to dismiss the people on the grounds that the amendments and alterations they were making to the proposal were not for the best. What is more, Polydorus and Theopompus convinced their fellow citizens that it was the god who had ordained this rider, as Tyrtaeus seems to imply in the following lines:

They heard the voice of Phoebeus and brought home from Pytho
Oracles of the god and words of sure fulfilment:
Authority in council belongs to the god-favoured kings
Who are responsible for the lovely city of Sparta,
And to the elders, and then to the common people
As they respond with straight rhetras.*

[7] So Lycurgus fashioned a mixed constitution.* His successors, however, were still faced with an oligarchy that was undiluted and strong. When they saw it 'chafing and spirited', as Plato puts it, 'as a bridle they imposed on it the office of the ephorate'*. The first ephors, Elatus and his colleagues, were appointed about 130 years after Lycurgus, during the reign of Theopompus. Another thing that is said about Theopompus is that when his wife scolded him and said that the kingship he would pass on to his sons would be inferior to the one he had received, he replied, 'No, greater, because it will last longer.' And in fact, once it had shed its extreme aspects, the kingship stopped attracting envy and made itself secure enough to avoid what the Messenians and Argives did to their kings when they refused to give up or release any of their power to the people. Nothing made Lycurgus' wisdom and foresight more obvious than a survey of the misgovernment and feuding between the people and the kings that afflicted Messenia and Argos, the kinsmen and neighbours of the Lacedaemonians. They had started with the same opportunities, and in fact were held to have done better than the Lacedaemonians out of the allocation of land,* but their prosperity did not last long. Thanks to the arrogance of the kings and the unruliness of the masses their

institutions were thrown into chaos—thus proving what a truly divine piece of good fortune it was for the Spartiates to have had someone to construct a mixed constitution. But I have got ahead of my story.

[8] The second, and the most revolutionary of Lycurgus' constitutional reforms was the redistribution of the land. There was terrible inequality, crowds of paupers without property and without any means of support were accumulating in the city, and wealth was entirely concentrated in the hands of a few people. In order to banish arrogance, envy, crime, luxury, and those more chronic and serious political afflictions, wealth and poverty, Lycurgus persuaded them to pool all the land and then redistribute it all over again, so that everyone would live on equal terms and with the same amount of property to provide an income. In the future the only ascendancy they would seek would be assessed by the criterion of excellence, on the basis that there was to be no difference or inequality between any one of them and another except as determined by criticism of shameful deeds and praise of noble ones.

Putting his ideas into practice, he divided most of Laconia into 30,000 plots of land which were distributed among the *perioeci*,* and the part of Laconia which was assessed as belonging to the city of Sparta into 9,000 plots.* This was the number of plots in the hands of Spartiates, but some writers say that Lycurgus distributed 6,000 of them and then later Polydorus added another 3,000, while others say that Polydorus and Lycurgus were responsible for allocating 4,500 each. Each person's allotment was large enough to produce a yield of seventy medimni of barley for a man, plus twelve for his wife, and a proportionate amount of fruit,* since in Lycurgus' opinion that amount of food was enough to guarantee an adequate degree of health and fitness without them needing anything else. There is a story from later in his life that once on his return from a trip abroad he was passing through the countryside just after harvest-time, and when he saw all the equal stacks of grain, one after another, he smiled and commented to the people who were with him that the whole of Laconia looked like an estate which had recently been divided between a large number of brothers.

[9] He next tried to divide up their furniture too, so as to get rid of every last trace of inequality and discrepancy, but when he saw that people were not prepared to tolerate the direct confiscation of their goods, he took a circuitous route to the same end and attacked their

greed by political means. First he revoked all gold and silver coinage and made iron the only legal tender; then he gave even a considerable weight and amount of iron such a low value that ten minas' worth needed a large storeroom in one's house and a team of cattle to transport it.* Once this decree was in force, many types of crime disappeared from Lacedaemon. Who would set out to embezzle, or accept as a bribe, or rob, or steal something which was impossible to conceal, which no one particularly wanted to have, and which could not even be profitably cut up? For it is said that Lycurgus had the hammered iron cooled when red hot in vinegar, which made it too brittle and unworkable to have any other use or function.

He next set about ridding the state of useless, superfluous professions.* In fact, most of them would have left along with internationally acceptable coinage, without anyone having to banish them, since there was no longer any market for their products. The iron money could not be taken elsewhere in Greece, where it had no value and was held in contempt, and this meant that no one could buy any foreign trash, no cargo was imported into their harbours, no verbal casuist set foot on Laconian territory, no vagabond diviner, no keeper of prostitutes, no maker of gold or silver ornaments, because there was no money to pay them with. Once luxury was deprived of the things that enliven it and nourish it, it gradually wasted away of its own accord, and there was no advantage in owning a great deal of property because wealth had no means of displaying itself in public, but had to stay shut up in idleness at home. And so essential daily utensils such as beds, chairs and tables began to be made to a high degree of excellence there, and the Laconian drinking-cup, according to Critias, was especially famous for its utility during military expeditions. For the unpleasant appearance of the kinds of water the soldiers were inevitably drinking was disguised by the colour of the cup, and the muddy sediment caught against the inside of the lip of the cup and went no further, so that the liquid that actually reached their mouths and was drunk was cleaner than it might otherwise have been. The legislator was responsible for even this, in the sense that once craftsmen were released from non-essential work, they began to display their skill on essential items.

[10] Now, Lycurgus intended to eradicate admiration of wealth altogether, so he increased his assault on luxury with his third and finest reform, which was to introduce the system of common messes,

by which people came together to eat along with others the same specified savouries and foods. This stopped them spending time at home reclining at table on expensive couches, fattening themselves up in the dark like insatiable animals on the produce of craftsmen and cooks, and ruining themselves morally as well as physically by indulging every whim and gorging themselves until they needed long sleeps, hot baths, a great deal of quiet, and, so to speak, daily nursing. This was a considerable achievement, but the fact that he made riches undesirable, as Theophrastus says, and by means of shared meals and simplicity of diet made wealth no more important. For when rich and poor went to the same meal, the rich could not even use or enjoy, let alone gaze upon or display, all their paraphernalia. The upshot was—and this was how everybody put it—that Sparta was the only city in the world where Wealth could be seen truly blind,* lying as lifeless and inert as a picture. It was not even possible for a rich man to eat at home first and then go to the common mess with a full stomach, because everyone else was alert to the possibility, and they used to watch out for people who would not drink or eat with them and taunt them for their lack of self-control and for being too delicate to take the common diet.

[11] It was apparently this reform above all which made the rich members of Spartan society angry with Lycurgus. They formed themselves into a party to oppose him and used to band together to shout him down and express their irritation. Eventually the time came when he had to run out of the city square under a hail of missiles from them. He managed to reach a sanctuary ahead of most of them, and take refuge there, but a young man called Alcander (who, apart from his impatience and quick temper, was a fairly decent man) was hot on his heels, and when Lycurgus turned round Alcander hit him with his stick and knocked out his eye. This injury did not make Lycurgus give in, however. He stood and confronted his fellow citizens, showing them his bloody face and ruined eye. They were so overcome by remorse and horror at the sight that they handed Alcander over to him and escorted him home, unanimous in their outrage at what Alcander had done. Lycurgus thanked them and sent them all away with the exception of Alcander, whom he took inside. He did him no harm, however, and did not even tell him off, but dismissed his usual servants and attendants and told Alcander to attend to him instead. And because Alcander was a man of honour, he

carried out his orders in silence. As he lived with Lycurgus and shared his life, he came to observe his self-possession and high-mindedness, his ascetic lifestyle, and his inexhaustible capacity for hard work, and he became extremely attached to him. He used to tell his friends and acquaintances that Lycurgus was not dour or surly, but was uniquely gentle and even-tempered with others. So this was Alcander's punishment, and the penalty he had to undergo was to change from being an insubordinate, badly behaved young man to a very well-mannered and responsible adult.

In memory of his injury Lycurgus had a sanctuary of Athena built, under the name Athena Oprilleitis, because the local Dorian word for eyes is *opilloi*. But some writers (including Diocorides, who wrote a monograph on the Laconian constitution) say that although Lycurgus was struck in the eye, he did not lose his sight in that eye, and had the sanctuary built for Athena in gratitude for his recovery. Be that as it may, after this accident the Spartiates abandoned the practice of carrying sticks when attending the assembly.

[12] The Cretan word for these common messes is *andreia* or men's quarters, but the Lacedaemonians call them *phiditia*, either because they promote friendship (*philia*) and loyalty, with a 'd' in place of the 'p', or because they train men in frugality and thrift (*pheidō*). However, it is also possible, as some claim, that the first letter has been added from elsewhere, and that they were originally named *editia* after the words for 'dier' (*diaita*) and 'eating' (*edide*).*

They used to meet in groups of fifteen, give or take a little either way. Each member of the group would bring per month a medium-nus of ground barley, eight choes of wine, five minas of cheese, two and a half minas of figs, and also a very small sum of money for the purchase of savouries.* Apart from this, if anyone had made a sacrifice of first fruits or had been out hunting, he sent a portion to his mess; for eating at home was permitted if one had made a sacrifice or got back late from hunting, even though everyone else had to be at the mess. This custom of eating together was strictly observed for a long time. At any rate, when King Agis returned from his campaigns after his defeat of the Athenians, he wanted to eat with his wife and he asked for his portions to be sent to him at home, but the polemarchs refused to do so. He was so angry that the next day he refused to carry out the obligatory sacrifices, and the polemarchs fined him.*

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Male children also used to go to these common messes: it was as if they were attending schools of discipline. They used to listen to political discussions and watch entertainments suitable for free men, and they themselves were taught to entertain others and tell jokes without descending to vulgarity, and to be teased without getting annoyed. (This is another thing that is generally held to be a particular feature of Laconian character: the ability to take a joke.) If someone found a joke intolerable, he was allowed to protest to the person making it, who then stopped.

As any of its members entered the mess, the oldest member indicated the doors and said, 'Not a word is to reach the outside world through these.' Apparently, anyone who wanted to join a mess was assessed in the following way. Each member of the mess would take a piece of bread in his hand and without saying a word would toss it, like a voting pebble, into a basket carried by a slave on his head. Anyone supporting the candidate's entry threw the bread in just as it was, while anyone who wanted to exclude the candidate would first squeeze the bread hard in his hand. A squashed piece of bread means the same as a holed ballot.* If they find even one squashed piece of bread in the basket, the candidate is refused entry, since they want everyone to be happy with everyone else's company. In their terms, a rejected candidate has been *kaddishied*—a word deriving from the name of the basket into which the pieces of bread are thrown, which is *kaddikhos*.

The savoury dish they rate most highly is their famous black broth.* In fact, the older men refuse even a morsel of meat, and leave it all for the younger men, while for them a bowlful of the broth is a feast. There is a story that one of the kings of Pontus actually bought a Laconian cook because he wanted to try the broth, and when he found that he did not like the taste of it the cook said, 'My lord, it's only people who have washed in the Eurotas who should drink this broth.'* They drink only a moderate amount of wine and then leave without carrying a torch. They are not allowed to use a light on this or any other journey, so that they get used to making their way boldly and fearlessly in darkness and at night. So much for their system of common messes.

[13] Lycurgus did not commit his laws to writing; in fact, one of the so-called rhetras expressly forbids it. He was of the opinion that the principles which make the most substantial and important

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contribution towards the prosperity and excellence of a state remain stable if they are implanted in the characters and training of the citizens, and thereby form a stronger bond than compulsion (which is what young men normally get out of their education) by including a steady inclination which recreates the intention of the legislator in each and every person. At the same time, minor business contracts, where the details change from occasion to occasion according to the requirements of the particular case, were best left unrestricted by written constraints and unchangeable conventions, so that they could have clauses added or deleted as the occasion would demand and as educated men would decide. In short, from start to finish he made all his legislation depend on education, and that is why, as I have already mentioned, one of his rhetras prohibited the use of written laws.

Then again, there was another rhetra against extravagance, stating that in house-building only an axe should be used to make the roof, and that a saw and no other tool was to be used in making the doors. The point later expressed by Epaminondas* who, on taking his place at his own table, is supposed to have said, 'A meal like this does not promote treachery,' was first appreciated by Lycurgus: a house like that does not promote luxury and extravagance, and there is no one vulgar or stupid enough to bring into a simple, everyday house silver-footed couches, purple-dyed covers, golden cups, and all the extravagance that goes with such things. His couch is bound to be consistent and compatible with his house, his clothing with his couch, and all the rest of his provisions and furniture with his clothing. Once the elder Leotychidas* was dining in Corinth, and when he saw the expensively panelled ceiling of the house he asked his host, because of what he had become accustomed to at home, whether trees grew square in Corinth.

There are accounts of a third rhetra issued by Lycurgus which forbade repeated campaigns against the same enemy, in order to avoid them getting used to defending themselves and so becoming expert fighters. Later, this became a particular complaint they brought against King Agesilaus: they said his constant invasions and frequent campaigns against Boeotia had made them a match for the Lacedaemonians. This is why when Antalcidas saw him wounded he said, 'What an excellent way the Thebans have found to pay you for the lessons you gave them when they had neither the inclination nor the expertise to fight!':*

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Anyway, they called these decrees of his ‘rhetras’ because they regarded them as oracular utterances brought to Sparta from the god.* [14] He thought that there was no field more important or worth-while for the legislator than education, so he began to tackle the topic from a remote point, with a review, right at the start of his legislation, of the regulations concerning marriage and childbirth. Aristotle was wrong to say that Lycurgus gave up on his attempt to restrain women when he found that he was unable to control the considerable freedom and influence they had gained as a result of their husbands’ frequent periods of military service, when the men had no choice but to leave the women in charge, with the result that they used to defer to them to an unsuitable extent and gave them the title of Mistress.* In actual fact, Lycurgus made all the provisions he could for women. He instigated a tough regime of physical exercise for unmarried women, involving running, wrestling, discus, and javelin, so that when the time came for embryos to take root in their wombs they would gain a healthy start in healthy bodies and develop well, while the women themselves would have the strength to endure childbirth and would cope well and easily with the trials of labour. He removed their physical frailty, stopped them spending all their time indoors, and in general got rid of their femininity; he made girls just as used as boys to parading naked,* and to dancing and singing at certain festivals, with young men present as spectators. There was even an opportunity for the girls to taunt the young men one by one and helpfully criticize their errors, or alternatively to list in songs they had composed the praiseworthy achievements of those who deserved such eulogies. All this used to fill the young men with ambition and rivalry, because anyone who was praised for his manly qualities and acquired a favourable reputation among the young women left feeling proud that he had won their praise, while their light-hearted taunts stung just as much as serious rebukes, since the kings and the elders came to attend the spectacle along with all their fellow citizens.

There was nothing shameful in the young women’s nakedness—never a trace of lewdness, but only modesty. On the contrary, nudity accustomed them to simplicity and made them admire physical fitness. It also gave women a taste for a positive kind of pride, since excellence and ambition were just as much for them as for men. As a result women learnt to speak and think as we are told Gorgo the wife of Leonidas did.* When some woman—a foreigner, apparently

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said to her, ‘You Laconian women are the only ones who control your men’, she replied, ‘That’s because we’re the only ones who give birth to men.’

[15] These practices—I mean having young women join in the parades, shed their clothes, and take part in athletic competitions, all with young men looking on—also encouraged marriage, because the young men were drawn by, as Plato* puts it, sexual rather than logical necessity. Moreover, Lycurgus also imposed a certain loss of privilege on unmarried men, who were not allowed to watch the Festival of Unarmed Dancing,* and who by governmental edict had to walk naked around the perimeter of the city square in winter, while singing a song composed to fit their circumstances, about how this punishment of theirs was fair because they had disobeyed the laws. They were also not to be shown the respectful attention which their elders usually received from young men, which explains why no one found fault with the remark made to Dercyllidas,* despite his distinguished career as a military commander, once when he came into the theatre a younger man refused to give up his seat for him, and said, ‘No, because you have no son to give up his seat for me one day.’

Their marriage ceremony involved the forcible abduction of the woman, who would not be a child, too young for marriage, but a woman in her prime, ripe and ready for it. The abducted woman was then handed over to the so-called bridesmaid, who would cut her hair very short, dress her in a man’s clothes and shoes, and leave her lying alone on a straw mattress without any light to see by. The groom, who was not drunk or otherwise rendered impotent, but was as sober as usual, first dined in his *phidition* and then slipped into the room, undid the woman’s belt, picked her up, and carried her over to the bed. He spent only a short time with her before leaving quietly, and going to the same sleeping-quarters he had been sharing before with the other young men. This pattern continued in the future: he would spend the day with the men of his age-group, and take his rest with them as well, but he would visit his wife secretly, taking every precaution out of embarrassment and fear of being seen by anyone in the house. Meanwhile his wife would be devising plans and helping to find opportunities for them to meet without anyone else knowing about it. They went on behaving like this for quite a long while; in fact, in some cases there were children born before the men saw their own wives by the light of day. In the first place, this manner of

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meeting provided training in self-control and restraint; secondly, it brought the couple together for sex when they were physically fertile and always fresh and ready for love, rather than being sated and jaded from unrestricted sexual intercourse, so that every time they parted a feeling remained in each of them which would act as a stimulus for desire and affection.

Despite making marriage such a chaste and decorous affair, Lycurgus also banished the vain, womanish feeling of jealousy by making it acceptable to share the business of procreating children with others of sufficient excellence, provided there remained no place for any kind of outrageous or disorderly behaviour within the marriage. In other words, the idea that this is something that cannot be shared and held in common, and the use of murder and warfare to back up such an idea, struck Lycurgus as absurd. Suppose an older man with a young wife liked and approved of a young man of nobility and virtue: he could introduce him to her and then, once the younger man had impregnated his wife with his noble seed, he could adopt the child as his own. Or again, suppose a man of high principles admired a woman who was married to someone else for her modesty and fine children: he could prevail upon her husband to let him sleep with her, so that he could sow his seed in rich and fertile soil, so to speak, and produce excellent children who would be blood relatives of others just as fine.*

The point is, first, that to Lycurgus' way of thinking children did not belong to their fathers, but to the state in common; and so he wanted the citizens of the state to come from the best stock, not just any random parents. In the second place, he thought there was a great deal of stupidity and hypocrisy contained in others' legislation on these matters, when people arranged for their bitches and mares to be mounted by the best males by prevailing upon their owners in the name of friendship or by paying them, but kept their wives guarded under lock and key, claiming that they and they alone had the right to have children by them, whether they, the husbands, were idiots or dotards or invalids. This, as far as Lycurgus was concerned, was to ignore the fact that children born from bad parents are bad above all for those who have them and bring them up, and that on the contrary it is children who are lucky enough to have good parents who are good for those who have them and bring them up. This conduct of theirs was originally both natural and in the best interests of the

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state, and was so far removed from the promiscuity which was later attributed to their womenfolk that adultery was completely unknown there. In fact, something said by Geradas, a Spartiate from the very distant past, has been preserved. He was once asked by a visitor how they punished adulterers in Sparta. 'My friend,' he said, 'we don't have adulterers.' But suppose there were one,' the visitor persisted. Geradas said, 'His fine would be a bull large enough to bend over Mount Taygetus and drink from the Eurotas.' The man was astonished and said, 'How could there ever be a bull that big?' Geradas laughed and said, 'How could there ever be an adulterer in Sparta?*' So much for what has been recorded about Lycurgus' provisions for marriage.

[16] It was not up to the father whether or not the child was to be brought up. Instead, the child was taken to a place called a *leskeē*, or 'assembly place', where a session of the eldest men of his tribe was convened.* They examined the baby and if it was sturdy and strong they told the father to bring it up, and assigned it one of the 9,000 plots of land; if it was flawed and deformed, however, they sent it to the place called *Apothetai*, the 'place of exposure', a rugged spot near Mount Taygetus, on the assumption that death was preferable for both the child and the state given that from the moment of its birth it had been inadequately endowed with health and strength. The reason, then, why in Sparta the women used to wash babies in wine rather than water was as a kind of test of their constitution. For washing a baby which is liable to seizures and illness in undiluted wine apparently induces a fit and purrefaction of the flesh, whereas the condition of a healthy child is toughened and improved.

Nurses there had special responsibilities and skills. They trained the babies to use their limbs and bodies freely by dispensing with swaddling clothes, and also not to be fussy and fastidious about their food, not to be scared of the dark or frightened of being left alone, and never to demean themselves with tantrums or tears. This is why people from abroad sometimes used to buy Laconian nurses for their children; in fact, Amycla, the nurse of Alcibiades of Athens, is said to have been a Laconian woman.*

However, as Plato records,* Pericles put Alcibiades in the care of a tutor called Zopyrus, who was no more than an ordinary slave, whereas Lycurgus refused to put the sons of Spartiates under tutors who were slaves bought and owned, or at best hired assistants. At the

same time, however, he did not allow people to decide on their own how to bring up and educate their sons: as soon as the children were seven years old, Lycurgus personally took them all in hand and enrolled them in various 'herds', so that they became used to playing together and learning together under the same rules and régime. The boy who showed the greatest intelligence and the most fighting spirit was put in charge of his herd, and the rest kept their eyes on him, listened to his orders, and endured his punishments, so that their education was a training in obedience. They were watched at play by older men who, as the occasion arose, often used to get them to fight and compete with one another, which was no idle activity, but enabled them to assess how courageous each boy was and whether or not he was likely to avoid confrontation.

The boys learnt to read and write as much as they would need to get by, while all the rest of their education was geared towards inculcating ready obedience, the capacity to endure hard work, and the ability to win in battle. That is why, as they grew older, their training was stepped up: their hair was cut short and they became accustomed to go about barefoot and usually to play without any clothes on. At the age of twelve they stopped wearing tunics and were given one cloak a year. Their skin was weathered, their bodies unfamiliar with bathing and oiling, which were comforts they experienced only a few times a year. They slept along with others from their unit or herd on straw mattresses they packed themselves with the tips of reeds growing alongside the Eurotas which they broke off with their bare hands, not with knives. In winter they used to add some wolfshape, as it is called, to the make-up of the straw mattresses they lay on, since this plant is supposed to be have warming properties.*

[17] By the time they were this old the boys used to be accompanied as they went about by lovers from among the young men of good families. The older men also used to pay them more attention, visiting the wrestling-grounds and hanging around while they fought and teased one another. Nor was it the case that the older men had nothing to do there: in a sense they all regarded all the boys as their sons, pupils, and wards, which meant that there was never a time or a place when the boys would be without someone to criticize and correct their mistakes.

Moreover, there was also a post of 'boy-herder'* which was filled by one of the outstanding men of the city, and the boys of each herd

themselves appointed the most sensible and warlike of the eirens, as they are known, to be in charge of them—an 'eiren' being someone in the year after childhood, while the oldest of the boys are called 'near-eirens'.* So this eiren, aged twenty, takes command of those assigned to serve under him in their battles, and has them attend to him indoors at mealtimes. He tells the sturdy boys to fetch wood and the smaller ones vegetables—and they go and get the things by stealing them. Some of them go to people's gardens, while others show a fine turn of cunning and caution and sneak into the men's common messes. Any boy who is caught is given a thorough thrashing for turning out to be a careless and incompetent thief. They also steal any food they can, and so learn the art of getting past sleeping people and careless guards. A boy goes hungry, as well as being beaten, if he is caught, because their meals are never generous, so that they learn to rely on themselves to ward off hunger by their own bravery and cunning.*

While this is the main purpose of their scanty rations, a secondary one, according to the Lacedaemonians, is to help the boys' physical development. For when the vital breath is unimpeded and unhindered—that is, when it is not forced down into the depths and sides of the body by the bulk of a large quantity of food, but rather follows the upward course dictated by its lightness—it contributes towards height, because the body can then develop straightforwardly and easily. A light diet is also held to make people good-looking, since spare, lean frames allow the features to be distinct, whereas the weight of fat, over-fed bodies tells against any such definition. This no doubt also explains why women who purge themselves during pregnancy produce babies which are lean, but well formed and nicely shaped, since the material the women provide is light enough to be dominated by the shaping agent.* But the cause which produces this result still needs further investigation.

[18] How seriously the boys go about their thieving is shown by the story that when one of them had a fox cub he had stolen hidden under his cloak, rather than be found out he put up with it fatally lacerating his gurs with its claws and teeth.* Even this story seems perfectly plausible, given that we have seen large numbers of the Lacedaemonian youths of today dying under the lash at the altar of Artemis Orthia.*

Once the eiren had eaten, he would lie back on his couch and get one of the boys to sing songs, while he asked another one a question

which needed a careful reply. He might ask him, for instance, which man was outstanding, or what he made of something a particular person had done. This got the boys from a very early age in the habit of assessing excellence and concerning themselves with their fellow citizens' affairs, since the inability to answer when asked who in Sparta was a good man, or who had a poor reputation, was taken to be the sign of a dull mind which lacked the desire to win recognition. The answer also had to be accompanied by a demonstration of its validity—a demonstration reduced to a brief and succinct argument. The punishment for a wrong answer was a bite on the thumb from the eiren, who would also often punish the boys under the supervision of some elders and magistrates, so that they could see whether or not his punishments were reasonable and appropriate. Not that he was stopped while he was actually taking disciplinary action, but after the boys had left he would be reprimanded if his punishments were unnecessarily severe or, on the other hand, too lenient and indulgent.

Whatever reputation the boys acquired, for good or ill, was shared by their lovers. In fact we hear that once when a boy degraded himself by crying out during a battle his lover was fined by the magistrates. Although passionate love was so highly thought of in Sparta that even noble and respectable women used to have love-affairs with unmarried girls, yet rivalry in love was unknown; instead, if two men were in love with the same boy, they would let this forge a bond of friendship between them and from then on would share their efforts to improve their beloved.*

[19] The boys were also taught how to speak in a way which was brusque but elegant, and which contained a great deal of food for thought in a few words. Lycurgus may have made large amounts of the iron coinage worth little, as I have already explained, but he did the opposite with the coinage of speech: a simple short sentence had to convey a great deal of subtle meaning. He turned out boys with the ability, trained by long periods of silence, of giving pointed, honed responses. The seed of a man who exercises no self-restraint in his sexual life is usually sterile and unproductive; by the same token, lack of self-restraint in talking makes what one says vain and pointless. Once, when some Athenian or other was joking about how short Laconian swords were and remarked how easily stage conjurers swallowed them, King Agis replied, 'But we certainly reach our enemies with them.* And I add that in my opinion the Laconian style may seem terse, but it certainly gets to the point and touches the minds of the listeners.

In fact, as far as we can tell from his recorded sayings, Lycurgus himself seems to have been a man of few but pointed words. For example, there is his *bon mot* about government, spoken in response to someone who was wanting to make the state a democracy: 'Only after you've made your home a democracy,' he said. Then again, when someone asked him why the sacrifices he arranged were so small and inexpensive, he said, 'So that we never have to stop paying our respects to the gods.' Or again, we hear that he allowed his fellow citizens to take part only in those sports which did not involve them raising a hand.*† Similar responses also occur in extant letters of his to his fellow citizens: 'How should we repel a hostile invasion?' 'By staying poor and by each man among you having no desire to be greater than anyone else.' And on the subject of defensive walls he said, 'Brave men, not bricks, constitute a city's fortifications.' However, it is not easy to know whether to believe or disbelieve in the authenticity of these letters and others like them.*

[20] Here are some apophthegms which illustrate Spartan aversion to longwindedness. When someone chose a bad moment to raise a not unimportant matter with King Leonidas* he said, 'You're right, my friend, but the time is wrong.' When Charilaus, Lycurgus' nephew, was asked about the small number of laws Lycurgus had made, he said that people of few words need few laws. When some people were criticizing the sophist Hecataeus for having kept silent at the mess to which he had been invited, Archidamidas said, 'People who know how to speak also know when to speak.*'

Here are some examples of the kinds of sayings I described earlier as brusque but not without elegance. Once an objectionable fellow hammered Demaratus* with a whole lot of inopportune questions, including 'Who is the best of the Spartiates?'—to which Demaratus replied, 'The one who is least like you.' When some people were praising the Eleans for their excellent and fair conduct of the Olympian Games, Agis* said, 'What's so great about the Eleans behaving fairly for one day every four years?' When a visitor from abroad was letting Theopompus* see how much he liked Laconia, and was saying that in his home town he was known for his loyalty to Laconia, Theopompus said, 'It would be better if you were known for your loyalty to your own state, my friend.' On hearing an Athenian orator describe the Laconians as men of no learning, Pleistonax* the son of Pausanias said, 'You're right: we're the only Greeks who've learnt nothing bad from you.' When someone asked Archidamidas how

many Spartiates there were,' he replied, 'Enough to keep us safe from bad men, my friend.'

Lacedaemonian ways can even be judged by their light-hearted quips, since it was never their way to waste words or to say anything which did not somehow contain a thought that would repay further reflection. So when one of them was invited to listen to a man imitating a nightingale he said, 'I've heard the real thing.' Then again, once a Spartan read the following epitaph:

Bronze-clad Ares* took these men while they were involved in an attempt To extinguish the flames of tyranny. They died by the gates of Selinous.

'They deserved to die,' he commented. 'They should have let tyranny burn itself out completely.' A young man was once promised some cocks that would give their lives fighting. 'No, thank you,' he said. 'Give me some that will *take* lives fighting.' At the sight of some men sitting on stools to relieve themselves, another Spartan remarked, 'I hope I never find myself sitting where I can't get up and offer my place to someone older than me.'

These apophthegms are so typical that it is not odd for people to claim, as they sometimes do, that devotion to the intellect is more definitive of Laconian character than devotion to exercise.*

[21] They were just as interested in studying poetry and song as they were in achieving purity and perfection in the spoken word. In fact, their songs were designed as stimulants to arouse their spirits and motivate them to wholehearted, effective action. They were plain and unpretentious in style, and sung of impressive, morally sound achievements. The usual themes were praise of those who had died for Sparta, who were counted happy; condemnation of cowards,* dwelling on the wretched, miserable lives they lived; and either promises of future bravery or the proud recounting of past bravery, whichever was appropriate to the singers' ages. It is quite instructive to give an example of a song belonging to this latter category, by way of illustration. At their festivals, three choruses were formed, one from each age-group, and first the chorus of old men would sing, 'We once were valiant young men.' Next the chorus of men in their prime would take up the theme with 'But it's our turn now: please try us out.' And finally the chorus of boys would sing, 'But we shall prove mightier by far.'

Anyone who has made a study of Laconian poetry, some examples of which have survived down to the present day, and has familiarized himself with the marching rhythms they used, to the accompaniment of the pipes, as they advanced on the enemy,* will agree with Terpander and Pindar when they associate music and courage. One of Terpander's poems about the Lacedaemonians contains the following lines:

Where thrives the young men's warlike spirit and the clear-voiced Muse;

Where thrives Justice on the spacious streets of the city.

And Pindar says:

Where flourish unsurpassed the councils of elders,
The warlike endeavours of young men,
Choruses, the Muse and celebration.

As far as these two poets were concerned, the Lacedaemonians were the most cultured* as well as the most warlike people. As the Laconian poet said:

Good playing of the lyre counterbalances iron weaponry.

Before engaging an enemy, in fact, the king used to sacrifice to the Muses, presumably to remind his men of their upbringing and the choices they had made, in order to get them ready to risk their lives and to perform memorable deeds of valour in battle.

[22] Another thing they used to do in wartime is relax the most rigid aspects of the young men's training: they used to let them make their hair attractive and decorate their weaponry and clothing, and they enjoyed the sight of these horses, so to speak, prancing and whinnying in eagerness for the fray. That is why as soon as they came of age they let their hair grow long, and they used to look after it especially in times of danger, making sure that they kept it sleek and well combed,* because they remembered something Lycurgus had said about long hair—that it increases the attractiveness of handsome men and the fearsomeness of ugly men. They also took less arduous exercise while out on campaign, and in general the way of life the young men were required to follow was not as curtailed by rules and regulations as usual, which meant that they were the only people in the world for whom warfare was more restful than their preparations for it.

[23] When they were actually drawn up in their phalanx* within sight of the enemy the king would sacrifice the traditional she-goat, give the command for everyone to put on their garlands, and tell the pipe-players to play the Ode to Castor,* while he would strike up a marching paean. The resulting spectacle was both impressive and terrifying, as the men advanced in time with the pipes in a solid, unbroken phalanx, suffering from no inner perturbation, but marching up to face danger in a composed and cheerful manner to the sound of the music. It is reasonable to expect that men in this frame of mind will feel neither fear nor excessive rage, but rather a steady self-assurance sustained by hope, courage and the belief that the gods are on their side.

The king's escort, as he advanced against the enemy, consisted of men who had been victorious in athletic competitions where the prize was a garland.* There is a story that once a Spartan was offered a great deal of money in the Olympic Games, but turned it down; he overcame his opponent in the wrestling, but it was an extremely tough contest, and afterwards he was asked what he had gained from his victory. He smiled and said, 'The right to a place in the unit defending the king in battles against our enemies.'

If they succeeded in defeating and routing enemy troops, they chased them until their victory had been made secure by their opponents' flight, but then turned back, because as far as they were concerned hacking and slaughtering men who had given up and withdrawn was degrading and inappropriate for any Greek. As well as being honourable and noble behaviour, this also had a practical side: once their opponents realized that Lacedaemonians killed people who resisted them, but spared those who surrendered, they began to regard flight as more expedient than standing their ground.*

[23] The sophist Hippias says that Lycurgus himself was particularly fine strategist and a veteran of many campaigns, and Philostephanus also attributes to him the division of the cavalry into *oulamoi*. On Lycurgus' system, an *oulamos* was a body of fifty horsemen drawn up in a square formation. But according to Demetrius of Phalerum Lycurgus undertook no military activities at all, since it was a time of peace when he established his constitution. And the idea of an Olympic truce also seems to indicate a man of even temper and a peaceful disposition. However, there is also the story, recorded by Hermippus on the authority of some writers, that at first Lycurgus had no interest in Iphitus and was not his partner in the scheme

from the start, but happened to be there on a visit from Sparta on some other business and went to watch the games. He heard what sounded like a man's voice behind him, telling him off and expressing surprise at his failure to encourage his fellow citizens to join in the festival. He turned around, but could see no one there who could have spoken to him, and so came to the conclusion that the voice was divine. He therefore teamed up with Iphitus and helped him organize the festival on a more magnificent scale and establish it on a securer basis.

[24] Spartan education did not end when they reached adulthood, in the sense that no one was allowed to live just as he pleased. Life in the city was like life in a military camp: people lived in a prescribed way and spent their time on communal concerns, because it never occurred to them to regard themselves as autonomous rather than as subject to their country. And so, unless they had been given some other job to do, they would always be found supervising the boys and teaching them something useful, or learning themselves from their elders. The point is that one particular benefit and blessing which Lycurgus arranged for the citizens of Sparta was an enormous amount of leisure; he did not allow them to become involved in any manual work at all, and there was not the slightest need for them to engage in business and undertake the laborious and troublesome task of accumulating money, because wealth was no longer something to be admired and respected. The helots worked the land for them and paid them in tribute the amounts mentioned earlier.* Once a Spartan was abroad in Athens when the lawcourts were in session there, and he heard that someone who had been fined for not working* was going around in a state of depression with a retinue of sympathetic friends sharing his sorrow and grief—but the Spartan asked his companions to point out to him the man who had been found guilty of freedom. This shows how servile they considered artisanship and money-making to be. Lawcourts, of course, vanished along with coinage, since greed and want had been banished from their midst, and were replaced by equality in sufficiency and the comforts of a simple lifestyle. Normally, all their time was spent on choral festivals, celebrations, feasts, hunting expeditions, exercises, and assemblies, unless they happened to be out on campaign.*

[25] Men under the age of thirty never went to the city square, but had all their domestic needs met by their relatives and lovers.

Moreover, it was considered demeaning for older men to be seen constantly engaged in these matters, rather than spending most of the day exercising and at their 'assembly places', as they called them.* For when they came together at these assembly places they passed the time together in a respectable fashion. No mention was made of anything concerned with money-making or commercial matters; instead, the main business of the time they spent there was to praise what was honourable and condemn what was disgraceful, but to do so in an easy and jocular manner which lightly bore the person under scrutiny to a point of castigation and reproof.* In fact, not even Lycurgus himself was unremittingly serious: it was he, according to Sosibius, who set up the statuette of Laughter and made the telling of appropriate jokes a feature of Spartan recreations such as symposia, as a way of sweetening the rigours of their lifestyle.

In short, as a result of Lycurgus' reforms, his fellow citizens lost both the will and the ability to live as individuals. Instead, they became accustomed, bee-like, to always being organic parts of the life of the community, to swarm around their leader in a state of near ecstasy induced by their eager desire for recognition, and to commit themselves wholly to their country. This intention can be seen in some of their remarks too. For instance, when Pedaritus failed to be chosen to join the ranks of the Three Hundred,* he left with a broad grin on his face, as if to show how glad he was that the state had three hundred men better than him. When Polystratidas* and the other members of a diplomatic delegation to the Persian king's commanders were asked whether they were there on a private or public mission, he replied: 'A public one if we succeed; a private one if we fail.' Once some people from Amphipolis came to Lacedaemon and paid Argileonis, the mother of Brasidas, a visit. She asked whether Brasidas had died well, without letting Sparta down. They began to lavish praises on the man, and said that there was no one to compare with him in Sparta. 'Don't say that, my friends,' she said. 'For all Brasidas' admirable qualities, there are many men better than him in Sparta.'*

[26] At first, as already mentioned,* Lycurgus personally appointed the elders from among those who had been his co-conspirators, but later he arranged things so that the place of someone who died would be filled by whichever man over the age of sixty was judged to be of outstanding quality. No contest in the world was held to be as

important as this one, and none was as highly prized. This was not a test to find who could outrun or outwrestle his peers: the person chosen had to surpass his peers in virtue and sound sense, and his excellence would be rewarded by the possession, for the rest of his life, of what it is hardly any exaggeration to describe as absolute political power, since he would have the right to decide about all the most important aspects of his fellow citizens' lives, such as death and dishonour.

The selection was made as follows. The assembly met, and chosen men were shut up in a room near by, where they could neither see what was going on nor be seen, but could only hear the shouts of the assembled people, since as usual the contest would be decided by acclamation. The candidates were not introduced all at once; they came in one by one, in an order decided by lot, and walked in silence through the assembly. Now, the men shut up in the room had writing-tablets, and in each case they noted down the volume of the shouting without knowing the identity of the candidate, only that he was the first or second or third or whatever to be brought in front of the assembly. So they proclaimed whoever received the longest and loudest shouting the winner.* Crowned with a garland, the winner visited the sanctuaries of the gods one after another, followed by a crowd of young men applauding and praising him, and by a large number of women too, who would recount in song his excellent qualities and the blessings attending his life. On the way, each of his closest friends would serve him something to eat and say, 'With this table the state honours you.' Once he had completed his rounds, he went off to his mess, where everything was as usual except that he was served an extra portion of food, which he accepted and kept safe. His female relatives gathered by the doors of the *phidition* and after the meal he called for the one he regarded most highly and gave her the extra portion of food, saying that he was giving her the prize he had been given for his excellence. She was then congratulated and escorted home by the rest of the women.

[27] Lycurgus also made excellent arrangements for their funerals. In the first place, he banished all the superstitious beliefs surrounding death by lifting the prohibition on burying the dead within the city limits and on locating tombs near sanctuaries. This meant that young people grew up seeing things of this kind and became so familiar with them that they were not upset by the sights and did not fear

death or believe that it polluted those who touched a dead body or walked through a graveyard. In the second place, he made it illegal to bury anything with the corpse; all they used to do when they laid out the body was cover it with a red cloak and olive leaves. He also made it illegal to inscribe the name of the dead person on the tomb, unless it was a man who had died in war or a woman who had died in childbirth.* He limited the amount of time spent in mourning to eleven days; on the twelfth day they were to sacrifice to Demeter and give up their grief. In fact, Lycurgus left nothing unemployed, but put everything to work: he found a way to include in every essential task some feature that would lead people to strive for goodness or dislike badness. He created so many educational examples that no aspect of life in the city remained uncovered. As a result, since they were all† constantly coming across them and were surrounded by them in their formative years, they were inevitably shaped and moulded by the ideal of excellence.

This also explains why he did not let them leave Sparta and travel abroad freely, to acquire foreign habits and copy the ways of people who lacked culture and lived under different political systems. In fact, he even expelled the crowds of people who streamed into Sparta from abroad for no particular reason. Thucydides is wrong to suggest that he did this because he was afraid that they would copy his political system and learn some valuable moral lessons;* no, he was more afraid of the corrupting influence these foreigners might exert. Foreigners inevitably bring with them into a country foreign notions, novel ideas lead to novel choices, and these in turn are bound to cause the development of a number of feelings and inclinations which clash with the euphony, as it were, of the existing political system. So to Lycurgus' mind it was more important to protect the state from infection by pestilential customs than it was to keep people from abroad bringing disease in with them.

[28] Now, there is no trace in all this of the injustice or rapacity which some people have found in Lycurgus' laws. They accuse him of framing laws which were good at promoting courage, but defective when it came to justice. Conceivably, it was the existence in Lacedaemon of the so-called *krypteia*, or secret service—assuming that Aristotle* is right in saying that it was Lycurgus who set it up—that gave Plato* this opinion of the man and his constitution.

Here is how the *krypteia* worked. From time to time the young men's commanders would send those who gave them the impression of being the most intelligent out into the countryside—to different districts at different times—with nothing more than a dagger each and a bare minimum of supplies. By day the young men spread out and found remote spots where they could hide and rest, but at night they came down to the roads and murdered any helots they caught. They also often used to walk through the fields and kill the helots who were in the best shape and condition. Also in this context, Thucydides records in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* how once some helots who had distinguished themselves by their bravery were crowned by the Spartiates in token of their freedom and visited each of the sanctuaries of the gods in turn, but then a short while later every single one of them—more than 2,000 men—vanished, and neither straight away nor subsequently could anyone say precisely how they had met their deaths.* There is also the point Aristotle makes, that the first thing the ephors did on taking office was declare war on the helots, so that killing them would not pollute the killer.

There were other ways in which their treatment of the helots was harsh and brutal. For instance, they used to force them to drink large quantities of undiluted wine and then bring them into the common messes, to show the young men what it was like to be drunk. They also used to get them to make fools of themselves by performing degrading songs and dances, while denying them the right to perform any which were suited to free men. This puts in context the later story that during their invasion of Laconia the Thebans wanted the helots they captured to sing some compositions by Terpander, Alcman, and Spendon of Laconia, but the helots refused, on the grounds that their masters would not approve.* So the claim that there is no one more free than a free man in Lacedaemon, and no one more of a slave than a slave there, rests on sound observation of the difference between the two.

It is my view that this kind of harsh treatment of the helots was a later development among the Spartiates, starting particularly after the great earthquake, when, we hear, the helots and the Messenians seized the opportunity to attack, wrought terrible havoc throughout the countryside, and brought the city to the very brink of destruction.* I myself would be reluctant to attribute to Lycurgus a disgusting institution like the *krypteia*. I base this judgement of his character on

his equability and fairness in other respects—an assessment which the god supported as well.*

[29] The time came when his most important measures had become ingrained in the Lacedaemonians' customs and he had nurtured his constitution enough, so that it was capable of supporting itself and seeing to its own preservation. Just as the god, according to Plato,* was enchanted by the birth of the world and its first movements, so now that his legislation was in operation and proceeding on its way Lycurgus found its elegance and grandeur deeply satisfying, and he wanted to leave it to posterity as immortal and unchanging, in so far as a mere human being could look ahead and achieve this. So he convened a general assembly and told the people that although basically things were running adequately enough to guarantee the material and moral welfare of the state, there was still something of critical importance to be done, but he would not tell them about it until he had consulted the god. He went on to say that they therefore had to abide by the existing laws, without making any changes or alterations, until he returned in person from Delphi, because then he would carry out the god's recommendations. They all agreed to this and told him to be on his way. Once he had exacted an oath from the kings and the elders, and then subsequently the rest of the citizen body, to the effect that they would abide by and keep to the existing constitution until his return, he left for Delphi.

On his arrival at the oracular shrine, he sacrificed to the god, and then asked whether the laws he had made were in fact good enough to guarantee the material and moral welfare of the state. The god replied that the legislative measures he had taken were good, and that by keeping to Lycurgus' constitution the state would continue to be held in the highest honour. Lycurgus had the oracle written down and sent to Sparta, but he himself sacrificed once more to the god and embraced his friends and his son. He had decided never to release his fellow citizens from their oath, but to kill himself there and then. He had reached an age when the choice between further life and putting an end to it may fairly be made, and his dependants seemed to be sufficiently prosperous and happy, so he starved himself to death.

He was of the opinion that even in death a statesman should benefit his state, that even the end of a statesman's life should not be vain, but should be classed as an effective act of virtue. After all the wonderful things he had achieved, he felt that for him personally his death

would truly constitute the perfection of his happiness, and that for his fellow citizens he would bequeath his death to protect all the admirable benefits he had provided them with during his lifetime, since they had sworn to keep to his constitution until his return. Nor were his calculations misguided, because there was no state in Greece to match Sparta for lawfulness and fame for a very long time, since it adhered to Lycurgus' laws for five hundred years; for fourteen generations after him not one of the kings made any constitutional changes, until the time of Agis the son of Archidamus.* For the existence of the ephorate strengthened rather than weakened the constitution, and although it seemed to favour the common people, it actually increased the power of the aristocracy.

[30] It was during Agis' reign that money first poured into Sparta, and along with money greed and admiration of wealth assaulted the land. This was Lysander's fault: even though he was impervious to money himself, it was because he brought back gold and silver from the war, flouting Lycurgus' laws, that the country became infected with love of wealth and with luxury.* Previously, under Lycurgus' laws, Sparta had not so much a political constitution as the lifestyle of a trained and intelligent man. Or a better analogy might be how the poets describe Heracles in their stories as traversing the world with his lion skin and club, punishing lawless and savage tyrants. So, one might say, with no more than a single *skyphos** and a thin cloak Sparta ruled Greece with the willing consent of its inhabitants, dissolving unjust power blocks and overthrowing tyrannies in various states, mediating in wars, putting an end to civil strife—and managing to do all this often without any military intervention at all, but by sending a solitary envoy. Just as on the appearance of their leader bees cluster round him in a neat and orderly array,* so everyone concerned would immediately carry out the commands of the Spartan envoy. All this shows that Sparta had lawfulness and justice to spare.

I fail to understand, then, how some people can say that Lacedaemonians made good subjects but bad rulers, and can cite with approval the remark of King Theopompus, who replied, when someone was claiming that that the security of Sparta was due to the leadership of its kings, 'No, it's due to the obedience of its citizens.' After all, people refuse to obey those who are incapable of command; obedience is a lesson taught by a commander, because it takes the right sort of leader to inculcate the right sort of compliance. Just as the object

of horsemanship is to produce an even-tempered, tractable horse, so the function of kingship is to instil obedience in men. In fact, what the Lacedaemonians instilled in other Greeks was not so much obedience as a positive desire to be commanded and ruled by them. People tended not to ask the Lacedaemonians to send them ships or money or hoplites, but a single Spartan leader, and when they got him they treated him with the kind of respect and awe that Gylippus received from the Sicilians, Brasidas from the Chalcidians, and Lysander, Callicratidas, and Agesilaus from all the Greeks living in Asia.* They called them 'harmosts' or imposers of order and discipline on people and rulers everywhere, and they regarded the Spartan city as a whole as a tutor or teacher of respectable living and stable government. This seems to be the point of Stratonicus' joke,* when he proposed a mock law to the effect that the Athenians should conduct mysteries and processions, the Eleans should be responsible for athletic contests, because that is what they do best, and the Lacedaemonians should be flogged for any mistakes the Athenians and Eleans might make! This may have been no more than a piece of fun, but all the same, when faced with Theban pride after the battle of Leuctra, Antisthenes the Socratic remarked that they were behaving just like children prancing about in delight at having beaten up their tutor.*

[31] However, Lycurgus' main purpose at the time was not to leave his city in command of a huge numbers of places. He thought that happiness in the life of a whole city was due to the same factors as in the life of a single individual, namely virtue and internal unanimity,* and so the point of all his arrangements and institutions had been to enable the Lacedaemonians to be free, autonomous, and self-disciplined for as long as possible. This political scheme has been taken over by everyone who has come to be admired for attempting to address these issues, including Plato, Diogenes, and Zeno, even though they left to posterity nothing but words and ideas.* Lycurgus, however, left no mere words and ideas, but created an actual and unrivalled system of government. To those who doubt the existence of the condition said to be attained by the wise man, he showed that a whole state could be devoted to wisdom, and so it is not surprising that he is the best known Greek statesman there has ever been. That is why Aristotle says that in Lacedaemon Lycurgus has received less recognition than he should, despite the fact that he has had the highest honours conferred upon him, since he has a sanctuary there, and they

offer him sacrifices once a year as if he were a god. There is even a story that after his body had been brought home a thunderbolt struck his tomb, and this is something which happened to hardly any other eminent person later except Euripides, who died and was buried near Arethusa in Macedonia. So Euripides' admirers count it as an important piece of evidence supporting their opinion of the man that what happened to him after his death had previously happened only to a person who was dearly loved by the gods and lived a life of unsurpassed piety.

Some say that Lycurgus died in Cirrha, but Apollothemis says that he was taken to Elis and died there, while Timaeus and Aristoxenus claim that he ended his days in Crete.* Aristoxenus adds that the Cretans show people his tomb beside the Foreigners' Road in Pergamia. We hear that he left a single son, Antiorus,* who died childless, at which point Lycurgus' family became extinct. His friends and relatives, however, instituted a kind of school which met for many years, and called the days when they met 'Lycurgan days'. Aristocrates the son of Hipparchus says that after Lycurgus had died in Crete his guest-friends there burnt his body and, in accordance with his own wishes, scattered the ashes on the sea, to ensure that his remains were never taken back to Lacedaemon, and prevent the Lacedaemonians altering his constitution on the grounds that he had returned and therefore their oaths were null and void. This is all I have to say about Lycurgus.*

SOLON

INTRODUCTION

Lawgiver, sage, poet: at the beginning of Athenian history Solon combines in one person intelligence, practicality, and persuasion. Solon held the office of archon and enacted his reform of the Athenian constitution in 594 BC. Despite the absence of contemporary historical accounts, Plutarch is able to blend four disparate sources into an imaginative and thought-provoking Life.

Plutarch's (and our) only contemporary written sources were Solon's poems, collected by scholars long after his death, and the preserved text of his laws. Though the poems are known to us only in fragments, some found only in this Life,¹ Plutarch had access to many complete poems—he notes, for example (8), that the Salamis poem ran to one hundred lines, although he only quotes the first two—and incorporates passages from them into his portrait. In his poems, Solon presented the moral justification for his reforms and describes the tension between aristocratic landowners and impoverished farmers: 'I stood protecting rich and poor with my stout shield | And saw that neither side prevailed unjustly' (18). But the poems contain little specific on his reform: for this Plutarch went to the inscribed law code of Solon, still partially preserved in his own day at Athens, and the subject of learned commentaries. This code was officially revised at the end of the fifth century, and there is the possibility that some provisions ascribed to Solon in fact reflect later changes. Nevertheless, Plutarch cites a number of laws known from no other source, and overall gives us the most complete surviving account of Solon's legislation (15–25).²

After the recovery in 1890 from the sands of Egypt of the *Constitution of the Athenians*, written by Aristotle or close associates in his school, it became apparent that Plutarch had also relied heavily on the account of

Solon's reforms given there.³ This work, one of a series treating some 250 Greek city-states, offered a brief history of the stages of constitutional development at Athens: Solon's reforms occupy cc. 5–12, with sections before and after treating the political situation preceding and following the reforms. Like Plutarch, Aristotle incorporated citations of Solon's poems, and it is of some interest to observe the different ways in which the two writers exploit this common source. The other major source for Plutarch was the fifth-century historian Herodotus, whose famous (and largely fictional) account of the meeting of Solon with Croesus of Lydia lies behind his own account of their meeting in cc. 27–8.

For the modern historian, Solon's reforms addressed several problems which came to a head at the end of the seventh century. First, control of the land was in the hands of a restricted aristocracy. Whatever the nature of the *hektemoros* system of tenant farming, from the poems it appears that large numbers of farmers were deeply in debt and liable even to being enslaved: Solon's *sesachtheia* (relief of debts) in large part resolved this problem. Second, by making eligibility to office dependent on wealth and not birth, Solon broke the political control of the landed aristocracy, although they would still dominate politics for the next 150 years. The military importance of hoplite warriors and the economic power of the new wealth held by non-aristocratic landowners and merchants now could find political expression. Finally, by establishing an elected council alongside the Areopagus council and by giving the right of appeal to citizen courts, Solon laid the foundations for the Cleisthenic and Periclean democracies which would follow.

This 'historian's view' is fleshed out in the life with Plutarch's imaginative reconstruction of events in Solon's life from the poems and other material: Solon's early erotic relation with Pisistratus, his travels as a merchant, his contact with other sages, his role in annexing (or recovering) Salamis. An ardent admirer of Plato, Plutarch includes Plato's story that Solon brought back from Egypt the account of the ancient war between Athens and Atlantis (26, 31–2). In addition, he cited occasionally other authors for details or interpretations. These include Heracleides of Pontus and Phanias of Eresus, two students of Plato; the commentary of the grammarian Didymus on Solon's laws; and Hermippus, author of works on the seven sages and on lawgivers. For a variant account of Solon's *sesachtheia*, he refers to Andronion, a fourth-century author of a chronicle of Athens

¹ Collected in M. L. West (ed.), *Iambi et Elegi Graeci ante Alexandrum cantati*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 39–65. In the notes, quotations are identified by the number in this edition. All Solon's poems are translated in *Elegy and Iambus*, ed. J. M. Edmonds (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, and London: Heinemann, 1931); selected poems are translated in Andrew M. Miller, *Greek Lyric: An Anthology in Translation* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1990), 64–76.

² The fragments of Solon's laws are collected by E. Ruschenbusch, *Solon's novum. Die Fragmente des solonischen Gesetzesmusters mit einer Text- und Übersichtsgeschichte*, Historia Einzelschrift 9, 2nd edn. (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983).

³ For all questions relating to matter treated in this important text, see the excellent *Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* by P. J. Rhodes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). Cf. also Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, translated and with notes by P. J. Rhodes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

(15), and he may have used him for other items as well. Plutarch can enlarge on his sources in imagining what must have taken place, putting before the reader Solon's thinking before reciting his Salamis poem, or the pressures upon him to make himself tyrant (8, 14). These passages must be taken for what they are, historical reconstruction, and not as actual records of the time.

Plutarch's personal preference was for aristocratic government, so Solon's reputation as founder of the democracy was not a recommendation. In the biography, he notes the foolishness of popular thinking (e.g. 5, Anacharsis' words, and 29). Instead he enhances Solon's image of fairness to both rich and poor. Other special touches include his approval of child-rearing despite the risks of pain that children bring (6). The general statement on living with risk which follows can be interpreted as a justification for risking oneself in the political arena. The encounter with Thespis, the founder of Attic tragedy, raises serious questions about the role of spectacle and performance in public life. Solon's strictures seem to reflect both Plato's rejection of tragedy and Plutarch's aversion to the confusion of play-acting and real life which Nero's reign had raised to an art form.

The portrait that Plutarch shapes from these sources is original. Solon is coupled with the Roman Publicola, a leader who helped expel the Tarquins and set up the new republic, won great popular favour, and took decisive action against attempts to reinstitute tyranny. The two lives compare the two founders of the Athenian democracy and the Roman republic, with special emphasis on their handling of tyranny and their relation to the populace. But while throughout Publicola is characterized as a man of action, Solon is presented as a philosopher, one of the Seven Sages of ancient Greece, whose role is more that of adviser and counsellor than actor. Solon advises the people on Salamis, he advises them through his poems and his legislation, he warns them against the tyrannical designs of Pisistratus, but when offered absolute power himself, he refuses to take it. Once he has completed his legislation, he leaves Athens for ten years, and he withdraws from public life rather than fight Pisistratus. While travelling, he gives advice to king Philoclypus, and most famously to Croesus (and through him to Cyrus, 28); on his return, once Pisistratus has become tyrant, he advises him as well (31). Solon thus emerges as first of all the wise counsellor, bringing to populace and ruler the light of reason and proportion; Publicola as the doer, putting this wisdom into practice. It is perhaps not hazardous to speculate that Plutarch may have seen something of himself in Solon, of Publicola in Sosius Senecio and other prominent Romans who were his readers. Having lived under Nero and Domitian, both philosopher and imperial official had had experience of tyrants.

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SOLON

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Solon

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- [1] In his *Response to Asclepiades on Solon's Tables of Law* Didymus the Grammarian* quotes the remark of a certain Philocles to the effect that Solon's father was Euphorion.* However, this contradicts the view of everyone else who has ever written about Solon, because they all without exception say that his father was Execestides, who was, according to them, a man of moderate wealth and political influence, but a member of the most distinguished family in the state, since he was descended from Codrus.* As for Solon's mother, Heraclides of Pontus records that she was the cousin of Pisistratus' mother. At first, the fact that they were related made Pisistratus and Solon very close to each other, and another factor was Pisistratus' good looks and youthful charms, because Solon was, on some accounts, in love with him. If so, this would probably explain why later, when they had become political opponents, the hostilities between them were carried out in a spirit free of brutality and ruthlessness; their earlier pacts remained in their minds and, 'smouldering with the lingering flame of Zeus' fire',* preserved the memory of their love and a sense of gratitude. That Solon was not immune to good-looking young men, and did not boldly challenge love 'like a boxer to a fist-fight',* can also be inferred from his poems. Then again, he proposed to make it illegal for a slave to give himself a rub-down in the gymnasium or to have a boy as a lover, because he thought it was a fine, honourable practice and was therefore, in a sense, encouraging men of superior quality to take up the practices he was proscribing for men of inferior quality. Pisistratus is said in turn to have been in love with Charmus, and apparently it was he who dedicated the statue of Love in the part of the Academy where the runners in the sacred torch-race light their torches.*
- [2] Now, despite the fact that his father had reduced the estate by what Hermippus describes as certain acts of humane kindness, Solon would have had no difficulty in finding people who were willing to help him out, but coming from a family which had traditionally been the benefactor of others, he was too proud to accept help and so he started out, while he was still a young man, as a trader. Some people, however, say that his travels were undertaken to increase his

experience and to acquire information, rather than for business reasons, and it is undoubtedly true that he had a passionate desire for knowledge,* since even at quite an advanced age he used to say that he 'never stopped learning—and learning a lot—as he grew old'. Moreover, he was not impressed by wealth, but in fact goes so far as to say that two people are equally well off when one

has much silver

And gold, and wide wheat-bearing fields,
And horses and mules, while the other has only enough

To keep belly, body and feet in comfort,

And to enjoy the youthful bloom of woman and boy

When they too arrive, and become agreeable in their season.

But elsewhere he says:

Money I would like to have, but not unjustly gained;

For in the end justice always comes.

There is indeed no reason why a man of integrity who is involved in state business should either value the possession of superfluous wealth or despise the use of an adequate income on necessary expenses. In those days, as Hesiod puts it, 'work was no disgrace';* it was not considered demeaning to have a profession, and trading was actually highly regarded, since it familiarized people with foreign lands and customs, gained them the friendship of kings, and provided them with extensive practical experience. Some traders even became the founders of important cities; one thinks, for example, of how Protis won the friendship of the Celts living on the banks of the Rhône and founded Massalia.* Even Thales is said to have engaged in trade, and so is Hippocrates the mathematician; and Plato is supposed to have disposed of some olive oil in Egypt to help cover the cost of his trip there.*

[3] So the extravagance and luxury of Solon's lifestyle, and the fact that in his poems he addresses the subject of pleasure more like a common man than a philosopher, are generally attributed to his life as a trader, in the sense that in return for all the considerable risks he ran he demanded a degree of comfort and indulgence. However, he classified himself as poor rather than rich, as is clear from the following lines:

While good men are often poor, many bad men are rich;
Still, I would not exchange with them
My goodness for their wealth; for goodness endures,
While different men have money at different times.

He also seems to have approached the composition of poetry lightly at first, as a minor matter and as a pleasant way of spending his spare time. Later, however, he began to put philosophical maxims into verse as well, and he wove into his poems a great deal of political material, not as a way of investigating and preserving information, but in order to justify his actions and sometimes to advise, rebuke, and scold the people of Athens. According to some writers, he also tried to promulgate his laws in the form of epic verse; they quote the following opening lines:

Let us begin with a prayer to Lord Zeus, the son of Cronus,
That he may grant these laws good fortune and acclaim.

In the sphere of ethics, he was particularly attracted to political philosophy, which was the norm for thoughtful men at the time; in the realm of physics his ideas are extremely simplistic and old-fashioned, as the following lines show:

Clouds give rise to the force of snow and hail,
And thunder comes from bright lightning.
The sea is churned up by the winds, but if no wind
Disturbs it, there is nothing more equable.

By and large, it seems that in those days Thales was the only one whose mind could speculate beyond the bounds of functional necessity, while the rest of the sages* gained their reputation for wisdom as a result of applying their skills in the political arena.

[4] There is a story that they all met together in Delphi and then again in Corinth, where it was Periander who organized a kind of communal meeting-cum-symposium for them. But their renown and reputation were even more firmly established by the circulation among them of the famous tripod, which made a complete round of them all, with each of them deferring to the next person and endeavouring to outdo the one before in courtesy. What happened—so the story goes—was that Coan fishermen were hauling in a net and some visitors from Miletus bought the catch off them sight unseen, but when the haul reached dry land it turned out to include a golden tripod

which is supposed to have been dropped there by Helen during her voyage from Troy, when she called to mind the injunction of a certain ancient oracle. At first a dispute arose between the Milesian visitors and the fishermen about who should keep the tripod, and then their respective states took up the quarrel which escalated into warfare. At that point the Pythia delivered an oracle meant for both sides which stated that the tripod should be given “to the wisest”. It was first sent to Thales in Miletus, since the Coans had no qualms about presenting him, a single individual, with the object which had been the cause of their going to war with the whole population of Miletus *en masse*. Thales, however, declared that Bias was wiser than him, and passed the tripod on to Bias—who in turn sent it on to someone else, on the grounds that *he* was wiser. And so it carried on around, one person sending it on to another, until it came back to Thales again!

Eventually it was taken from Miletus to Thebes and dedicated to Ismenian Apollo there.

Theophrastus, however, says that Bias was the first recipient of the tripod in Priene, and that he then sent it on to Thales in Miletus; on this version, then, after it had made a complete circuit of them all it came back to Bias and was eventually sent to Delphi. These are the most common versions of the story, but there are others to the effect that the gift was not this tripod but either a bowl sent by Croesus or a cup left behind by Bathycles.*

[5] Here is an account, as reported by my sources, of two private meetings and conversations Solon had, the first with Anacharsis and the second with Thales. Once, on a visit to Athens, Anacharsis went to Solon's house, knocked on the door, and said, ‘I'm not from here, but I've come to forge ties of friendship and hospitality with you.’ Solon replied that this was something better done at home, but Anacharsis said, ‘Well, you're the one at home, so why don't *you* forgive ties of friendship and hospitality with *me*?’ Impressed by the man's wit, Solon made Anacharsis welcome and had him to stay for quite a while.

Now, this was at a time when Solon was involved in state affairs and was drafting his laws, and when Anacharsis found out what Solon was up to, he mocked his belief that he could use mere decrees to curb his fellow citizens' injustice and rapacity. ‘These decrees of yours are no different from spiders' webs,’ he said. ‘They'll restrain anyone weak and insignificant who gets caught in them, but they'll be

torn to shreds by people with power and wealth.' Solon is supposed to have replied that people do in fact abide by their agreements when neither party gains by infringing them, and that he was tailoring his laws to his fellow citizens so as to prove to everyone that honesty is always better than criminality. In actual fact, though, the results justified Anacharsis' conjecture rather than Solon's expectations. Anacharsis also expressed astonishment, after a visit to the Assembly, that in Greece the proposals are made by clever people, but the decisions are made by fools.

[6] When Solon visited Thales in Miletus, the story goes that he expressed surprise at Thales' complete disinterest in marriage and parenthood. Thales said nothing at the time, but a few days later he got a visitor from abroad to say that he had just arrived from Athens where he had been ten days earlier. Solon asked what news there was of Athens, whereupon the man followed his instructions and said, 'Nothing—oh, except for the funeral procession of a certain young man, which was attended by the whole population. I was told that his father was someone distinguished, whose excellence made him the foremost man in Athens. The father wasn't there, however; they said he was abroad and had been for a long time.' 'What was the poor man's name?' asked Solon. 'I was told it,' the visitor said, 'but I've forgotten it. All I can remember is that people went on about his wisdom and justice.'

Everything the man said made Solon more and more afraid, until eventually he became so distraught that he blurted out his name to the visitor and asked whether the dead man had been called the son of Solon. 'Yes,' said the visitor. Solon began to beat his head with his hands and generally to behave and speak as people do when crushed by grief—and then Thales took him by the hand and said with a smile, 'This is what makes me steer clear of marriage and parenthood, Solon. It overwhelms even you, and there is no one stronger than you. But don't be alarmed at this tale, because it isn't true.' Anyway, that, according to Hermippus, is the story told by Pataecus—the person who claimed to have Aesop's soul.

[7] However, it is strange and churlish behaviour to be so afraid of losing things that one forgoes what one ought to have; this attitude would make one dissatisfied with having wealth, prestige, or intelligence, for fear of losing it. After all, we can see that even virtue, the most important and enjoyable possession in the world, can be displaced

by illness and medicines,* and Thales' refusal to marry could not make his life any freer of fear, unless he also avoided having friends, family, and country. Besides, he actually adopted his sister's son Cybisthus, we are told. The point is that the mind inherently possesses a faculty of affection; it is in its constitution to love, just as it is to perceive, think, and remember. When the mind takes on this faculty, it attaches itself to external objects which are completely alien to it; as if it were a house or a piece of land abandoned by its legitimate heirs, this capacity for affection is occupied and taken over by other people's children, illegitimate children—even slaves—who make it not only love them, but fret and worry about them too. As a result you can see men who rather hard-heartedly resist marriage and parenthood later racked with sorrow and making ignoble noises over the illness or death of a slave's or concubine's child. Grief affects some of them so much that they go so far as to behave in a shocking and intolerable manner at the death of a dog or a horse.* Others, by contrast, do not suffer torments or behave disgracefully even when they have lost a valued child, but continue to follow the dictates of reason for the rest of their lives.*

For it is not affection but emotional weakness which burdens men with endless troubles and anxieties if they have not been trained by reason in how to cope with fortune. Such people cannot enjoy the possession even of something they really want, because it only makes them suffer pangs of anxiety and apprehension about the future, in case they lose it. Rather than using poverty as a shield against loss of wealth, or avoiding friendship in order to guard against the loss of friends, or refusing to have children in order to protect oneself against their death, one should make reason one's defence against every eventuality. But I have gone on too long about this in the present context.

[8] After a protracted and difficult war with Megara over the island of Salamis, the exhausted Athenian population passed a law making it illegal and punishable by death for anyone ever again to propose, in writing or in speech, that the city should lay claim to Salamis.* Solon found the humiliation hard to bear, and he also noticed that a considerable proportion of the younger generation wanted to see the initial moves that would lead to war, but did not dare to make these moves themselves because of the law. He therefore pretended to have taken leave of his senses, and his family spread the word around the

city that he was insane. He secretly composed some elegiac couplets, practised them until he had learnt them by heart, and then made a sudden, unexpected appearance in the city square, wearing a felt cap on his head.* A large crowd quickly gathered—whereupon Solon mounted the herald's block and recited the elegiac poem which begins:

I have come as a herald from fair Salamis
With no speech but a composition in ordered verse.

The poem—which is called ‘Salamis’—is 100 lines long, and very elegant. Anyway, at the time in question, after he had recited it, his friends began to applaud, and Pisistratus in particular proceeded to exhort and urge the people of Athens to follow the speaker’s recommendations. And eventually they repealed the law and resumed the war, with Solon appointed as their commander.

The commonly cited version of the story of the campaign is as follows. Solon, along with Pisistratus, took the fleet to Cape Colias,* where he found all the women performing the traditional sacrificial rites to Demeter. He therefore sent a fake deserter—someone he could trust—to Salamis to tell the Megarians that they could capture all the leading women of Athens if they sailed with him to Cape Colias without delay. The Megarians fell for it and detailed a contingent of heavily-armed troops for the mission. When Solon saw the ship making its way from the island, he ordered the women to make themselves scarce and had those of his men who were still too young to have beards dress up in the women’s costumes, head-dresses and sandals. Then he sent them to play and dance by the sea-shore—armed with short swords concealed in their clothing—and to wait for the enemy troops to land, when they could seize the ship. So this plan was put into effect. The Megarians were lured on by the sight, beached their ship near by, and leapt out to get the ‘women’, competing with one another to reach them first.† The upshot was that none of them escaped; as soon as they were all dead, the Athenian fleet set out for the island and took possession of it.

[9] However, there is an alternative account of the way the island fell. According to this version, Solon first received the following oracle from the god at Delphi:

Sacrifice to the local heroes who founded the land
And win their favour. The vales of Asopia conceal them now,
Where they lie in death facing the setting sun.

So Solon sailed to the island under cover of darkness and sacrificed to the heroes Periphemus and Cychreus.* Then he chose 500 Athenian volunteers to take with him (who had been promised by official decree political control of the island, if they took it), set sail in a large number of fishing-boats, with a triacontar as an escort, and anchored off Salamis by a breakwater which projects in the town of Salamis; they armed themselves in some confusion and set out. They also dispatched a ship to reconnoitre for the enemy, but Solon captured it as soon as it came close to his position. He captured the Megarian crew and then put the best of his Athenian troops on board with instructions to sail to the town, doing all they could not to alert anyone to their presence. Meanwhile, he took the remaining Athenians and joined battle with the Megarians on land, and while they were still fighting, the Athenians on the ship reached the town and occupied it.

There is also a dramatic enactment of events which seems to corroborate this version. An Athenian ship used to sail up to the island, with the crew initially keeping quiet, but then charging into the attack yelling and screaming, while one man in full armour used to run to Cape Sciradium and fetch the men on land.† Also, near by there is a temple to Enyalius founded by Solon to commemorate his defeat of the Megarians. After his victory, he released under a truce all the Megarians who had survived the battle.

[10] Even so, the Megarians remained belligerent, and the war continued with each side giving as good as it got. Casualties and damage were heavy, and eventually they arranged for the Lacedaemonians to act as mediators and arbiters of the conflict. Now, most writers claim that Solon enlisted the support of Homer, with all his authority, in the sense that he inserted a line into the ‘Catalogue of Ships’ and then read it out during the trial:

Ajax brought twelve ships from Salamis
*And posted them where the Athenian troops were stationed.**

However, the Athenians themselves think that this story is nonsense; according to them, Solon proved to the judges that Ajax’s sons Philaeus and Euryssaces took Athenian citizenship, donated the island to the people of Athens, and settled in Attica—one of them in Brauron, the other in Melite. (In fact, there is a village in Attica called Philiadae after Philiades; this is the village where Pisistratus was born.)

The Athenians add that in order to make his refutation of the Megarians even more convincing, Solon used the dead heroes buried there to build a strong case, pointing out that they had not been buried in the Megarian fashion—that is, facing east—but in the Athenian fashion, facing west. But Herreas of Megara counters this with the claim that the Megarians too position their corpses facing west and, even more importantly, that the Athenians give their dead individual graves, whereas it is the Megarians who use a single grave for up to three or four corpses.* Be that as it may, the Athenians also say that Solon had the support of a number of oracles from Delphi, in which the god described Salamis as ‘Ionian’. The judges of this case were five Spartiates—Critolaidas, Amonpharetus, Hypsichidas, Anaxilas, and Cleomenes.*

[11] By now, and especially because of all this, Solon had become a well-known and important public figure. But his celebrity and fame rose throughout Greece with the speech he made on the temple at Delphi, to the effect that the Greeks should not stand idle while the Cirrhaeans violated the oracle, but should come to its assistance and help the people of Delphi defend the god.* In fact it was because they were won over by his arguments that the member-states of the Amphictyonic League went to war. Aristotle is far from being the only person to vouch for this when in the course of his list of victors at the Pythian Games he credits Solon with the plan. However, Solon was not given a military command for this war (according to Hermippus, citing Euanthes of Samos), and in fact Aeschines the orator does not mention him in this context, and the records at Delphi have Alcmaeon, not Solon, down as the Athenian commander.*

[12] The pollution originating with the famous Cylonian affair had been a source of turmoil to Athens for a long time, ever since Megacles, who was an archon at the time, persuaded Cylon and his gang to come down from Athena’s temple, where they had sought sanctuary, and stand trial. They tied a length of spun wool to the goddess’s statue and held on to it, but on their way down, when they reached the shrine of the August Goddesses, the thread broke of its own accord, whereupon Megacles and his fellow archons leapt in to arrest them, because Athena, as the archons saw it, was refusing to give them sanctuary. Megacles and the others stoned to death those who were caught in the open and murdered those who had taken refuge at some altar or other; the only ones they spared were those who had

sought sanctuary with the archons’ own wives.* As a result of this the archons were called ‘the Accursed’, and they became unpopular, while the survivors from Cylon’s party regained their position of strength. There followed a period of constant political feuding between them and Megacles’ party. At the time in question the dispute had reached a particular peak, with the general population of Athens taking sides, but Solon, who by then was held in high regard, joined forces with the most distinguished men in Athens and acted as intermediary between the two sides. His appeals and arguments had the effect of persuading the Accursed to submit to a trial and to allow themselves to be judged, provided that the jury of 300 was selected from the top of the social scale. Myron of Phlya brought the prosecution and the defendants were found guilty.* Those of the Accursed who were living were banished, and the corpses of those who had died were dug up and cast out beyond the borders of Attica.

As if all this were not turmoil enough, the Megarians attacked at the same time, and as a result the Athenians lost Nisaea and were driven once again off Salamis.* Also, the city was overrun by superstitious fears and apparitions, and the word from the diviners was that their sacrifices pointed to the existence of acts of evil, causing pollution which required purification.

Under these circumstances they sent to Crete for Epimenides of Phaeustus, who duly arrived. Some of those who do not count Periander as one of the Seven Sages include Epimenides instead. He was held to be a favourite of the gods and to have an inspired and mystical insight into matters pertaining to the gods; accordingly, his contemporaries called him the son of a nymph named Biaske, and a ‘New Coures’.* During his time in Athens he befriended Solon and helped him a great deal, in the sense that he paved the way for his legislation.* What he did was organize the way people went about their religious observances and get them to express grief in a less frenzied manner by the immediate introduction of certain sacrificial rites into their funerary practices, and by abolishing the savage, barbaric customs which had usually been followed by female mourners up to that time.

The most important thing he did, however, was institute certain propitiatory and purificatory rituals, and found places of worship, because this enabled him to make Athens a reverent and religious city, observant of justice and more inclined to heed the call of unity. It is

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also said that when he saw Munychia, he studied it for a long time and then remarked to those who were with him, 'How blind man is to the future! If the Athenians could look ahead and see how much suffering this place is going to cause them, they would chew it up with their very own teeth'*

Another person who is supposed to have made a similar conjecture about the future is Thales. The story goes that he gave instructions to the effect that after his death he was to be buried in an insignificant and obscure part of Miletus, with the prediction that this spot would one day be the Milesians' city square. Anyway, Epimenides made a huge impression on the Athenians, but refused their offer of large sums of money and of important privileges; he wanted nothing more than a sprig from the sacred olive tree,* and once he had been given it, he returned home.

[13] When the turmoil surrounding the Cylonian affair had died down, and after the banishment of the Accursed, which I have already described, Athens returned to a long-standing political dispute, with people forming as many different political parties as there were different kinds of terrain in the country. There were the Men of the Hills, who were the most democratic party, the Men of the Plain, who were the most oligarchic, and thirdly the Men of the Coast, who favoured an intermediate, mixed kind of system and who opposed the other two parties and made it hard for them to gain power.*

Moreover, at that time the disparity between rich and poor had, as it were, reached a peak. The city was in an extremely precarious state, and it looked as though the only way it could settle down and put an end to all the turmoil was by the establishment of a tyranny.* All the common people were in debt to the wealthy members of society, because either they paid them a sixth of the produce they gained from working the land (which earned them the name of sixth-parters or hired hands*), or else they put up their own persons as collateral for their debts and were forfeit to their creditors, in which case they might become slaves right there in Attica or be sold into slavery abroad. The creditors were so ruthless that people were often forced to sell even their own children—there was no law prohibiting this—or to go into exile. However, a great many of them (the most resolute of them, in fact) banded together and began to urge one another to do something about the situation—to choose a reliable man as a champion for their cause and then to remove the debtors from the grasp of their

[14] creditors, redistribute the land, and form an entirely new system of government.

[14] At this point the most sensible Athenians began to look to Solon. They could see that he was possibly unique in keeping his distance from all the problems—that he had no part in the wrongdoing of the rich, and was not caught up in the afflictions of the poor either. So they asked him to become involved in public life and to resolve their disputes. However, Phanias of Lesbos writes that Solon's desire to save the city led him to deal in an underhand fashion with both parties, without his involvement being solicited; he reports that he secretly promised those who were badly off that he would redistribute the land, while at the same time promising the plutocrats that he would reaffirm their existing contracts. Solon himself, however, says that his engagement in politics was hesitant at first, because he was worried about the consequences of one side's greed and the other side's presumption.

In any case, he was elected archon, following Philombrotus' term of office, with the power to resolve disputes and make laws.* The rich found him acceptable because of his wealth, and the poor because of his integrity. Besides, we hear that there was a remark of his, made before the election, going around the city, to the effect that equality does not cause war, which pleased both the well-to-do and the disadvantaged—the former because they expected the forthcoming equality to be based on merit and calibre, the latter because they assumed it would be assessed arithmetically and numerically.

Both sides, then, had high hopes, and their leaders kept on at Solon, constantly recommending tyranny to him and arguing that he could seize control of the city with all the more confidence now that he was in a position of authority. Even many Athenians who did not belong to either of the political extremes saw that it would be a hard and laborious task to effect change by means of reasoned argument and legal measures, and so did not dislike the idea of having a single person in charge, given that he was a man of such honesty and intelligence. And on some accounts Solon also received the following oracle from Python:

Take your place amidships, accept the pilot's job,
And steer the ship; you will find many allies in Athens.

His friends and supporters remonstrated with him particularly vehemently for turning his back on absolute power merely because it

had a bad name, as if the calibre of the person with the power would not immediately make it become lawful sovereignty, or as if there were not precedents for this in the case of Tymondas in Euboea, and just recently in the fact that the people of Mytilene had made Pittacus tyrant over them.*

However, none of this deflected Solon from his purpose. To his friends he is supposed to have said that while tyranny may be a delightful spot, there is no way back from it; and to Phocus, in his poems, he wrote:

And did I spare the land of my birth?
Did I refrain from tyranny and brutality,
Preferring to keep my name unblemished by disgrace?
There is no shame for me in this. In fact, I think
It will set me above all other men.

All this makes it clear that he was held in very high regard even before his legislation. However, his refusal of the tyranny earned him a great deal of scorn, which he wrote about as follows:

‘A man of shallow intellect was Solon, of no good sense;
He spurned the bounty offered by the gods. The fool:
His net was fat and full of fish—he did not pull it in!
He lacked the courage, and sanity as well.
Else, if he had taken power, accepted boundless wealth,
And ruled as tyrant over Athens for just one day,
He’d gladly then have been flayed into a wineskin
And let his family be wiped off the face of the earth.’

[15] This is what, in his poem, he has the base majority say about him. However, his rejection of tyranny did not mean that his handling of affairs was particularly gentle, or that he meekly deferred to influential people or enacted the kind of legislation he thought would please those who had elected him. But where the present situation seemed acceptable, he did not apply remedies or open new wounds, because he was afraid that ‘If he made a complete mess and muddle of the state, it would be beyond his abilities to restore order’, and arrange things for the best. The guiding principle of his actions was, as he himself says, ‘to harmonize force and justice’; that is, he acted where he expected to find people receptive to his proposals and submissive to the application of pressure. And that is why, when he was subsequently asked whether the laws he had introduced were the best

possible ones for the Athenians, he replied, ‘They were the best they would accept.’

Now, recent writers have pointed out that the Athenians had the sick habit of glossing over the distasteful aspects of their affairs by using inoffensive and charitable terms to disguise them. For instance, they used to call prostitutes ‘escorts’, taxes ‘contributions’, garrisons in cities ‘protectors’, and prison ‘quarters’. However, it looks as though this trick originated with Solon’s description of the cancellation of debts as an ‘alleviation’—the first of his measures being the enactment of a law whereby all existing debts were rescinded, and whereby in the future it would be illegal for any lender to require the borrower’s own person as collateral.* Some writers, though, including Androton,* have claimed that the measure taken for the relief of the poor was a moderation of the rate of interest, not a cancellation of debts—a charitable act which pleased them so much that they called it an ‘alleviation’, a term which also covered the upward rescaling of the weights and measures and of the value of the currency. This was part of the same piece of legislation, according to Androton and the others, because whereas a mina had previously been valued at 73 drachmas, Solon made it 100 drachmas, the upshot of which was that although the amount they paid was the same on paper, it was worth less, which benefited the debtors a great deal, without harming the creditors in the slightest.* However, most writers agree that the ‘alleviation’ was the abolishment of all due debts, and that makes better sense of what Solon wrote in his poems, because he prides himself there on having ‘removed’ from the mortgaged land

The frequent markers planted here and there;
A land enslaved once now is free.*

As for those of his fellow citizens whose persons had become forfeit through debt, he either brought them back from abroad

With Attic Greek no longer on their tongues,
Forgotten in their wide and long wanderings;
While the others, held in sorry servitude here,
In their native land,

he claims to have freed.

This business is said to have got him into more trouble than anything else in his life. What happened was that once he had resolved

to do away with the debts, he reached the stage of casting around for suitable arguments and for a good opportunity to introduce the measure, and he divulged to his most trusted and intimate friends—Conon, Cleinias, Hippocnus, and their circle—that he was going to leave the land as it was, but had decided to cancel the debts. These friends of his immediately pre-empted the legislation and stole a march by borrowing large sums of money from wealthy people and combining to purchase huge tracts of land. Then, after the decree had become law, they reaped the profits from these estates, while refusing to repay their debts. These actions of theirs earned Solon a great deal of hostile criticism, on the serious charge that he had not so much been one of the victims of the crime as party to it. However, he lost no time in repudiating this charge by means of the famous five talents—or fifteen talents, according to some, including Polyzelus of Rhodes—which was the amount of money it emerged that he had lent, and he was the first to obey the new law and write off what was owed to him. But for the rest of their lives those friends of his were known as ‘the debt-cheats’.*

[16] This measure of his did not meet with the approval of either party. His cancellation of the debts annoyed the rich, and the poor were even more aggrieved at his failure to redistribute the land as they had expected, and because he had not completely removed the disparities and inequalities between men’s lives and incomes, as Lycurgus had done.* Lycurgus, however, was eleventh in descent from Heracles, and had been on the throne of Lacedaemon for a number of years; he was therefore well equipped with prestige, supporters, and power to help see his constitutional reforms through, and in any case—and this actually cost him an eye—he relied on force rather than persuasion to achieve the goal of enormously enhancing the stability and unity of the state by arranging things so that no citizen was either rich or poor. This kind of equality was not the outcome of Solon’s policies: he was an ordinary citizen, with moderate resources. Nevertheless, considering that he was acting solely on the basis of his fellow citizens’ acceptance of his proposals as sound and trustworthy, he made full use of the power available to him.

We have his own words on the fact that he offended most of the people of Athens by failing to fulfil their expectations. He says:

Once their minds were filled with vain hopes, but now
In anger all look askance at me, as if I were their foe.*

But in fact, he says, anyone else with that much power

Would not have curbed the people or stopped
Until he had extracted the butter from the churned milk.

Before long, however, they saw the advantages of his reforms, laid aside their purely personal complaints, and established a public sacrificial ritual, which they called the ‘Alleviation’. They also gave Solon the power to reform the constitution and institute legislation, and not in a piecemeal fashion either: they entrusted everything to him without hesitation—offices, assemblies, lawcourts, and councils. In every case it was up to him to decide what property qualification would be required, how many of each of them there should be, and when the appointments and meetings should be held. He could discontinue or preserve elements of the existing system as he saw fit.

[17] The first thing he did was repeal all of Draco’s laws, except the ones on homicide, on the grounds that they were too harsh and prescribed penalties that were too severe. For a single penalty—the death penalty—had been fixed for almost all crimes, which meant that even people convicted of not working were to be put to death, and that the theft of vegetables or fruit carried the same penalty as temple-robery and homicide.* This explains why Demades later became famous for commenting that Draco had written his laws in blood rather than ink. The story goes that Draco himself was once asked why he had made most crimes carry the death penalty; he replied that petty crimes deserved it, in his opinion, and he could not find a heavier penalty to impose on serious crimes.

[18] The second thing Solon did was assess the property qualifications of the Athenian citizens, because he wanted to leave all the political offices in the hands of the well-to-do, as before, but to diversify the rest of the political apparatus, from which the common people had previously been excluded. In his system, the top class consisted of those whose annual income was at least 500 units of dry and wet goods together, who were known as the ‘Men of 500 Medimni’. The second class consisted of those who could afford to keep a horse or whose income was 300 units, who were known as the ‘Payers of the Knight’s Tax’. The third property qualification was fixed at an income of 200 units of dry and wet goods, and its members were called the ‘Men with a Team of Oxen’. The rest of the population were called ‘Hired Hands’; they were excluded from holding office, and were

involved in the political apparatus only to the extent that they could attend the Assembly and act as jurors.* The fact that they could act as jurors was at first taken to be unimportant, but it later turned out to be absolutely critical, since most disputes fell within their jurisdiction, because Solon granted the right of appeal to a popular court even in cases which were to be tried, in his system, by office-holders. It is also said that the reason why his laws were phrased somewhat obscurely and ambiguously was to increase the power of the courts, in the sense that since people could not resolve their differences simply by reference to the law, in the end they turned to the juries of the courts for help and brought every dispute before them, so that they were in a way the masters of the laws.* He congratulates himself on this in the following lines:

For I granted the people an adequate amount of power
And sufficient prestige—not more nor less.
But I found a way also to maintain the status
Of the old wielders of power with their fantastic riches.
I stood protecting rich and poor with my stout shield,
And saw that neither side prevailed unjustly.

Nevertheless, he felt he should make still further provisions for the weakness of the common people, so he gave every citizen the right to institute a lawsuit on behalf of someone who had suffered wrong. So if someone had been the victim of an assault, for instance, and had been beaten up or injured, it was possible for anyone who had the resources and the will to bring a lawsuit against the offender and prosecute him.* This was a sound move on the part of the legislator: he was conditioning the people of Athens to regard themselves as so many parts of a single body, and so to share one another's feelings and suffering. There is a saying of Solon's that has come down to us which is consistent with this piece of legislation: apparently he was once asked which was the best city to live in, and he replied, 'The one where there is no difference between the victims of a crime and anyone else in terms of how vigorously they charge and punish the criminal.'

[19] After he had constituted the Council of the Areopagus out of each year's former archons (he himself being, as an ex-archon, one of the members), he noticed that the common people were still full of themselves and that the cancellation of their debts had made them more assertive, so he instituted another Council as well, consisting of

100 men selected from each of the four tribes. He gave this second Council the job of debating issues before they reached the people, and of ensuring that the Assembly was not presented with any motions that had not previously been through this process of deliberation, and at the same time established the upper Council as a general overseer of the state and guardian of the constitution. His thinking was that if the state was moored, so to speak, with two anchors—the two Councils—it would be better equipped to ride out any swell and to contain the restlessness of the general population.*

Most writers report that the Council of the Areopagus was constituted by Solon, as I have said, and this view seems to be strongly supported by the fact that Draco nowhere mentions the Areopagites by name, but always refers to the *ephetae** in cases of homicide. However, Solon's thirteenth table contains the eighth of his laws, phrased exactly as follows:

Of the disenfranchised all those who were disenfranchised prior to the archonship of Solon are to regain their rights except those who were convicted by the Areopagus, the Ephetae, or the city hall (that is, the king-archons) of homicide, murder or tyrannical ambition and were already in exile when this law was published.

So this proves that, on the contrary, the Council of the Areopagus existed before Solon's archonship and legislation. After all, if Solon had been the first to give the Council of the Areopagus its judicial powers, how could anyone have been convicted of anything in the Areopagus before Solon's time? Of course, the wording of the law may possibly be ambiguous or incomplete, so that what it really means is that those found guilty on charges which are *currently* tried by the Areopagites, the Ephetae, and the officers of the city hall are to remain disenfranchised, while all the others are to regain their rights and franchises. But the reader must make up his own mind about this.

[20] One of his other laws is extremely idiosyncratic and odd. It ordains that anyone who takes neither side in a political dispute is to be disenfranchised.* Presumably he means that no one should be so indifferent and insensitive to the common good that he just sees to the safety of his own private affairs and congratulates himself on his distance from the pain and suffering afflicting his country, rather than immediately joining whichever side is acting with a higher degree of integrity and justice—that he should offer them his support and

co-operation in the dangers they face, rather than waiting safely on the sidelines to see which side gains the upper hand.

Another strange, even ridiculous law of his is the one stating that if the husband of an heiress (who under the law has control and authority over her) is impotent, she has the right to have sex with close relatives of his.* There are, however, people who claim that this was a good move to make, to prevent an impotent man from marrying an heiress for her money and using the protection of the law to abuse her, because when the heiress's promiscuity comes to his attention, he will be faced with the choice of either divorcing her or persisting in a marriage that only brings him shame, as a punishment for his avarice and abuse. It is also a good idea to restrict the heiress's choice of partner to her husband's relatives, so that any child that is born belongs to the same family and lineage. This is also helped by the stipulation that the woman is shut away in a room with her new husband after eating a quince,* and that he is to have sex with her three times a month without fail. The point is that, leaving aside the issue of procreation, the husband is thereby indicating that he respects his wife for her self-restraint, and feels fond of her, which always removes a great deal of any accumulated resentment and stops any quarrels becoming a cause of complete estrangement.*

Where other marriages were concerned, Solon abolished dowries and stipulated that a bride was to bring with her at the most three items of clothing and some inexpensive household items, but nothing else. He did this because he wanted to take the mercenary and commercial aspect out of marriage and make child-bearing, mutual gratitude and affection the point of a husband and wife living together. After all, when Dionysius' mother wanted to become the wife of one of his subjects, he remarked that although he had broken the laws of the state by becoming tyrant, he could not abuse the laws of nature by arranging marriages which the prospective partners' ages made out of the question.* Indeed, states should not connive at this aberration or allow inappropriate and unloving unions to take place when there is nothing about them remotely connected to the function or purpose of marriage. No, any true archon or legislator who found an old man marrying a young woman would quote the words spoken to Philoctetes: 'You poor devil! What a fine state you're in for marriage!*' And if he discovered in the rooms of a rich old woman a young man growing partridge-plump in her company, he would

remove him from there and give him instead to a young unmarried woman who needed a husband. But that is enough about this.

[21] Another law of Solon's which has met with approval is the one making it illegal to slander a dead person. This is a good idea because piety requires us to regard the dead as sacred, decency requires us to refrain from attacking people in their absence, and political expediency requires us not to let a conflict go on for ever. He also made it an offence to slander a living person in or near temples, lawcourts, and government offices, and during publicly attended games and competitions—an offence punishable by a fine of three drachmas to the individual involved and two more drachmas to the state treasury. For there are certain places where it is uncouth and undisciplined to fail to keep one's temper, but it is also hard (and for some people impossible) to succeed in doing so everywhere; at the same time, a legislator has to take feasibility into consideration when framing his laws, otherwise he will end up punishing large numbers of people ineffectively, rather than achieving his goal of punishing a few people effectively.

He also became famous for his legislation on wills. It had not previously been possible to make a will: a person's money and land had to stay within his family. Solon, however, left it up to a man to dispose of his estate as he wished, provided that he had no children; in other words, he valued friendship over kinship and gratitude over duty, and made money the property of those who had it. At the same time, however, he did not allow bequests to be made without some limits and qualifications: the person making the bequest had to be free of the influence of illness, drugs, imprisonment, coercion, or the persuasive powers of a woman.* He included the latter stipulation because he thought—and the idea is perfectly correct and unassailable—that persuading someone to go against his best interests is no different from forcing him to do so; in fact, he held that trickery and coercion, and pleasure and pain, belong in the same category in the sense that they are all equally capable of undermining a person's powers of reason.

Other laws of his imposed certain conditions of neatness and orderliness on women when they were outdoors, and also on the way mourners expressed their grief and on the conduct of festivals. When a woman was outdoors, she was not to wear more than three items of clothing, nor to carry more than an obol's worth of food or drink,

or a basket more than a cubit in length, nor was she to travel at night except on a cart with a lamp on the front. He banned mourners from lacerating themselves and using set dirges, and outsiders from lamenting at others' funerals. He made it illegal to sacrifice a cow, to lay out more than three sets of clothing for the corpse, and to visit the tombs of people outside one's own family except during the actual funeral procession. Most of these practices are also banned under our laws, but ours also state that offenders are to be punished by the Superintendents of Women,* on the grounds that they are indulging in unmanly and effeminate feelings and faults.

[22] People were constantly pouring into Attica from everywhere else because it was a safe place to live, and the city was becoming crowded, while at the same time the land was largely infertile and poor, and seafarers were not in the habit of importing goods for those who had nothing to give them in return. His awareness of all these factors prompted Solon to encourage his fellow citizens to take up manufacturing, and he made a law to the effect that a son who had not been taught one of the manufacturing arts by his father was under no obligation to support him. Now, Lycurgus lived in a city which was unpeopled by hordes of foreigners, and had land which, as Euripides puts it, 'was spacious enough for many, and was even more spacious for twice the number',* and most importantly had masses of helots spread out all over Lacedaemon, whom it was in the national interest not to leave with nothing to do, but to grind down with toil and labour; so it was all very well for *him* to release his low citizens from laborious manual pursuits so that they could concentrate on the arts of war and master and practise just this one area of expertise.* Solon, however, was adapting his laws to the situation rather than the situation to his laws; he could see that the land could barely supply the needs of those who worked it and was incapable of feeding a mass of idle, unemployed people, so he covered artisanship in a cloak of respectability and got the Council of the Areopagus to look into how every single person made a living and to punish those who were unemployed.

An even stricter regulation of his was the one exempting sons born out of wedlock from supporting their fathers, which Heracles of Pontus records. The thinking behind this was that anyone who disregards the honourable state of marriage is plainly looking only for a woman to give him pleasure, not to give him children; so now he is

paid back in full, and he has no comeback against his children, because he has made their very birth a source of shame.

[23] By and large it is Solon's laws about women that seem the most strange. In his code, for instance, although an adulterer caught in the act could be killed, the crime of raping a free woman was punishable by a fine of 100 drachmas, and the seduction of a free woman by a fine of twenty drachmas. He excluded from this provision those who openly sell their bodies, or in other words prostitutes, since they do not disguise the fact that they have sex with anyone who pays their price. He also made it illegal for anyone to offer his daughters or sisters for sale, unless that person found that one of them, though unmarried, had slept with a man. But it makes no sense to punish one and the same offence with ruthless severity in some circumstances, and then with lenient mildness in others, fixing the penalty as some slight fine or other; perhaps there was a shortage of money in circulation in the city at the time, in which case the difficulty of raising it would have made these monetary penalties severe.

At any rate, when it came to estimating the value of sacrificial offerings, he reckoned a sheep and a medimnus of wheat to be worth a drachma, and he set the reward for victory in the Isthmian Games at 100 drachmas, for victory in the Olympic Games at 500 drachmas, and for bringing in a wolf five drachmas, or one drachma for a wolf cub, which were respectively, according to Demetrius of Phalerum, the value of an ox and a sheep.* Although the prices he fixes in his sixteenth table are presumably considerably higher than usual, since they are for choice sacrificial victims, they are still low compared to today's prices. The Athenians have been battling wolves ever since ancient times, because their land is better for livestock farming than for arable farming. And there are people who claim that the names of the Athenian tribes are not derived from Ion's sons, but from the various ways of making a living originally followed there. So people were called Hopletes if they were members of the warrior class, Argadians if they were artisans, and, of the remaining two classes, the arable farmers were called Geleontes, while those who spent their time grazing and farming sheep and goats were called Aegicorians.*

Water is a scarce commodity in Attica, with its lack of constant rivers, any lakes, or prolific springs; instead most of the population used to rely on artificial wells. Solon therefore made a law to the effect that people were to make use of any public wells that were a *hippikon*

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or less away from their land—a *hippikon* being a unit of distance measuring four stades*—but that where the distance was greater, people should try to find their own water; however, if they had not struck water on their land after digging to a depth of ten fathoms, they could then get it from a neighbour, by filling a six-choes jar twice a day.* The idea behind this rule was to help the needy while at the same time not encouraging idleness.

He showed a great deal of expert knowledge in prescribing the distances to be followed when planting trees as well. He stated that no one was to plant a tree in a field within five feet of his neighbour's land, or nine feet in the case of fig trees and olive trees, whose roots extend further, and which damage some plants by their proximity, in the sense that they might even deny them nourishment, and they emit a secretion which can be harmful. He also fixed the minimum gap between a pit or a ditch and someone else's land as equal to the depth of excavation, and a bee-hive was to be set at least 300 feet away from the site of hives previously established by someone else.

[24] The only natural product he allowed to be disposed of abroad was olive oil; the export of everything else was banned. He decreed that the archon was to curse anyone who tried to export any forbidden product, or otherwise to pay into the public treasury himself a fine of 100 drachmas. Now, this law is actually inscribed on the first of his tables, so there are grounds for not finding entirely untrustworthy the tradition that in the old days the export of figs was forbidden and that a person who exposed and informed on exporters of figs was known as a 'fig-informer'.*

He also passed a law about injuries caused by animals, which included the provision that a dog which had the habit of biting was to have a clog three cubits long tied on to it—a nice safety-measure. Another puzzling law of his is the one about naturalized citizens. The only classes of people he allowed to become citizens were those who had been permanently banished from their own country or who had moved their whole household to Athens in order to practise a profession. It is said that his reason for making this law was not so much to drive other categories of people away as to invite these ones to Athens with a guaranteed prospect of citizenship, and that he also thought that people who had been expelled from their own countries against their wills and those who had deliberately decided to leave were the kinds of people whose loyalty one could rely on.*

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Solon

[25]

Another typical piece of legislation by Solon governed the privilege of being fed at the publicly funded table, which he called 'table-sharing'.* He made it illegal for a single person to be fed there over and over again, because he thought this showed greed, and at the same time he made refusal to take up one's right to do so a punishable offence, because he thought this showed contempt for the state.

[25] He decreed that all his laws were to remain in force for 100 years.* They were inscribed on revolving wooden tables enclosed in frames; fragments of these tables have survived right up to modern times in the City Hall. According to Aristotle, they were called 'tablets', and the comic poet Cratinus says somewhere:

I swear it by Solon and Draco, whose tablets
Nowadays are used to cook barley.

However, some people say that the word 'tablets' applies properly only to the means of displaying the legislation concerning religious rituals and sacrifices, while all the rest were called 'tables'.* In any case, the Council collectively took an oath that they would uphold Solon's laws, and each member of the legislative committee swore a separate oath at the stone in the city square in which he declared that if he failed to abide by any of the laws he would set up as a dedicatory offering at Delphi a life-sized golden statue. *

He was aware of the irregularity of the month—that is, that the movement of the moon is not quite synchronized with the setting or the rising of the sun, but that the moon often catches up with and passes the sun in the course of a single day. He therefore decreed that when this happened the day was to be called the Day of the Old and the New, on the grounds that the portion of it which occurs before the conjunction between the sun and moon belongs to the month that is coming to an end, while the remainder of it belongs to the month that is now beginning (which apparently makes him the first to have understood Homer's words 'While the one month was waning, the other was drawing in'), and it was the next day that was the first day of the month. From the twentieth to the thirtieth he did not count the days forwards but backwards, in reverse order, following the visible behaviour of the moon. *

Once his laws were in force, not a day passed without several people coming up to him to express approval or disapproval, or to recommend the insertion of some point or other into the statutes,

or the removal of something from them. Moreover, a great many people had queries about the legislation; they would question him about it and ask him to explain in detail the meaning and purpose of every single point, and it was clear to him that it would be odd not to answer these questions and invidious to do so. He wanted to extricate himself completely from this predicament and to avoid his fellow citizens' peevish quibbling (as he himself says, 'On important issues, it's hard to please everyone'), so he claimed that as a ship-owner he had business to attend to and used this as an excuse to set off on his travels.* He sought and was granted permission by the Athenians to live abroad for ten years, by which time he expected them to have become used even to his laws.

[26] The first place he visited was Egypt, where he stayed, in his own words, 'by that mouth of the Nile which adjoins the Canobic shore'. He also spent some time studying philosophy as a member of the groups surrounding Psenopis of Heliopolis and Sonchis of Sais, who were the most learned of the Egyptian priests. It was from them, as Plato says, that he heard the story of Atlantis, which he tried to introduce to Greece in the form of a poem.*

He sailed next to Cyprus, where he made great friends with one of the kings, Philocyprus. Now, Philocypus' domain consisted of a smallish town (founded by Demophon the son of Theseus), which was situated on the banks of the River Clarius, in territory that was easy to defend, but too rugged and infertile to have anything else to recommend it. So Solon persuaded him to move down to the beautiful plain below and to build there a larger and more attractive town. Moreover, since he was there, he took charge of the resettlement and arranged things so that the new town was not only an excellent place to live, but also very secure. As a result, settlers applied to Philocypus in large numbers, and all the other local kings looked up to him. And that is why Philocypus paid Solon the honour of renaming the town Soli after him, whereas it had previously been called Aepeia.*

Solon mentions the foundation of this town himself in the elegiac poem in which he addresses Philocypus as follows:

For you, I pray that you may long dwell here as lord
Of this town of Soli, and your descendants after you;
As for me, may violet-crowned Cypris keep me unharmed
On my journey from this famous isle in my swift ship,
And, with this town here founded, may she grant me favour,
Fame, and a safe journey home to my fatherland.

[27] Some people think they can prove, on chronological grounds, that the famous meeting between Solon and Croesus is a fiction.* However, when a story is so famous and well attested and, more importantly, so much in keeping with Solon's character and worthy of his self-assurance, I for one do not feel inclined to reject it on the basis of some so-called chronological tables, which have so far proved incapable of making the slightest progress towards resolving all the inconsistencies, despite the revisions undertaken by countless writers. In any case, the story goes that Solon went to Sardis at Croesus' invitation and behaved much like a landlubber on his way down to the sea for the first time, who imagines that every successive river he sees is the sea. As he walked through the courtyard he saw plenty of courtiers swaggering around in their expensive robes, surrounded by retainers and personal guards, and he took each of them to be Croesus, until he was brought into the presence of the man himself, whose outfit lacked nothing that men regard as remarkable or extraordinary or desirable in the way of precious stones, dyed clothing, and wrought gold jewellery—nothing that might help him present a thoroughly impressive and gorgeous spectacle. Contrary to Croesus' expectations, however, Solon stood there opposite him unmoved by the spectacle and without passing any comment on it; in fact, anyone with any sense could see that he actually despised the vulgarity and tawdriness of it all. So Croesus gave his men instructions to open up for Solon the treasure-chambers where he stored his money and to take him on a tour to show him how magnificently appointed everything was—an unnecessary tour, since his very person was sufficient evidence of his character.

Anyway, after Solon had seen everything and been brought back into his presence, Croesus asked whether there was anyone on earth, to his knowledge, who was happier than him. Solon replied that he did know of someone—Tellus, an Athenian like himself. He explained that Tellus had been a man of integrity, with distinguished sons to succeed him, who had lacked for none of life's essentials while he was alive and had died a glorious death winning the prize for valour in defence of his homeland. This reply showed Solon, to Croesus' mind, to be eccentric and naive, since he did not take abundant silver and gold to be the measure of happiness, but preferred the life and death of an ordinary private citizen to his own vast power and dominion. Nevertheless, he put the same question to him again and asked whether, apart from Tellus, he knew of anyone else who was

happier than him. Solon again said that he did, and this time he named Cleobis and Biton, brothers whose devotion to each other and to their mother was unrivalled; once, he explained, when their mother's oxen were delayed, they harnessed themselves to the yoke of her cart and took her to the temple of Hera. Her fellow citizens called her a happy woman, and she was glad. Later, after her sons had performed their sacrifices and drunk their wine, they went to sleep and never got up in the morning, but were found to have capped their great glory with an easy, painless death.*

By now Croesus had lost his temper, and he cried, 'Do I come nowhere in your list of happy men?' Now, Solon refused to flatter Croesus, but he also did not want to make him any more angry than he already was, so he said, 'My lord, we Greeks have basically been only moderately endowed by the gods, and this limitation explains why our understanding is apparently so cautious and ordinary, rather than being splendid and fit for a king. Because this average intelligence of ours sees that life is constantly liable to vicissitudes of all kinds, it stops us getting overexcited when things are going well for us, or being impressed by a person's good fortune when there is still time for things to change. The future that bears down on each of us is variable and determined by unknowable factors, and so we consider a man happy only when the gods have granted him success right up to the end of his life. However, to count anyone happy while he is still alive and still faced with all the uncertainties of life is as unsound and invalid as proclaiming an athlete the winner and crowning him while the contest is still in progress.' With these words Solon left the room, leaving Croesus in some distress, but without having shown him the error of his ways.

[28] Now, the storyteller Aesop (who happened to be in Sardis as an honoured guest of Croesus) was annoyed that Solon was never treated with any kindness and offered him some advice. 'Solon,' he said, 'there are only two ways to deal with a king—with the utmost brevity or the utmost flattery.' 'No, no,' Solon replied. 'With the utmost brevity or the utmost honesty.*'

At that time, then, Croesus had a low opinion of Solon, but later, after defeat by Cyrus and the loss of his city, when he had been taken prisoner and was due to be burnt alive, and he had climbed in chains, with all the Persians watching and in Cyrus' presence, up on to the pyre, he called out Solon's name three times at the top of his voice.

Cyrus was puzzled and he sent men to ask who in heaven or on earth this Solon was, and why he was the only one Croesus called on in his desperate situation. Croesus' reply was frank: 'He was one of the sages of Greece,' he said. 'He was a guest of mine, but not because I had any desire to hear what he had to say or to learn what I needed to know. No, I wanted him to observe, and then to testify after he left to my happiness—a happiness where the advantage of possession is, as I now see, outweighed by the disadvantage of loss. For the only

advantage to having it lay in what others would say and think of me, whereas the torment and unbearable hardship brought on by its loss are real. So inferring what the future held for me from the way things were then he told me to look to the end of life and not to puff myself up with insolent pride on the basis of precarious fancies.'

Now, Cyrus was blessed with more intelligence than Croesus, so when his men told him what Croesus had said, the present instance showed him the force of Solon's argument. He therefore not only released Croesus, but treated him with honour for the rest of his life; and Solon gained the reputation of having with a single saying saved one king and educated another.*

[29] While Solon was abroad, the citizens of Athens resumed their political feuding. The Men of the Plain were championed by Lycurgus, the Men of the Coast by Megacles the son of Alcmaeon, and the Men of the Hills (who included the common rabble of hired hands, with their bitter enmity towards the rich) by Pisistratus.* The upshot of the feuding was that although the city was still governed constitutionally, everyone was anticipating an imminent revolution and looking forward to a new system of government, not because they expected a state of equality, but because they hoped to gain the upper hand during the upheaval and to trounce their adversaries.

This was the situation facing Solon on his return to Athens. How-

ever,

although he was universally admired and respected, he was now too old to have either the energy or the inclination to speak in public and take part in politics. But he held private meetings with the leaders of the parties, in which he tried to get them to reconcile and resolve their differences, and Pisistratus seemed particularly receptive to the attempt. There was, after all, something subtly charming about the way he spoke; he was quick to come to the help of the poor, and he approached his political conflicts in a reasonable fashion and with moderation. He was so good at simulating faculties with which

he was not naturally endowed that he was credited with them more than those who really did have them, and was therefore taken to be a cautious, restrained man, a staunch democrat, and an enemy of anyone with subversive and revolutionary designs. He deceived most people in these respects, but Solon soon grasped what he was really like and was the first to recognize his schemes for what they were. This did not make him dislike him, however; instead he tried to calm him down and show him the error of his ways. In fact he told him, and others too, that all it would take to bring out his unrivalled natural tendency towards virtue and to make him a model citizen would be the excision from his mind of his overweening ambition and the purging of his desire to be tyrant.

Now, the first tragedies were being performed then, under the direction of Thespis* and his fellow poets, and the novelty of the enterprise was attracting crowds of people, even though it had not yet been developed as a competitive contest. Since Solon was naturally fond of a recital and eager to learn, and even more because in his old age he was giving himself over to relaxation and fun—yes, and even to drinking and music—he went to watch Thespis personally acting in one of his own plays, as was the custom in the old days. After the performance he had a question for Thespis: ‘Aren’t you ashamed to tell such enormous lies in front of so many people?’ he asked. Thespis replied that there was nothing wrong with saying and doing this kind of thing for fun, whereupon Solon gave the ground a mighty blow with his stick and said, ‘But if we accept this “fun” and think highly of it, before long we’ll start to find it cropping up in important areas of life.’

[30] After Pisistratus’ self-inflicted wound and the return from exile which had him carried into the city square on a cart,* he began to stir up the general populace by claiming that his enemies had conspired against him because of his political views. He was starting to win over large numbers of people, united by their loudly voiced grievances, when Solon came up to him, stood by his side and said, ‘Pisistratus, you’re not playing the part of Homer’s Odysseus correctly. You’ve disfigured yourself just as he did, but in his case it was to trick his enemies, not to mislead his fellow citizens.’*

Later, when the people of Athens were ready to take up arms for Pisistratus, they convened a general assembly at which Ariston proposed that Pisistratus should be allowed a bodyguard of fifty

club-bearers. Solon stood up and delivered a speech against the motion, in which he went on at length in a similar vein to some lines in one of his poems:

For you pay heed to the tongue and words of a subtle man.
Individually, each one of you walks with the steps of a fox,
But when you come together your thinking is vain.*

However, when he saw that the poor were clamorously determined to gratify Pisistratus, while the rich were slinking away to avoid conflict, he walked out of the assembly, remarking that he had more intelligence than the one party and more courage than the other. He meant that he had more intelligence than those who failed to understand what was going on, and more courage than those who could see what was going on, but who were still too cowardly to offer any resistance to tyranny. So the people of Athens endorsed Ariston’s motion, but then stopped worrying Pisistratus about the precise number of bodyguards he had and let him get away with blatantly maintaining and recruiting as many men as he felt like, until in the end he seized the Acropolis.

After this, with the city in chaos, Megacles and the rest of the Alcmaeonidae lost no time in fleeing into exile; Solon, however, despite his extreme old age and his political isolation, appeared in the city square and addressed his fellow citizens. He had two objectives: to berate them for their ill-advised timidity, and to try to rouse them to further action and to urge them not to throw their freedom away. This was also the occasion when he famously said that though it would have been easier for them to have stopped the tyranny early, while it was still fledgling, it was more important and more glorious to eradicate it and destroy it now that it had already grown to maturity. People were too afraid to pay any attention to him, however, so he went back home, took his arms and armour, and put them in the lane in front of his door. ‘I have played my part,’ he said. ‘I have done all I could to help my homeland and the laws.’ And from then on he kept himself to himself. He ignored the advice of his friends to go into exile, and wrote poems in which he rebuked the Athenians:

Your own cowardice is to blame for your wretched lives;
Bear no ill will against the gods for them.
It was you who gave these men guards and made them great,
And that is why base servitude holds you now.

[31] Because of these poems people often used to try to set him straight and warn him that he would be put to death by the tyrant. When they asked him what gave him the confidence to be so reckless, he said, 'My old age.' Once Pisistratus had gained power, however, he set about winning Solon over; he expressed such admiration for him, showed him such kindness, and sent for him so often, that Solon actually became his adviser and approved of many of his measures. After all, most of Solon's legislation remained intact under Pisistratus, who not only led the way in abiding by the laws, but also insisted on his associates doing so as well. Once, for instance, when he was already tyrant, he was summoned to the Areopagus on a charge of homicide, and he duly appeared to defend himself (even though the prosecutor failed to turn up). He also made some laws of his own, one of which decrees that people disabled in war are to be maintained at public expense. Heracles, however, says that Solon had made a law to this effect even earlier, to cover the case of a disabled man called Thersippus, and that Pisistratus merely copied this law of Solon's. And Theophrastus reports that it was Pisistratus, not Solon, who enacted the law against not working, which enabled him to increase the productivity of the countryside and the peacefulness of the city.* Solon made a start on his *magnum opus* covering the history or legend of Atlantis,* which was peculiarly relevant to Athens, according to the learned priests of Sais who were his informants, but he abandoned it. His reason for doing so was because he was afraid that he was too old to complete such a lengthy poem—not, as Plato says, because he was too busy. After all, the following words show that he had plenty of free time:

I never stop learning—and learning a lot—as I grow old.

And again:

Dear to me now are the works of the Cyprus-born goddess,
Of Dionysus, and of the Muses; for they give men comfort.

[32] Plato treats the subject of Atlantis as if it were an abandoned plot of fine land (and it was in a sense his by right of kinship*). He was eager to work it up and embellish it, and he started by endowing it with huge porches, enclosures and courtyards, of a kind never before seen in any history, legend, or poem. He turned to the task too late, however, and his life came to an end before the writing did,

which means that the more we enjoy what he wrote, the more we regret what he left undone. As the temple of Olympian Zeus is to the city of Athens, so the story of Atlantis is to Plato's skill as a writer: a single incomplete work standing among plenty of fine products.* Anyway, Solon survived into the period of Pisistratus' tyranny—a long time, as Heracles of Pontus reports, but less than two years, according to Phanias of Ereus. Pisistratus' rule began in the archonship of Comias, and according to Phanias Solon died during the archonship of Hegestratus, which immediately followed that of Comias.* The story that he was cremated and his ashes were scattered on the island of Salamis is so odd that one would regard it as a completely untrustworthy fable, if it were not for the fact that it is written down by a number of reputable authors, including Aristotle the philosopher.*