

SPARTA

# Fantatising about Sparta

## Main Sources:

Xenophon, The Constitution of the Lacedaemonians (4<sup>th</sup> BC)

Plato, The Laws (4<sup>th</sup> BC)

Aristotle, Politics (4<sup>th</sup> BC)

Plutarch, Life of Lycourgos (2<sup>nd</sup> AD)

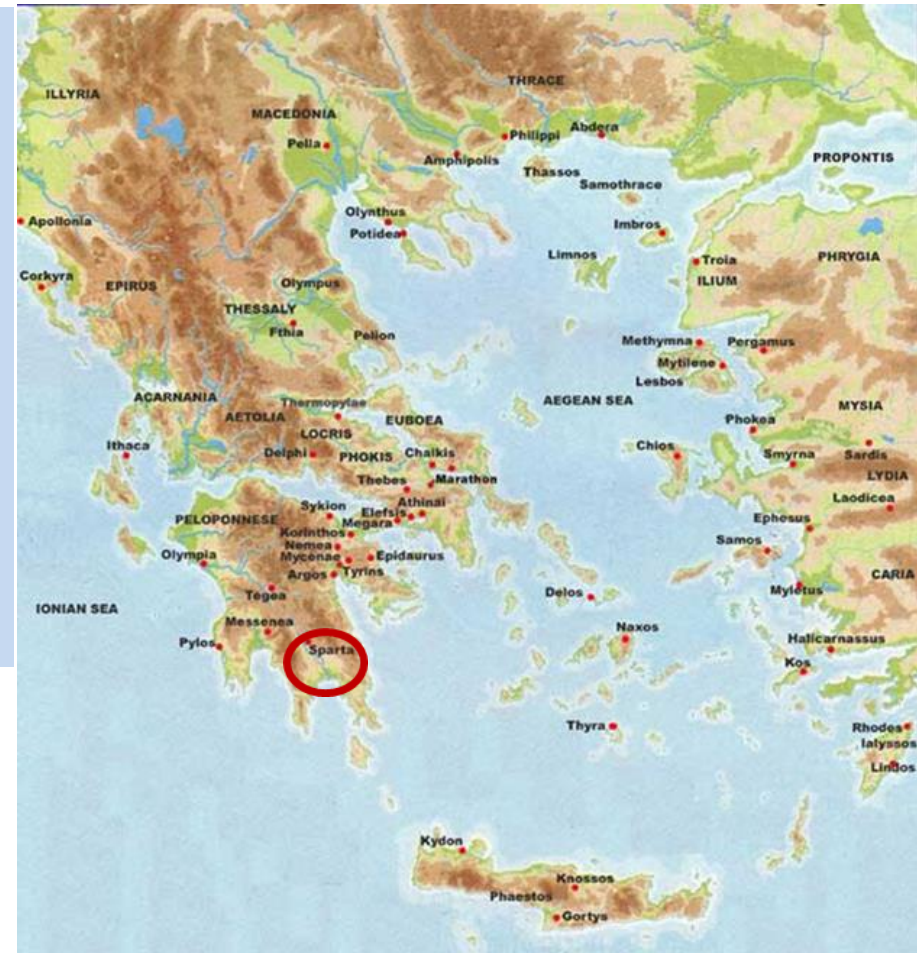
## Archaic Sources

- Tyrtaeus
- Alcman
- Archaeology



# Spartans' version of their distant past

- Invade region of Lakonia at some point after Trojan war, early in the Iron Age
- Conquer previous local population, who become either semi-autonomous (perioikoi), or serfs (helots)
- Expand at the late 8<sup>th</sup> c. to Messenia and subject the population into serfdom



# Main population groups

**Spartans:** Homoioi, those who are alike

**Perioikoi:** those who dwell around  
Free but subservient communities of Lakonia  
(Lacedaemonians: Spartans-peroikoi)

**Helots:** Servile class who lived at Lakonia and  
Messenia



# The importance of the helots for Spartan society

- Spartans in control of a vast territory, supposedly equally distributed amongst them
- The helots do all the work, so Spartans can train
- But the helots much more numerous
- Constant fear of revolts:

Second Messenian war (mid 7<sup>th</sup> c)

Revolt of 460s

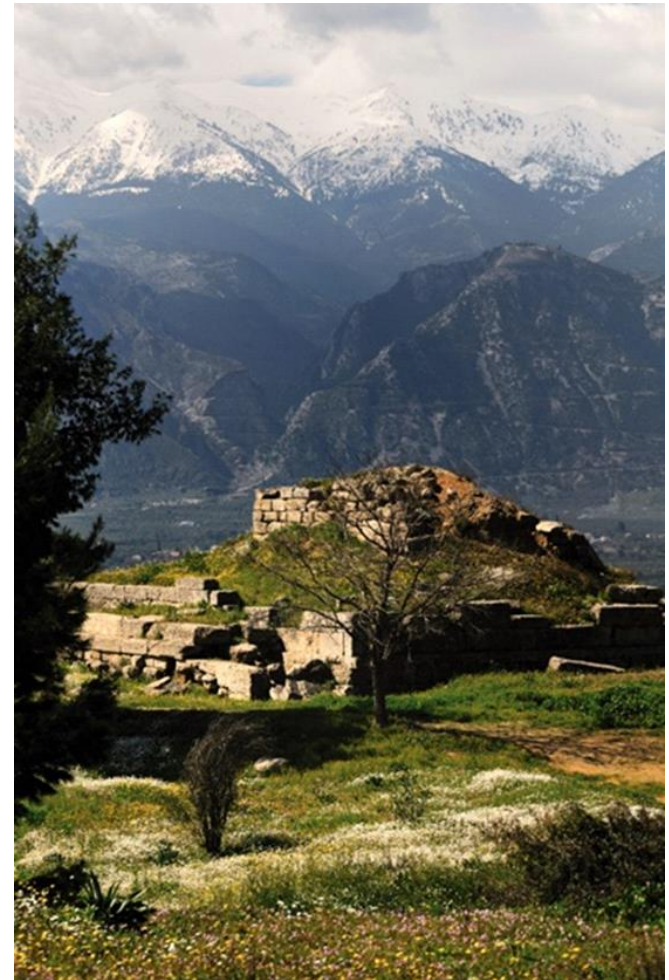
- Annual declaration of war against helots by the ephors
- Killing a helot an important rite of passage (krypteia)



# Spartan Lifestyle

For I suppose if Lacedaemon were to become desolate, and the temples and the foundations of the public buildings were left, that as time went on there would be a strong disposition with posterity to refuse to accept her fame as a true exponent of her power. And yet they occupy two-fifths of Peloponnese and lead the whole, not to speak of their numerous allies without. Still, as the city is neither built in a compact form nor adorned with magnificent temples and public edifices, but composed of villages after the old fashion of Hellas, there would be an impression of inadequacy.

Thucydides 1.10.2



When the Samians who were expelled by Polycrates came to Sparta, they came before the ruling men and made a long speech to show the greatness of their need. But the Spartans at their first sitting answered that they had forgotten the beginning of the speech and could not understand its end. [2] After this the Samians came a second time with a sack, and said nothing but this: "The sack wants flour." To this the Spartans replied that they were over-wordy with "the sack"; but they did resolve to help them.

Herodotus 3.46

# Becoming Spartan

- Week/deformed infants exposed at birth
- 7 year old assigned to a herd (boua)
- 7-18 Agoge: group education based on harsh discipline and military training
- 18- select? group joins the krypteia
- 20-29 remain in barracks but serve in the army, attend the syssitia, and the assembly
- Institutionalized pederasty between older youths and boys



# The common messes (syssitia)

- Admitted to the syssitia at age of 20
- Each Spartan made an equal contribution
- Plain food, sobriety
- Mixture of young and old
- Only kings could select their company and had double portions
- Conversation about deeds in war

When Xerxes fled from Hellas, he left to Mardonius his own establishment. Pausanias, seeing Mardonius' establishment with its display of gold and silver and gaily colored tapestry, ordered the bakers and the cooks to prepare a dinner such as they were accustomed to do for Mardonius. [2] They did his bidding, but Pausanias, when he saw golden and silver couches richly covered, and tables of gold and silver, and all the magnificent service of the banquet, was amazed at the splendor before him, and for a joke commanded his own servants to prepare a dinner in Laconian fashion. When that meal, so different from the other, was ready, Pausanias burst out laughing and sent for the generals of the Greeks. [3] When these had assembled, Pausanias pointed to the manner in which each dinner was served and said: "Men of Hellas, I have brought you here because I desired to show you the foolishness of the leader of the Medes who, with such provisions for life as you see, came here to take away from us our possessions which are so pitiful."

# Women and Family Life

- Girl at home, while boy left to join the *agoge*
  - Physical training for women (running, throwing of javelin, discus)
  - Nudity in public processions, short chitons
  - Spartan women speaking (Plut. Mor. 240c)
  - Men obliged to marry, usually on prime of manhood
  - Controlled, secret intercourse after marriage to increase desire
  - Sharing of wives (if husband old, or if young man did not wish to cohabit)
- Aim, according to Xenophon, production of healthy, strong children

# The Spartan marriage

For their marriages the women were carried off by force, not when they were small and unfit for wedlock, but when they were in full bloom and wholly ripe. After the woman was thus carried off the bride's-maid, so called, took her in charge, cut her hair off close to the head, put a man's cloak and sandals on her, and laid her down on a pallet, on the floor, alone, in the dark. Then the bride-groom, not flown with wine nor enfeebled by excesses, but composed and sober, after supping at his public mess-table as usual, slipped stealthily into the room where the bride lay, loosed her virgin's zone, and bore her in his arms to the marriage-bed.

Plutarch, Lycourgos 15. 3

# The army

- Weapons supplied by state
- Army led by one of the two kings
- Elite group of 300 who fought around king
- The Spartan hoplites famous for keeping the line

After this they joined battle, the Argives and their allies advancing with haste and fury, the Lacedaemonians slowly and to the music of many flute-players—a standing institution in their army, that has nothing to do with religion, but is meant to make them advance evenly, stepping in time, without breaking their order, as large armies are apt to do in the moment of engaging.

Thucydides 5.70



# The soldier's beautiful death

- Those whose relatives had died gratified, the kin of the survivors ashamed
- Only those who died in war could have an inscribed tombstone
- Songs about men who died at war

Now in as much as such a calamity had been unusual with the Lacedaemonians, there was great mourning throughout the Laconian army, except among those whose sons, fathers, or brothers had fallen where they stood; they, however, went about like victors, with shining countenances and full of exultation in their own misfortune.

Xenophon , Hellenica 4.5.10



# A dishonoured Spartan

Among the Greeks, the Tegeans and Athenians conducted themselves nobly, but the Lacedaemonians excelled all in valor. [2] Of this my only clear proof is (for all these conquered the foes opposed to them) the fact that the Lacedaemonians fought with the strongest part of the army, and overcame it. According to my judgment, the bravest man by far was Aristodemus, who had been reviled and dishonored for being the only man of the three hundred that came alive from Thermopylae; next after him in valor were Posidonius, Philocyon, and Amompharetus. [3]

Nevertheless, when there was a general discussion about who had borne himself most bravely, those Spartans who were there judged that Aristodemus, who plainly wished to die because of the reproach hanging over him and so rushed out and left the battle column behind, had achieved great deeds, but that Posidonius, who had no wish to die, proved himself a courageous fighter, and so in this way he was the better man. [4] This they may have said merely out of jealousy, but all the aforesaid who were killed in that fight received honor, save Aristodemus; he, because he desired death because of the reproach previously mentioned, received none.

# Political Organization

## THE 2 KINGS

Claimed descent  
from Heracles

Leadership in war

Religious duties

Exempt from agoge

Jurisdiction over  
some cases

## GEROUSIA

28, largely elite,  
over 60

life -membership

Elected by popular  
assent

Probouleutic role

acted as supreme  
court

## The 5 EPHORS

open to all Spartans

annual office

elected from the  
assembly

held kings to  
account

supervised agoge

## ASSEMBLY

all Spartans

Elected gerousia  
and ephors

Voting done by  
acclaim

# Death of a King

The kings are granted these rights from the Spartan commonwealth while they live; when they die, their rights are as follows: Horsemen proclaim their death in all parts of Laconia, and in the city women go about beating on cauldrons. When this happens, two free persons from each house, a man and a woman, are required to wear mourning, or incur heavy penalties if they fail to do so. [2] The Lacedaemonians have the same custom at the deaths of their kings as the foreigners in Asia; most foreigners use the same custom at their kings' deaths. When a king of the Lacedaemonians dies, a fixed number of their subject neighbors must come to the funeral from all Lacedaemon, besides the Spartans. [6] When these and the helots and the Spartans themselves have assembled in one place to the number of many thousands, together with the women, they zealously beat their foreheads and make long and loud lamentation, calling that king that is most recently dead the best of all their kings. Whenever a king dies in war, they make an image of him and carry it out on a well-spread bier. For ten days after the burial there are no assemblies or elections, and they mourn during these days.

# The problem of Archaic Sparta

# Lycourgos

Before this they (the Lacedaemonians) **had been the worst-governed** of nearly all the Hellenes and had had no dealings with strangers, but they changed to good government in this way: **Lycurgus, a man of reputation among the Spartans**, went to the oracle at Delphi. As soon as he entered the hall, the priestess said in hexameter:

“You have come to my rich temple, Lycurgus,  
A man dear to Zeus and to all who have Olympian homes.

**I am in doubt whether to pronounce you man or god,**  
But I think rather you are a god, Lycurgus.

” **Some say that the Pythia also declared to him the constitution** that now exists at Sparta, **but the Lacedaemonians themselves say that Lycurgus brought it from Crete** when he was guardian of his nephew Leobetes, the Spartan king. Once he became guardian, he changed all the laws and took care that no one transgressed the new ones. Lycurgus afterwards established their affairs of war: **the sworn divisions, the bands of thirty, the common meals; also the ephors and the council of elders.**

# The Great Rhetra

So eager was Lycurgus for the establishment of this form of government, that he obtained an oracle from Delphi about it, which they call a 'rhetra.' And this is the way it runs: 'When thou hast built a temple to Zeus Syllanius and Athena Syllania, divided the people into 'phylai' and into 'obai,' and established a senate of thirty members, including the 'archagetai,' then from time to time 'appellazein' between Babyca and Cnacion<sup>1</sup> and there introduce and rescind measures; but the people must have the deciding voice and the power.'

Plut. Lyc.6

- In Herodotus Lycourgos, according to Spartans, did not receive constitution in form of an oracle
- No mention of the ephors



# Tyrtaeus' Eunomia (orderliness)

'Counsel is to begin with the divinely honoured kings,  
who have the lovely city of Sparta in their care,  
and with the ancient elder. Then the men of the people,  
responding in turn to straight *rhetai*  
must say what is noble and do all that is just,  
But not longer (?) plot (?) against the city (?)  
Victory and power will attend the multitude of the people'  
For thus Phoebus declared to the city in these matters

- To whom is the oracle given?  
(no mention of Lycourgos)
- Emphasis on obedience to  
kings and elders
- In Great Rhetra the assembly  
much more powerful

➤ A variety of different competing and evolving traditions about  
Spartan politic institutions

# Manliness

I would not remember or attach importance to such a man,  
not to one with swiftness of foot, not to a great wrestler,  
not even if he would be as big and strong as a Cyclop  
and would run faster than the Thracian northern wind.

...

For that does not make him brave man in battle,  
if he does not dare to look at the bloody killing  
and to attack the enemy from close up.  
That is excellence, the highest prize for mankind,  
splendid to carry away for a young man.  
He a common good for the city and all people,  
every man who remains firmly in the front lines

Tyrtaeus Fragment 12

# Praise of women

There is such a thing as the gods' punishment. Prosperous is the man who weaves his days happy at heart and with no cause for mourning. But I sing the radiance of Agido. She seems to me like the sun, which Agido summons to shine upon us. The famous leader of our chorus will not let me praise or blame

Agido. For she seems outstanding, as if one were to set in a meadow a sturdy horse which wins contests with its thundering hooves, such a horse as one sees as one dreams in the shade of a rock. Do you not see? The racehorse is from Venice; the hair of my cousin Hagesikhora blooms like undefiled gold, her silver face – why am I telling you so explicitly?

*Alkman, frg. 1.36–56. An extract from Alkman's Partheneion in which the singer celebrates the other members of the female chorus.*

# Archaeology

## Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia

- Team of boys trying to steal cheese laced on altar while another teams was whipping them

