



Classical Civilisation 1A

Sparta: the military state

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The 'Spartan Mirage' (Ollier, 1933)

- from Plato's *Republic* to Zak Snyder's *300*



Partly due to deliberate Spartan secrecy:

- expulsion of foreigners
- no written records apart from oracles



Ancient Greece

Sources for Archaic Sparta

Contemporary

- Tyrtaeus (early 7th cent., martial poetry)
- Alcman (late 7th cent., choral poetry)
- Archaeology (esp. of Artemis Orthia sanctuary)

Later

- Herodotus, esp. 1.65-66 and 6.56-60 (5th cent. BC)
- Thucydides *History*
- Xenophon *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* (4th cent. BC)
- Plutarch *Life of Lycurgus* (1st cent. AD)



Probable historical outline

End of Bronze Age

- 'Dorian Invasion' (= 'return of the Heraclidae').
Archaeology hard to reconcile with ancient texts.

Late 8th century

- Foundation of two colonies: Thera (Santorini) and Taras (Tarentum/Taranto)
- Conquest of Messenia/First Messenian War
- The Messenians work the land and pay half of the produce to the Spartans. Result:
 - 8,500 km² territory = the largest in Greece
 - Fertile farmland - great wealth
 - No need for further colonies



Ancient Greece



Early 7th cent.

- Written law-code: The Great Rhetra – to solve civil unrest? Lycurgus?
- Wars with Argos and Tegea
 - 669? Defeat at Hysiai leading to military reform?

Mid-7th cent.

- Messenian revolt/Second Messenian War
 - Very hard-fought victory
 - Led to military ideology/a military state
 - Civil unrest because of unequal distribution of wealth
 - Commented on by Tyrtaeus
 - New law code? Gradual revision of laws?

6th cent.

- Recognised as the most powerful state in Greece (cf. Herodotus)

Early 5th cent. (cf. Hdt. books 5-9)

- 499: Refuses to help the Ionians in revolt against Persia.
- 490: First Persian War. Goes to the help of Athens, but arrives too late for Marathon.
- 480-479: Second Persian War. Leads the Greek alliance.
 - The 300 defeated at Thermopylae.
 - Victory at Plataea.

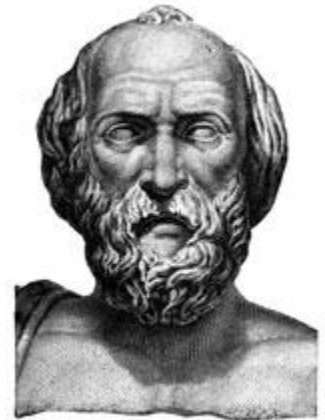




Political system

Origins of political system

- Said to be based on 'the Great Rhetra'
 - Said to have been written or discovered by Lycurgus.
 - Quoted in Plutarch (1st-2nd century AD)
 - Is it authentic?
 - In verse like an oracular answer
 - Riddling, like an oracular answer
 - But late and possibly falsified...
- Tyrtaeus' *Eunomia* (7th cent. BC) seems to reflect it.
 - Poetic paraphrase?
 - Precursor – political pamphlet?



Lycurgus

Basic structure

- Dual kingship Kings
 - Held in check by 5 annually elected ephors
- Gerousia = council of Elders
- Apella = people's assembly
 - Led by the kings and/or the Gerousia
 - Perhaps only voting power?
- Population divided along originally geographical lines



Social organisation

Lacedaimonians

- Spartans/Spartiates
 - Engaged only(?) in military training
 - = *homoioi* ('similar')
 - Hoplites
 - Core of the state and the army
- *Perioikoi* ('around-dwellers')
 - Farming and manufacturing
 - Hoplites, commanded by Spartans

Numbers at Plataea:

5000 Spartiates
5000 Perioikoi
35,000 Helots

Helots = serfs

- The original population and Messenians
- Farming and menial labour
- In war: attendants and light-armed soldiers (*peltasts*)



Archaic Greek land armies

Hoplites and peltasts

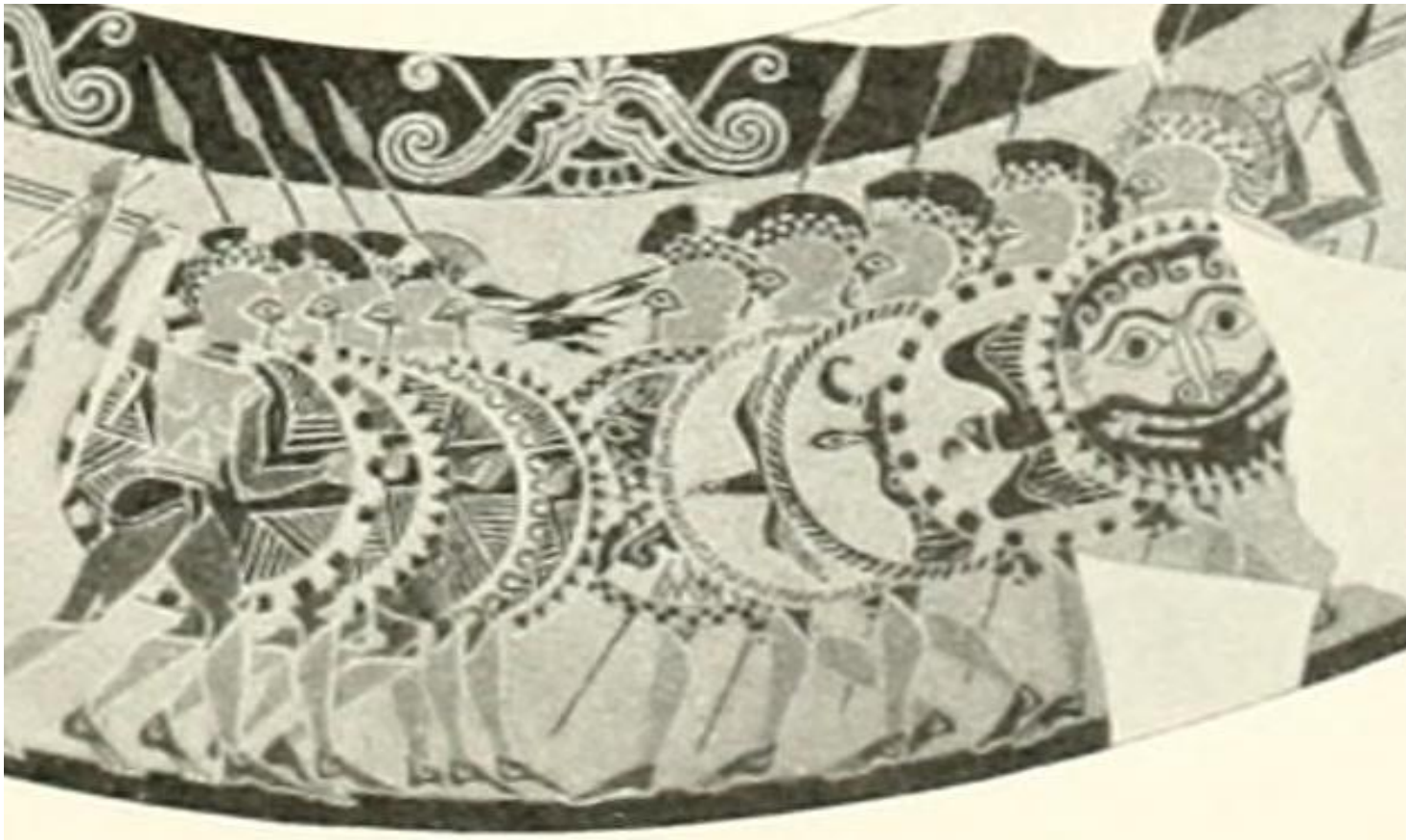
What is a hoplite?

- Heavy-armoured:
 - helmet
 - breast-plate
 - leg-greaves
 - shield (Greek: *hoplon*)
- Heavily armed: spear and short-sword
- Fighting in close formation
 - Shield covers self and man to the left

Chigi vase

Proto-corinthian *olpe* found in Etruscan grave.

From 650-640 BC



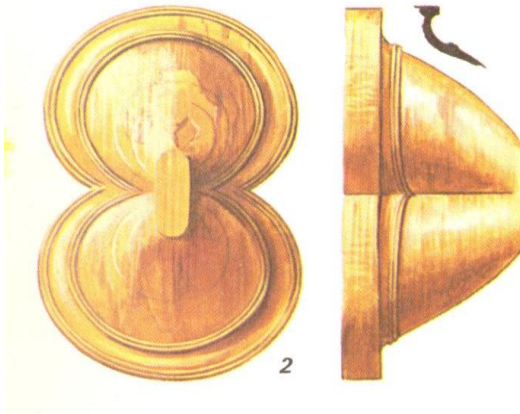




Main characteristic: shield (*hoplon*)

(Images from P. Connolly (1977) *The Greek Armies*, Macdonald Educational.

Homeric
shield



7th-6th cent. double-grip shield



6th cent. hoplite formation





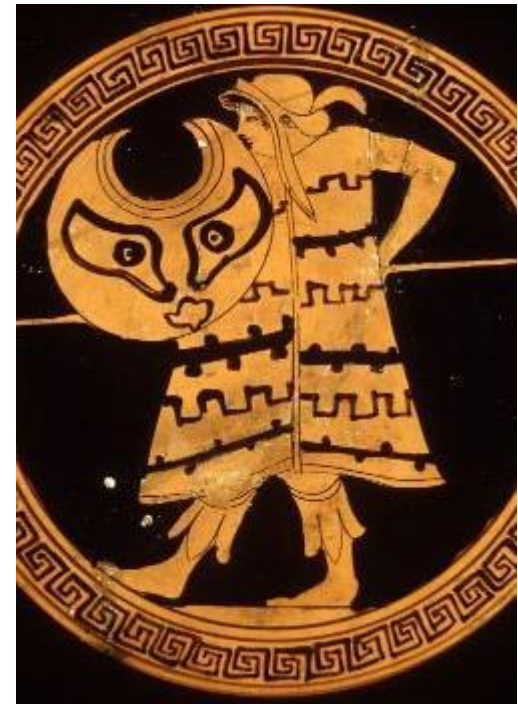
Thucydides (mid-5th cent.) on the hoplite formation

‘It is true of all armies that, when they are moving into action, the right wing tends to get unduly extended and each side overlaps the enemy’s left with its own right. This is because fear makes every man want to do his best to find protection for his unarmed side in the shield of the man on his right, thinking that the more closely the shields are locked together, the safer he will be.’

Thucydides 5.71.1

What is a peltast?

- Light-armoured: leather or linen cuirass
- Light-armed: small shield, javelin, bow, and/or short-sword
- Armour and weapons vary



(Images from

http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Morals%20and%20Law/M+L/Plato/peltast.htm



Citizen army in other Greek *poleis*

Aristocratic cavalry

Middleclass hoplites

Poor peltasts

Civilians in peace, soldiers
in war

Citizen army in Sparta

No cavalry until 420 BC

Every Spartan and *perioikos*
is a hoplite

Only helots are peltasts

Soldiers all the time (helots
do the work)



Ideology: Equality through Similarity

The Spartiates = *Homoioi* = the 'similar'

- in armour, training, behaviour – and wealth?

- Key virtues:

- ☐ Endurance
- ☐ Obedience
- ☐ Self-control
- ☐ Modesty

- Ingrained by:

- ☐ The *agoge* (from age 7)
- ☐ Communal living (from age 7-30)
- ☐ Rite of passage: the *krypteia*



Spartan male life: equality through uniformity

20-30: Communal living, elite corps of army

- Eating in the *syssitia*
- Paying monthly contribution
- Unmarried, or seeing his wife in secret

30 onwards: 'family life'

- Wife and children
- - but eats all meals at the *syssitia*

Dispossessed groups:

- Those too poor to contribute to *syssitia*
- Those proved cowards in battle
- And others, now obscure to us

Spartan female life

- The absence of the husband:
 - More social freedom than in the rest of Greece
 - Less secluded, and less covered by clothing, than other Greek women
 - Famed for their 'shamelessness' and 'insubordination'
- The state needed many and strong boys:
 - Education, mainly physical
 - Famed for their beauty
 - Wife-sharing





Spartan culture

Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia



Spartan bronze figurine of running girl, 520-500 BC, British Museum

Laconian pottery, flourished 590-550 BC



Laconian black-figure kylix, Name vase of the Rider Painter, cup, *circa* 550/530 BC. London: British Museum. Copied from Wikipedia.



Amphora in the style of the Hunt Painter, *circa* 540/530 BC. London: British Museum. Copied from Wikipedia. ³⁰

Laconian bronze mixing bowls



Bronze hydria, late 7th century, MET museum n. 1995.92



Spartan poetry: Tyrtaeus and Alcma

Martial poetry: Tyrtaeus

- Mythology
- Homeric imagery
- Brutal details
- Focus on courage and steadfastness
- Addressed to the young
- The *polis* before the individual
- The good individual celebrated by the *polis*
- A “beautiful death”
- Rewards: fame, civic distinction

I would not commemorate a man for his excellent
running or wrestling, not
if he had the size and strength of the Cyclopes, beat
Thracian Boreas running,
was fairer of form than Tithonus,
richer than Midas and Cinyras, more kingly
than Tantalid Pelops, had a tongue that spoke sweet as Adrastus and every
other distinction, but lacked furious courage.

In war, no man is good
unless he faces blood and death, taking
a stand in enemy reach.

*That is excellence; that is the noblest contest
a young man can win.*

The city and all of its people gain when a man
takes an unflinching stand
in battle, gives no thought to flight but calmly
wagers life and spirit
with a cheerful word to the soldier beside him. In war,
that is a "good man."


He quickly turns the bristling enemy ranks;
his determination stems the tide

of battle. Though he may fall and die, struck
in the chest a hundred times
despite his shield and breastplate, he leaves his fame
to his city, people, and father.
Old men and youths have tears in their eyes,
the city staggers with grief,
but his tomb and children are famous, even his children's
children and later descendants.
His name and legend never die. Lying
in the earth, he becomes immortal,
whoever is killed by Ares, heroically standing
and fighting for land and children;
and the man who escapes the leveling demon and earns
the victorious warrior's boast
accepts congratulation from young and old, and many
joys smooth his earthly
journey. With age, he becomes a prominent counselor.
No one would cheat or insult him.
Older, younger, the same in years----everyone
yields his place on the benches.
Climb the hill of virtue, soldier;
never soften your warrior's heart.


Choral poetry: Alcman

- Obscure content
 - Related to rituals unknown to us
 - Social interaction of girls
- Beauty of and desire for girls (by girls?)
- Beautiful and strange imagery
- References to objects of value
- Shows a different side to Spartan society






‘Divine retribution is real;
blessed is he who weaves a prudent and tearless
day. But I sing of Agido's brilliance. She draws
my gaze like the sun
she invokes as a shining witness;
but our dance's glorious
leader will not have another word of praise
or blame, for she thinks that she herself
is the one to notice, a thoroughbred
in the common herd, a thundering,
muscular steed, the kind
you dream of, dozing in the shade.



Picture an Adriatic courser,
but above the mane
of my cousin, Hagesichora, hovers
a golden sheen,
and her cool smooth brow, like silver - but why elaborate?
Simply say, "This is Hagesichora!"

Whoever races Agido in beauty
will seem a Scythian steed trailing a Lydian.
For rivals rise up but dimly,
like Pleiades at dawn, and our light
is bright as the star Sirius
framed by ambrosial night.

This confidence does not depend
on plenteous purples,
the spangled, golden snakes
on our wrists, Lydian
headbands, pride of dewy
eyed girls,



Nanno's tresses, Areta,
though she looks divine,
Sylacis or Cleesisera, nor will you ever run
for a magic spell to Aenesimbrotas, crying:
"Let Astaphis be mine!
Let Philylla, beloved Damareta
and Vianthemis look my way!" But, "Hagesichora is making
me weak!"

(24 lines at the end left out)



Main points to take away

- Spartan mirage
- Lack of certain knowledge
- Military society – but also culture
- Equality through similarity