

SPARTAN SOCIETY

TO THE BATTLE

STEPHEN  
CLARKE

MARTIN  
GARNER

OF LEUCTRA



**SMALL CAPS**

**SPARTAN  
SOCIETY  
TO THE BATTLE OF LEUCTRA**

**STEPHEN CLARKE    MARTIN GARNER**

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# 900 BC

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# 371 BC

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## ***Spartan society to the Battle of Leuctra* traces the origins of Sparta and then explores the unique culture and political system that emerged behind the Spartan mirage. Combining the varied interpretations of contemporaries and modern historians, this new work seeks to reconcile historical Sparta with the image created by the Spartan mirage.**

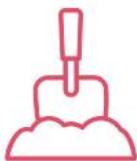
The book's approach to these topics combines the practice of historians with the needs of senior secondary students. Like the historian, students engage with secondary literature before investigating and interpreting the sources. By taking this approach, students apply the historical concepts of causation, continuity and change, perspectives, significance, and contestability. This approach prepares students to become more than simply observers of the past. They are empowered to understand it and its implications.



**Chapters and activities** apply historical concepts and skills, including the analysis and use of sources, historical interpretation, historical investigation and research, and explanation and communication.



**Historically accurate images**, including photographs and artworks, along with diagrams and tables, enhance engagement and present information and interpretations in a variety of ways.



**Source studies**, which include artwork, photographs, extracts from speeches, laws, personal accounts, and historians' interpretations, feature regularly throughout the textbook. Each source study includes exam-style questions.



**Review activities** consolidate student understanding, encourage the synthesis of content, include opportunities for research, and support the application of historical concepts.



Each **chapter ends with activities** that focus on larger historical questions arising from the topic and suggestions for further resources.

# Publisher acknowledgements

This is the fourth textbook published by Small Caps. We thought we had developed a system. But things don't work like they used to. During the development of the book, everybody involved in the project self-isolated at least once, and most of us had COVID. Sometimes twice. Then there was 'flu. And then there was the flooding. It was all so very 2022.

Despite all of this, everything came together. We just did things slightly differently. Katie Lawry set the style, edited, and prepared a fantastic artwork list. Kim Ferguson applied her original design to a Spartan context and laid out the pages. Again. And again. Janet Purkis reprised her role of final polisher, as Shelley Campbell prepared the index and Bruce Rankin created maps and illustrations. As always, production is less assembly line and more a team effort.

It now feels like the Steve and Marty show is a well-oiled machine. They tag-team chapters, cheerfully respond to endless queries about the length of Spartan spears and rule on the appropriate plural for *ephor*. It has been a continuing pleasure to work with you both.

## Almay

2.7, 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 4.3, 5.1, 5.5, 7.1, 7.13, 7.14, 8.2, 8.5, 8.8, 9.3

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# Author acknowledgements

This is the second book that Marty and I have written for Small Caps, and while the writing of this book in the 'time of Covid' is still difficult, it is made easier by the skill and ability of the team Michael, our wonderful publisher, has gathered together. It has been fun to create this book retelling a story that is very much overdue for a thorough review of the content, and Marty has again been a pleasure work with in this process. As always, my thanks and love go to my wife and our beautiful children, who give me the strength, energy and desire to keep creating when it would just be easier to enjoy the fruits of repose.

– Stephen Clarke

Firstly, thanks to my wife Pepper and kids Escher, Buzzy and Emmeline for being the coolest dudes. Thanks Chris, Mum, Dad , Dee Dee and Poppy for everything you all do.

Huge thanks to my co-author Steve for all the support and advice and for keeping this project trucking along, I really appreciate everything you did to get this book over the line. Finally, thanks to Michael Spurr, and the team at Small Caps Publishing for the thoughtful suggestions and support throughout the whole process, it's been a pleasure working together again.

– Martin Garner

# Glossary

## **Archaic period**

the period in Greek history extending from approximately 800 to 500 BC

## **agoge**

the Spartan military training/education system

## **agon**

a formal or informal contest of any sort in Greek society

## **agora**

the large, open area of a Greek polis that was the central point of the city, particularly for commerce, trade, religion and politics

## **ajoure**

art style that leaves open spaces in the carved item to create an image

## **black-figure**

figures that were mostly black on a white background in scenes on pottery

## **blazon**

a large symbol; for example, Spartans had a large L (*lambda* in Greek) on their shield, representing the word 'Lakedaimonia'

## **brachylogy**

the style of speaking in brief or terse language to get the key points across

## **capital charge**

a charge brought against someone where the penalty is death or exile

## **chiton**

the most basic item of ancient Greek clothing for men, similar to a long tunic

## **chorus**

an area where large groups of singers would perform as part of festivals or competitions

## **Classical period**

the period in Greek history covering 500 to 338 BC

## **demos**

the people, the citizens of Sparta

## **dyarchy**

a system of two kings reigning at the same time, with equal power

## **eiren (pl. eirenes)**

a group of young men from which the commanders of boys in the *agoge* are drawn

## **ekklesia**

a meeting of the Spartiates as a political body for deliberation on matters put to it

## **elegiac**

poetic form in which lines alternate between dactylic hexameter and pentameter

## **encomium**

a form of writing that often sacrifices the truth to praise an individual

## **ephors**

the five men elected annually to assist in running the state

## **erastes**

older male lover of a 'youth'

## **eromenos**

a youth who is the object of an older male lover's affection

## **eunomia**

the concept of good laws in Greek society, sometimes personified as a goddess

## **exceptionalism**

the idea that a state is better than others because of its divine destiny to succeed

## **extant**

still in existence, existing, surviving

## **fibula**

the pin or brooch for attaching garments at the shoulder

## **fragment**

a part of something one author wrote that was preserved, or copied, by another ancient source that we still possess

## **Geometric period**

an early period of Greek history, defined by the geometric shapes painted or etched onto pottery during this era

## **gerontes**

literally 'old men', individual members of the *gerousia*

## **gerousia**

the advisory council of elders in Sparta

## **Gymnopaedia**

an important Spartan religious festival

## **hebontes**

the young soldiers of the Spartan army between the age of 20 and 29, before being admitted as full Spartan citizens at the age of 30

## **Hellenistic period**

the period of Greek history after the Classical period, starting with the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, ending with the death of Cleopatra in 30 BC

## **helots**

the population conquered by the Spartans, probably in the 8th century BC, who were used as a slave population for agricultural purposes

## **hypomeiones**

a group of men who had been Spartiates, but had lost their position for a range of reasons

## **kleroi**

the parcels of land allotted to Spartiates at birth and given to them upon successful completion of their military training

## **komai**

the name given to the five original settlements that made up the *polis* of Sparta

## **krypteia**

the organisation selected from among the *paidikoi* to monitor and punish the helot population

## **Lakedaimonia/Lakonia**

the region of the Peloponnese controlled by Sparta

## **Messene**

the part of the Peloponnese west of Sparta; conquered by Sparta probably during the 8th century BC and its original population made into helots

## **misogyny**

the dislike or hatred of women

## **neodamodeis**

former helots who had been made part of the regular Spartan army

**nucleated population centres**

the condition in which more people live in large centres than in surrounding countryside

**oligarchy**

a government run by a small number of (usually) wealthy people

**paeon**

a song associated with the worship of a god

**paides**

boys, usually between the ages of 7 and 14

**paidikoi**

youths, usually aged between 15 and 19

**paidonomos**

'boy-herdsman'; an adult magistrate, responsible for the upbringing of the males aged from 7 to 30 years

**panhellenism**

the idea that all of Greece should work together for common goals

**Peloponnese**

the southern part of Greece where Lakadaimonia was located

**Peloponnesian League**

the league created in the 6th century BC and led by the Spartans, comprised mainly of *poleis* in the Peloponnese

**Peloponnesian War**

the war between Sparta and Athens, fought 431–424 BC and 413–404 BC

**perioikoi**

the non-Spartan people who lived in Lakonia

**Persian Wars**

the invasion of Greece by the Persians in 490 BC and 480/79 BC

**polis (pl. poleis)**

an independent self-governing city that controlled the land around the city, the standard organisation of Greece at the time

**polyandry**

literally, 'many men', or the practice of having children with many men

**probouleutic**

pertaining to a system in which a group of people decide what will be on a meeting's agenda

**protome**

a depiction of a person that captures the head and shoulders

**scholion**

a comment made on an ancient papyrus text to explain what is being said by the original author

**skias**

the large, open building in which the Spartan *ekklesia* met

**Spartan mirage**

a theory that the Spartans deliberately made the Greeks think incorrect information about them was true so that they would believe the Spartans to be more powerful and single-minded than they actually were

**Spartiatiai/Spartiates**

the name for Spartan males who had undergone the *agoge*; the rest of the population of Sparta were simply called Spartans

**stela (pl. stelai)**

a large stone slab on which an inscription was carved

**strategos**

a general or commander

**syssitia**

a group of men who ate together as a group in the Spartan military

**temenos**

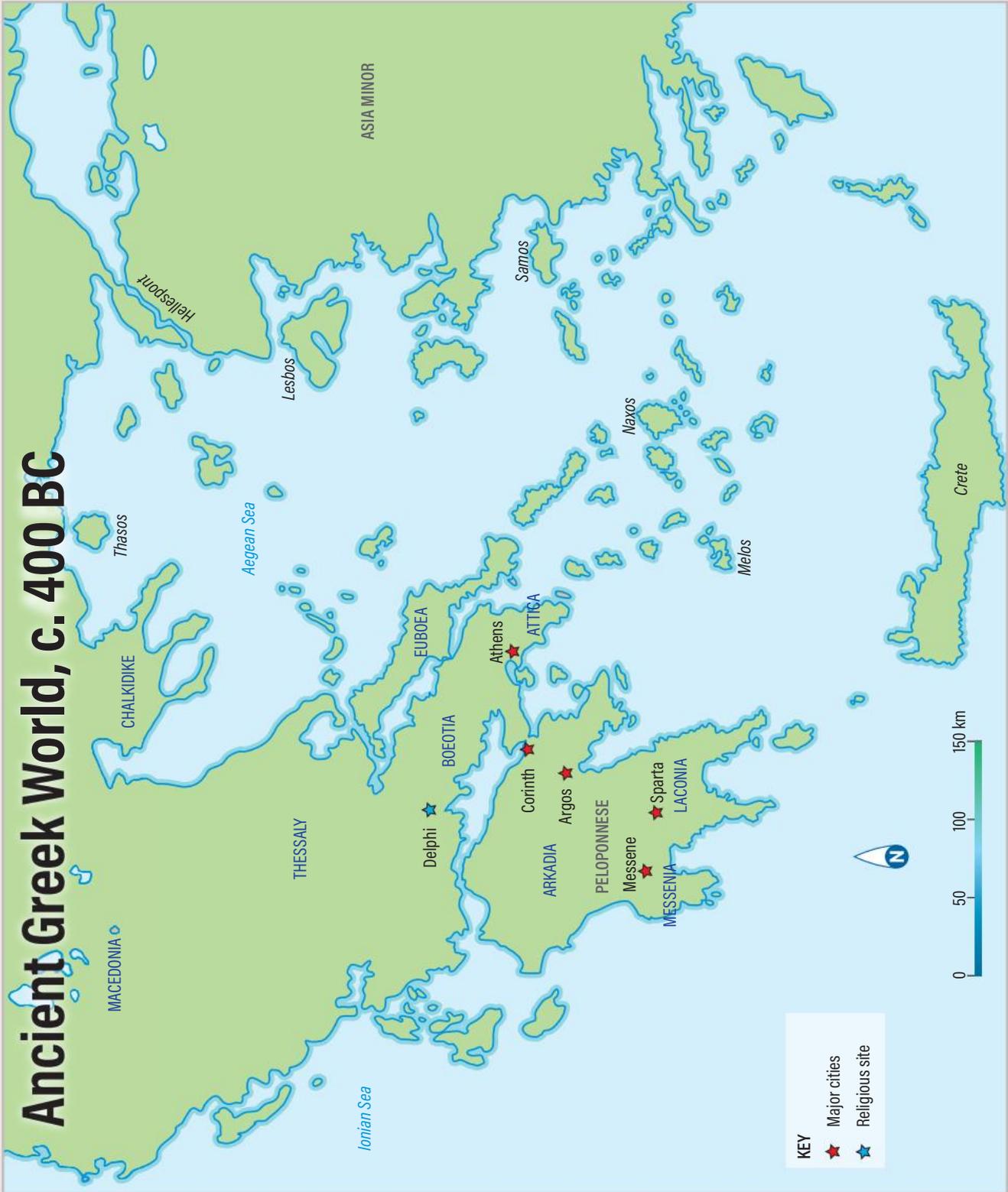
the sacred boundary of a temple or shrine

**testamonia**

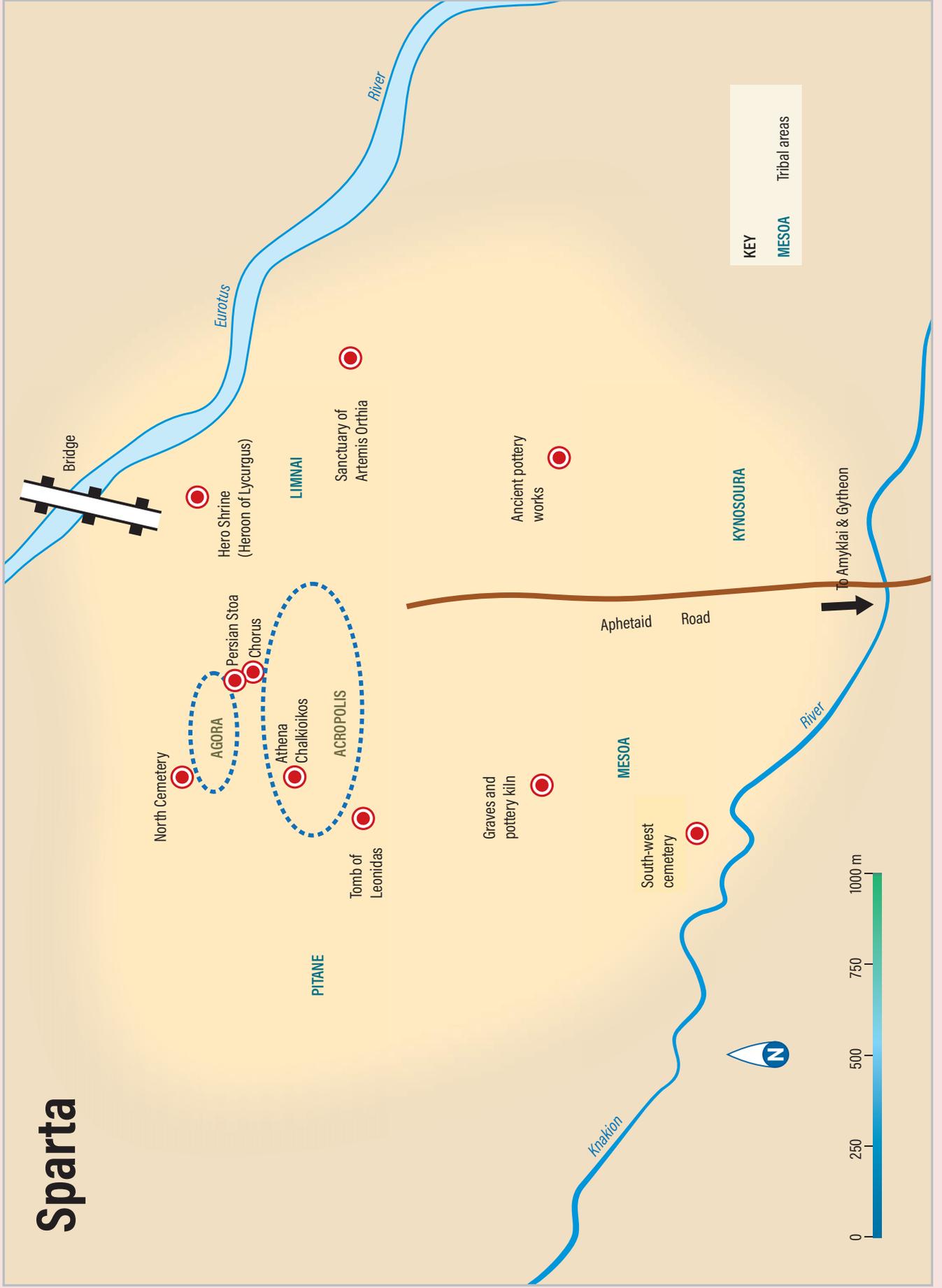
quotes, paraphrases and comments on an ancient work

**tresantes**

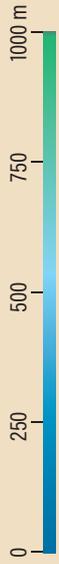
a social group in Sparta who had lost their citizenship because they had fled in battle



# Sparta



KEY  
MESOA  
Tribal areas



Chapter

# 1

## Do we know Sparta?



**FIGURE 1.1** Popular culture has reduced Sparta to a highly militarised stereotype. As we approach the historical record, this image of Sparta becomes increasingly inadequate.

Sparta is one of the most fascinating societies of the ancient world. It is continually referenced in the modern world in graphic novels and movies. More recently, it has been used to symbolise the far-right stance in politics, which rejects government interference in everyday lives. This use is particularly ironic, because Spartans are believed to have allowed the state and its norms to control their lives far more than we generally would in the modern world. It is difficult to understand the extent to which this is true because our sources are particularly problematic. However, what can be asserted accurately is that Sparta, its political institutions and its social structures emerged as a direct result of their historical and cultural contexts.

### By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- explain the importance of Sparta's geographical setting to its society
- identify the available natural resources
- recognise significant sites
- evaluate the impact of the context of various historians' accounts of Sparta on our understanding of Spartan society.

## Geographical setting

The notion of 'Sparta' in the ancient world was defined differently by the various peoples around Greece. Sometimes they were called *Spartiatai*, particularly when referring to their army. They were usually called *Lakedaimoniai*, referring to the land as the Spartans named it – **Lakedaimonia** (now known as **Lakonia**). This included the communities that lived around the Spartans, the *perioikoi*, and the Spartan slave population, the **helots**. Lakonia is in the south of the **Peloponnese**, a region joined to central Greece by an isthmus, a narrow strip of land.

Ancient Sparta was almost unique in the ancient Greek world. Most Greek cities existed as a *polis* (pl. *poleis*), or a 'city-state', with their own customs, laws and land. Sparta controlled approximately 8500 square kilometres of the Peloponnese, making it even larger than the other two city-states that controlled large tracts of land: Athens (which controlled Attica) and Thebes (which controlled Boeotia at various times).

Sparta was not a single city, but a collection of *komai*. The *komai* were located around the centre of Sparta, which was more of a gathering place for military, political and religious events. These *komai* were Amyklai, Limnai, Pitane, Mesoia and Cynosura. Limnai, found along the west bank of the Eurotas River, was probably the oldest settlement and Pitane was north-west of the central area called 'Sparta'. The other *komai* are yet to be positively identified but were probably south of the central area of Sparta.

To say that Sparta was just a grouping of villages, as has been the traditional view, plays down the importance of the early city. The population lived around the city in small farmsteads and villages, but Sparta was clearly the focus of the region's commerce, politics and religion. The focal point of the city was the **agora**, a central meeting point in all Greek cities, used for political, social and religious purposes. It was large enough to contain around 4000 people in the Classical period, and Herodotus' description of a king's funeral indicates that thousands could meet there. Sparta was also an important trading centre, and the agora was the political heart of the region. It is also clear that Sparta served as the central marketplace for Lakedaimonia, which would have made the agora particularly important.

### **Spartiatai/Spartiates**

the name for Spartan males who had undergone the *agoge*; the rest of the population of Sparta were simply called Spartans

### **Lakedaimonia/Lakonia**

the region of the Peloponnese controlled by Sparta

### **perioikoi**

the non-Spartan people who lived in Lakedaimonia

### **helots**

the population conquered by the Spartans, probably in the 8th century BC, who were used as a slave population for agricultural purposes

### **Peloponnese**

the southern part of Greece where Lakedaimonia was located

### **polis (pl. poleis)**

an independent self-governing city that controlled the land around the city, the standard organisation of Greece at the time

### **komai**

the name given to the five original settlements that made up the polis of Sparta

### **agora**

the large, open area of a Greek *polis* that was the central point of the city, particularly for commerce, trade, religion and politics



FIGURE 1.2 Sparta controlled much of the Peloponnese, a peninsula in southern Greece.

**Archaic period**

the period in Greek history extending from approximately 800 to 500 BC

**Classical period**

the period in Greek history covering 500 to 338 BC

**Messene**

the part of the Peloponnese west of Sparta; conquered by Sparta probably during the 8th century BC and its original population made into helots

Sparta had been one of the surviving cities after the collapse of Mycenaean civilisation in about 1200 BC. A period of anarchy followed, but the region had settled down by approximately 800 BC. During the **Archaic period** Sparta was sparsely populated, but major cults that continued into the **Classical period** were already in place. Cult centres, such as those for Apollo and Hyakinthos at Amyklai, Artemis Orthia and Athena Khalkioikos, were already established. Sometimes key features of the cult centres changed; for example, in the Bronze Age, Amyklai was the centre of worship of the goddess Potnia (a vegetation/fertility goddess) and changed to Apollo/Hyakinthos.

By around 800 BC, Sparta had become the dominant *polis* in Lakedaimonia. It was clearly an important religious site, with many cultic dedications found in the major sanctuaries. Towards the end of the 8th century BC, items indicating greater wealth seem to have been dedicated as cult offerings, evidence that the Peloponnese was also experiencing greater urbanisation, trade and concentration of wealth, as was the case in other areas of Greece. Unlike Lakedaimonia, the cities of **Messene** did not become dominated by a single city in the same way that Sparta had dominated its region, which probably contributed to its subjugation by Sparta at some point before 700 BC.

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What does the name Lakedaimonia mean, and who and what does it include?
2. How is the name Lakedaimonia different to the term Peloponnese?
3. Describe the *polis* of Sparta.
4. In what way was the *polis* of Sparta different to those in other parts of Greece?
5. What were the features of Archaic Sparta?

## Natural features and resources

The land around Sparta is dominated by two mountain ranges, Parnon and Taygetos. The Eurotas River flowed through the heart of Lakedaimonia, supplying water for the entire region. It also provided the Eurotas river valley with extremely fertile soil for production of crops, primarily barley, grapes and olives. The Helos plains were also large and fertile areas for growing crops. Lakedaimonia is defined in the east, south and west by the Mediterranean Sea, while in the north, there was a vague boundary created from the river Nedha in the north-west to the city of Theresa in the north-east, although this was not a definite border as we would recognise it today. The most significant resources available to Spartans were the crops grown in the fertile regions of Lakedaimonia. This was possible because of the alluvial soil primarily carried and deposited by the Eurotas River.

The mountain ranges of south-east Lakedaimonia contained substantial amounts of metals. The city of Boia was mined from early on for its iron, and other metals, such as lead, silver and copper, have been found. These metals were important to Sparta from an early age, both for religious purposes in the creation of votives for sanctuaries (thousands of which have been found), and for the creation of weapons and armour. From the Archaic period onwards, there was a significant increase in the use of lead to create figurines for dedication in temples, and these were particularly found in the shrine to Artemis Orthia and the Menelaion.

Stone quarries were also found near the Tainarion and Malean peninsulas, areas renowned for their coloured marble. Closer to Sparta, stone was quarried at the Gynaika and Taygetus mountain ranges from the Archaic period.

Another substantial resource for Sparta was fish, found in abundance along the coast of the Peloponnese, and there is evidence of fishing industries established around the Peloponnese. Another aquatic creature, the murex mollusc, provided the only known source of the colour purple and the dye from the mollusc was used to colour the Spartan army's cloaks. The centre of this industry was Kythara and South Malea.

The mountain forests provided the Lakedaimonians with a supply of good quality wood. In particular, Mts Taygetus and Parnon were known for the quality and quantity of their wood. Other resources of the region included salt, honey, flax and wool, which were used as the basis of trade. The forests on the mountains also sustained a healthy animal population, which provided good hunting.

Large monuments around Sparta were notably absent. This is possibly because of the lack of money in Sparta. The use of coined money was not permitted at various times in Spartan history; instead, they used pelanors (iron bars that were boiled to make them brittle



**FIGURE 1.3** The modern city of Sparta sits at the foothills of Mt Taygetos.

to make the metal worthless) as coinage. It could also be a result of the structure of Spartan society, which (in theory) did not allow individuals to become too significant – this meant that individuals did not invest money in buildings that would only be resented by the rest of the people. Spartan society also focused on the performance of religion rather than on religious buildings, so the temples and shrines that existed in Sparta were not as grand as other religious structures around Greece at the time. In the second half of the 7th century and early 6th century BC, there was a significant increase in the number of temples constructed. The Spartans tended to build their temples on a smaller scale than other *poleis*, but they were lavishly decorated with intricate designs and precious materials, such as gold and ivory. Cavanaugh, a modern archaeologist, has suggested that given the number of temples constructed, it is actually difficult to understand why more have not survived until the present.<sup>1</sup>



**FIGURE 1.4** The Eurotas River, which runs through the fertile valley

The notable exception to the lack of large public monuments was the *stoa*, a conspicuously grand covered walkway constructed to commemorate the Greek victory over the Persians at Plataea, using the money taken from the vanquished enemy. The temple to Athena Khalkioikos (Athena of the Bronze House) was an ancient temple, built in the 7th century BC, as was the other significant temple, the Temple of Artemis Orthia. Other shrines were constructed over the centuries, including the Heroon and the Menelaion.

---

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe the geographical setting of Sparta.
  2. What were the natural features of Sparta and Lakedaimonia, and where were they found?
  3. Which natural features were important for trade, and which were important for local use?
  4. Did the Spartans build large monuments around the city? Explain your answer.
- 

## Significant sites

While the traditional view of Sparta was that it was unimpressive, that does not mean there was nothing there. It was a focal point for the surrounding region, which made it an important political, economic and religious centre.

## Public buildings

Aside from the temples already mentioned, there were many smaller cult buildings and shrines. For example, a hero shrine was established to worship the memory of two particularly brave soldiers who fell at the Battle of Thermopylae: Maron and Alpheios. Similarly, the regent Pausanias and King Leonidas were also worshipped at a sanctuary next to the Temple of Athena Khalkioikos. A private monument was also dedicated to the bravest Spartan at the Battle of Thermopylae: Dienekes.

There were many other public buildings around Sparta. We know from written sources that Sparta had hippodromes (for horse-racing, a particularly important and popular Spartan sport), stadia, a dromos (running track) and a gymnasium, but these have not been uncovered. Rather than being dominated by large public buildings, it seems that the city of Sparta was comprised of large open spaces. The acropolis was not like the large acropolis of Athens that had significant buildings on it, but simply the most prominent hill in the city. It has been suggested that the agora was located at the south side of the acropolis,<sup>2</sup> which was the central point of Sparta.



**FIGURE 1.5** The Tomb of Leonidas, once a site of worship, now sits in a small park in modern Sparta.

## Source Study 1.1 Shrines in Sparta

### Source A: Pausanias

At the grove of plane-trees, there is also a hero-shrine to Kyniska, the daughter of the Spartan king Archidamus. She was the first female horse-breeder and the first female to take victory in the chariot racing at the Olympia. Behind the stoa built next to the grove of plane-trees are other hero shrines, one to Alcimus, one to Enaraiphoros, and, not too far away, one to Dorkeos, and nearby, one to Sebros ... There are sanctuaries to Helen and Herakles; the former is near the grave of Alcman, and the latter is very close to the wall on which there is an armed statue of Herakles.

Pausanias, 3.15.1

## Questions

1. What do you think is the most interesting thing about the hero shrine to Knysiska in Source A?
2. Alcman was a Spartan poet. Why do you think they made a poet's grave so prominent?

The *skias*, a large open-air building in which meetings of the *ekklesia* (assembly) were held, was also located in Sparta. The agora was also thought originally to be where the army met before marching out on campaigns. Since you had to be a Spartan soldier, an equal, to vote in the *ekklesia*, the political and military significance of the city of Sparta in the region is also noted by modern historians.

### *skias*

the large, open building in which the Spartan *ekklesia* met

### *ekklesia*

a meeting of the Spartiates as a political body for deliberation on matters put to it



FIGURE 1.6 Footings and elements of the walls of the agora

### **chorus**

an area where large groups of singers would perform as part of festivals or competitions

### **Gymnopaedia**

an important Spartan religious festival

## Religious buildings

Religion was also valued in the city. The *chorus*, an area of the agora used for ritual dancing and recital competitions, became the focal point for the celebration of the **Gymnopaedia**. As poetry and singing were an important part of life (contrary to many depictions of Sparta, both ancient and modern), the location of the *chorus* in the agora is testament to its significance in Spartan life. The agora was also the intersection of important roads that led to religious sites: the Aphetais, which led to Amyklai, and the roads to the Temple of Athena Khalkioikos and the Temple of Artemis Orthia. The monument to the hero Orestes was also located in the city, and was allegedly where his bones were buried after being brought back from the city of Tegea.

## Houses

Remains of houses are not commonly found in Sparta. There is one building thought to be a house from the Archaic period, to the north of the city near the Eurotas River. It had two rooms, one 7.5 metres long and the other 5.5 metres long with an adjoining courtyard, probably made of mudbricks, and a tiled roof. Houses were probably similar in the Classical period, though larger and possibly with two storeys, as we know that wealthy Spartans liked to display their wealth lavishly in their houses.

## Around Lakedaimonia

Sparta was unwalled, a fact that was significant in the ancient world. It was believed that Sparta required no walls because the army was invincible. However, pottery finds on important hill sites tell us that there were probably several garrisons located within 10 kilometres of Sparta. Important harbour towns around the Peloponnese were also walled, indicating that while Sparta may have been unwalled, defensive networks were in place.

Lakedaimonia was populated by a large number of small farming settlements in the Archaic period, but they gradually changed from small hamlets and farmsteads to larger holdings. It used to be believed that the land was divided into **kleroi** by Lycurgus (the supposed original lawgiver of Sparta) in the Archaic period, but archaeological evidence indicates that there was significant inequality in the size and likely production capability of land throughout Lakedaimonia. Messenia, on the other hand, was farmed using **nucleated population centres**, indicating that Messenian helots lived in settlements and went out to work away from their settlement. The land around Sparta in the Archaic period shows that there were many small farmsteads, but during the Classical period this had changed to larger estates, suggesting an inequality of wealth developed within Sparta.

Communication within Lakedaimonia and Sparta was facilitated by a network of roads that have survived until today. They were standardised in size, with grooves cut 1.4 metres apart, probably indicating that they were built not only to help military campaigns, but also to assist trade. These roads are found on the flat plains of the Peloponnese, and high into the mountains.

### kleroi

the parcels of land allotted to Spartiates at birth and given to them upon successful completion of their military training

### nucleated population centres

the condition in which more people live in large centres than in surrounding countryside

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Name the most significant monuments that existed in Sparta. Explain what they tell us about the Spartans.
2. What were the public buildings that existed in Sparta and what do they tell us about what Spartans valued?
3. Research Leonidas and the role he played in Spartan history. Explain what his public grave tells us about the Spartans.
4. What does the location of the *chorus* tell us about the importance of song in Spartan society?
5. What do we know about Spartan houses?
6. Explain the significance of the *skias* and its location.
7. Why was Sparta unwalled? Without walls, how was it protected?
8. Describe the population distribution of Lakedaimonia and Messenia and how this changed over time.
9. Kings were responsible for the maintenance of roads in Lakedaimonia. Why do you think this responsibility fell to them?

## Greek writers' views of Sparta

When comparing the written sources about Sparta to almost any other Greek city of this time (except Athens), historians have an abundance of material spanning topics of not only history, but also of many other aspects of society. This supplements the less abundant (but still important) archaeological material, sometimes supporting the written sources, other times making it more problematic. Significantly, all **extant** written sources, with the exception of the Spartan poets Alcman and Tyrtaeus, are by non-Spartans (mainly Athenians) and/or were written years, and sometimes centuries, after the periods in question. Also, Spartan society changed significantly up to 371 BC. This means that even if later historians, such as Pausanias, describe what they saw themselves in Sparta, it is unlikely that what was seen by the historians was done in the same manner 400 years after 371 BC. Errors preserved in contemporary sources may have been the result of simple misunderstandings about Sparta. But most historians believe that much of the incorrect information, particularly about the rugged nature of Spartan society, was probably deliberately circulated by Spartan authorities to create a certain image of Sparta and Spartans – this has been called the **Spartan mirage**.

### extant

still in existence, existing, surviving

### Spartan mirage

a theory that the Spartans deliberately made the Greeks think incorrect information about them was true so that they would believe the Spartans to be more powerful and single-minded than they actually were

## Contemporary sources

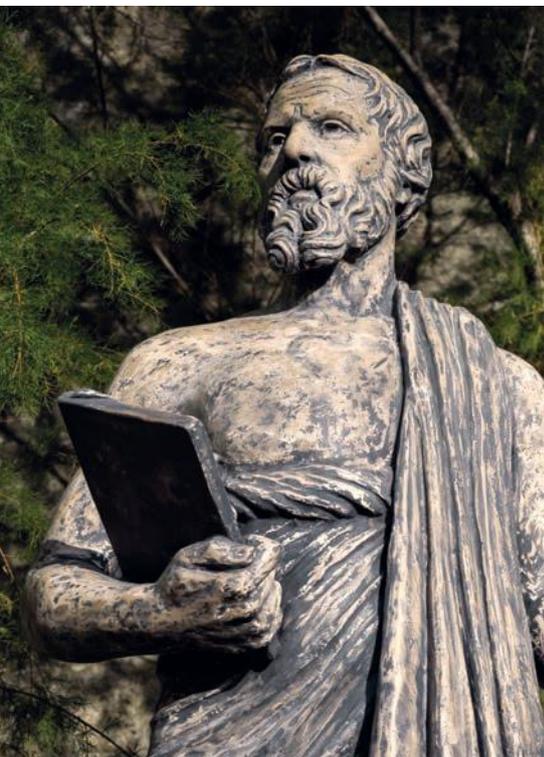
It is fortunate that there remain a number of written sources providing significant details about Spartan society, particularly those of Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon. Each of these authors were alive at the time and visited Sparta or spoke extensively to Spartans, making them important sources. However, Herodotus came from the city of Halicarnassus and spent much time in Athens during a period of mutual suspicion and conflict between Athens and Sparta, which no doubt coloured his account of Sparta. Thucydides was an Athenian general during the **Peloponnesian War** between Athens and Sparta and, although he visited Sparta and with Spartans, his account is thought to reflect the 'official line' in Spartan society and history, which emphasises the **exceptionalism** of Sparta. Finally, Xenophon was an Athenian general and aristocrat who lived in Sparta and the Peloponnese, and was a good friend of the Spartan king Agesilaus II, who gave him property and an income on which to live. While the traditional view of historians is that Xenophon was too pro-Spartan, historians are now more willing to note the subtle criticisms of Sparta and King Agesilaus than has previously been recognised.

### Peloponnesian War

the war between Sparta and Athens, fought 431–424 BC and 413–404 BC

### exceptionalism

the idea that a state is better than others because of its divine destiny to succeed



**FIGURE 1.7** Herodotus, commonly described as the father of history, was among the first to draw on sources to develop his interpretations of the past. This modern statue is in Bodrum, Turkey, the site of his birthplace, the Greek city of Halicarnassus.

### Persian Wars

the invasion of Greece by the Persians in 490 BC and 480/79 BC

### ethnography

the study of the characteristics and history of specific ethnic groups

## Herodotus, c.484–425 BC

Herodotus is one of the most important writers in Western history as he composed the first extensive 'history' ever written. This meant that he had no models to use as the basis for his work. He wrote a history of the **Persian Wars**, the invasion of Greece by the Persians in 490 and 480/479 BC. *The Histories*, as they are known, record not only the events of the invasion, but also the separate peoples as they came into contact with the Persians, making it as much an **ethnography** as a history. It is interesting that the Spartans were the only Greeks given a detailed ethnographical background in the same way that non-Greeks were, which makes the Spartans stand out in Herodotus' history. To do this, Herodotus probably used various sources, written by both Spartans and non-Spartans. He also seems to have consulted various Spartan allies and opponents to create an account that deliberately depicted the Spartans negatively. Given that he was writing in the middle of the 5th century BC in Athens (even though he was not Athenian), this would have been acceptable and well-received.

Herodotus thought Sparta was vastly different from the rest of Greece. Ethnically they were Greek, but their customs marked them out as unique. Herodotus not only identified them differently, but he also depicted them in a very poor light. This was so much the case that recent research has focused on the extent to which Herodotus deliberately described the Spartans in this way to warn potential Spartan allies of the untrustworthy Spartan nature.

Herodotus primarily wrote unfavourably about the kings, characterising them as Persian despots by referring to their unfamiliar funeral rites and self-mutilating mourners, unusual sexual relations and marriages, the frequent sacrilege, tyrannical attitude towards other Greeks and their power over foreign affairs. He often depicted the poor behaviour of Spartans as a group, rather than as small groups of Spartans or individuals. While Herodotus was implicitly and explicitly critical of the Athenian attitude to their empire-building, the Spartan desire for power and domination is also emphasised, with the Spartans usually acting only out of self-interest. There are some positive stories preserved about Spartans, but they are few in number when compared to the negative depictions by Herodotus, as described by Wolfgang Blösel in the essay 'Herodotus' allusions to the Sparta of his day'.

Hesitancy, fear and vacillation stand out as central characteristics of the Spartans in their foreign affairs in Herodotus' work. The Spartans' lack of resolution makes the other Greeks think that the Spartans are primarily driven by selfishness and duplicity ... In most cases, the Spartans seem to have conducted themselves in a way that was disappointing to the Greeks of their own free will and on their own initiative.

W Blösel, 'Herodotus' allusions to the Sparta of his day', in T Harrison and E Irwin (eds), *Interpreting Herodotus*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2018, p 257.

## Thucydides c.460–c.400 BC

Written in the later part of the 5th century BC, Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is about the war between Sparta and Athens, which started in 431 BC and ended with the Spartan defeat of Athens in 404 BC. Thucydides was a young man during the war, probably in his 20s or 30s at its start. He served as an Athenian **strategos** in the mid-420s BC and was exiled from Athens after his defeat at the hands of the brilliant Spartan commander Brasidas. He spent the next decades researching his topic, speaking to many people around the Greek world, including Spartans.

Thucydides spent much time 'creating' a history, not just recording it. His work is full of explanations and justifications, and is written in a philosophical way, as were most written works of the period. He created a stereotype of the Spartans as cautious, slow to act and traditional in every way, but then presented examples to the contrary that almost seem designed to confuse the reader. The Spartans deliberately cultivated an image of themselves as dour and focused only on their military life, and in some ways it seems that Thucydides was a victim of the Spartan mirage. But it has been suggested that Thucydides wrote his history to show that everything in war is fluid and changeable, even the cultural characteristics of a group of people. Thucydides even provided evidence directly from a Spartan perspective that argues against one of the most central stereotypes of Spartans, their **brachylogy**.

However, we can detect that while Thucydides remained generally impartial in his account of the Peloponnesian War, he could be critical of Spartans and their institutions. He implies regularly that Sparta, through the institution of the monarchy (seen as an ancient and old-fashioned political model), was similar to Persia in many ways. While Thucydides is critical of Athenian imperialism, he also criticises Spartan imperial practices and depicts the Spartans as largely self-serving.

**strategos**

a general or commander

**brachylogy**

the style of speaking in brief or terse language to get the key points across

## Source Study 1.2 Thucydides and the Spartans

### Source A: Thucydides

Speaking at length is not contrary to our custom. Though it is the custom of our country not to proclaim in great detail when saying little will be sufficient, we say much should the appropriate circumstances and need to instruct in matters of importance arise.

Thucydides, 4.17.2

### Source B: Powell

If Spartans ... agreed to give information about their state to Thucydides, they might take care that such information, if it was eventually fed back to Athens, would help rather than subvert the Laconian cause. Thucydides, as we have tried to show, may have been told many things calculated to protect Sparta's reputation, and to hide that city's weaknesses.

A Powell, 'Information from Sparta: A trap for Thucydides' in A Powell and P Debnar (eds), *Thucydides and Sparta*, The Classical Press of Wales, London, 2021, p 263.

## Questions

1. What was the stereotype of the Spartans that Thucydides depicted in Source A? In what way does Thucydides seem to criticise that stereotype?
2. Does Powell (Source B) believe that Thucydides' depictions were accurate? Explain your answer.



**FIGURE 1.8** The parliament of Austria, in the capital Vienna, was built in the second half of the 19th century. Among sculptures of other classical Greek and Roman figures are statues of Thucydides (left) and Xenophon (right).

### Xenophon c.430–354 BC

Xenophon is one of the most interesting sources when it comes to Spartan history. He was an Athenian general who rose to prominence as the eventual leader of a group of Greeks who fought Persia as mercenaries in the early 390s BC. He was exiled from Athens, probably in 399 BC, and from 394 BC lived in the Peloponnese at Sparta's expense. He wrote many different books, and his works of history include the *Anabasis*, an account of his campaign in Persia, and the *Hellenika*, a history of Greece that continued from where Thucydides' work broke off in the mid-4th century BC. He also wrote an *encomium* of his friend the Spartan king Agesilaus, a book on the Spartan constitution, a book on commanding cavalry forces, and even a book on household economics (the *Oikonomikos*).

It has been pointed out by many historians that Xenophon is very pro-Spartan in his works. He was, after all, given a pleasant life by the Spartan king, and he was even allowed to put his sons through the *agoge* – a rare honour for children of non-Spartiates. Interestingly, it has been proposed that his three most important works focusing on Sparta (the *Hellenika*, *Agesilaus* and *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians*) are closely interrelated but present different perspectives of Sparta.

In the *Hellenika*, Xenophon presented a Sparta involved in complex diplomatic relations as the leader of Greece. Xenophon relied heavily on the Spartans to supply information for his research, which skewed his portrayal significantly. The work portrayed Spartan exceptionalism, emphasising the traditional views of Sparta that the Spartans themselves wanted to put out into the wider Greek world, that is, the Spartan mirage. Traditional 'Lycurgan' Spartan behaviour and the values of bravery, obedience to the laws, and concord within the state, were praised and demonstrated throughout the *Hellenika*, Xenophon was

#### encomium

a form of writing that often sacrifices the truth to praise an individual

#### agoge

the Spartan military training/education system

not blindly apologetic for the Spartans, however, and incidents such as the unjust surprise seizure of Thebes by the Spartans in 382 BC received direct criticism (while leaving out Spartan speeches when they no doubt would have made one) points to implicit criticism.

The *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians* is the most complete source on the workings of the Spartan constitution and government. It is written with complete focus on the state as a whole, and individuals are almost never mentioned. This emphasises the unity of Sparta and its supposed ancient constitution. In contrast, the *Agesilaus* is a representation of Sparta through King Agesilaus II, Xenophon's friend. It was designed not only to praise his friend, but also to use Agesilaus as the model of the ideal Spartan to project an image of all Sparta and Spartans. However, Xenophon is gently critical of Agesilaus at times in the *Hellenika*, and we can compare both works to identify how Xenophon created the *Agesilaus* as an *encomium* rather than history. For example, Agesilaus is praised for his **panhellenism** in the *Agesilaus*, but in the *Hellenika*, he is depicted as treating other Greeks rudely and with great disdain, only concerned with the benefits for Sparta in all situations.

However, Xenophon had a detailed knowledge of Sparta from someone who was on the inside looking out, unlike other sources who were looking in. He clearly knew about the internal workings and machinations of Spartan politics (which were far more complex than other sources tend to recognise) and was a skilled writer. Xenophon was also a close friend and student of the philosopher Socrates and, as a result, we should remember that his works are not just history, but also philosophical works, designed to examine larger ideas about people and politics.

### panhellenism

the idea that all of Greece should work together for common goals

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why is Herodotus important in the study of historical writing?
2. In what way was Herodotus also an ethnographer?
3. What does the ethnographical treatment of the Spartans by Herodotus say about his view of the Spartans?
4. Why do you think Herodotus may have been biased against Sparta in his writing?
5. How does Herodotus create a negative depiction of the Spartans?
6. How does Blösel claim that Herodotus depicts the Spartans in his writing?
7. Why did Thucydides have a personal interest in depicting the Spartans in a certain way?
8. In what way were the depictions of Spartans in Thucydides similar to those in Herodotus?
9. Explain Xenophon's connections to Sparta.
10. In what way do the three main works of Xenophon create different, but interrelated, representations of Sparta?
11. In what ways does Xenophon present negative representations of Spartans?
12. What made Xenophon a particularly important source for Spartan history?

## Later sources

While there are clear problems with contemporary sources, later sources present similar problems. Wealthy people (particularly in the Roman period) wanted to visit Sparta, much as a tourist would today, because of the important role it played in Greek history. Spartans wanted to control the way that their history was presented so that the Spartan mirage continued, and they staged elaborate rituals emphasising the bloody nature of classical Spartan society, even though this was not an accurate representation of Sparta in the classical period. Moreover, though Sparta was not powerful after 371 BC, temples continued to be built and statues continued to be erected, misleading later visitors and writers who visited the city in the ancient world. When this is combined with the deliberate misinformation Spartans spread about themselves to create the Spartan mirage, we need to be careful to disentangle the truth about Sparta from the fiction.

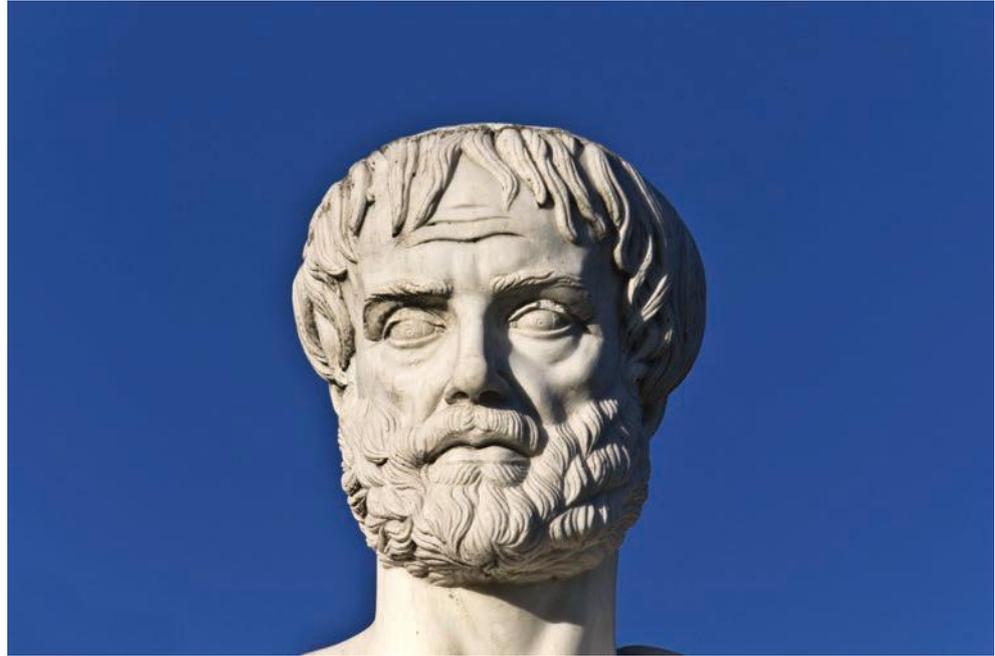


FIGURE 1.9 A statue of Aristotle at Stageira, Greece, the place of his birth

### Aristotle, 384–322 BC

Aristotle was considered the foremost philosopher of his day in Athens. A student of Plato, he inherited a tradition of Athenian intellectualism that had existed for more than a century. Aristotle lectured on all manner of things in Athens, from natural science to political organisation, and wrote books with a similarly large scope. His works focus on broad topics, but his references to Sparta provide us with an insight into his thoughts about the city-state and its people. Also, because he lived during the period studied (though he wrote his works after 371 BC), he preserved useful information for historians.

While Aristotle generally favoured political structures that incorporated elements of various systems, as the Spartan system did (monarchy with the kings, **oligarchy** with the **gerousia**, democracy from the **ephors** and the *ekklesia*), he was critical of Sparta. Much of his criticism is levelled at the inequality in Sparta, which clearly existed in his time (though it has only been in the last few decades that historians have largely agreed on this), and he was particularly critical of the women's role in this. This is partly because Aristotle was very **misogynistic**, but his portrayal of women as large landowners is generally thought to be correct. He disliked the notion of the ephorate, because while the *gerousia* represented the best element of society, he thought that the *ephors* came from the ordinary people of society, something that modern historians do not agree with. All in all, he thought that the constitution of Lycurgus, though it had excellent aims, made Spartans greedy and selfish.

### Pausanias, c.110–180 AD

The work of the travel guide writer Pausanias is an important, though problematic, source for Spartan society. He wrote a guide to the Roman world in the mid-2nd century AD, travelling and recording what he saw. He also preserved many of the stories of the places he visited, which makes his work an excellent source for the depiction of Sparta in his time. He preserved the myths of Sparta's origins and founders, the history of the 5th and 4th centuries, and descriptions of what he saw while he was there, with explanations for its origins. He also provided descriptions of the *komai* of Sparta and the regions immediately surrounding the city.

#### **oligarchy**

a government run by a small number of (usually) wealthy people

#### **gerousia**

the advisory council of elders in Sparta

#### **ephors**

the five men elected annually to assist in running the state

#### **misogyny**

the dislike or hatred of women

## Source Study 1.3 The agora in Sparta

### Source A: Pausanias

The Lakedaimonians in Sparta have an agora worth a look. The council chamber of the *gerousia*, that of the *ephors*, guardians of the laws, and of those called the Bidiaians, are all in the agora. The *gerousia* is the council that has the most power over the Lakedaimonian body of laws, while the rest are the magistrates. There are five *ephors* and five Bidiaians. At the place called the grove of the plane-trees, the latter regularly hold contests for the ephebes, while the *ephors* manage the most serious affairs, and one gives his name to the year, just as in Athens one of the nine people called archons does.

The most distinguishing feature of the agora is the building called the Persian Stoa, made from the spoils of the Persians. Over time, they continually altered it to be as large and decorated as it is now. There are Persians of white marble on the pillars, including Mardonius, son of Gobryas [a Persian commander], among others. There is also Artemisia, daughter of Lygdamis [another Persian commander], queen of Halicarnassus. They say that she volunteered to join the expedition of Xerxes against Greece and distinguished herself at the naval battle near Salamis.

Pausanias 3.11.2-3

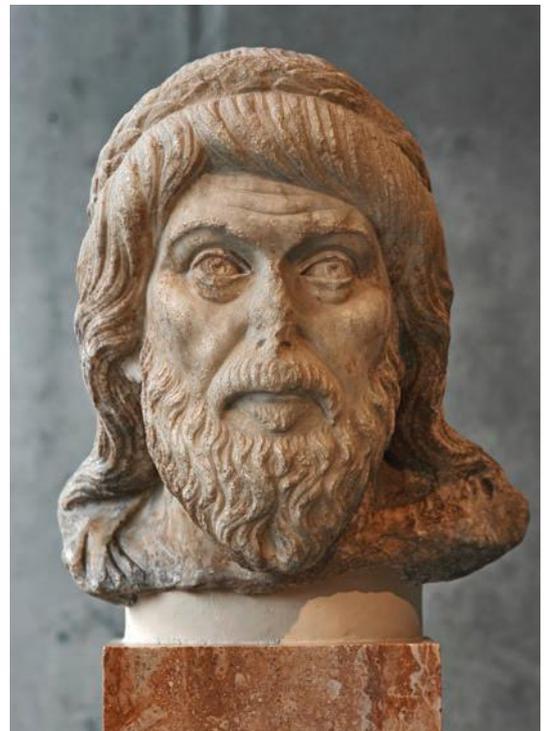
## Questions

1. Read Source A carefully. How does Pausanias present his 'history' in his writing?
2. How useful do you feel this extract would be for understanding the Spartan agora?

### Plutarch, 46–119 AD

Of all sources, Plutarch is one of the most important. Writing in the late 1st century and early 2nd century AD, he was a prolific author. He is most famous for his *Lives*, parallel biographies that compare a prominent Greek and Roman with a summary of their similarities and differences. He also wrote works on love, sayings, the glory of Athens, the lying nature of Herodotus, and many more. It is most important to recognise that even though Plutarch preserved much information about Sparta and Spartan society, he was writing to educate people about good and bad, morality and how people should live their lives. Each of the *Lives* has a similar three-part structure (focusing on background, deeds and personal life), and each is crafted to show both their strengths and weaknesses, which Plutarch emphasises for effect. The Spartan *Lives* he wrote (Lycurgus, Agesilaus, Lysander, Agis and Cleomenes) each contain important information about Sparta, but very deliberately create a whole understanding of Sparta. It is also clear that Plutarch read very widely and used Xenophon's works as the basis for much of his Spartan history.

Of particular importance is the *Life of Lycurgus*. This provided much of the basis of understanding of Spartan society that is used by historians today. Modern historians, until relatively recently, thought of Spartan society as austere and dominated by its military culture because of Lycurgus' reforms, which is largely a result of the impact that Plutarch's writing had on the creation of Spartan history. Many historians now believe that Plutarch preserved information



**FIGURE 1.10** This stone bust is commonly believed to represent Plutarch, the author of some of the most influential accounts of Sparta.

about Sparta that the Spartans wanted people to believe (the Spartan mirage), and gathered this information from earlier sources (most of which no longer survive). Plutarch is an invaluable source for historians, but much more work is done by historians now to try to separate factual information about Sparta from the more fanciful information.

## Source Study 1.4 Plutarch's overall view of Sparta

### Source A: Gengler

... Plutarch deliberately accepts Xenophon's interpretation of Sparta's decline: as long as the Spartans respected the laws of Lycurgus, their city was unrivalled; but the irruption of wealth after 404 BC, which already violated Lycurgus' precepts, destroyed the system. This passage from the end of the *Lycurgus* reveals the overall framework of the Plutarchan vision of Spartan history.

O Gengler, 'Plutarch's and Xenophon's Sparta: Intra- and intertextual relations in the Spartan *Lives*', in T Schmidt, M Vamvouri and R Hirsch-Luipold (eds), *The Dynamics of Intertextuality in Plutarch*, Brill, Leiden, 2020, p 117.

## Question

1. What does Gengler tell us about the overall picture that both Xenophon and Plutarch paint of Spartan society?

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the key problems with using later sources to study Spartan society?
2. In what way is Aristotle critical of Spartan society? Since he is a philosopher, in what ways could his depiction present problems for historians?
3. What type of work did Pausanias write? How does this make him both useful and problematic for historians?
4. Why is Plutarch such an important source for historians to understand?
5. Explain the importance of Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* for understanding Spartan society.
6. Explain the idea of the Spartan mirage. In what ways do the contemporary sources for Spartan society (Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon) both provide good information and create problems for the later historians (Aristotle, Pausanias and Plutarch)?

## Further resources

W Blösel, 'Herodotus' allusions to the Spartans of his day', in T Harrison and E Irwin (eds), *Interpreting Herodotus*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2018, pp 243–264.

W Cavanaugh, 'An archaeology of Ancient Sparta with reference to Laconia and Messenia' in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta* (Vol. 1), Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 61–92.

A Powell (ed), *Xenophon and Sparta*, The Classical Press of Wales, Swansea, 2020.

O Gengler, 'Plutarch's and Xenophon's Sparta: Intra- and intertextual relations in the Spartan *Lives*', in T Schmidt, M Vamvouri and R Hirsch-Luipold (eds), *The Dynamics of Intertextuality in Plutarch*, Brill, Leiden, 2020, pp 111–128.

A Powell, 'Information from Sparta: A trap for Thucydides' in A Powell and P Debnar (eds), *Thucydides and Sparta*, The Classical Press of Wales, London, 2021, pp 221–274.

## Activities

### Bringing it together

1. Describe Sparta and Lakedaimonia, making specific reference to monuments and natural features.
2. What do the features of Sparta tell us about Spartan attitudes towards religion?
3. Are the contemporary sources for Spartan society as far back as 371 BC always reliable? Explain your answer, using examples.
4. In what way do later sources preserve the idea of the Spartan mirage?

### Activities

1. Create an annotated map of Lakedaimonia, noting key sites, monuments and cities.
2. Research one of the historians and complete the following questions.
  - a. What was their social background?
  - b. When did they write their work?
  - c. What work(s) did they write?
  - d. What examples are there of their attitudes towards Sparta?

### HSC-style questions

1. Name two geographical features of Sparta. (2 marks)
2. Outline the key resources of Sparta. (4 marks)
3. Explain the value and limitations of the written sources for Sparta. (8 marks)

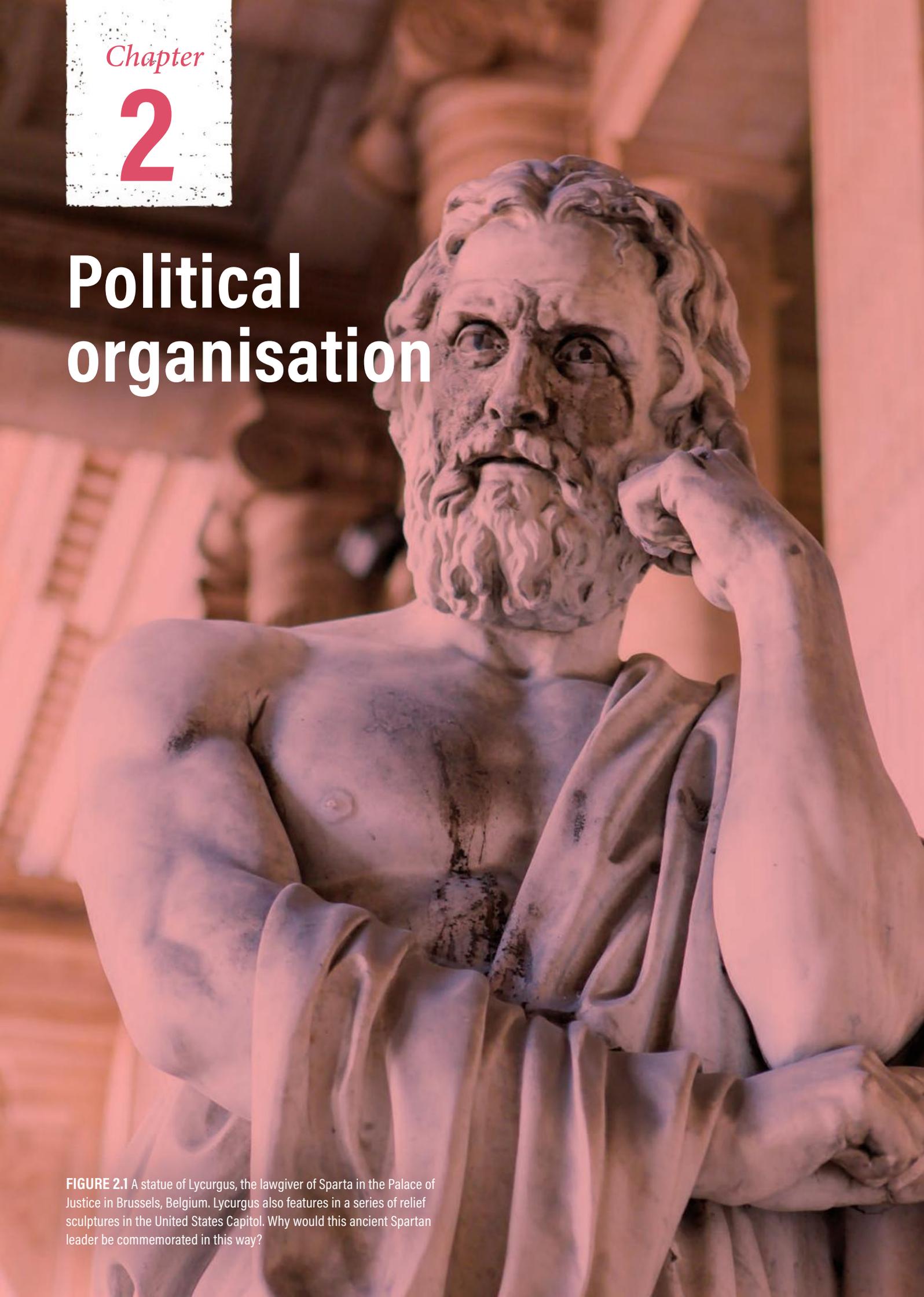
## Endnote

1. W Cavanaugh, 'An archaeology of Ancient Sparta with reference to Laconia and Messenia' in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta* (Vol. 1), Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 67.
2. W Cavanaugh, 'An archaeology of Ancient Sparta with reference to Laconia and Messenia' in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta* (Vol. 1), Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 67.
3. W Blösel, 'Herodotus' allusions to the Sparts of his day', in T Harrison and E Irwin (eds), *Interpreting Herodotus*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2018, pp 243–264.
4. E Greenwood, 'Thucydides' general attitude to Sparta' in A Powell (ed), *Thucydides and Sparta*, The Classical Press of Wales, Swansea, 2021, p 2.

Chapter

# 2

## Political organisation



**FIGURE 2.1** A statue of Lycurgus, the lawgiver of Sparta in the Palace of Justice in Brussels, Belgium. Lycurgus also features in a series of relief sculptures in the United States Capitol. Why would this ancient Spartan leader be commemorated in this way?

Sparta had a unique political organisation in the Greek world. Not only did the Spartan government have kings, which most *poleis* had removed well before the Classical period, but they also had two, who were technically equal in power. Their power was balanced by several other positions of different types, but the Spartans themselves seem to have questioned the continuing existence of kings. Much of this, as well as the most prominent features of Spartan life (at least in the Classical period) was laid down by the *Great Rhetra*, with which the lawgiver Lycurgus became eternally associated. This document and the mythical lawgiver provided foundation stories for the Spartans that continually changed throughout the Archaic and Classical periods.

### By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- identify the key features of the *Great Rhetra*
- explain the importance of the myth of Lycurgus and the changing use of his story over time
- outline the key features of Spartan government
- explain and assess the importance of the roles of the kings, *ephors*, *gerousia* and *ekklesia* in Spartan government and society.

## The *Great Rhetra*

Spartans and other Greeks believed Lycurgus to be the man who established the Spartan government system and way of life. The story of Lycurgus seems to have changed significantly over time and was used by different leaders to serve various political purposes. It was said by some of ancient sources that the way Lycurgus was able to achieve his goal of a better Sparta was by implementing the *Great Rhetra*, an oracle possibly from Delphi. Few, if any, historians believe that Lycurgus was real or even based on a real person, and the focus of scholarship is on how and why the myth of Lycurgus was propagandised and used to achieve change in society at different points in time.

### The mystery of Lycurgus

The first reference to Lycurgus is from Simonides, preserved in Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* (1.8), who says that Lycurgus was the son of King Prytanis and brother to King Eunomos, placing him in the first half of the 8th century BC. Simonides could be one of two possible individuals: if he was the poet Simonides of Ceos, this reference was made no earlier than the second half of the 6th century BC. If the Simonides in question was the grandson of the aforementioned poet, as most scholars believe, the reference is from the second half of the 5th century BC.

The first detailed reference, however, is Herodotus, writing in the mid-5th century BC. He gives two possibilities about Lycurgus' reforms: either Lycurgus received the reforms from the Delphic Oracle, or he was the guardian of the Spartan King Leobotas (placing him in the 9th century BC) and based the Spartan laws on the laws of Crete to transform Spartan society from lawlessness to *eunomia*.

Thucydides, writing later in the 5th century BC, talks about the transformation of Sparta from lawlessness to orderliness about 400 years prior to his writing, but does not mention Lycurgus by name. Hellanicus, the Athenian historian whom Thucydides criticises for making mistakes, claimed that the Spartan constitution was actually founded by the kings

#### **eunomia**

the concept of good laws in Greek society, sometimes personified as a goddess

Eurystheus and Procles (the first Spartan Kings). In contrast, Xenophon, in his *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians* (probably written in the 370s BC), talks in detail about Lycurgus. He claims that Lycurgus instituted his reforms of the Spartan constitution entirely by himself, not copying any other state, saying that he lived ‘in the time of the descendants of Herakles,’ implying that the laws were particularly ancient.

We also know of two Spartans who wrote about the Spartan constitution and Lycurgus: the general Thibron at the beginning of the 4th century BC, and the exiled Spartan king Pausanias, who wrote political pamphlets while in exile in the early 4th century BC. Pausanias’ account of Lycurgus was particularly influential on later accounts, and it is probably in Pausanias’ pamphlet, which preserved sections of several oracles, that what we know as the *Great Rhetra* was preserved. Plato and Aristotle also mentioned Lycurgus for various purposes, and it has been suggested that Xenophon’s portrayal of Lycurgus as more as a philosopher-statesman is a result of the ‘Athenianisation’ of Lycurgus by Plato. This is important because our surviving sources from the period are Athenian, and these heavily influenced later accounts of Lycurgus.

## Source Study 2.1 Xenophon’s image of Lycurgus

### Source A: David

The present writer cannot agree that the idea of Lykourgos the philosopher, the founder of an ideal state ... was no more than a Spartan invention. Xenophon’s Lykourgos is drawn with certain Socratic touches which may be the product of the author’s own imagination. These are, a prevailing austerity and simplicity ... modesty ... pursuit of virtue and the attainment of *eudaimonia* [good-mindedness], emphasis on the importance of moderation ... and the demand for self-control in the face of instincts: *eros* [erotic feelings] ... food, wine ... and material wealth ... All of these are characteristics of Sokrates in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* ... It is also worth wondering whether Plato’s enigmatic description of the Spartans as a people of philosophers ... may have influenced Xenophon’s image of the founder of the Spartan *kosmos* as a practical philosopher ... In any case, from Xenophon onwards the lawgiver acquires Athenian characteristics; like the author who portrays him, he becomes a person with a hybrid nature.

E David, ‘Xenophon and the myth of Lykourgos’, in A Powell (ed), *Xenophon and Sparta*, The Classical Press of Wales, 2020, pp 210–211.

## Questions

1. What is the main argument put forward by David?
2. What are the features of Xenophon’s Lycurgus?
3. On whom does David think that Xenophon modelled Lycurgus? Why do you think Xenophon did this?

The historian Ephorus claimed that Lycurgus was a regent, had travelled to Crete after his regency and brought back laws to reform the state in the early 9th century BC. Ephorus wrote an extensive biography of Lycurgus, which included his guardianship of the young King Charillus and his wanderings around Greece, then his return to Sparta, a visit to the Oracle at Delphi, legislation in Sparta and voluntary exile and a noble suicide. He even met Homer in this story. This was used as a basis on which Plutarch wrote his (largely fictional) account of Lycurgus in the early 2nd century AD, borrowing from all earlier sources to create a complete biography.

There were two basic stories about Lycurgus: that he was a common Spartiate, or that he was a regent for a king. It is more likely that most Spartans believed he was a regent, and it seems that a variant of the myth was already circulating in the mid-6th century BC. Some stories say that he passed reforms while he was regent, but most variants of the story talk about Lycurgus resigning the regency early, going into self-imposed exile and returning to implement his reforms. It was believed that he went into exile either because he was unjustly accused of plotting the downfall of his ward or that he refused the widowed queen's advances in order for him to ensure that the young king lived.

## Source Study 2.2 Lycurgus as regent for the king

### Source A: Plutarch

Polydeuctes was dead a little while afterwards, and then Lycurgus became king, as many had thought, and he ruled until it came to be known that his brother's wife was pregnant. But as soon as he realised this, he declared that the child was to be king, if it was to be a boy, and he determined his kingship was as a guardian. However, the woman approached him secretly, saying that she would destroy the baby in her womb on the condition that he would marry her when he was king of Sparta. Though he hated her morality, he didn't approve her words, and he pretended to approve and accept it. He said to her, however, that she did not need to use drugs to cause a miscarriage, as it would cause her harm, because he would get the child out of the way as soon as it was born. In this way, he diverted her from her course for the full length of time, and when he learned that she was in labour, he sent people to sit with her through the pangs of childbirth and watch over her, ordering them that, should a girl be born, to hand her over to the women, but if it was a son, to carry the boy to him, whatever he happened to be doing.

It happened that when he was eating dinner with the chief magistrate, a son was born and servants brought the little baby to him, and receiving him said to those who were present, 'A king has been born to you, O Spartans,' and he laid it down in the king's chair and named him Kharilaos on account of the joy with which he filled everyone, admiring his good spirit and righteousness. Thus, Lycurgus ruled for eight months in total, and in all ways he was admired by the citizens, and the people who followed him on account of his virtue and were ready and willing to carry out his commands outnumbered those who obeyed him just because he was king and possessed royal power.

There were also those, however, who envied him and tried to resist the increase in his power, particularly the family and friends of the king's mother, who thought she had been treated outrageously. Her brother, Leonidas, abused Lycurgus once quite boldly, suggesting that he knew clearly that Lycurgus would be king himself, planting suspicion and preparing the accusation in advance against Lycurgus in case anything should happen to the king ... Thus, Lycurgus decided to travel abroad to avoid suspicion, and to continue his wanderings until his nephew came of age and could have a child to succeed him on the throne.

Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 3

## Questions

1. Why was Lycurgus placed in the position of regent at the beginning of this story?
2. What did the wife of the former King Polydeuctes propose to Lycurgus and what was his response?
3. How did Lycurgus guarantee the future of the new king Kharilaos?
4. Why did Lycurgus go abroad?
5. How is Lycurgus depicted in this story? Outline key events in the story that support your assertion.

In almost all the regency stories, it is clear that Lycurgus had the opportunity to become king but he chose the honourable path instead. This is important, because the Spartans do not seem to have wanted to depict Lycurgus as a king. Because Lycurgus (who came to be seen as more important than mere kings) strictly adhered to laws, his story made it clear that even kings should also abide by the law.

Stories about Lycurgus changed over time, reflecting the different political needs of the moment. It is important to note that the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus, who lived in the second half of the 7th century BC, did not mention Lycurgus by name. Some historians have suggested that the tradition had not yet been created, but this is not necessarily the case. It is possible that the poetry of Tyrtaeus was so obviously connected to Lycurgus that he did not need to be mentioned by name. Lycurgus may have been a local god or hero whose story was gradually embellished. It is likely that the myth of Lycurgus existed in the 7th century BC when the establishment of tribes, and the foundation of the *gerousia*, *ekklesia* and prominent cults had already happened.

In the 5th century BC, the Spartans believed that Lycurgus established *eunomia* through a change in the constitution, but that the Kings Theopomus and Polydorus made changes to the constitution, possibly by introducing the ephorate. Hippias of Elis claims that Lycurgus also founded the Spartan military system, so this part of the tradition dates from at least the 5th century BC. Later, non-Spartan 4th century BC authors (Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle and Ephorus) say that he brought about changes in government and society, but that land distribution had happened at an earlier date, possibly influenced by the writing of the exiled King Pausanius. Thus, according to the Spartans, Lycurgus played an important role in the development of the Spartan state, and almost all aspects of social and military life were increasingly attributed to him. The Spartan traditions indicate that they believed that to transform Spartan society, Lycurgus was given an oracle – we call this oracle the *Great Rhetra*.



**FIGURE 2.2** Jacques-Louis David's *Lycurgus of Sparta*, 1791, portrays Lycurgus showing a newborn child, and possible future king, to the council of elders who would determine whether a child was healthy enough to live. It is (possibly incorrectly) believed that if the elders decided that the child was healthy, they would be granted land and allowed to live. Artists in the 18th and 19th centuries paid considerable attention to ancient historical themes in their artwork.



**FIGURE 2.3** Eugène Delacroix's *Lycurgus Consulting the Pythia*, 1835–45, portrays Lycurgus seeking the guidance of the oracle.

## The Great Rhetra

A *rhetra* in Spartan society was any religious pronouncement, and King Pausanius preserved several in his propaganda pamphlets, no doubt using them selectively to prove why he should not have been exiled. There are two traditions about Lycurgus and the *Great Rhetra*. The first claims that Lycurgus was given the *Great Rhetra* by the oracle at Delphi, while the other claims that Lycurgus gave the proposal to the oracle, who approved it. It was preserved in several places, but most importantly in Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*. Plutarch may have obtained it either from Aristotle's *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians* or from Pausanius' political pamphlet of the early 4th century BC (now both lost to us). The *Great Rhetra* says:

After building a temple to Zeus Syllanius and Athena Syllania, and having divided the people into *phylai* and *obai* and established a *gerousia* of thirty members including the *archagetai* [kings], they shall *apellazein* [meet] from season to season between Babyka and Knakion, under which conditions they shall introduce and stand aside, but the people will have the power.

A second part of the *Great Rhetra*, called the Rider, also says that: '... if the people should choose [or speak] crookedly, the **gerontes** and the *archagetai* are to dismiss them.'

While some ancient authors thought that the Rider was a later addition to the *Great Rhetra*, many historians now believe that it is an integral part of the original. By the mid-4th century BC, it became 'official' Spartan belief that King Theopompus introduced the ephorate, and his tomb was located opposite the Temple of Lycurgus. Theopompus was praised by Plato and Aristotle for reforming the monarchy to ensure that it would have a chance to survive. It is in this context that they also believed the Rider to be a later addition, so that the *gerontes* or kings could dismiss the *ekklesia* if the people were being led astray by the *ephors*. In the 3rd century BC, in order to remove the *ephors*, King Cleomenes III disseminated propaganda that the kings used to appoint *ephors*

### **gerontes**

literally 'old men', individual members of the *gerousia*

**fragment**

a part of something one author wrote that was preserved, or copied, by another ancient source that we still possess

when they were on campaign (a reference to Theopompus and the Messenian Wars), and that they were not part of Lycurgus' reforms. Tyrtaeus (**fragment 1**) also talks about Kings Theopompus and Polydorus carrying out reforms with the support of the oracle at Delphi, so it is thought that ancient writers believed the ephorate to have been introduced by Theopompus after the reforms of Lycurgus.

The *Great Rhetra* therefore prescribed the following:

- the establishment of cults to Zeus Syllanius and Athena Syllania
- the reorganisation of the people into groups (*phylai* and *obai*)
- the establishment of the *gerousia* (council of 'elders') of 30 people, which included the kings
- the introduction of procedures for holding assemblies, emphasising the right of the people.

Aristotle also talked about the foundation of the Spartan state through the *Rhetra*. He quotes Tyrtaeus (fragment 1), who said that,

Hearing Phoebus [Apollo], they brought home  
Oracles of the Gods and words of prophecy:  
Let the power in the council belong to the god-honoured kings,  
In whose care is the beautiful city of Sparta,  
And the elderly *gerontes*; next is the common men,  
Responding to [or with] straight *rhetrai* [answers]...

Aristotle, *Politics*, 5.6.1306b36

Diodorus also provides extra information in his quotation from Tyrtaeus:

Thus the Lord of the Silver Bow, far-shooting Apollo  
Proclaimed from this wealthy sanctuary:  
Let the power in the council belong to the God-honoured kings,  
In whose care is the beautiful city of Sparta,  
And the elderly *gerontes*; next is the common men,  
Responding to [or with] straight *rhetrai* [answers],  
They must speak rightly and carry out everything justly,  
Nor are they to give bad counsel to the city;  
And let the masses of people have victory and power.

Diodorus of Sicily, 7.12.6

It is generally believed that Diodorus simply copied more lines from Tyrtaeus than Aristotle did, and that they are from the same poem by Tyrtaeus. Notice that Lycurgus is not mentioned by name in the poems, even though historians believe that Spartans would have automatically assumed it to have been Lycurgus to whom Tyrtaeus is referring.

Since Tyrtaeus is believed to have been alive in the mid-7th century BC, the *Great Rhetra*, about which Tyrtaeus seems to be talking, seems to come from an earlier time and is considered by some historians to be evidence for the beliefs of the foundation of the Spartan state. However, some historians also believe that the *Great Rhetra* was a written record of an oral tradition about the foundation of the Spartan state. This is primarily because the *Great Rhetra* talks about general and wide-ranging actions, whereas genuine legislation from the Archaic period almost always contained very specific measures. It is, therefore, considered by many to date from the beginning of the myths about the Spartan state, rather than from the foundation of the Spartan state. To historians who hold this view, this then explains why Lycurgus is not mentioned by name in Tyrtaeus' poetry.

## Source Study 2.3 The *Rhetra* as a summary of Lycurgus

### Source A: Nafissi

It is perhaps legitimate to consider the *Rhetra* a succinct summary of what was said of Lykourgos, say, in the early sixth century. At this time the Spartans did not attribute to Lykourgos a complete overhaul of the customs of the community. Lykourgos is the protagonist of a primeval organization of the political life of Sparta, but not – as in Herodotus – the reformer who entirely changed its way of life, promoting its excellence in war and peace.

M Nafissi, 'Lykourgos the Spartan "Lawgiver": Ancient beliefs and modern scholarship', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta (Volume I)*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2018, p 99.

### Question

1. What does Nafissi believe about the *Great Rhetra* and when it was written?

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who was Lycurgus?
2. What are the various stories about how Lycurgus came to power?
3. Copy and complete the following table. What do the following ancient sources tell us about Lycurgus?

Historian	What they say about Lycurgus
Plutarch	
Herodotus	
Thucydides	
Simonides	
Hellanicus	
Xenophon	
Ephorus	
Hippias	

4. Why is it significant that Tyrtaeus did not mention Lycurgus in his poetry?
5. How was the myth of Lycurgus used over time by the Spartans?
6. What is a *rhetra* in Spartan society? Why do you think that the *rhetra* of Lycurgus has been called the *Great Rhetra*?
7. What reforms did the *Great Rhetra* establish for Sparta?
8. What element of Spartan government is not mentioned in the *Great Rhetra*? What could this mean?
9. According to both extracts of the *Great Rhetra* in Tyrtaeus, who was the real author of the *Great Rhetra*? Why do you think this is important?
10. How do some historians explain the omission of Lycurgus in the *Great Rhetra*?

# Government

## oligarchy

government run by a small group of men, usually the wealthiest people in the state

## dyarchy

a system of two kings reigning at the same time, with equal power

Spartan government was unique in the Greek world. Philosophers believed that the Spartans had an ideal constitution, with the right mix of monarchy, **oligarchy** and democracy to create the ideal state. In fact, there was great tension between different parts of the government, with particular indignation directed towards the monarchy.

## The kings in Sparta

While all mainland Greek cities had moved away from monarchy, seeing it a sign of an underdeveloped state, Sparta had retained their kings. This situation was so unusual that Sparta was the only Greek city described ethnographically by Herodotus in his *Histories*, in which he recorded the belief of some that the kings had an Egyptian origin. Moreover, they had a dual monarchy (a **dyarchy**) with two families, the Agiads and Eurypontids, each providing a king. However, while other kings of the time had absolute power, or close to it, Spartan kings had their power limited in very real ways by other parts of government and laws circumscribing their power. That is not to say that the kings lacked power – they could use their position, influence and wealth to dominate Spartan political life, best seen in the reigns of Cleomenes I (reigned c.520–c.490 BC) and Agesilaus II (reigned 400–c.360 BC). Much of this influence derived from their lifelong tenure (which could span decades) and their position as supreme commanders in war, a key focus for much Spartan history. This role was affirmed by the position of the kings (*archagatai*) in the *Great Rhetra*.

All Spartan kings were supposedly descended from Herakles, the son of Zeus and among the greatest of Greek mythical heroes, through the first kings, Eurystheus and Procles. From Eurystheus came the Agiad dynasty, and from Procles the Eurypontid dynasty. Their descent from Herakles gave them a semi-divine status in religious Spartan society, placing them above ordinary Spartiates in a very real and meaningful way. It seems that the kings were revered as ‘divinely descended and sanctioned “founder-leaders”’.<sup>1</sup> They also boasted of the connection between the two royal families and Menelaus, Helen and the Dioscuri (Helen’s semi-divine brothers, who accompanied the army on campaign in some representative form). Many of the early kings are also named for qualities that the Spartans valued (for example, Eunomos – ‘good law’, or Soos – ‘safety’ or ‘stability’), indicating that the early kings were probably fictional, representing the ideals that they felt the kings should possess.

There were two stories of the origin of the dyarchy, as can be seen in the following source study.

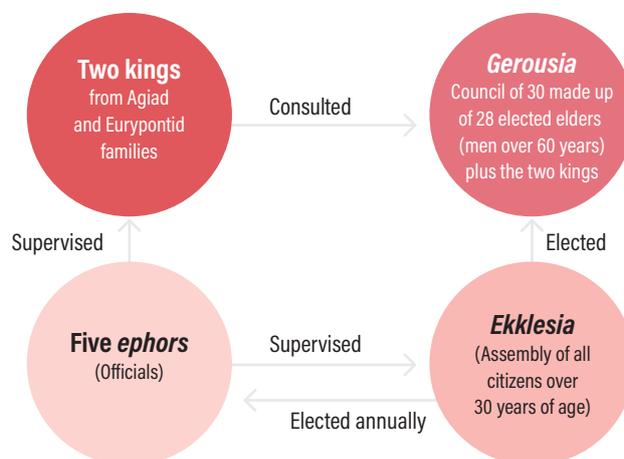


FIGURE 2.4 The structures of Spartan government

## Source Study 2.4 The Spartan dyarchy

### Source A: Herodotus

The Lakedaimonians of that day decided to act according to their customs and make the oldest of the children king. But the Lakedaimonians couldn't tell which was which, or perhaps before this they asked their mother. It was obvious to her which was which, but she didn't say this because she hoped that they both could become king. The Lakedaimonians didn't know what to do, so they sent to the oracle at Delphi to find out what was best to do in this matter. The priestess advised them to make both of them kings, but to give greater honour to the older of the two. When the priestess gave this response, the Lakedaimonians still didn't know how to decide which was the oldest, but a Messenian named Panites advised them of this: watch the mother to see which of the children she bathed and fed first, and if she was always doing this in the same way, they would have found out everything they wanted to discover; but, if she did things differently, then it would be clear to the Lakedaimonians that she had no idea either, and they would need to find a different way. So, the Spartans did as the Messenian advised, and as they watched the mother of Aristodemus' children, they always found her preferring to wash and feed the eldest first ... so, they took that child that was preferred by its mother and had him raised at public expense as the first-born, calling him Eurystheus, and the other Procles. It is said that when these two brothers became men, they fought with each other their whole lives, as their descendants continued to do.

The Lakedaimonians are the only Greeks who tell this story ... farther back than this, if we recount the kings' ancestors ... from Danae, the daughter of Acrisius upwards, then the leaders of the Dorians are native-born Egyptians.

Thus, I have traced their lineage according to what the Greeks say, but if I was to tell the story according to the Persians, Perseus himself was an Assyrian, and became Greek, which his ancestors had not been.

Herodotus, 6.52.2-55

## Questions

1. Why were there two royal families, according to the story told by Herodotus?
2. Why do you think the role of Delphi is important in the myth?
3. How did the Spartans decide which was the senior royal house?
4. The first part of the extract is the Spartan story of their origins. With which peoples were the Dorians (the Spartan people) associated by other Greeks? Herodotus liked to tell different versions of a story to give the reader the opportunity to make up their own mind about what is correct. Why do you think Herodotus would be providing such different stories about the origins of the Spartan kingship and ethnicity?

The best evidence indicates that the Spartan dyarchy existed from at least the second quarter of the 8th century BC, and the first kings who were identified as historical are Leon and Agasicles in the early 6th century BC (Hdt. 1.65.1). In theory, the kingship was supposed to pass from father to son but this was often not the case, with succession passing from brother to brother (or half-brother), between cousins, or even from uncle to nephew. The royal families were given further justification for their continued rule through the king-lists of Sparta. Herodotus used these as the basis for his accounts of Spartan history (7.204, 8.131). Cartledge also says:

... they affirmed the determinate, vertical system of succession to high office and specified the limits of eligibility. For the Agiads and Eurypontids were not the only Herakleidai (descendants of

Herakles) in Sparta, and there were at least two other Spartan families, the Aigidai (Hdt. 4.149.1) and the Talthybiadai (Hdt. 7.134.1, cf. 6.60), who were not descendants of Herakles and yet were of aristocratic status and (in the latter's case at least) enjoyed hereditary public prerogatives. So the king-lists of the Agiads and Eurypontids acted as a 'mnemonic of social relationships' (Goody & Watt 1963, 309), providing what Malinowski called a genealogical 'charter' of their right to rule.

Secondly, the king-lists asserted the equal legitimacy of the two royal houses in case either one should ever seek to usurp monarchical privilege (as in fact did not happen until the third quarter of the third century).

P Cartledge, *Agasilaos and the Crisis of Sparta*, Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd, London, 1987, p 102.

While the kings were technically equal in power, often one king would develop greater power than the other through his particular political skills. The two kings were frequently political rivals, with each king trying to outdo his equal in political contests. This was not always the case, however, and there is evidence to suggest that sometimes the kings were more amicable, even co-operating to achieve common goals.

## Source Study 2.5 Power in Sparta

### Source A: Millender

Among the advantages at the dyarchs' disposal, we must also include the continuity in office that all dyarchs theoretically enjoyed. In Sparta the majority of offices, including the Ephorate, were annual; and the single exception to this rule, the *Gerousia*, was open only to elite Spartiates over sixty years of age. The kings, on the other hand, could exercise influence over great spans of time and thereby gain the experience, support, and opportunities to shape, if not control, Spartan foreign and domestic policy. Particularly important in this regard was their membership on the *Gerousia ex officio* from a comparatively young age, which likely enhanced their relative power in this **probouleutic** council. It is surely no coincidence that Kleomemes I and Agasilaos II, two of the most powerful kings in Spartan history, enjoyed unusually long reigns.

EG Millender, 'Kingship: The history, power, and prerogatives of the Spartans' 'divine' dyarchy', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta (Volume II)*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 467.

#### **probouleutic**

pertaining to a system in which a group of people decide what will be on a meeting's agenda

## Questions

1. What does Millender believe was the true basis of royal power in Sparta?
2. Create a timeline of the kings of Sparta from the reign of Cleomenes in the late 6th century BC to 371 BC, recording the fate of each king. Research key events in Spartan history and place them on the timeline as well. Can you draw any conclusions about the power of different kings and the events of their reign?

There is more information about the roles, duties and privileges of the Spartan kings than almost any other aspect of Spartan society. Tyrtaeus is the earliest source, talking about the kings generally and specifically mention King Theopompus (fr. 4-5), but then there are no mentions of kings until Herodotus. There are accounts of the actions of kings in Thucydides and Xenophon, but in Xenophon's *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians* there is enormous detail about the role and duties of Spartan kings. Plato and Aristotle also provided some information on the kings, as did Polybius, but much of the information comes from Plutarch, who wrote a long time after the period. It should be noted that, except for Tyrtaeus, all sources are non-Spartan.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who were the two royal families? How was this different from the majority of the Greek world in the Classical period?
2. Did the kings have absolute power in Sparta? If not, how did they remain dominant?
3. How did the Spartan kings possess a semi-divine position in society?
4. Why do you think the Spartans gave their (probably) mythical early kings specific names?
5. Which are the earliest kings about whom we have historical evidence and when did they reign?
6. Were the families of the Eurypontids and Agiads the only possible royal families?
7. What were the king lists and how does Cartledge feel they were important in preserving the positions of the royal families?
8. What is significant about almost all of our sources of Spartan kings? What do you think the problem of this could be?

## The role of the kings

As leaders of the Spartan state, the kings had several roles. Their military, religious, legal and political duties ensured that they were able to build up personal power if they were capable political operators.

As part of their political role, the kings were members of the *gerousia*. This gave them influence over Spartan policies for a long time, as they could be members of the council for decades. Importantly, as members of the *gerousia*, the kings could initiate legislation or dismiss the *ekklesia* if the vote or debate was not going their way. Moreover, as the *gerousia* could not be called to account for their decisions, this gave the kings even more power.

A key role for the kings was leading the army. For each campaign, a king was chosen by the *gerousia* to lead the army, and he had sole command of the army and battle strategies. The king was required to make sacrifices, first to Zeus Agetor before leaving Sparta, then to Zeus and Athena when the army arrived at the boundary of Spartan territory. Because the king was in charge of diplomacy in the field, he could have a significant impact on Spartan foreign policy. For example, Agesilaus II was able to determine the policy towards Persia in the 390s BC and policy towards Thebes in the 370s BC, as a result of being the king leading the campaign at key moments. It is likely that he engineered the vote in the *gerousia* to ensure that he was given those commands at those times.

However, the power of the king on campaign was limited from the beginning of the 5th century BC. In 479 BC, the Elean seer Tisamenos was sent as co-equal with the king on campaign at the battle of Plataea because of an oracle who said he would be victorious in five 'contests'. Also, possibly from 479 BC, two *ephors* accompanied the king on campaign to ensure that the king did nothing to harm the interests of the state. In 418 BC, Agis II conducted the campaign so badly in the eyes of other Spartans that he was required to take ten advisors with him on campaign to ensure he made 'correct' decisions. When a king returned home, he could be subjected to questioning by the *gerousia* or ephorate and be punished if he had not acted in the interests of Sparta. It was the fate of many kings to be punished by fines, exile or even death for poor campaign decisions. However, to be a successful military king led to great political influence at home, whereas weak military leadership led to unpopularity and political impotence.

The direct legal role of kings was limited to determining who should marry heiresses whose fathers had died without indicating to whom they were to be married, and cases concerning public roads (because they were responsible for maintenance). These might seem fairly unimportant duties, but because women could inherit a portion of their father's estate, they could become extremely wealthy and owners of large amounts of land. Since male citizenship was determined by the ability to provide produce to the *syssitia*, land ownership could therefore determine citizenship. This meant that it was important to determine who should marry heiresses. This role also gave the kings more influence and enabled them to build up political alliances in the process.

### **syssitia**

a group of men who ate together as a group in the Spartan military

The *gerousia* held an advisory role in politics, but oversaw a legal role in the most important court in Sparta, so the ability of the king to exert pressure in this court could prove to be important; this was particularly so in the case of the acquittal of Sphodrias in 378 BC. Sphodrias was a Spartan general who led forces into Athenian territory in peacetime, for reasons that are completely unknown (possibly with the blessing of the Spartan government or one of the kings) and with the purpose of attacking Athens. Leaving at night, he and his forces became lost in Attica and were found in the morning a long way from their target, the Athenian port of Piraeus. This led to a major diplomatic disaster for Sparta – Sphodrias was eventually acquitted of the act, much to the anger of many other Greek *poleis*. It seems that it was because of the influence of Agesilaus II within the *gerousia* that Sphodrias was acquitted of this clearly illegal action for which he should have been punished.

### The privileges of the kings

While the Spartiates considered themselves ‘*homoioi*’, or equals, the kings had a distinct status. They even considered themselves ethnically different, identifying as Achaean, rather than Dorian like the rest of the Spartans. While the kings may have had their powers curtailed in some ways, they had enormous privileges in society. It was of significant benefit to the kings that they were very wealthy, and there is much evidence for this wealth. They



**FIGURE 2.5** Jacques-Louis David's *Leonidas at Thermopylae*, 1814. Leonidas is arguably the most well-known of Spartan kings and is immortalised in the story of the resistance of the Greeks to the army of Xerxes in 480 BC. David used examples from ancient history to embody values associated with the French revolution. Here Leonidas represents duty and self-sacrifice.

owned extensive property in *perioikic* territory and received tributes directly from the *perioikoi*. Herodotus (9.81.2) wrote that the regent Pausanias was given 10 of every type of spoil after the Battle of Plataea in 479 BC, while Agis II gave a tithe of the war booty to Apollo at Delphi in 400 BC. Agesilaus II did the same thing in 394 BC; this king was so wealthy that he gave half of his father's (Agis II) estates to his mother's family and he was still fabulously wealthy. It was Agesilaus II that used his wealth to good political purpose, sending an ox and a new cloak, both very expensive, to each newly-elected member of the *gerousia*, calculated to buy favours in the voting in the council.

There is also evidence of kings donating large sums of money or land to Spartiates to ensure that they remained citizens when their land did not produce enough to provide food for their *syssitia*. Another way the kings could build connections in Sparta was by appointing *proxenoi*, or representatives of Spartan interests in other cities. Usually this role was assumed by a citizen in the other city, which indicates that the Spartan kings had considerable control over foreign policy and relations with other cities. They were also able to exercise their indirect power politically by being entitled to address the *ekklesia* directly, speaking first in all debates when they chose.

Another significant privilege was that the kings were allowed to select two men called *pythoi*, whose role was to consult the oracle on behalf of the king (and only the kings were allowed to consult the oracle on behalf of the state). These men dined with the king at public expense. This gave the kings significant power in the ultra-religious Sparta, because the oracles' pronouncements were kept by the kings and made public as they saw fit. Also, the kings were the priests of Zeus Lakedaimonius and Zeus Ouranios, which were the only known priesthoods in Sparta. They had the right to make sacrifices when on campaign, and were given the skins (while on campaign) and the backs of sacrificial animals. At home, they were given two animals for sacrifice to Apollo at state expense each month, as well as the honour of being seated and served first at public sacrifices, with a double portion of the sacrificial food. When they attended the public festivals, they were given the front-row seats of all events. When the kings died, they were given a state funeral and honoured by all Spartiates, *perioikoi* and helots (see Chapter 7).

Kings could also give honours to other Spartiates on a regular basis. The kings did not dine with the rest of the Spartiates; they dined with their own personal *syssitia*, which was considered more prestigious. They were given double servings of food in the *syssitia*, so they could invite other Spartiates to dine with them. In addition to the kings and their guests, the *pythoi* also dined with the *syssitia*. Kings also had the right to dine at home and entertain their guests privately, but if they chose to dine at home for no legitimate reason, it appears that they could be given half-rations (Plut. *Lyc.* 12.5).

On military campaign, the kings were also entitled to privileges. They could command the forces in whatever way they saw fit and had the power to execute Spartiates. The kings also dealt with diplomatic engagements between Spartans and other state or empire representatives, allowing them great control over foreign policy. The kings were attended at all times by a bodyguard of 300 soldiers. These were called the *hippeis* cavalry, although they fought as regular infantry soldiers.

It is, however, clear that, from the 5th century BC onwards, the Spartans took issue with the notion of monarchy. Many of the kings of the 5th and 4th centuries BC were punished, often with a large fine, exile or even death. Historian Anton Powell says that this indicates some deeper issues with the idea of monarchy in the upper classes of Spartan society.

## Source Study 2.6 Royalty in Sparta

### Source A: Powell

Sparta was restless under the control of royalty. In her propaganda, she claimed that her political constitution had been loyally respected for centuries, and that the dual kingship, the dyarchy, was the oldest of all surviving offices. But the very fact that there *was* such Spartan insistence on these and similar claims should make us suspicious. In reality, the rough treatment of Pausanias was entirely in keeping with Spartan treatment of royalty in the fifth and early fourth centuries. Most Spartan royal rulers of that period were either imprisoned, or effectively put to death, or threatened with exile, or actually exiled. And even exile was not secure: three of the dyarchs-in-exile had reason to fear that they would be pursued by Sparta and killed. So recurrent is this violent impatience of Sparta with her kings that we should probably regard hostility to these rich and hereditary officials as a continuing part of the 'Lykourgan' revolution which aimed for a state made up of 'Similars'.

A Powell, 'Sparta's foreign – and internal – history, 478–403', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, London, 2018, p 293.

### Question

1. What is the problem outlined by Powell with regard to the idea of monarchy in Sparta? How did the problem affect Spartan kings?

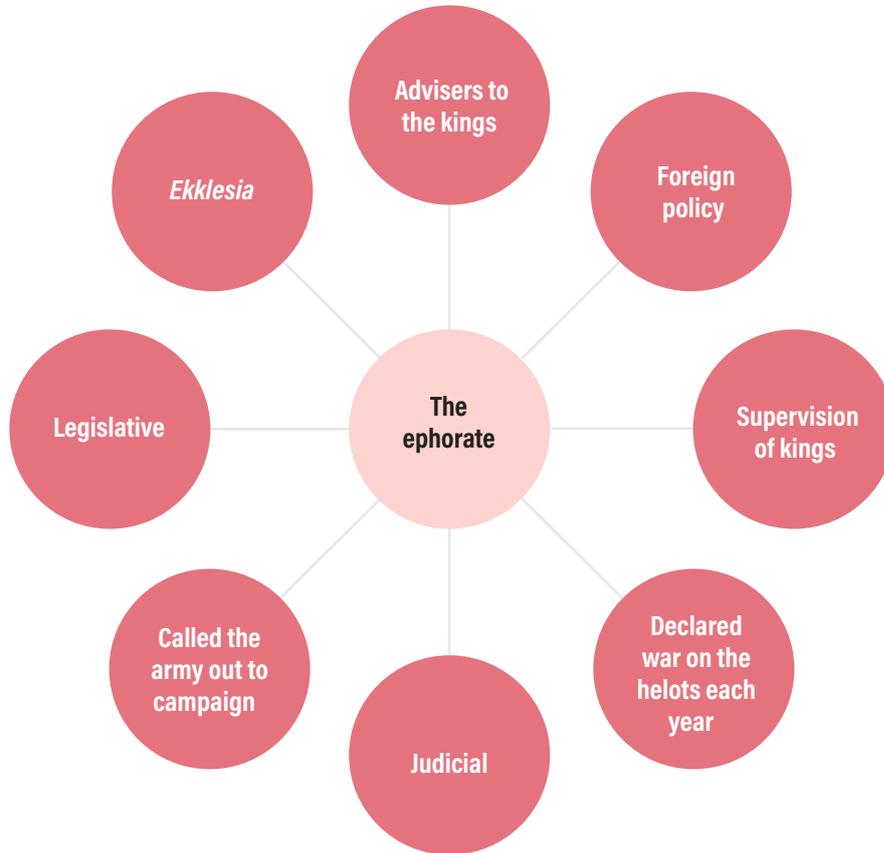
### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Define the terms 'role' and 'privilege'. Create lists of the roles and privileges of the king under the four categories of military, social, legal and religious.
2. Which category do you think is the most important: role or privilege? Why do you think that?
3. Explain how the events surrounding the 'Sphodrias affair' are a good example of the influence possessed by the king.
4. Were the Spartan kings 'equals'? Explain your answer.
5. Explain the source of the kings' wealth.
6. Why would it be important for the kings to be able to appoint the *pythoi*?
7. What marked the kings as superior in the *syssitia*? Why were they given such privileges in a part of life that was designed to mark men out as equal?

### The ephorate

One of the most difficult offices to understand in Spartan society was that of the *ephor*. There were five *ephors* elected annually (probably one from each of the *komai*), each serving a term of one year. *Ephors* had significant power in Spartan government, so much so that Xenophon compared them to five annual tyrants. They are not mentioned in the *Great Rhetra*, which leads some scholars to suggest that it was written down before the ephorate was instituted, meaning that it was not thought by the Spartans to be part of the original Lycurgan settlement. However, Herodotus and Xenophon both indicated that they thought the ephorate was part of the original Spartan government, and it is possible that the 4th century BC views, particularly those of Plato and Aristotle (such as those in Source Study 2.7, Source A), were influenced by the propaganda pamphlet of the exiled king Pausanias, who attacked the ephorate's legitimacy as 'un-Lycurgan' after he was probably exiled by them.

*Ephors* could come from any ranks of Spartiate society, although Aristotle (possibly incorrectly) said that they were open to bribery and corruption because they often came from the poorer part of society (*Pol.* 1272b). They were probably elected by acclamation (the noise, or clamour, created by the cheering or clapping of those attending the *ekklesia*) and were only allowed to serve one term in their life.



**FIGURE 2.6** The responsibilities of the ephorate

We are told by the *Suda* (an encyclopaedia created in the 10th century AD) that the historian Charon created a list of councillors of Sparta in the 5th century BC. It is believed by many scholars that this probably included a list of *ephors* that may have stretched back as far as the 8th century BC, although the earliest name we have of an *ephor* is Chilon, one of the ‘Seven Sages’ (wise men) of Greece, who possibly held office in the mid-6th century BC.

Diogenes Laertius, writing in the 3rd century AD, even says that Chilon was made the first *ephor* after proposing the ephorate as ‘yokemate’ to the kings (a yoke was used by oxen to pull a farm plough together, meaning that both the kings and the *ephors* should work together for Sparta). Aristotle (*Politics*, 1313a) records that it was actually invented by King Theopompus to ensure that the monarchy might last longer by giving Spartans the ability to have a measure of power over it. When King Cleomenes III tried to remove the ephorate altogether from the Spartan constitution in 225 BC, he claimed that the ephorate was created well after the kings and *gerousia* had controlled Sparta for a long time. Cleomenes III stated that the ephorate was created during the Messenian Wars to allow the kings to go on campaign and leave behind the running of the state to their close friends, the *ephors*. Clearly, there was significant debate even in the ancient world about the origins of this important Spartan institution. It is thought by many modern historians that it was probably a later development or, if it did exist early in Spartan history, that it did not have nearly as much power as it developed in the Classical period.

The first time the *ephors* are mentioned in the historical sources, Herodotus tells us that they were advising King Anaxandridas in the mid-6th century BC to divorce his first wife, who was unable to provide a child, and remarry. It is possible that this involvement indicates that the ephorate was beginning to develop greater power or influence at this time, but as they were only offering advice, they were still probably subordinate to the kings. They seem to have had far greater powers during the Persian Wars, so it is possible that the problematic reign of Cleomenes II led to reforms of their powers, particularly over the kings.

Foreign policy was a key area of importance for the ephorate. The stories in Herodotus (9.7, 9.9, 6.106) indicate that from the time of the Persian Wars (490–479 BC), foreign embassies approached the *ephors* to discuss an audience with the *ekklesia*, but prior to this, foreigners seem to have approached the kings. The *ephors* also summoned the assembly of the **Peloponnesian League** when required. We can also assume their importance in foreign affairs by the attendance of two *ephors* on the king whenever a king led an army out on campaign. The *ephors* were tasked with keeping an eye on the king's behaviour and they were required to take the lead on major foreign policy issues, such as the proposed destruction of Athens in 404 BC after the Spartan victory in the Peloponnesian War.

The *ephors'* role over the kings indicates both that they were responsible for overall supervision of foreign policy, and that the kings, while influential, were not always trusted to do what was in the interests of Sparta. Each month, the kings swore an oath that they would continue to rule in accordance with the law, and the *ephors*, in turn, swore that they would not disturb the monarchy as long as the kings maintained their oaths. Every eight years, the *ephors* would also observe the skies and, if they saw shooting stars, they decided whether the kings had offended the gods and should be punished.

The role of the ephorate in domestic issues was also significant. First and foremost, it was the *ephors* who declared war on the helots at the beginning of each year, thereby justifying the murder of a helot at any time. This was a considerable duty, as one of the guiding principles of Spartan life was the control of the helots and fear of helot revolts. They also may have been required to expel any foreign influences in Sparta that were deemed a threat, something that was done regularly or as specific perceived threats arose. The best-known example of this was the conspiracy of Cinadon in 399 BC. This Spartiate was unhappy with the lot of many Spartiates (including his own), so he organised a well-supported revolt that included Spartiates, *neodamodeis*, *hypomeiones*, *perioikoi* and helots. Once the *ephors* were informed by a traitor to Cinadon's cause, they sent Cinadon away on a mission, where they arrested him and forced him to provide the names of leaders of the rebellion who, along with Cinadon, were executed immediately.

The *ephors* also had wide judicial power in Sparta. According to Xenophon (*Lak. Pol.* 8.3–4), *ephors* could fine anyone they chose and make immediate collection of the fine. They had wide powers against any magistrate: they could remove them from office, send them to jail, and even bring **capital charges** against them. The kings could also be charged by the *ephors*, but if they did try a king, it was done before a court that included the *gerousia* and the other king in conjunction with the *ephors*. Interestingly, each *ephor* was also assigned a specific type of contract law to supervise in court, indicating that they also had wide domestic powers.

While the kings were supreme in almost all military matters, they were still limited to a certain extent by the ephorate. As mentioned previously, two *ephors* accompanied the king on campaign, and while the king had absolute authority while on campaign, the *ephors* could fine him or bring him to court if they felt he was not acting in Spartan interests. It was also the *ephors* who called out the army for a campaign, including the Peloponnesian League forces, which gave them an important public role in military affairs. They also determined which age groups of the Spartan army were to be summoned to arms, and even supervised the *hebotentes*, inspecting their uniforms, clothes and bedding daily, and holding occasional inspection parades for them. The *ephors* selected the best of the *hebotentes* to serve

### Peloponnesian League

the league created and led by the Spartans in the 6th century BC, comprised mainly of *poleis* in the Peloponnese

### neodamodeis

former helots who had been made part of the regular Spartan army

### hypomeiones

a group of men who had been Spartiates, but had lost their position for a range of reasons

### capital charge

a charge brought against someone in court where the penalty is death or exile

### hebotentes

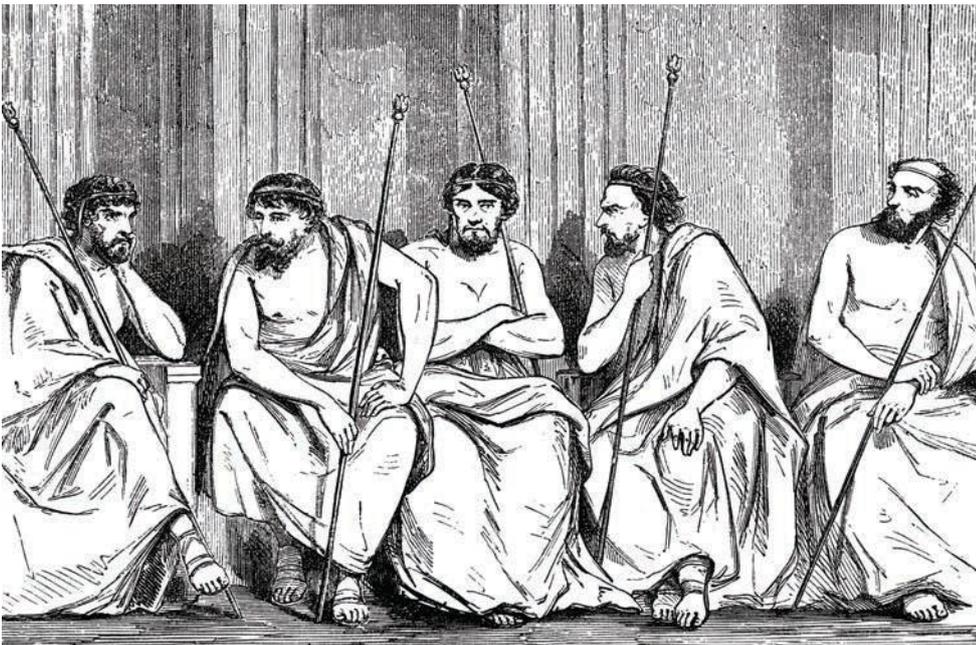
the young soldiers of the Spartan army between the age of 20 and 29, before being admitted as full Spartan citizens at the age of 30

as the *hippeis*, the king's personal bodyguard, which could also be used by the *ephors* for secret or sensitive duties (such as the arrest of Cinadon).

Their domestic duties also extended to legislation and the *ekklesia* in Sparta. The ephorate determined the agenda of *ekklesia* meetings, drafting many of the bills to put before it. The **eponymous ephor** presided over the meetings of the *ekklesia* and supervised the voting on all decisions to be made (which was usually done by acclamation). It also seems as though the eponymous *ephor* had the right to vary voting procedures as he saw fit, as the vote taken by the Spartans to being the Peloponnesian War in 432 BC shows. Finally, once the votes were taken, it was also the responsibility of the *ephors* to carry out the decision of the *ekklesia*.

#### eponymous ephor

the *ephor* who gave the year his name (so that people could tell in which year events happened)



**FIGURE 2.7** A later impression of the five *ephors* of Sparta. The *ephors* acted as a check on the power of kings and oversaw a range of judicial functions.

## Source Study 2.7 The *ephors* and their powers

### Source A: Aristotle

Thus this office does, truthfully, hold the state together – the people remain content because they have a role in the most powerful magistracy, so that whether this is on account of the lawgiver [Lycurgus], or due to good fortune, it is advantageous to affairs. For if the political order is destined to be saved, all parts of the city must want it to exist and persist with it ...

Aristotle, *Politics* 2.1270b

**Source B: Kennell**

The crisis [of Cinadon] shows how complete the *ephors'* mastery of the state apparatus was: they questioned the informant and on his evidence consulted members of the *Gerousia*; they dispatched troops for the missions and empowered them to make arrests on their behalf. The *ephors* must also have conducted undercover operations regularly, since Cinadon is said to have been their agent on other occasions. Most interestingly, the *ephors* did all this apparently without consulting either king.

N Kennell, *Spartans. A New History*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p 107.

**Source C: Thucydides**

After saying this, being an *ephor* himself, he had the *ekklesia* of the Lakedaimonians vote. Afterwards, he said that he could not judge which shout was the loudest (for they vote by shouting, not by using pebbles [as the Athenians did]), and wanting them to make known clearly their thinking about wanting to go to war, he said, 'Lakedaimonians, whoever of you who thinks the peace has been broked and the Athenians have done wrong, get up and go over there,' and he showed them where to stand, 'and whoever thinks the opposite, go to the other side.' So they stood up and separated, and there were a greater number who thought that the peace was broken.

Then calling in the confederates they told them that for their own parts their sentence was that the Athenians had done them wrong; but yet they desired to have all their confederates called together, and then to put it to the question again that if they would, the war might be decreed by common consent. This done, their confederates went home; and so did also afterwards the Athenians when they had dispatched the business they came about. This decree of the assembly that the peace was broken was made in the fourteenth year of those thirty years for which a peace had been formerly concluded after the actions past in Euboea.

Thucydides 1.87

**Questions**

1. In what ways did the *ephors* hold power over the kings? Compare this to Aristotle's quote (Source A) and explain how Aristotle may have been correct.
2. What was the conspiracy of Cinadon (Source B) and what does it tell us about the nature of the *ephors'* powers?
3. What does Thucydides (Source C) tell us about the role of the *ephors* in debate in the *ekklesia*?

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Why do you think Xenophon described the *ephors* as similar to five tyrants? Do you think this is an accurate description? Why or why not?
2. What do Herodotus and Xenophon both say about the origin of the ephorate? How do many 4th century BC sources disagree, and what is the possible origin of the disagreement?
3. How were *ephors* elected? Who elected them?
4. How do you think Cleomenes III's political activities in 225 BC complicates the issue of the ephorate and its origins?
5. How powerful were the *ephors* in the mid-6th century BC and when did this seem to change? How do we know it changed?

6. Copy and complete the table below describing the powers of the ephorate.

Area of ephorate power	Examples of power
Foreign policy	
Domestic power	
Political and legal powers	
Judicial powers	

## Gerousia

In contrast to the annual appointment to the ephorate, the *gerousia* held their position for life. Stretching back into the very origins of Spartan history, possibly as an advisory council of the king, the *gerousia* was considered by many around Greece to be the most respected body of any city. Its main purpose was to provide advice to the kings as requested, with no ability to initiate legislation or proposals. Members were required to be over 60 years of age and have completed their period of military service (which, for regular campaigns, ended at this age), and they must have led a respectable life. Only 28 were elected, and the two kings sat on the council from the beginning of their reign, making it a body of 30 men. The *gerousia's* power was enhanced because membership was usually from the Spartan elite (the wealthy families), though there was no formal requirement for this. The *ekklesia* voted them into office by acclamation. The *gerousia*, because of their advisory role in the state, provided continuity in Spartan policies, enhanced by the naturally conservative nature of the wealthy elite. It is also significant that members of the *gerousia*, could not be held to account for their decisions, which made their position unique and quite powerful.

The main duty of the *gerousia* was to sit as a court, and it was the sole court with the ability to sit in judgement of cases involving death or exile. The *gerousia* also sat in judgement of the kings when the *ephors* brought cases before them. The other primary role of the *gerousia* was the debate legislation. In the **Hellenistic period**, we know that a bill to go before the *ekklesia* had to first obtain unanimous approval from the *gerousia*, and most scholars believe that this was probably the process throughout all Spartan history. This made it good politics for the kings to develop strong relations with the *gerousia*, which can be seen throughout Spartan history; it was through such consideration that Agesilaus II gave a cloak and a bull to newly elected *gerontes*.

### Hellenistic period

the period of Greek history after the Classical period, starting with the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, ending with the death of Cleopatra in 30 BC

## Source Study 2.8 Politics in the *gerousia*

### Source A: Millender

We must keep in mind, of course, that the two hereditary kings served on the *Gerousia ex officio* and that they likely had supporters on this council in the form of members of their respective dynasties ... Nevertheless, the ancient evidence makes it clear that the *Gerousia* could be factionalized and that individual *Gerontes* were perfectly capable of opposing either or both kings over state affairs. Moreover ... several kings found themselves on trial before the court of the *gerousia* ...

EG Millender, 'Kingship: The history, power, and prerogatives of the Spartans' 'divine' dyarchy', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta (Volume II)*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2018 p 461.

## Question

1. What does Millender tell us about the nature of the relationship between the *gerousia* and kings? How do you think Cleomenes II tried to solve this problem?

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who were the *gerousia*?
2. The *gerousia* did not hold much direct power. What was it that made them powerful?
3. What were the duties of the *gerousia*?
4. Why was the *gerousia* probably important when it came to passing legislation?
5. Was the *gerousia* simply a 'rubber-stamp' for decisions of the kings? What makes you think that?

## Ekklesia

The last of the four elements of the Spartan government was the *ekklesia*, or assembly. Of all of the Spartan government, we know the least about the deliberative body of the Spartiates. Though the *ekklesia* was once thought to be simply a rubber stamp for decisions already made, it is now considered a place for more aggressive debate of ideas, where politics could be found happening. However, historians still do not know exactly who had the right to participate in debates, even though Spartiates of all rank of society could have varying opinions.

According to the *Great Rhetra*, the *ekklesia* met between the Babyka and Knakion, but historians have no idea where those locations are in Sparta. The *Great Rhetra* also says that it met from '*hora to hora*', but *hora* can be translated as both season and month, so historians are still not entirely sure about the frequency of its scheduled meetings, though a **scholion** about Thucydides says that it met each full moon, suggesting monthly meetings were most likely.

The *ekklesia*'s main role was to vote on proposals put to it; it could not propose bills, or even suggest amendments to the bills. It also played a role in settling disputes between the royal houses, which could include succession or the legitimacy of an heir. It was also the *ekklesia* that passed the law in 506 BC allowing only one king to go on campaign after the disastrous campaign of Cleomenes and Damaratus against Athens, when the Spartans had reached Attica but were forced to return home when the kings disagreed about the goals of the campaign. The *ekklesia* could also be addressed by foreign embassies, where debates between ambassadors from various other *poleis* could happen. Importantly, the *ekklesia* also had the final vote, possibly after they debated about whether or not Sparta was to go to war. It also seemed to be a requirement for the *ekklesia* to approve alliances and approve peace treaties, which agrees with the general tone of the *Great Rhetra*'s position on the importance of the **demos** in playing a role in society. It was also clear, though, that the kings and the *gerontes* had the right to ignore the *ekklesia*'s decision by simply dismissing the *ekklesia*, as noted in the *Great Rhetra*.

### scholion

a comment made on an ancient papyrus text to explain what is being said by the original author

### demos

the people, the citizens of Sparta

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the *ekklesia* and who was able to take part in it?
2. What does the *Great Rhetra* say about the *ekklesia*, its position in government, and where and when it met?
3. What examples are there of the *ekklesia* demonstrating some sort of power over the kings?
4. If the *ekklesia* had some sort of power over the kings, did this make it more powerful than the kings, or the *gerousia*? How do you know?

## Further reading

P Cartledge, *Agesilaus and the Crisis of Sparta*, Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd, London, 1987.

E David, 'Xenophon and the myth of Lykourgos', in A Powell (ed), *Xenophon and Sparta*, The Classical Press of Wales, Swansea, 2020, pp 203–222.

N Kennell, *Spartans. A New History*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2010.

EG Millender, 'Kingship: The history, power, and prerogatives of the Spartans' 'divine' dyarchy', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta (Volume II)*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 452–479.

M Nafissi, 'Lykourgos the Spartan "Lawgiver": Ancient beliefs and modern scholarship', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta (Volume I)*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 93–123.

## Activities

### Bringing it together

1. To what extent were the kings powerful in Sparta?
2. What is important about the myth of Lycurgus for Spartan society?
3. What are the problems in understanding the *Great Rhetra*?
4. Was Spartan society an oligarchy (government of a small wealthy group of people) rather than a monarchy or democracy? Explain your answer.
5. Should we consider the *ephors* as the most important part of Spartan government? Why or why not?

### Activities

1. Create a mind map of all of the features of Spartan government, roles and responsibilities.
2. Research either King Cleomenes I or Agesilaus II and explain the key features of their power, providing examples.
3. Read Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* and select quotes that best explain the features of Lycurgus that Spartans would have wanted to tell outsiders, with a brief explanation why.

### HSC-style questions

1. Who was Lycurgus? (4 marks)
2. Outline the roles and responsibilities of the kings in Sparta. (5 marks)
3. Explain the importance of the *Great Rhetra* for the Spartan state. (6 marks)
4. What does the evidence reveal about the nature of government in Spartan society? (12 marks)

## Endnotes

1. EG Millender, 'Kingship: The history, power, and prerogatives of the Spartans' "divine" dyarchy", in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta (Volume II)*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 470.

# Spartan social structures



FIGURE 3.1 Detail from an engraving of Spartan men training in the *agoge*

Classical Sparta has often been understood to be a uniquely organised society, both in the ancient world and by modern scholars. This understanding has traditionally highlighted the dominance of military elites who lived as perfect equals in a militarised utopia, ruling over a large population of state-owned slaves (helots) and ‘dwellers around’ (*perioikoi*). This view has been challenged by new archaeological evidence and changing approaches to the written sources from the ancient world that form the basis of our understanding of this society. This chapter will outline both the orthodox view of Spartan society, as well as some new perspectives in modern scholarship.

**By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:**

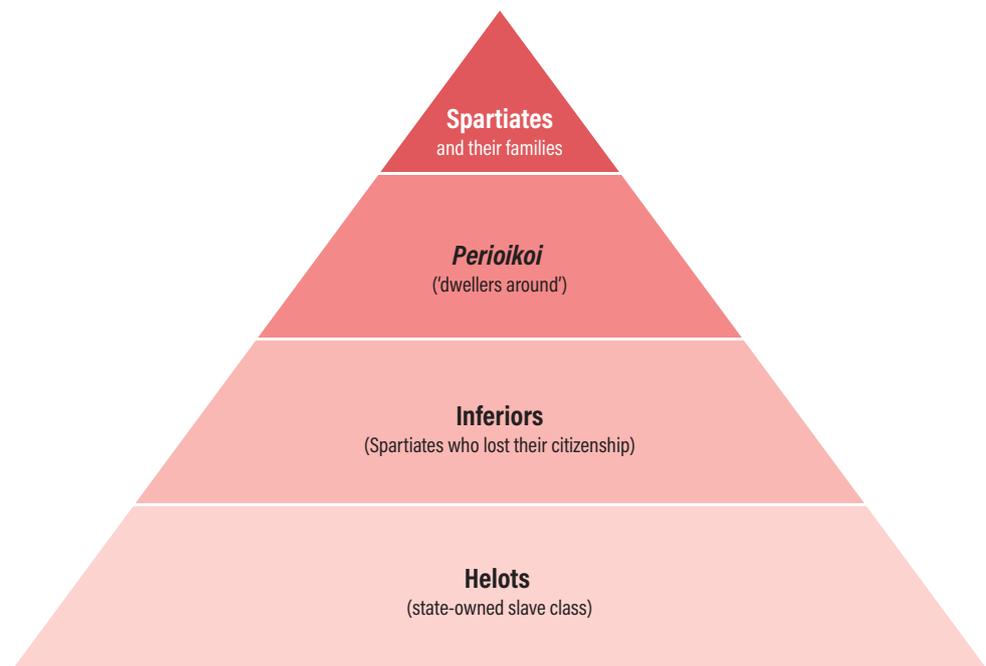
- explain the hierarchical social structure of Spartan society
- identify the roles, occupations, responsibilities and features of the different groups in Spartan society
- explain how and why our understanding of social structure is incomplete and changing.

## Social structure and occupations

According to the traditional view, Sparta was a conservative society dominated by the Spartiates, who lived as perfect equals. This elite class of men dedicated their lives to a warrior lifestyle of rigorous training, shunning luxury and wealth. The essentials of life were produced by the helots, a group of state-owned slaves, required to work the land and provide for their Spartiate masters. The *perioikoi*, or ‘dwellers around’, were charged with producing the weapons, armour and everyday items needed by the Spartiate class. Birth determined their status and there was virtually no possibility of moving up the social ladder. Spartiates who failed to live up to the rigours of warrior life by showing cowardice in battle or failing to provide enough food from their plots of land (*kleroi*), lost their rights as citizens and became ‘inferiors’. This group were symbols of failure, advertising to the community the terrible fate of those who did not to live up to the Spartan ideal.

While this view has a basis in ancient written evidence, the reliability of the ancient sources makes this judgement simplistic. Modern scholars generally agree that this notion, based mostly on hostile or later sources, oversimplifies the reality and fails to account for the success of the Spartan propaganda machine or any notion of change over time, feeding into the Spartan mirage. If we consider how much modern culture changes with each decade, it is not unreasonable to question the idea that Spartan society remained unchanged for many centuries, as suggested by writers such as the biographer Plutarch, who wrote centuries after Sparta’s decline as a regional power.

The picture painted by more recent scholarship, which has re-examined the ancient written evidence and archaeological finds, is more complex. It is generally accepted that the Spartiate class did not live equally, with some wealthier Spartiates forming an aristocratic elite. Similarly, modern scholarship has highlighted the commonalities between Sparta and other Greek *poleis*, arguing that Sparta’s government and social institutions were less unique than previously thought.



**FIGURE 3.2** Spartan social hierarchy

## Source Study 3.1 The orthodoxy of Spartan society

### Source A: Hodkinson

... opinions regarding several of Sparta's supposedly exceptional features have altered significantly over the last half-century. Fifty years ago, classical Sparta was normally portrayed as a conservative society which had shunned the socio-political changes experienced by other Greek city-states, retaining ancient institutions comparable to those of so-called 'primitive' modern tribal societies such as the Zulu or the Masai. Few scholars nowadays would subscribe to that interpretation. It has become evident that Sparta's classical institutions were as much the product of ongoing adaptation and change as those of other Greek *poleis* ...

S Hodkinson, 'An Exceptional Domination of State over Society?', in A Powell, *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 30.

## Questions

1. What was the popular view of Spartan social structure?
2. How has it changed according to Hodkinson?

## Spartiates

As full citizens, the Spartiates had political rights and freedoms not granted to the other groups who made up the population of Lakedaimonia, the *perioikoi* and the helots. Spartiate citizenship was exclusive and contingent on fulfilling the roles expected of them.

For a man to qualify as a full Spartan citizen he needed to:

- show descent from Spartiate parents
- pass an inspection by tribal elders as a child. According to Plutarch – those children who were deformed were thrown from a cliff into the ‘place of rejection,’ although this view is now generally thought by many historians to be an invention of the Spartan mirage.
- complete the Spartan training system, commonly known as the *agoge*
- be accepted into a military mess group (*syssition* – pl. *syssitia*), where they ate common meals
- ensure their *kleros* produced enough to provide a monthly contribution to the mess halls.

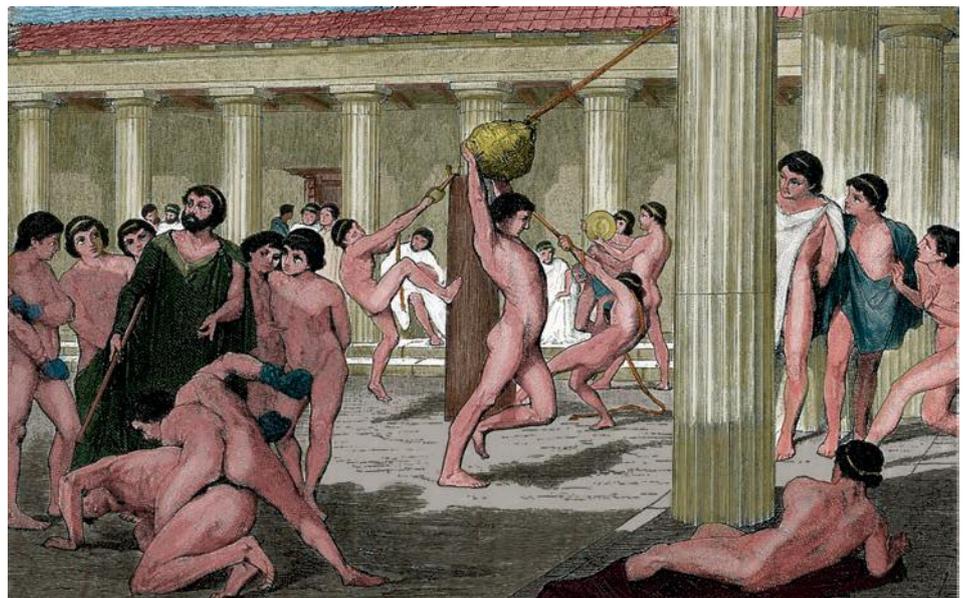
In *Life of Lycurgus* 16.1, Plutarch says:

The offspring was not reared at the will of the father, but was taken and carried by him to a place called Lesche, where the elders of the tribes officially examined the infant, and if it was well-built and sturdy, they ordered the father to rear it, and assigned it one of the nine thousand lots of land; but if it was ill-born and deformed, they sent it to the so-called Apothetae, a chasm-like place at the foot of Mount Taygetus.

According to Xenophon and Plutarch, uniformity of dress and behaviour was the foundation of the social system, creating harmony and *eunomia*. Spartans sought only to distinguish themselves through their bravery and obedience to the laws. They were expected to dress simply and live on equal terms with their fellow Spartiates. The interests of the collective and obedience to the law were more important than individual success and wealth.

After being made a full Spartiate, it was expected that each man would participate appropriately in Spartan society. Spartans, once they became Spartiates, were expected to contribute a portion of their produce to their *syssition*; not contributing could lead to their becoming an inferior (losing their citizenship, without any prospect of gaining it back). They were expected to serve in the army and train regularly (though not all the time, as has been widely believed), and set an example to the youth of society to be obedient to the laws at all times (though this seems not to have been followed as rigorously once outside of Lakedaimonia). Part of military obedience was to play their part in controlling the helot population, which drove much Spartan foreign policy and military decision-making.

Procreation was seen as an important duty to maintain the Spartiate population, and Spartiates were highly regarded if they had many children. Those Spartiates who had no children were not considered to support the *polis* and could be punished. It was traditionally thought that Spartiates were forbidden from participating in the economy, but this view has changed. Many Spartiates were wealthy, selling their extra produce in the markets for extra income, and we know that Spartiates were often found in the agora.



**FIGURE 3.3** A coloured engraving of the *agoge*, the site at which Spartan men trained and studied. As was customary in ancient Greece, physical training and sports were conducted naked.



**FIGURE 3.4** Spartiates were required to dine together, dress simply and only distinguish themselves through bravery and adherence to the laws.

The historian S Hodkinson, in the article ‘Social order and the conflict of values in classical Sparta’, neatly summarises the political and social structures of the Spartiate world as follows:<sup>1</sup>

The details of the Spartan citizen organization in the classical period can be summarized under three headings; first a political system in which power and decision making were divided among the kings, ephors, elders and assembly; secondly, a military and economic system according to which full citizenship was extended to a body of several thousand men who all became full-time hoplites supported by produce delivered by the helots who worked their lands; thirdly, a social and ‘ritual’ system as part of which every citizen was compelled, especially during his upbringing, to accept a common, public way of life.

## *Perioikoi*

The *perioikoi* were free peoples who lived and worked in villages mostly within Lakedaimonia, although some settlements were in neighbouring Messenia. A large proportion of the population of Lakedaimonia were *perioikoi*, living in at least 50 towns scattered across the region controlled by Sparta. These communities, many of which were situated a long way from Sparta itself, are thought to have been largely self-governing. Although they remained politically subordinate to Sparta and did not have Spartan citizenship, the *perioikoi* would have lived a type of agricultural existence similar to other Greek communities, and most of them probably had strong loyalty to their Spartan leaders.

The origins of the *perioikoi*, like many elements of the Spartan social structure, are shrouded in uncertainty. They may have been descended from the same Dorian migrants as the Spartans, and were therefore ethnically similar to them, but their communities were too remote from Sparta to be accorded citizenship. Alternatively, they may have been pre-Dorian inhabitants, possibly aristocratic, that were not forced into slavery. It is most likely, however, that these communities had multiple origins.

There is very little direct evidence explaining this group’s experiences and roles in Spartan society. To understand them, we rely on comments from ancient texts and some limited archaeological evidence, which is often hard to tie definitively to specific groups of *perioikoi*. It is likely there was a hierarchical social structure within these communities, with wealthy *perioikoi* at the top and the slaves of the *perioikoi* at the bottom, much like most other Greek *poleis* at the time.

According to JT Hooker (see Source Study 3.2), there was a clear separation between the land owned by the Spartiates and the *perioikic* communities, although this is impossible to establish with certainty. The Spartan government had overall control of the land, considering it part of their territory; relationships with other foreign cities, both Greek and non-Greek, were under the authority of the Spartan government; and the *perioikoi* fought alongside the Spartans, owing them allegiance and relying on them for protection. The *perioikoi* had no say in foreign policy, such as when and who they fought in war.

## Source Study 3.2 Historians and the *perioikoi*

### Source A: Hooker

The outlanders [*perioikoi*] were in the Spartan state but not of it: they enjoyed its protection but took no part in its political life having access to Sparta only for commercial purposes ... The Spartans did, however, employ outlanders extensively in their army and navy, sometimes as officers from the late fifth century onwards.

JT Hooker, *The Ancient Spartans*, JM Dent, London, 1980, p 115.

### Source B: Cavanaugh

Interestingly ... reliefs have been found throughout Laconia indicating how the *Perioikoi* followed Spartan customs and attitudes.

W Cavanaugh, 'An Archaeology of Ancient Sparta with Reference to Laconia and Messenia,' in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 69.

### Source C: Whitby

Their position was complex: they were politically subject to Sparta, to the extent that they could be summarily executed on the Ephors orders (Isocrates 12.181), and they seem to have had no influence over the campaigns on which they were obliged to follow the Spartiate lead, but ancient writers apply *polis* terminology to their communities, in which the Spartiates probably did not have the inclination or resources to interfere too closely. Their role in Spartan production and exchange is taken for granted, but the majority of *perioikoi* will have been farmers, of whom some will have been substantial land holders who live off the labour of slaves or other dependents.

M Whitby, *Sparta*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2002, p 178.

## Question

1. What do Sources A, B and C reveal about the status of the *perioikoi*?

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How was Spartan society grouped?
2. Explain the rights and obligations granted to Spartiates. What does this tell us about what was valued by the Spartans? How do the rights of the *perioikoi* compare?
3. Who were the *perioikoi*? What was their role in Spartan society?

## 'Inferiors' (*hypomeiones*)

Inferiors were social outcasts who had lost citizenship rights for failing to fulfill their responsibilities. These Spartans may have been demoted to the status of *hypomeiones* for failing to complete the training system, secure entry to a common mess or provide the monthly contribution to their *syssition*.

## Source Study 3.3 The inferiors

### Source A: Figuera

*Hypomeiones* were potentially a dangerous component of the community, as illustrated by the conspiracy in c.399 of Kinadon, a *Hypomeion* of considerable ability who continued to serve the state after his degradation (Xen. *Hell.* 3.3.4-11). The *Hypomeiones* were probably ranked lower than *perioikoi* as second-class citizens, since the latter preserved rights in their communities, but the *Hypomeiones* could serve militarily, perhaps for compensation.

T Figuera, 'Helotage and the Spartan economy', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 584.

### Question

1. Research the conspiracy of Cinadon, mentioned in the source above (begin by reading the source in Xenophon's *Hellenika*, noted in Source A). Outline what happened and explain how the conspiracy of Cinadon tells us that there was social unrest in Sparta, possibly caused by the idea of 'inferiors' in society.

### Other 'inferior' social groups

There were several other 'inferior' social groups that reinforced the hierarchical social structure, privileging the Spartiate class above all others.

#### *Tresantes*

Spartiates who showed cowardice in battle by fleeing from the enemy, surrendering or surviving a battle when their comrades had not, were labelled *tresantes* (tremblers). According to the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus in fragment 10, a coward was 'dogged by all evil and dishonour' having to roam the countryside 'as a beggar with their family', for 'he will be hated by all he approaches' and is forced to wander with 'his dear mother and aged father together with his little children and wedded wife.' Xenophon (*Lak. Pol.* 9.5) tells us that to mark them out even further, cowards were required to wear half a beard to make them look ridiculous.

#### *Mothakes ('step-brothers')*

Though the exact nature of this group is disputed, they were likely the children of Spartiate men and helot mothers, or the children of poor Spartiates who had become inferiors (*hypomeiones*). This group trained alongside the Spartiate children in the education system and there is evidence that they could marry and perhaps even attain citizenship.

#### *Parthenaiai ('sons of virgins')*

*Parthenaiai* were 'sons of virgins' or children of unmarried Spartan women. They appear in the ancient record as children born during the First Messenian War. As these sons were born to those men who did not fight, they were given second-class status, effectively labelled the sons of cowards and given no rights, according to Antiochus of Syracuse (Strabo, 6.3.2).

#### *Neodamodeis*

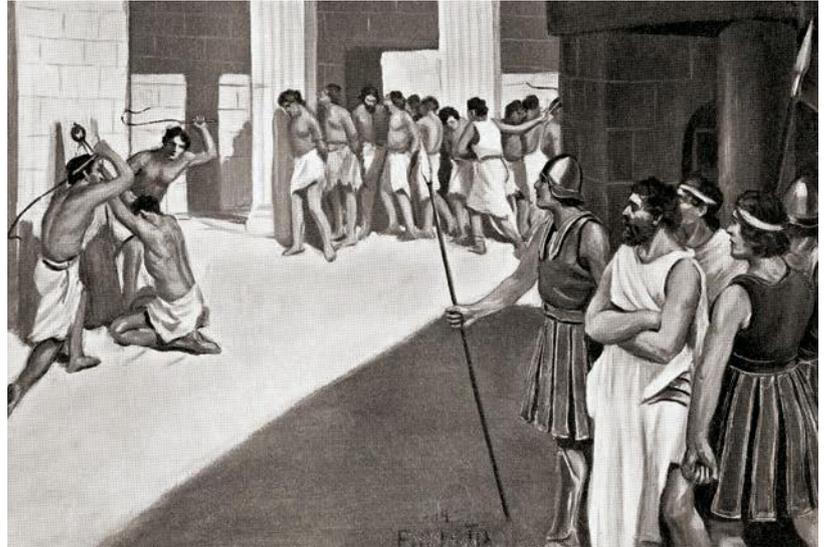
*Neodamodeis* were helots freed by the state for showing bravery or excellence in battle.

## Helots

Slavery was a common feature throughout ancient Greece, but the institution of slavery in Sparta has been portrayed as unique. In other Greek cities, such as Athens, slaves were owned by individuals, whereas in Sparta they were assigned to the land that was apportioned to Spartiates after successful completion of the *agoge*. This meant that they could not be traded or freed, and remained the property of the state. Most historians believe that the Spartan system of government was shaped by a fear of helot revolt and the need to maintain control over them.

The term ‘helot’ has been translated differently, but can loosely be defined as serfs, subject to the landowning elite (Spartiates). Helots had no political rights and were scattered throughout Sparta and Messenia; they greatly outnumbered the relatively small number of Spartiates. Many of the helots were captured during the Messenian wars, although sources suggest some helots were the descendants of the original inhabitants of Lakedaimonia, before the group that would become the Spartans settled in the region.

By the Classical period, the helots had become the economic backbone of Spartan society, allowing the Spartiates to focus on being full-time warriors. They had some limited freedom in their day-to-day lives; for example, they were able to marry and produce their own food primarily because most of them lived a long distance from Sparta. Nevertheless, the evidence supports the notion that their primary function was to produce resources for the Spartan elite. They were expected to work on the land and in the household (if they lived near their master) and work for the military by carrying provisions, serving as lightly armed skirmishers. The general picture painted of the helots by the ancient written evidence is one of extreme violence and exploitation by the Spartan *polis*.



**FIGURE 3.5** Helots, the sources claim, were given a stipulated number of beatings each year to remind them that they were subordinate to the Spartiates.

## Source Study 3.4 The helots

### Source A: Tyrtaeus

Just like asses, worn out by their enormous burdens,  
Bringing to their masters out of necessity  
Half of everything that the land brings forth.

Tyrtaeus, fr. 6

### Source B: Thucydides

Most of the helots were descendants of the ancient Messenians, who had been enslaved previously. Therefore, they were all called Messenians.

Thucydides, 1.101. 2

**Source C: Cooley**

Most helots worked for absentee landlords, and they were probably quite independent in organising their activities, as long as they were able to supply their masters with a 'rent' in kind, which the Spartiate would use to maintain his household and to meet his contributions to the *syssitia* ... Some evidence from Pylos on the west coast of Messenia seems to suggest that they lived in large villages, while evidence from Lakonia seems to point at communities around a large estate. In some areas helots may have lived in scattered farmsteads. It seems likely that not all helots in Lakonia and Messenia were settled in the same way.

MGL Cooley, *Sparta*, London Association of Classical Teachers (LACTOR), London, 2017, p 107.

**Questions**

1. What can we learn from Tyrtaeus' description of helots (Source A)?
2. What does Thucydides (Source B) believe about the origins of the helots? Considering Thucydides as a source, would this be reliable? Explain your answer.
3. What does Cooley (Source C) say about the distribution of helot communities? Why is where they lived significant?

**Helot revolts**

According to the eminent historian GEM De Ste Croix, 'the cardinal fact about Sparta is her uniquely dangerous position as mistress of the helots, above all the Messenian helots ... who might revolt at any time when a good opportunity arrived.'<sup>1</sup> Aristotle (Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, 28.4) says that the *ephors*, when taking their office each year, declared war on the helots. A general fear of helot revolt prompted the Spartans always to be prepared to crush any rebellion, so much so that Thucydides (4.80.3) says that, 'Most matters for the Spartans with regard to the helots were always established with a view to security'. The Athenian philosopher Plato also noted that the frequent helot revolts were a major problem for the Spartans. Several of these revolts are noted in the ancient records. The helot revolt of 464 BC took place after a major earthquake and Sparta needed the help of Athens to end it. The successful revolt of 370 BC occurred after Sparta's loss of power after the Battle of Leuctra.

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Who were the 'inferiors'?
2. Outline the different types of inferiors in Spartan society.
3. Who were the helots? How were they different from other slaves in Classical Greece?
4. What were the helots' roles in Spartan society?
5. Why do you think there was concern about the helots revolting?

## Further reading

GEM De Ste Croix, 'The helot threat', in M Whitby (ed), *Sparta*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2002, pp 190–195.

WG Forrest, *A History of Sparta*, Bristol Classical Press, London, 2002.

S Hodkinson, 'Social Order and the conflict of Values in Classical Sparta', in M. Whitby (ed), *Sparta*, Edinburgh University Press, 2002, pp 105–130.

P Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia: A regional history, 1300-362 BC*, Routledge, New York, 2015.

## Activities

### Bringing it together

1. What do the criteria for Spartan citizenship tell us about the values in Spartan society?
2. In what ways were the *perioikoi* and helots different? Were there any similarities between the two groups?
3. Explain the role played by the class of inferiors in Spartan society.

### Activities

1. Create a list of 10 short quotes (two to eight words long) that you could use to support a response about the structure of Spartan society.
2. Research the helot revolt of 464 BC and outline what happened.
3. Create a mind map of the various parts of Spartan society. For each part, include key points and, where possible, primary sources that provide information.

### HSC-style questions

1. Who were the helots? (4 marks)
2. Outline the relationship between Sparta and the *perioikoi*. (5 marks)
3. What does the evidence reveal about the social structure of Sparta? (12 marks)

## Endnotes

1. S Hodkinson, 'Social order and the conflict of values in classical Sparta', in M Whitby, *Sparta*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2002, p 104.
2. GEM De Ste Croix, 'The helot threat', in M Whitby (ed), *Sparta*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2002, p 190.

Chapter

# 4

## The Spartan army

A terracotta bust of a smiling Spartan hoplite. The figure is shown from the chest up, wearing a helmet with a prominent crest. The face is characterized by a slight, atypical smile, which is a notable feature of this particular sculpture. The material is a reddish-brown terracotta, and the lighting highlights the texture and contours of the face and helmet.

**FIGURE 4.1** The smiling statue of a hoplite. This statue, with its atypical smiling face, is commonly referred to as the Leonidas, or pseudo-Leonidas, after the Spartan king it was thought to represent.

The military was, arguably, the most significant institution in Spartan society. All male Spartan children were expected to leave their family between the ages of 7 and 8 to begin a long period of training in the *agoge*, with the purpose of becoming a hoplite and a citizen. The hoplite was the traditional Greek citizen soldier who fought with a *hoplon* (a bronze-faced shield, 2 metres in diameter), a *sarissa* (2-metre-long spear) and a short sword. Hoplites fought in lines, allowing them to make a wall of shields in rows, called a *phalanx*.

According to two of the more detailed ancient written sources on the Spartan *agoge*, Xenophon's *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians* and Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*, the whole society was focused on military excellence and obedience to the laws and state. However, this view is now thought by most modern historians to be part of the Spartan mirage, designed to intimidate existing and potential enemies.

### By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- evaluate the importance of the military to Spartan society and identity, training system (*agoge*) and the structure and tactics of the Spartan military
- understand the role of the *syssitia* and the *krypteia*.

## A military society

The relative importance of the military over other key aspects of everyday society, such as religion, is hard to determine because it has been so heavily affected by the Spartan mirage. Nevertheless, we also know from extant sources, such as Herodotus and Thucydides, that the Spartan army was revered and feared during the Archaic and Classical periods. This is shown in Source Study 4.1 (Source A), in which the Spartan exile Demaratus is telling the Persian king Xerxes about the strength of the Spartan military.

### Spartan military propaganda

The idea that Sparta had the best soldiers in Greece was not simply the result of famous military actions, but also Sparta's own propaganda. Spartan society was largely closed to outsiders, allowing the Spartans to control the narrative of their own social, political and military success. Their propaganda emphasised the stability of the political system, the equality of the Spartiates and the courage of the military. This propaganda was even disseminated to prominent writers, such as Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon, so later authors repeated their ideas about the role of the military in Spartan society.

Stories such as the heroic stand of 300 Spartans, led by King Leonidas at Thermopylae during the Persian wars, were legendary and symbolised the Spartan code of honour, military excellence and sacrifice in obedience to the state above all else. Such events could have been celebrated in Sparta (at the tombs of the 300 and Leonidas on the Spartan acropolis), leading to the development of official propaganda, which could readily be believed by contemporary writers as history. For example, Spartan propaganda depicted the stand of Leonidas and the 300 as a great sacrifice and evidence of the militaristic attitude of Spartans, whereas many historians now recognise it as Spartan propaganda after a catastrophic defeat. Also, while it is implied in both modern and ancient sources that



**FIGURE 4.2** A bronze relief image of a hoplite thought to be of Spartan origin. The hoplites were the citizen soldiers of the Greek city-states.

the Spartans spent much of their day training, it is now known that, although they trained far more regularly than the soldiers of other *poleis*, Spartiates also had time for hunting, leisure, and engaging in commerce. According to historian Anton Powell (see Source B in Source Study 4.1), Sparta actively promoted this type of propaganda to intimidate potential opponents, including the helots, and secure support from allies.

## Source Study 4.1

### The militarised society

#### Source A: Herodotus

Fighting singly, the Lakedaimonians are as brave as anyone, but as a group they are the best of anyone. For although they are free, they are not entirely free. For law remains their master, and stand in greater awe of it than any of your men stand in awe of you. Whatever it might command, they do, and its command is always unchanging: never permitting flight in battle, regardless of the enemy numbers in battle, but requiring them to stay and conquer or die.

Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book VII, 104

#### Source B: Powell

Even in her homeland, Sparta's citizen population was dwarfed by that of the helots, Greek-speakers, natives of the region, whose status was akin to that of slaves. Sparta exceeded other Greek states, according to Thucydides, in the number (or, perhaps, proportion) formed by this unfree population. Here was always the potential for internal war, between helot and master. Modern

societies, including democratic ones, recognize the close relation between war and intense secrecy ...

Efficient lying may not have been seen by Spartans as negative. It was apparently something that they prided themselves upon ... Thucydides' account of how the 2000 impressive helots were identified and massacred in secrecy may have reached him, highly sensitive information though it was, because some Spartans boasted of their efficient deception. As to ethnic stereotyping: Spartan society was structured to produce a stereotype – of themselves. Spartans were, they themselves insisted, the *homoioi*, the 'similar'.

A Powell, 'Sparta: Reconstructing History from Secrecy, Lies and Myth', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 8–15.

## Questions

1. According to Herodotus in Source A, why were the Spartans such fearsome warriors?
2. Herodotus attributes the story that the Spartans were fearsome warriors to Demaratus as part of a speech during the Persian Wars. Research Demaratus and where he was at this time. Explain the impact this has on your interpretation of the quote.
3. What does Powell in Source B suggest about Sparta's use of deception? Explain how the story about Leonidas and the 300 at the Battle of Thermopylae is an example of this.

## Male education (the *agoge*)

To become highly effective warriors, all Spartan boys were enrolled in the education system, commonly known as the *agoge*. We are not sure of its origins or original purpose, but it may have been part of a reordering of society in the 6th century, or part of reforms of society that happened during the Messenian Wars. The *agoge*, overseen by a special person called a *paidonomos*, was designed to instil young Spartans with a deep sense of patriotism, loyalty, obedience and comradeship. Holding one of the most important roles in Sparta, a *paidonomos* was tasked with managing the behaviour of all those in the *agoge*. According to Plutarch they were chosen ‘from men of physical and moral distinction’ (Plut. *Lyk.* 17.2). There were three key stages in the *agoge*: *paides* (boys), *paidikoi* (youths) and *hebontes* (young men). These age groups were approximate, and were probably a reflection of relative ability and skill as much as age. As the boys progressed through the education system, their training intensified.

Each stage included tests of endurance and strength, many of which were incorporated into whole-community religious festivals, suggesting the importance of this system of education to the entire Spartan society. As an example, the Gymnopaedia, a five-day festival of athletic and dancing competitions, was closely associated with the *agoge*. Xenophon wrote about another rite of passage, the stealing of cheese at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, which was a test for youths (*paidikoi*) to progress towards becoming young *hebontes* (see page 53).

The focus of training was the success of the collective, with older boys and young men responsible for the moral instruction of the younger participants. At around the age of 20, young men were enrolled as *eirenes*. Similar to troop leaders, *eirenes* were tasked with ensuring the training, discipline and conformity of their troop of trainees.



**FIGURE 4.3** The *agoge* was the site of study and physical training for the Spartiate elite. The training of younger men was supervised by the *eirenes*.

### **paidonomos**

‘boy-herdsman’; an adult magistrate, responsible for the upbringing of the males aged from 7 to 30 years

### **paides**

boys, usually between the ages of 7 and 14

### **paidikoi**

youths, usually aged between 15 and 19

### **hebontes**

the young soldiers of the Spartan army between the age of 20 and 29, before being admitted as full Spartan citizens at the age of 30

### **eiren (pl. eirenes)**

a group of young men from which the commanders of boys in the *agoge* are drawn

TABLE 4.1 Stages of the Spartan education system for males

Approximate age	Features of the stage	Written evidence
0–6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Raised in the household under the supervision of mothers and helot nurses.</li> <li>Taught the military values of Spartan society.</li> </ul>	<p>'They believed that a life that was not equipped by nature and not born naturally strong was of no benefit to itself or the state. In the same way, women washed newborns not in water, but in wine, to test their physical strength.'</p> <p>Plutarch, <i>Life of Lycurgus</i> 16.2</p>
7–14 <i>paides</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commenced the <i>agoge</i>.</li> <li>Enrolled in barracks (the age from which they actually slept away from their family is unclear).</li> <li>Focused on developing strength and obedience through physical hardship and punishment.</li> <li>Placed under the guardianship of a <i>paidonomos</i> (boy herdsman) who was tasked with punishing the boys severely if they misbehaved</li> <li>Participated in communal religious festivals and athletic competitions.</li> <li>Learnt to survive hardship, such as inadequate food rations, exercising naked, sleeping on a bed of rushes and provided with only one cloak per year.</li> </ul>	<p>'They learnt enough reading and writing to serve as needed, and the rest of their lessons were directed towards following commands well, enduring hard-work and conquering in battle.</p> <p>When they reached the age of 12, they no longer went about in tunics, receiving a cloak once a year. Their bodies were dry and went without washing or anointing with oil; they only indulged in the civilities on a few days each year. They used to sleep together in troops or companies on beds of straw that they collected themselves ... from the banks of the Eurotas.'</p> <p>Plutarch, <i>Life of Lycurgus</i> 16.6</p> <p>'Either straight away, or possibly from the age of 12, he had to sleep away from the home with his contemporaries in the barracks, a practice which continued until he reached the age of 30.'</p> <p>S Hodkinson in M Whitby, <i>Sparta</i>, 2019, p 105.</p>
15–19 <i>paidikoi</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Slept in barracks.</li> <li>Focused on military training.</li> <li>Completed initial training between 18 and 19 years of age, but remained under the control of superiors and was constantly occupied with duties.</li> <li>Would have joined the army as reservists after completing this initial training.</li> </ul>	<p>'When he grows from being a boy to a man, it is then that he stops being tutored and taught. He has no master at all and is sent on his own way. Lycurgus ... kept them ceaselessly at work and kept them constantly labouring. If anyone should run away from this, he was not given any honours ... In addition to this, wishing for modesty to be implanted in them, he also had them keep their hands in their cloaks while walking around the streets, going about in silence, never looking around but looking down at their feet.'</p> <p>Xenophon, <i>Constitution of the Lakedaimonians</i> 3.1–4</p>
20–29 <i>hebontes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Became full members of the army at 20.</li> <li>Enrolled as <i>eirenes</i>.</li> <li>Could apply for membership of a common mess <i>syssition</i> (in which they had to eat their evening meal) at 20 years old.</li> <li>Could attend the assembly and vote despite being under the supervision of the <i>paidonomos</i>.</li> <li>Were pressured to marry, but had to sleep in the barracks until 30.</li> </ul>	<p>'So that the boys were never without a leader, even if there was no adult present, he placed the keenest of the <i>eirenes</i> at the head of each company.'</p> <p>Xenophon, <i>Constitution of the Lakedaimonians</i> 2. 10–11</p> <p>'Apart from the <i>eirenes</i>, other young adults in the 20–29 age-group (<i>hebontes</i>) had a role in controlling the boys. The <i>paidonomos</i>, who organised the upbringing was given a group of <i>hebontes</i> as whip bearers to provide floggings.'</p> <p>S Hodkinson in M Whitby, <i>Sparta</i>, 2019, p 105.</p>

According to Xenophon's *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians*, a relationship with an older man was an important part of a Spartan boy's education and entry into society. Xenophon is dismissive of the idea that there was a sexual basis to the relationships between **erastes** and **eromenos** (older lover and desired youth), saying it was a practice forbidden by Lycurgus, although modern historians do not accept Xenophon's claim that there was no sexual basis to these relationships. Plutarch and Xenophon both connect these relationships with the *agoge*, highlighting the importance of teaching the Spartan youth the values of bravery, military excellence, and duty to the state.

As Spartan boys needed to win the approval of the community for entry into a *syssition* (pl. *syssitia*), the *erastes* acted as role models, encouraging them to excel in training and competition.

**erastes**

older male lover of a 'youth'

**eromenos**

a youth who is the object of an older male lover's affection

The ages of an *erastes* and an *eromenos* are not clearly defined; scholars generally place the age of *eromenos* starting at around 12 and the *erastes* in his twenties, but this may have varied. Evidence suggests that the pair maintained a relationship of mentor and mentee after their training was completed.

... the role of the boy's *erastes* was so important, according to Plutarch, that he shared in the good or bad reputation of his *eromenos* (beloved). On one occasion, so it was said, an *erastes* was actually punished for an ignoble cry emitted by his *eromenos* in some boys' combat.

P Cartledge, 'The Politics Of Spartan Pederasty', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 27, 1981, p. 17–36.

## Source Study 4.2 Spartan education

### Source A: Richer

An educational practice unique to Sparta involved theft. According to Xenophon (*Lak. Pol.*, 2. 7–8; cf. also Plutarch, *Lykourgos*, 17. 5–6), young Spartans were encouraged to steal food to supplement their ordinary meals (which must have taken place in a specified place, according to Plutarch, *Lykourgos*, 17. 4). Xenophon justifies this stealing by stressing its educational value, and the fact that youngsters who stole inefficiently and were caught were subjected to punishment. In this context, Xenophon (*Lak. Pol.*, 2. 9) mentions the practice of *bomolochia*, of theft at the altar of Orthia, which took place amid a hail of blows from whips...

N Richer, 'Spartan Education in the Classical Period in Powell', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 529.

### Source B: Cartledge

... an endless series of official measures illustrating another general feature of Spartan organisation, namely the concerted effort to minimise the importance of family life ... and to emphasise rather the cardinal and overriding significance of communal ties.

P Cartledge, *Spartan Reflections*, University of California Press, USA, 2001, p 84.

## Questions

1. Why was stealing encouraged according to Richer (Source A)? Explain why you think this was the case.
2. What does Cartledge mean in Source B when he says the *agoge* was designed to 'minimise the importance of family life'?

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were the aims of a Spartan education?
2. Could the *agoge* be seen as excellent propaganda for the Spartan mirage?
3. Explain the role of the *erastes* in the *agoge*.

## Historical debate about the *agoge*

The major sources for the education system need to be treated with caution. Xenophon's *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians* is based on firsthand experience of Spartan society, but his work is from the late Classical period, after Sparta's influence had started to decline. The other major source is Plutarch, who wrote several texts about Sparta during the Roman period, many centuries after Sparta's fall.

Because of the limitations of the written evidence, the accuracy of some descriptions of the *agoge* has been debated. Central to these uncertainties is that the *agoge* continued in some form into the Roman period in which Plutarch was writing, a fact that has, according to the historian Kennell (see Source Study 4.3), distorted our overall understanding of the *agoge* that existed during the Classical period. Kennell argues that, in reality, the *agoge* of the Classical period was more similar in nature to other Greek education systems from the same period.

## Source Study 4.3 The myth of the *agoge*

### Source A: Kennell

... this process, often called the 'Spartan mirage', is responsible for images of Sparta in the modern popular, and often academic, imagination. Since the classical training system constituted such an important part of the mirage, debate has centred in recent years not only on the system's modalities but also on the reliability of the ancient evidence itself ... The controversy hinges on the relevance of the later sources, overwhelmingly from the Roman period, to the earlier citizen training system. For if the Spartan civic training system had a continuous history from its beginning, probably in the sixth century BCE, to its end sometime after the 330s CE (Liban. Or. 1.23), the later evidence would reflect a living Spartan tradition and could then be used cautiously to reconstruct the system's structure and functioning in previous centuries (Ducat 2006: x–xi). On the other hand, if, as I believe, the Spartan training system ceased to function twice, in the third and second centuries BCE, for a period of several decades each time, this evidence reflects a Roman-era system that was actually a collection of invented traditions designed to project an image of Sparta as essentially unchanged from the archaic period (Kennell 1995: 9–12), and its utility for understanding the classical training system is significantly reduced.

N Kennell, 'Boys, girls, family, and the state at Sparta', in JE Grubbs, T Parkin and R Bell (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*, Oxford University Press, USA, 2013, pp 381–383.

## Questions

1. Identify and explain the debate about the features of the *agoge* in Source A.
2. Explain the impact of Kennell's beliefs about the *agoge* in the Roman period on our understanding of Spartan society.
3. Which approach do you find more convincing: Ducat's belief that there was continuity in the features of the *agoge* or Kennell's view that sources from the Roman period distort our understanding of Spartan education? Explain your answer.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what happened in the *agoge* of the 5th century BC. Xenophon was given the honour of having his sons undertake the *agoge*, so he would have had a good idea about it in his day, but it had no doubt changed significantly from the 6th century to the early 4th century BC. While it clearly had a military purpose, what

is often excluded in discussions about the *agoge* is the likely inclusion of literacy in some form, as most Spartiates had at least basic literacy. Also, the large focus on music and dancing was part of the training of the *agoge*, which would probably have assisted in the movements of the army, but were also a reflection of the large importance in Sparta of a 'song culture', including singing and dancing in festivals for pleasure and contest as much as for military training.

## Composition of the Spartan army

The Spartan army consisted of skilled warriors, known as hoplites. Hoplites were the standard heavily armed military force in most Greek states. These warriors fought in a formation called a *phalanx*, the smallest unit of which stood four men wide and eight men deep, formed closely together. The soldier's shields were interlinked, with part of one soldier's shield protecting the soldier next to them on their left, with soldiers holding their long *sarissae*, or spears, in front. They advanced as a group, marching in step with each other. The soldiers in the leading line were pushed forward by the force and weight of the ranks behind them, and if a soldier fell in the front, he was replaced by the soldier behind him. When they met a line of the enemy, they would, in the first instance, attack their heads or groins with their *sarissa*. If their line broke, they could use their short bronze sword as their primary weapon.

The success of this type of fighting depended on the discipline and training of the soldiers and their ability to stay together as a group. If individual soldiers dropped their shields, they left their fellow fighters exposed. The bravery and obedience of the Spartan soldiers is what made them so successful, and their success was a key reason why cowards were so actively shunned by the Spartan community (and, indeed, all communities where they fought as a *phalanx*).

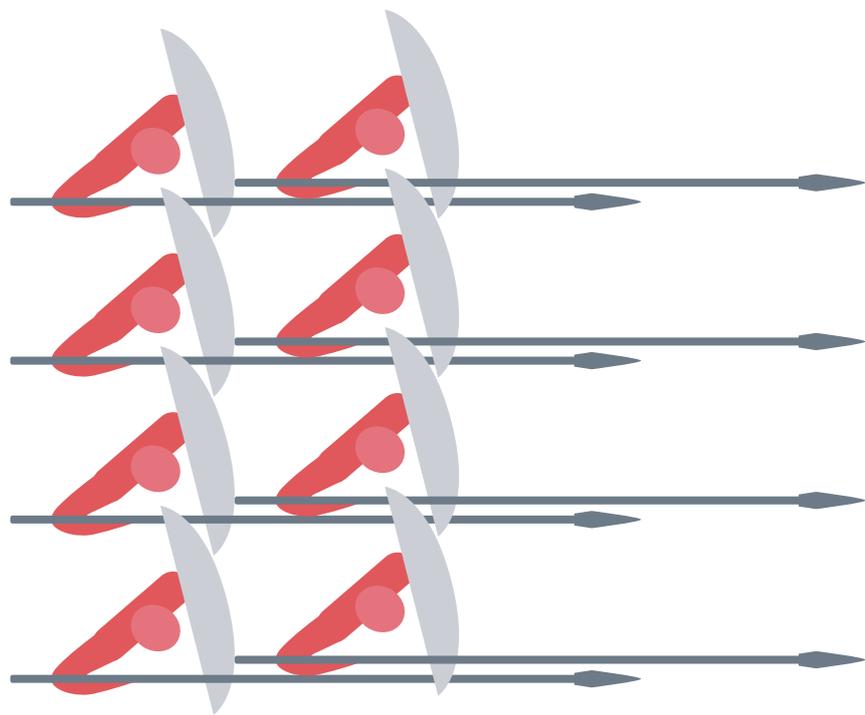
According to Paul Cartledge,<sup>1</sup> Spartan hoplites were equipped with their large, 2-metre-wide *hoplon* in their left hand. They were covered in bronze armour, wearing a helmet, a breastplate and greaves (lower leg armour). The helmet, which was adorned with a horsehair crest, protected a large area of the head and neck without restricting vision (although hearing was impaired). Spartans were famous for their bright red tunics and cloaks (they took their cloaks off before battle). The cloaks marked their superiority in society because red clothing was hugely expensive, requiring dye from thousands of special murex molluscs found in the southern Peloponnese. The colour possibly also helped to hide blood stains. Their *sarissa* was made from wood but had a bronze tip, and their *khalkes* (short-sword) was also made from bronze, and was used for close combat in a stabbing fashion.



FIGURE 4.4 A Spartan hoplite



FIGURE 4.5 A Spartan shield, c 425 BC. Usually made of wood covered in bronze, these shields generally featured a painted surface with personal insignia or a symbol of the hoplite's state.



**FIGURE 4.6** Above: Typical Spartan troop formations, from a single file through to the *Lochos*. Below: Spartan hoplite formations. Hoplites were a formidable military force that relied on maintaining strict discipline. In close *phalanx* formation, shields overlapped and provided greater protection against attackers. Those in the front rows fought, usually with spears and short swords, while those towards the rear pushed. As those in the front lines fell, the row members moved forward to take the place of their fallen colleagues. The closer formation, which the Spartans perfected, provided greater defensive capacity and offensive striking force.

## Source Study 4.4 Hoplites and the army

### Source A: Cartledge

The cardinal item of hoplite equipment was the large round shield (invented by 700 BC) from which, according to Diodoros (15.44.3), the heavy-armed infantryman (hoplites) took his name ... Since the shield was relatively hard to manoeuvre, it afforded only partial coverage on the flank and could not be slung round to protect the back, it was better adapted to use in close formation, preferably as close as comfort and safety would allow. It was imperative in this style of fighting to know at a glance who stood on either side of you and to be able to tell friend from foe almost automatically. So another differentia of the hoplite shield was the painted or bronze **blazon**, probably at first a decorative or personal emblem, later supplemented or replaced by an alphabetic badge of state. The practical and symbolic value of the shield is nicely encapsulated in the official Spartan attitude to men who lost or abandoned theirs, and in the curt admonition of the quintessential Spartan mother to her son to return from battle with it – or on it.

P Cartledge, 'Hoplites and heroes: Sparta's contribution to the technique of ancient warfare' *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 97, 1977, pp 12-13.

#### blazon

a large symbol; for example, Spartans had a large L (*lambda* in Greek) on their shield, representing the word 'Lakedaimonia'

### Source B: Hodkinson

Finally, the army was organised according to a uniquely hierarchical command structure, attested in no other Greek hoplite force: the king at the top, with the *polemarchoi* under him, then the *lochagoi*, the *pentekonteres* and, lastly, the *enomotarchoi*, who led the smallest army units, the *enomotiai*. In Thucydides' words, 'almost the entire army of the Lakedaimonians ... consists of officers commanding subordinate officers' (5.66). In addition, rank-and-file Spartan soldiers were required to swear a special oath of obedience to their officers: 'I shall not desert my *taxiarchos* or my *enomotarches* whether he is alive or dead, and I shall not leave unless the *hegemones* [commanders] lead us away.

S Hodkinson, 'An exceptional domination of state over society?', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 37.

### Source C: Pavlides

That the *perioikoi* fought alongside the Spartans is widely attested and their contribution to the Lakedaimonian army was noted in the Greek world. Isocrates (*Panathenaicus* 177–8) describes the hardships suffered by the *perioikoi* within the Lakedaimonian army, claiming that 'whenever need arose to dispatch a relief-force anywhere and they themselves [the Spartans] were afraid of the hardships or the dangers or the length of time involved, they sent them [the *perioikoi*] forth to take the brunt of the danger from all the rest'. Isocrates' testimony has been criticised as rhetorical exaggeration, anti-Spartan bias, and pro-Athenian exaltation. But the case remains that such a view, hyperbolic as it may be, reflects a truth in that the *perioikoi* were a crucial component of the Lakedaimonian army ...

... Perhaps the most unexpected group to serve in the Lakedaimonian army were the helots, a form of state-owned slave who lived in the Spartan controlled area of the Lakonike, composed of Messenia and Laconia. Herodotus (7.229; 9.28.2) and Thucydides detail a number of occasions on which helots were employed (4.8.9, 80.2–3; 5.64.2). In Thucydides (5.57.1), for example, we read that when the Spartans unleashed their full force against Argos the army included helots. We do not always know what role helots played in the army, but they are recorded as having served as hoplites, attendants, and light-armed troops.

N Pavlides, 'Non-Spartans in the Lakedaimonian Army: The evidence from Laconia', *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 69, 2020, pp 155–157.

## Questions

1. What, according to Cartledge (Source A), was the importance of the shield to the tactics of the Spartan army?
2. What impact would the Greek letter *lambda* have had on the Spartans before and during battle?
3. Using Sources A and B, describe the organisation of the Spartan army.
4. What is the significance of the oath sworn by Spartan soldiers to their commanders in Source B?
5. According to Source C, to what extent were the *perioikoi* and helots an important part of the Spartan army?
6. Locate some of the sources mentioned in Source C. Using these references, outline the roles played by the *perioikoi* and helots in the Spartan army.

## Syssitia

*Syssitia* were Spartan mess halls, in which all men were obligated to eat one daily meal. The term *syssitia* refers to the idea of eating in the military barracks. The term *syssition* indicates a single dining group that formed part of the *syssitia*. These ‘dining clubs’ were composed of approximately 15 men and had a range of different functions. They not only acted as a space in which Spartan values and ideals were handed down to different generations, they also effectively replaced the family unit with the male military corps.

At the age of 20, Spartiate men applied for entrance into a *syssition*. If they were not accepted as part of a *syssition*, or if they failed to make regular contributions from their *kleros* to their *syssition*, they might lose their citizenship rights. There are some stories of kings donating on behalf of a member who had fallen on hard times, to ensure that they did not lose their status as a Spartiate. Plutarch says that the required monthly contributions included barley meal, wine, cheese, figs and money for meat or fish. According to Plutarch, equality and military camaraderie were developed through the *syssitia*, which is why it was important that all members of a *syssition* attend. It was said that the Spartans ate a ‘black broth’ for their main meal, made primarily from pigs’ blood, sparse vegetables and grains. While it likely formed part of their diet, there is also evidence that the Spartans had a generally broad and healthy diet, which contributes to many historians thinking that this is again part of the Spartan mirage.

## Source Study 4.5 The *syssitia*

### Source A: David

As is well known, the citizens of Sparta had a basic duty to pay the dues necessary to keep the mess going—failure to do so entailing loss of political rights ... Plato discusses the common mess several times in the *Laws*. He considers it a basic element of both the Spartan and Cretan constitutions, designed to serve chiefly as a means of perpetual readiness for war, and thus, especially in Sparta, an integral part of the military organisation. At the same time, the philosopher believes that in addition to its original aim, imposed by military considerations, this institution could prove helpful also in the realisation of other important ends: the establishment of order in the private life of the citizen, and consequently of public order and discipline.

E David, ‘The Spartan *Syssitia* and Plato’s *Laws*’, *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 99, No. 4, 1978, pp 486–495.

## Source B: Plutarch

Each man in the *syssitia* takes a ball of bread in his hand, and when the servant comes around carrying the bowl on his head, they put it in quietly to vote, leaving it as it was if he approved, but flattening it with his fingers if he didn't ... The flattened bread had the power of a ... negative vote, and if one negative vote was found, he is not admitted entry to [the group].

Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, 12

## Questions

1. What does David consider to be the central role of the *syssitia* in Source A?
2. Based on your understanding, how could 'public order and discipline' be a result of the *syssitia*?
3. Explain the extreme punishment for not contributing to the *syssitia*.
4. What was the process of admission to a *syssitia*?

## Control of the helots

As the helots greatly outnumbered their Spartiate masters, a key focus of Spartan society was the control of the helot population of Lakedaimonia and Messenia. The dominance of Spartiates over the helot population was achieved in several different ways:

- a society-wide focus on the strength and discipline of the military
- the use of the *krypteia*, a unit of *paidikoi* who spread fear among the helot populations
- the *syssitia*, a system of organised eating messes that accentuated the distinctiveness and equality between Spartiates, in contrast to the helot population of the region.

At all times, the Spartans effectively made war on the helots, and their continued treatment of the helots as an underclass of Spartan society was noted as extreme behaviour even by some other Greeks. The Spartans mandated that helots wear dogskin caps and skins as clothing to differentiate them and ensure they were instantly recognisable. The Spartans are even said to have required all helots to receive a mandated number of beatings each year to ensure that they were in a constant state of fear of punishment, making them less likely to revolt. Such treatment makes it obvious that the Spartans held a genuine fear of the helots rising up against them, which would have destroyed Spartan society as it existed.

### *Krypteia*

According to ancient evidence from Plato and Plutarch, fear was another method used to control the helot population, through secret squads of armed youths, called the *krypteia*. The nature of the *krypteia* is far from certain, although its name comes from the ancient Greek word κρυπτός (*kruptós*), which means 'concealed', 'hidden' or 'secret.'

Plato's account is the earliest. In his work *Laws*, he suggests that the *krypteia* was a part of the training of Spartan soldiers, with the intention to prepare them for any harsh conditions and secret missions they may face. It has been interpreted, from Plato, as an ancient initiation rite for young men moving to manhood.

Plutarch's view differs, portraying the members of the *krypteia* as being hand-selected from the best of the young men, who were then tasked with spreading fear among the helots, and reducing the helot threat by killing off any strong helots they came across. Modern historians have debated the purpose of this group, with some likening them to secret police and others, such as Ross (see Source Study 4.6), arguing its role may have been to engage in an ancient form of guerrilla warfare.

#### *krypteia*

the organisation selected from among the *paidikoi* to monitor and punish the helot population

## Source Study 4.6 The *krypteia*

### Source A: Plato

Moreover, the so-called *krypteia* is a wonderfully severe training in hardiness, because in winter the men go around without shoes, go to bed without blankets, and they have no attendants fussing around them, and are made to wander the whole countryside by day and night.

Plato, *Laws* 1.633

### Source B: Plutarch

The magistrates would, upon occasion, send out the most intelligent of the youths in different directions, with a dagger and enough supplies to sustain them in hand. During the day, they would scatter to out of the way places, to hide themselves and rest, but at night they would come down to the roads and slit the throat of the helots they caught. Frequently, they would roam the fields and kill the strongest and most powerful of them ... Aristotle particularly notes that the *ephors*, whenever they first come to office, declare war on the helots, so that their murder is free from religious pollution ... Personally ... I can't attribute to Lycurgus such an abomination as the *krypteia*.

Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 28

### Source C: Ross

The *krypteia*, as discussed previously, was an elite force of lightly-armed soldiers sent to fight the helots using unconventional methods. They would attack both day and night whereas the hoplites would only attack in daylight. They also had very little in the way of provided standard equipment, which would require them to obtain the necessary supplies by other means. The members of the *krypteia* would disperse into the countryside, most likely into small teams, rather than remain together as a single unit. Furthermore they would attack targets of opportunity and then hide using the advantages of the terrain. Not only does the nature of the *krypteia* match an emphasis on mountainous fighting, it matches the model of guerrilla warfare perfectly.

BD Ross, 'Krypteia: A Form of Ancient Guerrilla Warfare', *Grand Valley Journal of History*, Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 4, 2012, p 8.

## Questions

1. What does Plato (Source A) see as the purpose of the *krypteia*?
2. Why would Plutarch (Source B) find it hard to believe that Lycurgus was supposedly responsible for the activities of the *krypteia*?
3. Ross (Source C) claims that the *krypteia* were engaging in guerrilla warfare (warfare that was undertaken without notice and not in uniforms, rather than on a normal battlefield). Do you think this is an accurate description of the *krypteia*'s activities with the helots? Explain your answer.
4. Based on the three sources, how were the actions of the *krypteia* an important training for young Spartans?

## Further reading

N Richer, 'Spartan Education in the Classical Period' in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018.

P Cartledge, 'Hoplites and Heroes: Sparta's contribution to the technique of ancient warfare', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 97, 1977, pp 11-27.

AHM Jones, *Sparta*, Blackwell & Mott, Oxford, 1967.

P Cartledge, *Spartan Reflections*, University of California Press, USA, 2001.

## Activities

### Bringing it together

1. Explain how the Spartans controlled the helot threat.
2. Explain the importance of the *agoge*.
3. How was propaganda about the military beneficial to Sparta?

### Activities

1. Examine the sources about the *krypteia* in this chapter. What do you think the purpose of the *krypteia* was? Support your answer with evidence.
2. Explain how the Spartan army was organised. Research the organisation of the Australian Defence Force. What are the similarities and differences?
3. Read Plutarch's *Lycurgus*, chapter 28. What does it reveal about the treatment of the helots?

### HSC-style questions

1. Outline the features of the *agoge*. (5 marks)
2. Explain the purpose and significance of the *syssitia*. (8 marks)
3. What does the evidence reveal about the role and composition of the Spartan army? (12 marks)

## Endnotes

1. P Cartledge, 'Hoplites and Heroes: Sparta's contribution to the technique of ancient warfare', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 97, 1977, pp 11-27.

# Women in Spartan society



**FIGURE 5.1 A** How does the mirage shape the representation of Sparta women? Were they simply women who waved their men off to war as this illustration suggests?

One of the most debated aspects of Spartan society is the relative freedom of Spartan women in comparison to other women from around Greece. According to ancient evidence, Spartan women were educated alongside the men; took part in singing, dancing and athletic competitions; managed estates; and had property rights. While this perception is based on surviving contemporary evidence and later written accounts, we should question its accuracy. All of the extant written sources come from male, mostly pro-Athenian writers, and much of it was written when Athens and Sparta were great rivals during the 5th century BC. Archaeological evidence has added greater complexity to our understanding, but it does not provide the same level of detail about the roles and status of women as does written evidence. The roles of non-Spartiate, helot and *perioikoi* women are also missing from the written record. There are fleeting mentions of helot women performing the spinning duties of upper-class women, but little more is known about their roles.

**By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:**

- evaluate the idealised role of Spartan women as mothers
- understand the education of Spartan women
- explain the role of Spartan women in the economy
- evaluate the religious and social roles of Spartan women.

## The Spartan woman

One of the strongest stereotypes of Spartan society is the position of women within it. Women are depicted as being strong, independent and different from other women around Greece. These impressions are most likely influenced by the sources, almost all of which are from men writing in Athens in the 5th century BC. Although this is not part of the Spartan mirage, it is still a mirage of sorts.

It is likely that women in Sparta did not differ greatly from women in other Greek societies. Their role as mothers was fundamental to society, and each woman remained under the power of their father or nearest male relative. Their education was probably more thorough than for women in other Greek societies and they could own land independently. Athenian writers of all genres probably seized on these minor differences to depict the Spartans as 'abnormal'.

Athenian comedy, tragedy, history and philosophy tended to use depictions of Spartan women in order to show them as 'un-Athenian' and Spartan society as barbaric. In contrast, Athenian women were treated far more strictly in both society and the family structure. The historian Herodotus, to appeal to his mostly Athenian audience, focused on the outspokenness of Spartan women to emphasise how different they were from other Greek women (just as he had made Spartan kings seem more like Persians). Recent archaeological work has helped to correct this view of Spartan women, so while Spartan women definitely possessed greater rights and responsibilities and were less 'hidden' in daily life than in other *poleis*, their basic role and position in society does not appear to have been fundamentally different.



**FIGURE 5.2** Brooches and dress pins made of bronze, silver and bone found at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, a key religious site of ancient Sparta

## Spartan mothers and wives

While much has been written about the exceptional nature of the role of women in Spartan society, it is important to recognise that their main roles were, like in other areas in ancient Greece, as mothers. Many of the Lycurgan reforms related to women emphasised the reproductive capacity of women, as outlined by Xenophon and Plutarch. For example, the marriage ceremony outlined by Plutarch (*Life of Lycurgus* 15) emphasises the production of strong children as the main goal. Married couples were encouraged to see each other infrequently, so they were more virile and produced stronger children. Xenophon also discusses how women were encouraged to exercise so that ‘they [would] produce more vigorous offspring.’ As wives and mothers, they were taught to value the sacrifice of their husband and sons for Sparta. It has been suggested that because motherhood is socially, as well as biologically, constructed, it is possible that they were ashamed if their husbands and sons survived battle, or proud if they were killed in battle.<sup>1</sup> However, historians are increasingly questioning this attitude and attribute it to the Spartan mirage, helping to make Sparta seem more awe-inspiring and different from the rest of Greek society.

However, this view of Spartan mothers and wives is a very Athenocentric view of Sparta as ‘other’. We know that Spartan marriage was controlled by the males in the family – Herodotus (6.57.4) says that a father controlled his daughter’s marriage and that legal guardianship for females also existed (also noted by Aristotle, *Pol.* 1270a 26-29). Plutarch’s stories about capture-marriages also emphasises the role of the men in marriage. It seems that while their husbands were living in the barracks until the age of 30 (only sneaking home at night), women would have had greater freedom. That is probably correct, but the

ultimate responsibility for the marital relationship rested on the husband. Divorce also seems to have been controlled by men, with no rights afforded to women. The concept of wife-sharing to produce children has also been noted by some historians as evidence that women had a greater voice in society, but there is no evidence that women were able to initiate this arrangement. It is likely that women were instructed to be part of a wife-sharing arrangement whether they liked it or not, again emphasising the power of the husband over his wife. The level of female agency is therefore unclear and under-documented, a common problem in ancient, and modern, sources and histories.

The domestic life of Spartan women has also been questioned, again with a greater emphasis placed on recent archaeological finds than the Athenocentric sources. The traditional view of Spartan daily life has the helots doing most of, if not all, the domestic duties. However, evidence found in the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia and on the acropolis, including votives representing weaving and wool-working, indicate that such traditionally female-oriented activities may have been undertaken by women, and also formed part of the education of Spartan girls. It is likely that women were primarily responsible for the distribution of food in the household, and that girls probably ate better than their brothers in the barracks, who were taught to survive with minimal rations.

Xenophon also discussed how women were encouraged to take other partners (known as **polyandry**) if they could produce stronger children for the state of Sparta, a practice that highlights the emphasis placed on Spartan women's reproductive capacity. Plutarch says that women could have tombstones if they died 'in sacred office', which has been interpreted by some scholars to include childbirth, though this has been questioned by historian Dillon, who believes that tombstones were only awarded to women who died as priestesses.<sup>2</sup> However, while men were rewarded if they had three sons (by not being required to

**polyandry**

literally, 'many men', or the practice of having children with many men



**FIGURE 5.3** Jean-Jacques-François Le Barbier, *A Spartan Women Giving a Shield to her Son*, 1826. Le Barbier drew on the historical sources to illustrate the militarised nature of Spartan society and to link motherhood to that ethos.

undertake garrison duty) or five sons (by not being required to contribute to the taxation for the state), there was no similar reward for the women who bore children. Women did not suffer the same stigma for not being able to reproduce, while men were shamed for not having children, particularly sons.

## Source Study 5.1 Women in the household

### Source A : Pomeroy

... Housekeeping was not a time-consuming job for women, though ... not only did they supervise domestics, but they could also weave and took pride in their skills. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that textiles were exchanged or sold, or that the women were obliged to weave in order to provide clothing for their families. Wives were, above all, mothers.

SB Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, OUP, Oxford, 2002, p 51.

## Question

1. What does Pomeroy believe about the main role of Spartan women? Do you agree with this? Explain your answer.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the emphasis of the Lycurgan reforms with regard to women? Why do you think this is the case?
2. Why were women encouraged to exercise? How does this relate to their role in the Lycurgan reforms?
3. What was the attitude of women towards their husband and sons in the Athenocentric sources? In what way could this be seen as part of the Spartan mirage?
4. What does the practice of polyandry tell us about the role of women in Sparta?
5. What is the key problem with understanding the role of women in written sources?
6. What was the role played by women in their marriage, and what does this say about their role in relation to their male guardian?
7. In what way has the archaeological evidence changed our understanding of what women did at home?

## Education

Spartan girls were educated by the state alongside the boys. Xenophon claims that Spartan women were organised into bands for team games and choral singing. They were required to train to be physically fit with the primary purpose of having strong children. They would also have been educated in music and dancing as this was an important part of their role in the Spartan community.

There is no evidence of the extent to which girls were taught to read and write. Plutarch (*Moralia* 241a, d-e) says that Spartan mothers wrote to their sons, and Aristophanes, an Athenian comedic playwright, speaks of a female Spartan poet named Kleitagora (*Lysistrata* 1237). Also, limited epigraphic evidence tells us that Spartan girls seem to have been given a basic education in literacy, though a more sophisticated literary education may have been limited to the upper classes.



**FIGURE 5.4** The French impressionist painter Edgar Degas' *Young Spartans* portrays the education of girls alongside boys.

Girls' education in music (*mousike*) is better described. As historian Millender points out, women's 'choral dances ... played a significant role in Spartan ritual activity, particularly in connection with the cults of Helen and Artemis.<sup>3</sup> As with the boys, there seems to have been competition between girls' choruses, and there is evidence that women and girls performed in choruses at many religious festivals, such as the festival of Orthia, in honour of Artemis at Karyai. They probably performed a *hyporchorema*, which involved singing and dancing at the same time, in front of young male spectators.

The various artistic depictions of women running have also been interpreted by some historians as dancing, as a result of their backward-turning position. It is likely that the involvement of women in such events and competitions were rites of passage, associated with transitioning girls into their roles as mothers and wives. Training girls to sing and dance also served the purpose of ensuring that they were given the same education in the importance of the state and the specific gender roles that they were required to perform to ensure its success.<sup>4</sup> Plutarch describes the extensive physical training that women received, including javelin-throwing, and while it seems that there were indeed trials of strength (noted by Xenophon *Lak. Pol* 1.4 and Plato, *Laws* 833d, likely wrestling), some of Plutarch's claims are incorrect for the period down to 371 BC. There is also evidence of Spartan women being involved in chariot racing; for example, Pausanias reveals that the Spartan woman Kyniska recorded a victory at Olympia.

Girls probably participated in running races, which is mentioned by numerous later sources. The existence of bronze statues of girls wearing short skirts (*khitoniskoi*), combined with the name 'thigh-flashers' used for Spartan girls in the 6th and 5th centuries BC, make it seem likely that this took place (see Figures 5.5 and 5.6). Running races also appear to be an important aspect of women's religious life. Athletic training was thought by Xenophon and the Athenian politician/philosopher Kritias to prepare girls and young women for the rigours of childbirth and to produce healthier children. The girls may have undertaken exercise and trained naked. Both Aristophanes and Kritias claimed that naked exercise improved the chance of healthier children, and Plutarch suggested that it was done to incite male interest in women for reproductive purposes. However, it is most likely that the girls wore the *khitoniskoi* or *diazomata* (worn during wrestling) rather than trained naked, and it was again part of transitioning girls into married life.

## Source Study 5.2 Girls

### Source A: Millender

Spartan girls did not simply parade, dance, sing and compete in athletic contests before young male spectators. They also participated in the civic instruction of young Spartan males and thus began their life-long responsibility for evaluating the behaviour of their menfolk and safeguarding the system of values that guided male and female conduct.

E Millender, 'Spartan women', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 508.

### Source B: Female representations



**FIGURE 5.5** Female Spartan figure, undated



**FIGURE 5.6** A bronze figure of a running girl, possibly a decorative element on a vessel

## Questions

1. What role does Millender (Source A) claim that girls played in the education of boys?
2. Examine Source B. Do you think the figures are athletes or dancers? Explain your response.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why were girls trained with the boys in Spartan society?
2. What is the evidence that girls were taught to read and write? Do you think literacy would have formed part of the education of most Spartan girls? Explain your answer.
3. What is *mousike*? In what way did it form part of the education of Spartan girls?
4. In what way was physical education undertaken with girls? Why was this done?
5. What is the evidence for girls undertaking athletic training naked? What is the evidence against this?
6. Why did some writers claim that girls did athletic training while they were naked?

# Women in the Spartan community

As athletic training prepared Spartan girls for the transition to married life, their education also focused on the religious aspect of Spartan society. Choruses and dancing were both a major focus of the ritual preparation of girls for adult life. Unlike in other Greek *poleis*, however, marriage and transition festivals and rites in Sparta were done in front of, and as part of, the entire Spartan community.

## Religious roles

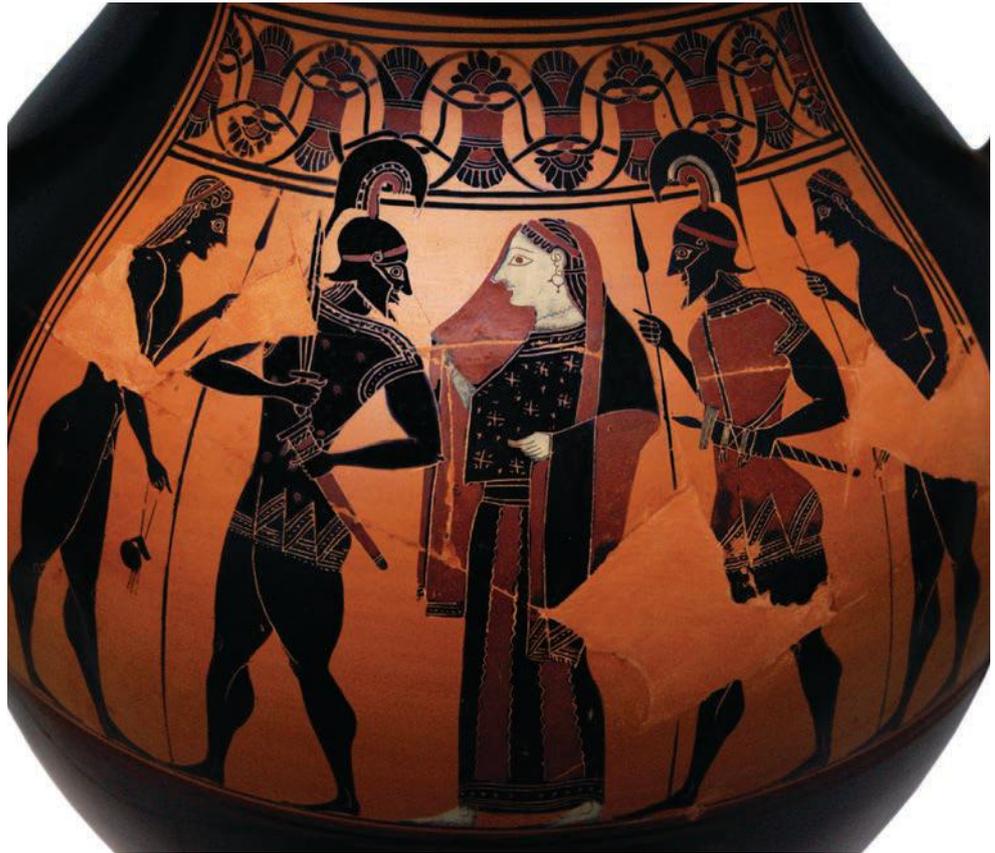
There were many cults in which Spartan women played an active role. Apart from the involvement in the more prominent Spartan festivals (see pp 99–102), they were active in cults around Lakedaimonia. The sanctuary of Orthia was located near flat grounds where children would exercise, and girls sang and danced in worship of her. Lead figurines from the 7th and 6th centuries BC depict both men and women playing musical instruments, such as flutes and lyres. At the cult of Artemis Limnatis ('Artemis of the lake'), situated on the border of Lakedaimonia and Messenia, women and girls made dedications and performed dances to Artemis in her role in fertility and marriage. The local goddess Eileithyia, who particularly protected childbirth, was associated with the worship of Artemis and was with the area near where boys and girls held running races, possibly in her honour. Races were also held in honour of Hera (queen of the gods), Helen (wife of the legendary Spartan king Menelaus and worshipped as a goddess in Sparta) and the Leukippides (see p 103), all

of whom were associated with female worship. Helen, who was only worshipped as a goddess in Sparta (but was recognised as an important figure in myth by other Greeks), was worshipped at the sanctuary of Helen in Sparta and at the Menelaion (see pp 118–19), primarily for her role in fertility and in marriage.

Approximately 300 lead figurines of women on horseback were found at the Menelaion, probably worshipped as strong independent women, a reflection of how Spartan women likely saw themselves. Priestesses named Leukippides (in honour of the daughters of Leukippos) were responsible for weaving and presenting the robe of Dionysus to his cult



**FIGURE 5.7** The remains of the Menelaion, the shrine to the king Menelaus and his wife Helen of Troy



**FIGURE 5.8** This Attic (the region controlled by Athens) black-figure amphora portrays Menelaus' recovery of Helen of Troy. Menelaus and Helen were venerated in ancient Sparta. Helen was worshipped only in Sparta.

statue. These women also organised 11 virgins, called *Dionysiades*, to run in a race in his honour. Women also made offerings to Athens Polioukhos and Athena Khalkioikos, though it seems that Athena was not an important goddess in Sparta.

One important role was to reinforce the Spartan values of military excellence and bravery by praising the deeds of brave men in song and admonishing those who did not live up to the ideal. This role worked alongside their participation in choral performances at religious festivals.

### Women and music: Alcman's *Partheneia* (maiden songs)

Alcman, a poet from the 7th century BC, wrote poems that were performed at religious festivals by Spartan women. The surviving fragments of these poems reveal some of the roles played by Spartan women – singing in competitions at festivals and taking part in foot races. Alcman wrote of young girls dancing and singing in separate choruses that seem to be competing with each other, as individual performers and as groups. The playwright Euripides also referenced such maidenly dances in *Helen*. It is most likely that this was performed as part of the worship of Orthia but may also have been part of the worship of Hyakinthos at the Hyakinthia. In Alcman's *Partheneia*, a chorus of 10 young, unmarried aristocratic women praised the beauty of the chorus leader while they escort a robe (but it has been suggested by some historians recently that the object they are singing about may have been a plough, as the item is not explicitly named) to the sanctuary. It is likely that this was done in competition with another chorus, or choruses.

The *Partheneia* exist today only as fragments, though they originally formed part of a larger collection of Alcman's songs. The original Greek of the songs make it very clear that these are performative, designed to be sung in a contest, and are part of a ritual activity.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the main role of women in religious worship? Why do you think this was the case?
2. Copy and complete the following table of female involvement in worship (it may also help to add detail after Chapter 7 on religion in Sparta).

Festival or cult	Activity	Evidence
Orthia		
Artemis Limnatis		
Eileithyia		
Hera		
Helen		
Dionysus		
Hyakinthia		

3. What were the *Partheneia*? What do they tell us about Spartan women and their role in religion?

## Women in the Spartan economy

Both Aristotle and Plutarch discussed the economic roles that Spartan women played, revealing that they looked after the estates while the men were on campaign, training or in the *syssition*. This is likely to have been true, and Spartan women were no doubt educated to a much higher level than other Greek women to ensure that the household was managed appropriately while their husbands were absent. However, men were present for at least half the year (military campaigns were only conducted for around six months each year, and the men would not have been away the entire time), and they would still have played an important role in the management of their household. Their husbands' absence would nevertheless have meant that Spartan women would have had a greater level of independence than other Greek women.

### Land ownership

Spartan women could inherit land and Aristotle suggested that women were significant land holders. Aristotle complained that up to two-fifths of Spartan land was owned by women and attributes the downfall of Sparta to the social problems caused, at least in part, by their comparative freedom. This was probably made possible by the laws of inheritance in Sparta, where daughters were entitled to a portion of the inheritance equal to half what a son would have inherited. Also, as many Spartiates would have died in battle, there would have been many families with only daughters remaining, and they would have inherited all the estate in that instance. This was significant in Spartan society because the kings were given the duty of ensuring that women whose father had died were married. This meant that the kings were able to reward loyal supporters or close family members with a marriage to a wealthy heiress. It also seems likely that the dowry given to the husband at the time of marriage was partially controlled by the daughter. This gave women greater leverage in their families (at least in aristocratic or royal families). Xenophon also says that women were keen to be involved in polyandrous marriages because it gave them access to the wealth of two houses, which is probably an indicator of their increased economic power in Sparta. This probably did not apply to wives of more 'average' or poorer Spartiates.



**FIGURE 5.9** A cast lead votive figure of a woman; more than 100 000 of these small, flat lead offerings have been found at ancient sanctuaries in Lakedaïmonia.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why was it likely that Spartan women played a more important role in the management of the household than other women did in other cities of Greece?
2. How much land does Aristotle claim women owned in the mid-4th century BC? Considering the ways in which Spartan citizenship and the *syssitia* worked, how would this have presented a problem in Spartan society?
3. How was it possible for women to own so much property and wealth in Sparta?
4. Explain the significance of kings being required to determine who should marry unmarried heiresses.
5. What might polyandrous marriages tell us about the position of women in Sparta?

## Source Study 5.3 Women of Sparta

### Source A: Xenophon

Firstly, I will look at the bearing of children, to start at the beginning. Elsewhere, the girls destined to bear children and who are raised in the correct way, are provided with the most basic food and most meagre of delicacies possible. Wine is either withheld completely or watered down if permitted. The other Greeks expect girls to undertake the craft of a sedentary life, keeping to themselves and doing wool-work. How then can it be expected that women raised like this will bear children of greatness? But Lycurgus believed in the labour of slaves enough to supply clothing, as he believed the bearing of children to be the greatest role of free women. So, foremost, he insisted on physical training for them no less than the boys, and thus instituted contests in running and strength for the girls, just like the boys, against each other, believing that if both parents were strong, they would produce healthier children.

Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lakedaïmonians* 1.3-4

### Source B: Plutarch

But even to women, Lycurgus paid all possible attention. He made the young girls exercise in running, wrestling, and throwing a discus and javelin, so that the offspring of their womb might grow to be strong and have strong bodies, and so that they themselves might through vigour better bloom, and that they might struggle more easily with the pangs of childbirth. He freed them from softness, delicacy, effeminacy and all womanish things by accustoming the girls to wearing tunics only while in processions, and to dance and sing only at certain festivals when the young boys were present and watching.

Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 14.1-2

### Source C: Plutarch

Inscribing the name of the dead on the tombstone was not permitted, unless it was a man who had died in war or a woman who had died in *hieron* [sacred office].

Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 27.2

### Source D: Cartledge

... unlike girls in all other Greek states, Spartan girls were also given some form of public education. Whether or not we accept the attractive suggestion of Nilsson, that they underwent a course of training parallel to the agoge, Spartan girls undoubtedly were educated in a sense other than trained to perform sedentary, and in ancient Greece exclusively feminine, tasks like weaving and baking. The running races mentioned in Xenophon and Plutarch and paralleled in other sources very likely had a ritual significance, as certainly did the choral dancing in which Spartan maidens participated both in Sparta and at sanctuaries elsewhere in Lakonia and Messenia. But the throwing of the discus and javelin and the trials of strength or wrestling also attested by Xenophon and Plutarch presumably had a mainly secular character. It is, however, a little hard to credit the evidence of Euripides (*Andr.* 597-600) that the girls wrestled naked with the boys.

P Cartledge, 'Spartan Wives: Liberation or Licence?' *Classical Quarterly* 31, 1981, p 91.

### Source E: Millender

... choral dances played an important role in the cycle of initiation rituals that marked the physiological, social, and institutional development of Spartan girls into wives and mothers. Spartan girls competed in choruses, each of which was bound together by age similarity and ties of companionship, trained by a professional poet, and led by a choregos selected from among the oldest girls. In these choruses girls received training in song, dances, and cultic acts that prepared them to participate in various public rituals, festivals, and contests. More importantly, this training instilled in Spartan girls the polis' system of values through the medium of the poet's verses and thus prepared them to adapt to those gender roles, behaviors, and responsibilities that sustained Sparta's body politic.

EG Millender, 'Spartan Women', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 504.

## Questions

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1. What does Xenophon (Source A) say about the education of Spartan women in comparison to that of other 'Greek' women?
  2. In what ways do Xenophon and Plutarch (Sources A and B) provide similar information? Can you account for this?
  3. What does Plutarch (Sources B and C) tell us about women and Spartan values?
  4. What does Cartledge (Source D) suggest about women's education? Is this supported by the primary sources here? Explain your answer.
  5. What does Millender (Source E) suggest about women's initiation?
  6. Based on Sources A to E and your knowledge from this chapter, evaluate the role and position of women in Spartan society using evidence.
- 



**FIGURE 5.10** A Spartan bronze mirror support in the shape of a nude girl, c.540–530 BC

## Further reading

Calame, D Collins, and J Orion, *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece: Their Morphology, Religious Role, and Social Functions*. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanhan, MD, 2001.

P Cartledge, 'Spartan Wives: Liberation or Licence?' *Classical Quarterly* 31, 1981, pp 84–105.

SB Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, OUP, Oxford, 2002.

## Activities

### Bringing it together

1. What was the primary role of women in Spartan society? How is this supported in the evidence?
2. In what way do the secondary sources in this chapter support or refute the evidence provided in the primary sources?
3. In what way does the concept of the Spartan mirage relate to the relative depiction of women in the written sources? How do the archaeological sources provide further information for this view?

### Activities

1. Create a mind map showing all the roles of women in Spartan society, providing evidence where possible.
2. Aristotle claims that Spartan society failed because of the freedom and wealth of women. Explain whether or not you think this is a valid comment.
3. Read Plutarch's *Sayings of Spartan Women*. What do these short 'sayings' reveal about women's roles? Are they reliable? Explain your answer.

### HSC-style questions

1. Outline the role of women in Spartan society. (5 marks)
2. What does the evidence reveal about the role and status of Spartan women? (10 marks)

## Endnotes

1. SB Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, OUP, Oxford, 2002, pp 57–58.
2. M Dillon, 'Were Spartan women who died in childbirth honoured with grave inscriptions? Where to read ἱερῶν or λεχοῦς at Plutarch Lykourgos 27.3' *Hermes. Zeitschrift für klassische Philologie* 135, 2007, pp 146–165.
3. E Millender, 'Spartan women', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 504.
4. E Millender, 'Spartan women', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 504.

# The Spartan economy



**FIGURE 6.1** Spartan pottery developed a distinct style and was traded throughout Greece.

The Spartiates referred to each other as *homoioi*, but the extent to which equality actually existed among them has been a matter of conjecture. There are debates because of the conflicting evidence we have about the Spartan economy. In later texts, such as Plutarch's works, there is emphasis on the economic equality of the Spartiate class, while earlier texts, such as those written by Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle, show that some Spartans were wealthier than others, particularly regarding the primary unit of wealth: land.

Other elements of the economic system of Sparta are also heavily influenced by the problems of evidence arising from the Spartan mirage. The supposed ban on the use of coinage in Sparta, the prohibition of Spartiate men from being involved in the economy and the role of women, helots and the *perioikoi* are all areas of ambiguity. The production of everyday items (such as pottery) and military items (such as weapons) were, according to the written evidence, the role of the *perioikic* communities, although recent scholarship has questioned this view, suggesting that Spartiates may have participated in the economy and sought wealth.

**By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:**

- explain what evidence reveals about land ownership
- understand the technologies of the Spartan economy
- evaluate the economic roles of the helots and *perioikoi*
- interpret the debate about the use of iron bars and coins in Spartan society.

## Land ownership: agriculture, *kleroi*, helots

The Spartan economy was built around the *kleros*. According to myth, Lycurgus sought to deal with rampant inequality in Sparta by gathering up all the land and then dividing it into equal *kleroi*. The major source for the redistribution of land is Plutarch, writing centuries later, without firsthand knowledge of how land was divided in the Archaic or Classical periods. It is most likely that his understanding was influenced by the propaganda of Agis IV, a later Spartan king who tried to implement land redistribution and claimed that he was returning Sparta to the 'Lycurgan constitution'.

Past reliance on Plutarch for the modern understanding of Spartan land ownership has been criticised by recent scholars. Stephen Hodkinson argues that it is important to focus on sources from closer to the period for any assessment of land ownership and economic equality.<sup>1</sup> Sources such as Aristotle and Plato suggest that land was primarily held as private property, perhaps with some small, symbolic plots (also known as ancient portions, or *archaia moira*) being prohibited from sale. Hodkinson asserts that land ownership was never equal and Spartan customs of inheritance, in which children of both sexes received portions of land as inheritance, effectively made it impossible to maintain equal plots of land as Plutarch claims. For example, women were able to inherit land and have some control over this inheritance in the form of dowries. This led the Athenian Aristotle, writing



**FIGURE 6.2** The fertile valley created by the Eurotas river provided the foundation of the Spartan economy and land tenure system. No doubt the groves of olive trees in the valley today would have looked remarkably similar to those of the ancient period.

towards the end of the Classical period, to decry the unequal distribution of land. Aristotle believed that the land holdings of women and their large dowries were reasons for the failure of the Spartan state.

There is little clarity about when a *kleros* was allotted, with some sources stating that *kleroi* were assigned at birth, while other evidence suggests that the *kleros* was given just before entering the *agoge* at age 7, or after becoming a full Spartan citizen. What the conflicting evidence does suggest is that we need to understand the economy, like much of Spartan history, as dynamic and changing markedly over time, and accept that a totally accurate picture is impossible to develop because of the problems of evidence associated with the study of Sparta.

Once a Spartan was awarded his *kleros*, he was given helots, who were technically still owned by the state, to work the land. They gave a portion of what the land produced to their masters, freeing the Spartans to focus on training, leisure and hunting. The helots were required to provide their Spartiate masters with enough food to make their monthly contributions to the *syssitia* and support their household. As the production of the *kleroi* was necessary for contributions to the common messes and thus citizenship, helots who did not provide for their masters were severely punished. The required contribution reveals the types of food that were grown on the *kleroi*. Barley would have been a staple grown on most *kleroi*, alongside other similar grains, olives, figs and other fruit and vegetables. Meat was also consumed, some from domesticated animals and some from hunting. Wine would have been produced from the vines and cheese from the milk of the animals kept on the *kleros*.

## Source Study 6.1 Land ownership and Spartiate wealth

### Source A: Plutarch

A second and very dashing measure of Lycurgus was his redistribution of the land. For there was terrible inequality, many landless and helpless people were imposing on the city, and all of the

wealth was concentrated with a few people. Therefore, to eliminate pride, jealousy, crime and luxury, and the illnesses that are yet more significant, wealth and poverty, he convinced them to bring all of their land together as one and divide it up anew, and live with everyone else in uniformity and equality with regards to subsistence, pursuing the greatest excellence only, so that there was no distinctions or great inequality between each other apart from that the words that marked out good and bad deeds.

Matching his words to actions, he distributed the rest of Lakonia to the *perioikoi* in 30 000 *kleroi*, and the land of the city in 9000 *kleroi* to Spartans. But some say that Lycurgus only distributed 6000 *kleroi* to Spartans, and that Polydorus added 3000 after this. Others say that Polydorus added half of 9000 to the half distributed by Lycurgus. Each *kleros* of each man produced ... 70 measures of barley for a man and 12 for his wife, and the same amount of wine and oil. Lycurgus believed this to be enough for them, since food was required for good health and well-being, and nothing else.

Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 8

### Source B: Aristotle

With regards to the things about which I have just now spoken, you could criticise the Spartans for unequal distribution of possessions. For some have acquired far too much property while others very little, which means that the land has come to be owned by very few. It was ordained that it was against common custom to sell a family's estate, which was a good thing, but he allowed any who wishes to gift or bequest it ... Also, approximately two-fifths of all land is owned by women, because many are given large bequests and large dowries ... thus, the city did not suffer just one hit, but was destroyed by a lack of men.

Aristotle, *Politics* 2, 1270a

### Source C: Xenophon

Lycurgus set up more regulations in Sparta that run counter to those in other Greek cities. In all other cities, people try to make as much money as they can, in farming, running a ship, trading and others in crafts. But in Sparta, Lycurgus declared that no free citizens were to engage in the making of money, only activities that contributed to the state. For why would someone seek wealth when Lycurgus had required equality in all contributions that are necessary in life, and the same standard of living for everyone. Pursuing wealth for pleasure would be pointless, since, after all, they don't even spend money on clothes, since they consider an excellent physical condition as the best type of bodily adornment.

Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians* 7.1–7.3

### Source D: Hodkinson

It is abundantly clear from evidence in Herodotus (6.61.3; 7134.2), Thucydides (1.6.4), Xenophon (*Lak. Pol.* 5.3; *Hell.* 6.4.10–11) and Aristotle (*Pol.* 1270a18) that throughout the classical period there were marked inequalities in Spartiate ownership of land. These passages, among other evidence, include specific references to activities which required larger than average estates. One example is the maintenance of horses for chariot racing and cavalry. Another is the provision by the rich to the common messes of extra donations of bread made from wheat, a higher-status and less reliable additional cereal crop compared to barley which all citizens grew to provide the *alphita* (barley meal) for their *compulsory* mess contributions and for the subsistence of their families ...

... by reasserting the correct methodology of giving primary consideration to contemporary or near-contemporary evidence, it is possible to construct a more reliable interpretation, according to which land tenure was fundamentally private in character, with only a minimum of state regulation and with women enjoying considerably more property rights than has previously been realised. The evidence suggests that there were two types of land, one which was the 'ancient

portion' (*archaia moira*). A landowner was prohibited from selling the ancient portion and sale of other land was shameful; but otherwise there is no evidence for further restrictions ...

S Hodkinson, 'Spartiate landownership and inheritance', in M Whitby (ed.), *Sparta*, Routledge, New York, NY, 2002, p 87–88.

### Source E: Van Wees

Plutarch credited the lawgiver Lykourgos, who in antiquity was dated to the early eighth century at the latest, with a radical equalisation of property by means of the redistribution of land and abolition of gold and silver coinage, as well as a severe restriction of the display of wealth, mainly by means of imposing compulsory dining in austere public messes for all citizens. It is now widely accepted that equalisation of property was a myth, never attempted in archaic or classical Sparta, and that restrictions on display, while real and significant, were neither as austere nor as ancient as Plutarch believed. Beyond this broad outline, however, there is little consensus either on the details of the property regime or on the nature and origins of the culture of austerity: it has been variously dated to the late seventh, mid-sixth or late sixth centuries, and according to many it was the result of militarization in response to external pressures, while others see it as primarily aimed at creating an egalitarian society in response to internal conflict ...

... Spartiates were thus not banned from 'making money' in a variety of ways, and what lies behind this myth is merely the exclusion from citizenship of those who made a living from manual labour and professional commerce. This exclusion may not have come into force until the late sixth century: Pausanias mentioned six archaic 'Lakonian' or 'Lakedaimonian' sculptors and another three who were explicitly 'Spartiates', including Sydras and Khartas, dated to c.550 BC and important enough to be credited with tutoring an apprentice from Corinth. As noted, the exclusion of craftsmen and traders served to ensure that only owners of sizeable landed properties were eligible for citizenship, and the most fundamental form of equality among Spartan citizens, namely that they were all leisured landowners, thus appears to have been created only after the middle of the sixth century, at the end of the archaic age.

H Van Wees, 'Luxury, Austerity and Equality in Sparta', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 203.

## Questions

1. What are the reasons Plutarch gives for the redistribution of the land in Source A?
2. What does Aristotle (Source B) say about inequality in the Spartan economy? How does his view differ from Plutarch's?
3. Outline Xenophon's view (Source C) of the economic regulations of Lycurgus.
4. What evidence does Hodkinson (Source D) provide to support the idea that there was an unequal distribution of land and wealth in Sparta?
5. In what way does Van Wees (Source E) disagree with the traditional view of Spartan equality and ownership of wealth demonstrated by Plutarch?
6. Compare the ancient sources to van Wees' ideas about Spartan austerity and wealth. Identify which sources support his conclusions and which do not. Can you account for these similarities and differences?

## Economic roles of the *perioikoi* and helots

A simple view of the Spartan economy is that agricultural production was carried out by the helots, and the artisanal crafts of weapon, armour and pottery were undertaken by the *perioikoi*. This notion is based largely on the supposed laws of Lycurgus, which forbade the Spartans from work. As there is little direct evidence about the economic roles of the *perioikoi*, it has been assumed that, on the basis of the traditional view of Spartiate economic roles, the *perioikoi* undertook all roles in arts and crafts. Accordingly, they would also have been the fisherman, miners, craftsmen and traders of the region. Although the *perioikoi* may have held these roles, our understanding of the roles of the *perioikoi* and helots is based on fragments of problematic written sources and limited archaeological evidence.

We should probably think of the *perioikoi* more as farmers and soldiers, than as craftsmen and traders, although some were probably involved in the production and trade of goods. As historian Prost points out, no one has discovered extensive centres of production in *perioikic* settlements, and there is no evidence of pottery and painting workshops in known *perioikic* towns, which explodes the myth of the role of the *perioikoi* as the main creators of crafts.<sup>2</sup> When Plutarch discusses land distribution, he says that 30 000 allotments were distributed to *perioikoi*. The Spartan trade port of Gytheion was a *perioikic* settlement, although historian Jean Ducat has suggested that the port was so heavily under ‘Sparta’s influence as to resemble her in fundamental respects such as political institutions and social structure.’<sup>3</sup> This port was on important trade routes in the Mediterranean and would have seen many of the imports needed for Spartan industry, such as copper and tin needed to make bronze. We also know that the Spartan army relied on *perioikic* soldiers.



**FIGURE 6.3** The coastal town of Gytheio is built on the site of the ancient Spartan port of Gytheion.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What has been the orthodox view of the economic roles of the *perioikoi*? What has been the basis of this belief?
2. How does the archaeology prove that the traditional view of the *perioikoi* is untenable?

## Spartan technology

Sparta was renowned for its production of bronze and pottery, examples of which can be found in many museums across the world. This archaeological evidence reveals that Spartan crafts were traded over long distances, although the widespread finds of pottery and bronze from Lakedaimonia do not necessarily serve as evidence of who was making goods or where production was taking place.

### Weapons and armour

Lakedaimonia used iron and bronze to make weapons and armour. The major iron ore deposits were located far from Sparta itself, in *perioikic* communities. The south-east of Lakonia was a particularly important mining region, where evidence of mining has been found in the form of the clay nozzles of bellows to smelt the metal, and slag (the waste product of smelting). It is likely that the bronzesmiths who made domestic and decorative objects also made weapons and armour. Bronze-making had prospered in Lakedaimonia since the 8th century BC, and several bronze sculptures are mentioned from the period in ancient texts. Some of these bronzesmiths are thought to have been from the region, while others were from Lakedaimonia, although we can only guess to which class they belonged.



**FIGURE 6.4** A bronze mirror and stand, 6th century BC. The female form, her nudity and the various animals, such as the lions and griffins, have led to the suggestion that this represents the goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite. Other argue that the figure represents Artemis Orthia.



**FIGURE 6.5** A Spartan helmet held at the British Museum. Less decorative and elaborate than domestic items, this helmet clearly served its intended purpose, as the dent on the forehead attests.

## Pottery

Lakedaimonian pottery has been found throughout Greece and the Mediterranean. The design and construction of their pottery developed similarly to that of other Greek *poleis*. Early examples had simple geometric designs, which became more complex. The most famous pottery, known as Lakonian III, has been linked to a handful of painters or painters' workshops. Although little is known about who produced these works, historian Maria Pipili argues that '... the production and distribution of Laconian **black-figure** brought out its customer oriented character. We may now be fairly certain that Laconian potters and painters had knowledge of the destination of their vases and of the wishes of their clients. Some of the vases might even have been special commissions made on the spot.'<sup>4</sup> Many of the pottery items discovered had a religious, votive function and were associated with particular sanctuaries. As an example, the Hunt Painter (a pottery painter in Sparta known for painting hunting scenes) may have been associated with the worship of Artemis.

### black-figure

figures that were mostly black on a white background in scenes on pottery



**FIGURE 6.6** Lakonian cup, attributed to the Rider Painter



**FIGURE 6.7** Drinking cup in a typically Lakonian shape, known as the *lakaina*. These were not decorated with figures like the larger vases, but tended to have geometric patterns.



**FIGURE 6.8** An unpainted terracotta dish with two handles. This miniature form may be from the Archaic period, around the 7th or 6th centuries BC, and may have been a votive offering.

## Source Study 6.2 Pottery

### Source A: Fitzhardinge

Painted vases represented at any time only a small fraction of the Laconian potters' output. Most people were content with plain red or black ware, decorated if at all with simple bands. In the first half of the sixth century a finer ware, attractively shaped and covered with a glossy black paint, sometimes with a single bold ornament in the form of a star or rosette, was exported even more widely than the figured ware, from Emporiae in Spain to Berezan and Sinope on the Black Sea, in the form of oil flasks, mixing bowls, and deep cups. Unfortunately, we know nothing of who the painters and potters were or of how the industry was organized. The small number and highly developed style of the figure painters of Laconian III and IV [different styles of Lakonian pottery] suggests a specialized and perhaps superior profession. They would not have been tied, as the potter was, to the wheel and kiln, and seem to have shared the interests and beliefs of the upper class. Two at least could write, and the difficulty they often found in adapting their picture to the round frame of the cup suggests that they may have been more used to a larger rectangular surface. That both painters and potters were native Laconians is proved by their roots in the local

tradition. They are generally supposed to have been perioeci and this may well have been so, but the discovery of a kiln, with the family graves inside, in one of the 'quarters' of the city, and of a claypot on its outskirts, show that at least something was carried on inside the town and so probably by or on behalf of Spartans in the narrow sense. Such trades may have been pursued in their spare time or by some of the poorer Spartiates or by the inferior citizens of whom we know little, younger men or sons who had forfeited their lots.

LF Fitzhardinge, *The Spartans*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1985, pp 41–42.

## Questions

1. Describe early Lakonian pottery. How did this change over time?
2. What does Fitzhardinge suggest about the nature of pottery in Sparta?
3. In what way may Spartiates or their families have been involved in pottery production? How does this tie in with the more recent views of Spartiate wealth and involvement in the economy?

## Economic exchange: the use of iron bars

According to legend, Lycurgus banned the use of coinage, replacing it with iron bars called *pelanors*, which were heavy and hard to steal. The understanding of how Spartans conducted commerce and trade is made complex by the usual lack of evidence. There is mention from Plutarch of coins being used in the *sysitia* and to pay mercenaries. Some ancient writers, such as Plato, suggest that the Spartans hid large amounts of wealth in the form of precious metals inside their homes. These two seemingly contradictory views can be reconciled by considering the ban on coinage as a ban on their use in public within Sparta. This would suggest that the Spartans were austere in public, despite having real private wealth, and iron money was symbolic of their different lifestyle. It has been suggested that there was a transformation of Spartan society that happened at some point after the mid-6th century BC. While this has traditionally been interpreted as a reinforcement of the Lycurgan laws, it seems as though it may actually have been the introduction of laws that limited the public display of wealth, which required the Spartiates to use the *pelanor* in Sparta. We know that many Spartiates engaged in trade, and that while they kept their *pelanors* for use locally, they also possessed coined wealth, as did the state.



**FIGURE 6.9** With the withdrawal of currency by Lycurgus, Spartans used iron bars, called *pelanors*, as a medium of exchange.

## Source Study 6.3 Spartan currency

### Source A: Plutarch

Then, he determined to divide up their movable possessions, so that all inequality and unevenness would be removed. But when he noticed that it was very difficult to have it taken from them directly, he took another course and he overcame their greed by political means. Firstly, he removed all gold and silver coinage from use and ordered only money of iron be used. Then, to a huge amount of it he only gave a small value, so that ten mna's worth of it needed a huge storeroom in the house and a yoke of cattle to transport it. When this was enacted, many criminals left Lakedaimonia, for who would steal, or take as a bribe, or rob, or plunder what you

can't hide, or own with pride, or even cut into pieces something without profit. For they say that vinegar was used to quench the red-hot iron, taking away its hardness and making it worthless for any other use ...

Next, he expelled all useless and superfluous arts, but even if they hadn't been expelled, many would have decided to leave because there was no coinage to buy their products. For the iron money was not able to be carried to the rest of Greece, nor did it have any value there, but was laughed at. This it was not possible to buy foreign goods or bits and pieces, no sailors brought goods into the harbours ...

Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 9

### Source B: Plato

If you want to consider the wealth of the Lakedaimonians, you would learn that they leave those people here far behind. For they have all of their own land, and also Messenia, nor would there be a comparison in terms of size of quality, nor in ownership of slaves of other types, particularly helots, nor of horses of other farm animals kept throughout Messenia. I will pass over all of these things, because there is more gold and silver in private Lakedaimonian hands than there is in all of Greece. Because for many years it has been coming in from all of Greece, and from barbarians too, but never comes out of there ... and the king himself is the richest of all the men of Greece, since the greatest and highest amount goes to him, and the king also receives a tax from the Lakedaimonians that is not small.

Plato, *Alcibiades* 1,122d-123d

### Source C: Figueira

Yet it should be noted that the Spartiates possibly did not contribute 10 obols, but only food worth that much, just as they evaluated goods in terms of silver coinage at other times.

... Spartan officers were involved in the levying and payment of sums of money in a manner that won them notoriety for avarice, and the influx of precious metals following the defeat of Athens was credited with undermining Spartan morale ... There is also a well-established tradition that wealthy Spartans kept silver on deposit in the neighboring allied cities of Arkadia (Poseidonios *FGrH* 87 F 48; cf. *IG V* 2.159). Similarly, the Spartans held stocks of precious metals in their homes, so that effectively it was only the public use, exchange, or display of gold and silver which was forbidden (cf. *Hdt.* 6.86.a3-8; Plato *Alcib.* 123A)

In contrast, nothing suggests that the Spartans evaluated goods in terms of their official iron coinage, which was itself largely symbolic, a means of differentiating Sparta from its neighbors using coinage (*Plut. Lys.* 17; *Lyc.* 9; *Poll.* 9.79).

TJ Figueira, 'Mess Contributions and Subsistence at Sparta', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 114, 1984, p 89-90.

## Questions

1. Why did Lycurgus supposedly introduce the use of *pelanors* as currency?
2. What was done to a *pelanor* to ensure that it lost its value as a metal?
3. Why is Plato's evidence about 'coined wealth' more significant than that of Plutarch?
4. If the Spartiates did indeed possess huge coined wealth, where would this wealth have been displayed?
5. Considering the evidence above, in what way is the idea of austerity evidence of the Spartan mirage?

## Trade

The conventional view is that trade and industry were the concern of the *perioikoi* as the Spartiates did not engage in everyday occupations. This view is derived from written sources that are often contradictory. Artefacts identified as being from Lakedaimonia have been found throughout the Mediterranean, and the wide distribution of these objects has been seen as evidence of thriving trade in Sparta. For example, the impressive bronze Vix Krater, was found in a Celtic burial in modern-day France. Other examples of Lakonian-style pottery have been found all over the Greek and Italian peninsulas, and from western France across to Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> As well as products such as pottery and bronze objects, the region produced woollen cloth, olive oil, wine, iron, lead, stone and dyes, all of which may have been exported.

The evidence about trade in the region suggests that many groups in Spartan society were interested and participated in trade, although in some periods of time Spartan men may have been forbidden from participating directly. Wealthy Spartans and *perioikoi* would have had at least indirect, if not direct, interest in commerce and trade. For example, wealthy Spartans produced a surplus from their lands, which would have been traded to produce their famed wealth. Also, there are reports that Spartiates would often be found in the agora, no doubt either purchasing goods or supervising the sale of their own goods. Again, this indicates that Spartiates were not only involved in trade, but they were also deriving profit from their surpluses.

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### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the evidence that Sparta was an active trading city in the Mediterranean?
  2. Who seems to have done the trading in Spartan society?
-

## Further reading

TJ Figueira, 'Mess contributions and subsistence at Sparta', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 114, 1984, pp 87–109.

H van Wees, 'Luxury, austerity and equality in Sparta', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 202–235.

S Hodkinson, 'Spartiate landownership and inheritance' in M Whitby (ed), *Sparta*, Routledge, New York, 2002, pp 86–89.

## Activities

### Bringing it together

1. Why is there a historiographical debate around the nature of land ownership in Sparta?
2. What were the roles played by the *perioikoi* and helots in Spartan society?
3. What is the traditional view of production and economic exchange in Sparta? What is the evidence that is used to indicate that this view requires revision?
4. What is the evidence for the main Spartan technologies?
5. What role did agricultural production and the *kleroi* play in the maintenance of the Spartan state?

### Activities

1. Research evidence of Spartan trade. What does it reveal about the Spartan economy?
2. The traditional view is that Spartan society was austere. Create a mind map that demonstrates the variety of evidence and ideas that show that Spartiates were wealthy and not in any way austere.

### HSC-style questions

1. Describe the key features of technology in Spartan society. (3 marks)
2. Outline the economic roles of the *perioikoi* and helots. (5 marks)
3. What does evidence reveal about the Spartan economy? (15 marks)

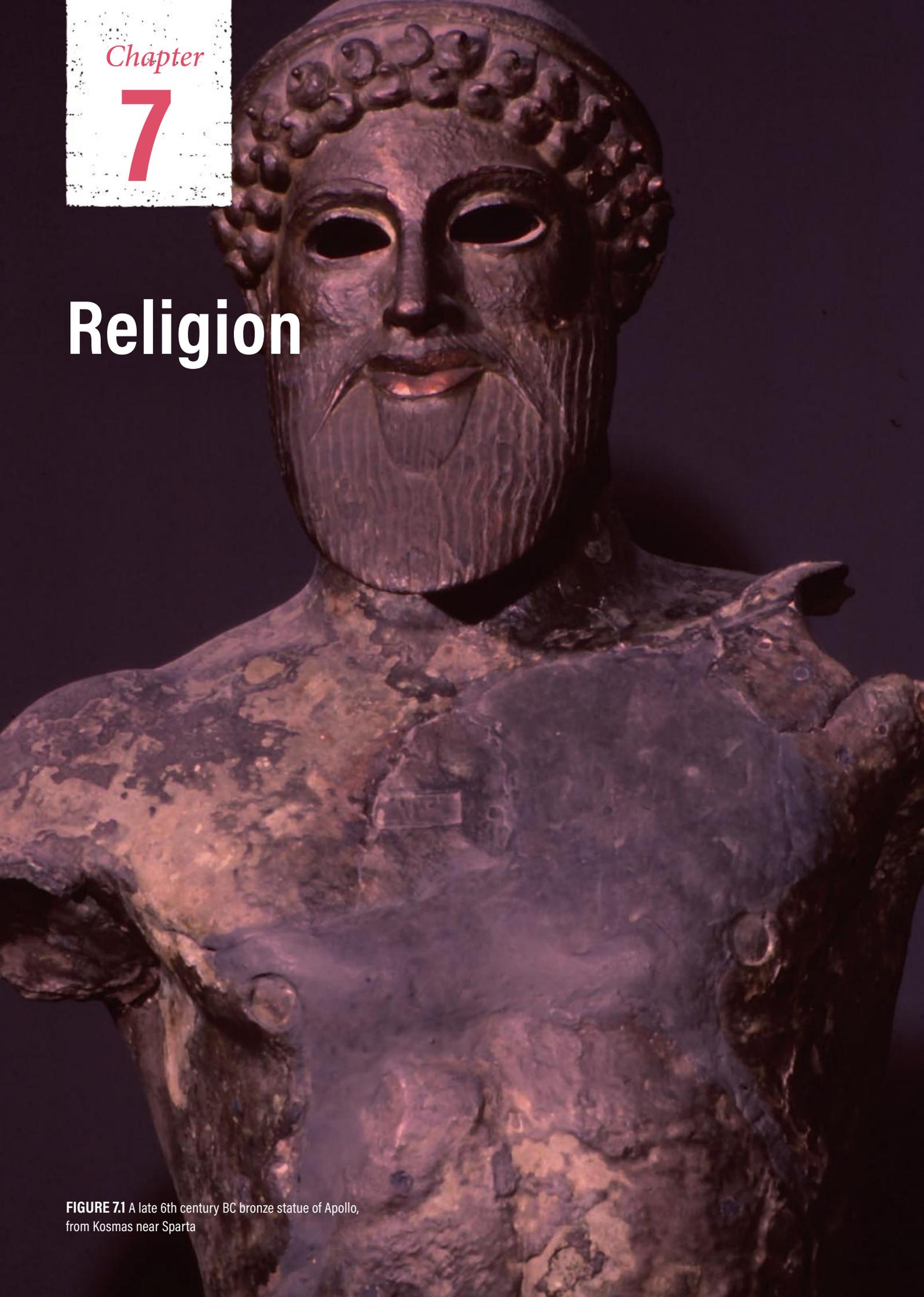
## Endnotes

- 1 S Hodkinson, 'Spartiate landownership and inheritance' in M Whitby (ed), *Sparta*, Routledge, New York, 2002, p 87.
- 2 F Prost, (trans. by J. Roy), 'Laconian Art', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 163–164.
- 3 J Ducat, (trans. by A. Powell), 'The perioikoi', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 599.
- 4 M Pipili, 'Laconian pottery', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 146.
- 5 L Fitzhardinge, *The Spartans*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1980, pp 32–33.

Chapter

7

# Religion



**FIGURE 7.1** A late 6th century BC bronze statue of Apollo, from Kosmas near Sparta

It is fair to say that most Greeks were religious, and that religion played an important role in all Greek *poleis*, but the Spartans were known throughout Greece as being particularly religious. However, to say that they blindly followed the will of the gods is not quite true either, as there were a number of instances where they manipulated religion to suit their political and military needs and goals. But religion did play a larger role in the Spartan state than it did in most, if not all, other Greek *poleis*.

While religion across Greece was largely of the same character (though differing slightly in some areas), the form of religion followed by the Spartans, including their gods and the way they worshipped them, was significantly different from the rest of Greece than is often recognised. What complicates things further is that, like all religion, Spartan religion was dynamic and receptive to changes in practices and ideas. Given that the sources were written over such long periods of time, historians are sometimes unsure whether religious practices described in later sources are what actually happened in the Archaic and Classical periods, or what happened in the scholars' own later period.

#### **By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:**

- explain the key concepts of religion in Sparta
- outline the key features of the main gods and goddesses worshipped in Sparta
- explain the key features of the main festivals in Sparta
- account for the myths and legends of Lycurgus and the Dioscuri in Spartan society
- explain the key features of Spartan burial practices.

## 'Spartan' religion

It was well-known around Greece that the Spartans were just a bit different from everyone else when it came to religion. It may have been one of the reasons that Herodotus wrote about Spartan society as he did the various ethnic groups in the known world, marking them out as 'Greeks with a difference'. While they followed 'Greek' religious practices, they did so in a way that reflected the values and necessities of their own context. The Spartans focused on the most important element of Greek religion, the idea of reciprocity. The Spartans would make dedications and sacrifices to the gods to build up favours and, in return, the gods might grant their requests when the Spartans asked. Part of this process was to follow established rules for worship, and the Spartans seemed to have placed a far greater emphasis on following rules than did other Greek states, a reflection of their society that was also established on the principle of following rules unbendingly (at least when at home in Sparta).

Another feature of Spartan society that can be seen in their religious practices is the idea of divine sanction for Spartan benefits. This is best illustrated in the times when Sparta refused to participate in military campaigns because of festivals of the Hyakinthia in 479 BC and the Karneia in 490 BC. It seems likely that the Spartans were perfectly able to bend the rules because the gods had granted them a divine sanction to do so when it benefited them – as it did when troops left during the Karneia in 480 BC for what would become the Battle of Thermopylae.



**FIGURE 7.2** Remains of the Temple Athena Khalkioikos (Athena of the Bronze House)

Historians also know that religion was used politically to benefit their control of the *perioikoi*. While Spartans were the focus of the main festivals in Sparta, the Spartiates participated in many religious festivals around the Spartan-controlled Peloponnese, deliberately creating a sense of shared culture and unity. This was important for Sparta in the rugged Peloponnese, where some communities might not see visitors for most of the year because of the isolation of their towns. Spartiates participated in *perioikic* cults and festivals, as did the *perioikoi* in Spartan ones, and Sparta even adopted *perioikic* festivals and cults for worship in Sparta itself. It has been suggested that this was done deliberately in certain areas of Spartan-controlled territory in the north to limit the influence of Sparta's powerful rival, Argos.

In battle, religion also played a crucial role for the Spartans. They would readily call off a military invasion because of 'bad omens', which made the special border-crossing sacrifices (called *diabateriai*) particularly important. Sparta is the only *polis* that historians know of where such rituals existed, possibly a reflection of the importance of the military focus of their society. It was normal for Spartans to sacrifice to Artemis Agrotera (Artemis of the wilds) when on campaign, recognising that they needed to give thanks not only to their gods, but the gods of the country they were invading. They were also ready to blame themselves when disaster struck Sparta, accusing themselves of bringing on divine retribution, such as the earthquake of around 465 BC that led to the great helot revolt, or the defeat at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BC that all but ended Spartan power (an event seen as punishment for breaking their oath and seizing the acropolis of Thebes in 382 BC). Interestingly, the most important Spartan festivals were all held during the campaigning season, which could well have been a deliberate decision to ensure that, for fear of a helot revolt, the army did not venture too far out of the Peloponnese, reflecting the widespread fear of helot revolt in Spartan society and the need to ensure that the army was present for such an eventuality.

The built environment was a very important aspect of Greek religion, and Sparta was no exception to this. While Thucydides tells us that there were no significant buildings in Sparta, it seems as though he was comparing Sparta to Athens, possibly the most richly decorated and architecturally-significant city in the Greek world at the time. Indeed, there were many religious buildings in Sparta, including the Temple of Athena Khalkioikos

(Athena of the Bronze House) on the Spartan acropolis, built in the 6th century BC; the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, on the west bank of the Eurotas River; and the Menelaion, built in honour of Menelaos and Helen, who were early Spartan rulers (Helen was also worshipped by women as a protector of marriage). These were Archaic temples enlarged and made more magnificent in the late Archaic and early Classical periods, which were most likely reflections of the military, political and social successes of Sparta in this period of the city's history. They also seem to have marked the sacred boundaries of Sparta, demonstrating where Sparta ended and *perioikic* lands began.<sup>1</sup>



**FIGURE 7.3** The remains of the Menelaion

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. While Spartans were very religious, what examples were there of not 'following the rules' of Spartan religious practices?
2. How was religion used to foster unity between Sparta and *perioikic* communities?
3. Explain how and why religion played a role in military campaigns.
4. How did religious practices connect to the fear of helot revolts in Lakedaimonia?
5. What were the key religious spaces in Sparta and how and why did they change over time?

## Gods and goddesses

Greek gods were all fairly standard by the Classical period. As with people in other Greek states, the Spartans worshipped four forms of divinity in the Greek world: the Olympian gods, the Chthonic gods, heroes and deified abstract ideas. The Olympian gods lived high up on Mount Olympus (where people sacrificed burnt offerings to them), while the Chthonic gods (who were associated with the dead) lived underground. The main Chthonic god was Hades, Lord of the Underworld. Many heroes had one divine and one mortal parent, as in the case of Herakles. To cap it off, the Greeks also worshipped ideas as divine, such as Justice (Dike), Law (Nomos) and Truth (Arete). The Spartans did this as well, but with a distinctly Lakedaimonian twist.

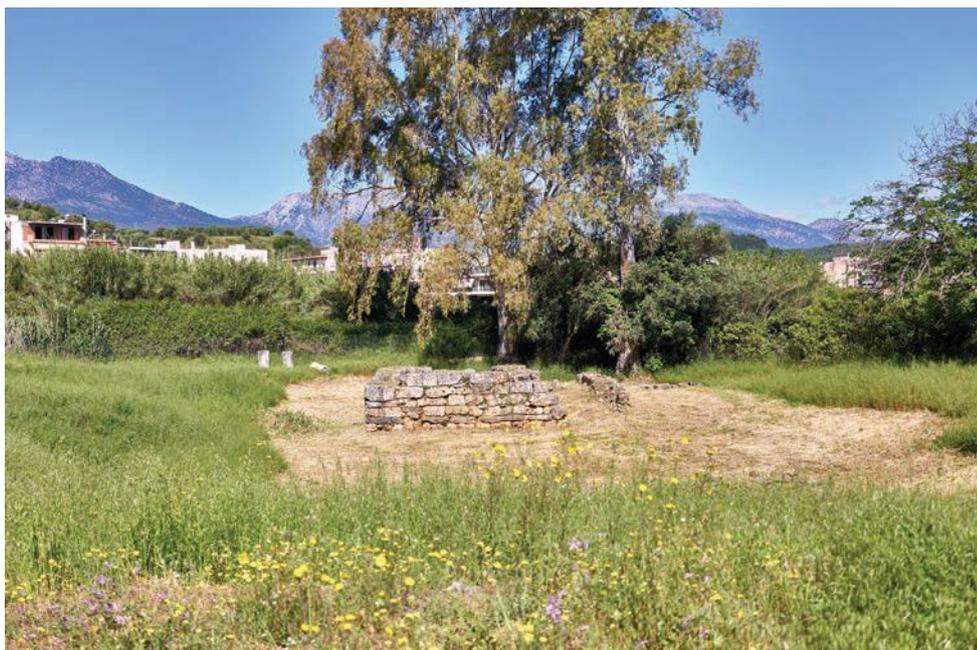


**FIGURE 7.4** Masks and other terracotta objects found in the vicinity of the acropolis of Sparta

Most distinctly, many Spartan gods and goddesses were armed. This was not unheard of in the Greek world, and it was common for certain gods, such as Zeus and Ares, to be represented as armed. But the frequency of these representations was not the norm and it was highly unusual for some goddesses, such as Aphrodite, to be armed at all. At the cult of Apollo at Amyklai, 6 kilometres south of Sparta, the statue of Apollo was armed with a spear and a bow, while the statue of Apollo at Thornax (on the north-eastern edge of Sparta) was similarly depicted, almost making Apollo a physical guard of the city of Sparta. Similarly, both within Sparta and on the edges of Spartan influence, the goddess Aphrodite was in military dress and the ancient temple of Aphrodite on the Spartan acropolis was dedicated to this goddess as a military patron. Her son (the god Eros) was also an important military deity, considered vital to the cohesion of the *phalanx*, although he was not worshipped in Sparta, but around the Peloponnese. Many weapon dedications have been found at sanctuaries to most of these gods around the Peloponnese and in Sparta, which is again a reflection of the role of the military in Spartan society.

There were also 'local' gods of Sparta, the most prominent being the mythical lawgiver Lycurgus (see p 102). A local goddess unknown elsewhere, named Orthia ('Upright'), was also worshipped for her ability to have Spartans grow up 'straight', and later came to be known as Artemis Orthia (though the first known use of this combined name comes from AD 50). Local gods were common around Greece, and Sparta was not an exception in having gods that only they worshipped.

The Spartans were also well known for worshipping a large number of heroes. Some heroes were the son of one divine and one mortal parent (and thus were demi-gods). Others were mortals who had been 'heroised' by the Spartans, such as the *ephor* Chilon. Pausanias tells us about the *heroon* (shrine for heroes) dedicated to Kyniska (the sister of King Agesilaos II), the members of the Spartan expedition to Sicily in 510 BC, and weven to the dead of the Battle of Thermopylae. Importantly, Spartan kings became heroes after their death and were worshipped as such. Archaeologists have found many offerings made to heroes, the two most prominent being stone 'hero reliefs' and terracotta painted relief plaques.



**FIGURE 7.5** The remains of the Temple of Artemis Orthia in Sparta

## Artemis Orthia

Orthia was an important goddess of Spartan religion. While her name came to include aspects of Artemis at some point from the 6th century BC, there is no definitive evidence for the name Artemis Orthia until the 1st century AD. It is clear, however, that Orthia was important in Spartan society throughout its history. The sanctuary of Orthia in Sparta, on the west bank of the Eurotas River (on the eastern side of Sparta), was Sparta's first stone temple built in the first half of the 6th century BC. In it, more than 100 000 lead figurines from the Archaic period have been found. They often represent a winged figure (possibly Orthia), soldiers and animals, and range in size from 2.5 cm to 8 cm.

The goddess herself was associated with the public raising of children (hence the name 'Orthia') and the sanctuary was the site of one of the most important rituals of the Spartan religious calendar. During the 6th and early 5th centuries BC, adolescent Spartans donned masks, perhaps made from wicker and linen, to be worn in various rituals. These masks represented a variety of characters, some old and grotesque, others youthful. Some are thought to represent early forms of Greek comedy or tragedy.<sup>2</sup> Copies of these masks, made from pottery, were then dedicated to the goddess. Most of them are too small to be worn, so are assumed to be dedications displayed in the temple. This was used as evidence by archaeologist Jane Carter to show that the cult of Orthia existed prior to the arrival of Dorians in the Peloponnese and was actually Phoenician in origin. She indicates that the cult of Orthia and some eastern Mediterranean religions may be connected, as they share many features (such as representations of Orthia standing near a tree, bulls) and practices (such as music, dancing, bloody rituals involving children, fertility rites). Artemis was an important goddess for the protection of pubescent girls and their fertility, and a nocturnal dance seems to have been an important part of a festival at the temple of Artemis Orthia called 'The procession of the girls'.

We do not know what happened in the Archaic (or earlier) examples of the festival, but by the time of Xenophon in the early 4th century BC, it had become the location for a cheese-stealing festival.



**FIGURE 7.6** Examples of the many thousands of small votive offerings made at Artemis Orthia. The examples shown include a ring, a soldier, a goddess and some form of animal. Historians and archaeologists suspect that they were made close to the temple.

## Source Study 7.1 Artemis Orthia

### Source A: Xenophon

He made it a point of honour to steal as many cheeses as possible [from the altar of Artemis Orthia], but appointed others to scourge the thieves, meaning to show thereby that by enduring pain for a short time one may win lasting fame and felicity. It is shown herein that where there is need of swiftness, the slothful, as usual, gets little profit and many troubles.

Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians* 2.9

### Source B: Carter

The typology of the Spartan masks and their presence in a sanctuary rather than in graves tie them more directly to eastern Mediterranean practices ... On the simplest level, then, the masks can be seen as Orientalizing Greek works copied from Phoenician originals about the same time as Phoenician colonists in the western Mediterranean began to develop independent versions of the same eastern prototypes. Most seventh-century Greeks had an appetite for Oriental forms, and the many seventh-century ivories from the Sanctuary of Orthia show that Spartans shared this predilection.

J Carter, 'The masks of Ortheia', *American Journal of Archaeology* 91, 1987, p 374

### Source C: Rosenberg

The origins of Orthia herself are somewhat clearer: she is a Dorian goddess, not found in any Mycenaean texts, who was worshipped elsewhere and eventually became associated, though never quite identified, with Artemis. The cult statue was a small wooden pillar-like frontal representation of the Orthia. The cult of Artemis Orthia at Messene represents a later stage of development, with most of the trappings of Artemis; it was an essentially female cult, with female priests and a marked concern with childbirth. It is difficult to reconcile this with the cult of Orthia at Sparta in the Classical period being 'a male initiation cult', though only thirty miles distant.

J Rosenberg, 'The masks of Orthia: Form, function and the origin of theatre', *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 110, 2015, pp 256-27.

## Questions

1. What does Xenophon (Source A) tell us happened in the temple of Artemis Orthia?
2. Research the masks found at the temple of Artemis Orthia and describe the key features.
3. Explain Carter's argument in Source B that the masks indicate that Orthia was not a Greek goddess.
4. In what way does Rosenberg (Source C) disagree with Carter's (Source B) beliefs about Orthia?
5. Is there a 'middle-ground' between the two theories proposed by Carter and Rosenberg?

## Poseidon

Poseidon was a powerful god, recognised throughout Greece. The Greeks were largely a sea-faring people, so many of them worshipped Poseidon as lord of the sea. In Sparta, Poseidon was worshipped more for his military accomplishments. Lysander, a Spartan general, dedicated a statue to him at Delphi after the Battle of Aegospotamoi, a naval battle in 405 BC. However, for the landlubbing Spartans, they were more concerned about Poseidon's other attribute, as the bringer of earthquakes. The Peloponnese was a mountainous territory (even more so than the rest of Greece) and prone to earthquakes. The Spartans believed themselves to have been on the receiving end of Poseidon's wrath after they killed some helot suppliants at the temple of Poseidon at Tainaron. As punishment, Poseidon sent the earthquake in 465 BC, leading to the great helot revolt that possibly took the better part of ten years to put down. There is evidence of one festival of Poseidon, worshipping him as the 'Earth-Holder', where there were athletic contests held in his honour. Tainaron, the region where he was most closely worshipped, was the location of marble quarries and it is likely that marble was also associated with Poseidon in Sparta for that reason. Poseidon was also worshipped in Sparta, and there was probably a *temenos* to him there in this period.

### temenos

the sacred boundary of a temple or shrine

## Apollo

By far the most important god for the Spartans was Apollo, and the three most important Spartan festivals (the Karneia, Hyakinthia and Gymnopaedia) were dedicated to the young god. Apollo was the god of music and medicine for much of Greece; the aspect of music was particularly important for the Spartans, who included music and singing in all of their festivals and their daily life. However, the representation of Apollo at both the north and south of the city, armed with a spear and bow, is also a strong indicator of the military importance ascribed to him by the Spartans.

The importance of Apollo went beyond simple military success. Young Spartiates were taken into the care of an older male lover as part of their training. This (probably) homosexual relationship was placed into the care of Apollo, who himself had a young male lover, Hyakinthos, and this relationship was celebrated in the sanctuary of Apollo at Amyklai. More importantly, Apollo was one of the gods who, along with Zeus and Athena, was generally responsible for the success of Sparta. Sanctuaries for his worship were found in Sparta as well as throughout the Peloponnese. It is possibly for this reason that the name for festivals to Apollo, *apellai*, was used as the foundation of political life – in the *Great Rhetra*, the people 'apellai' (meet or vote) between Babyka and Knakion. It should be remembered that the *Great Rhetra* itself was either directly handed down or sanctioned by Apollo from the Delphic oracle; the kings were also given a sacrificial victim to dedicate every month to Apollo, indicating the importance of Apollo to the success of Sparta as a whole.



**FIGURE 7.7** The Temple of Apollo at Amyklai

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the difference between the Olympian gods and the Chthonic gods?
2. What other forms of divinity did Spartans worship besides 'gods'?
3. Explain the significance of armed representations of gods. What are some examples of this?
4. Who was Orthia? When did the name change to Artemis Orthia and why did this happen?
5. What has been found in the temple of Artemis Orthia?
6. With what is Artemis Orthia associated in Spartan society?
7. With what is the god Poseidon associated in Sparta?
8. Explain the association between the great helot revolt of 465 BC and Poseidon.
9. With what is the god Apollo associated in Spartan society?
10. Explain the connection between Apollo and the practice of older Spartiates taking younger Spartiates into a homosexual relationship.
11. Explain the possible connection between Apollo and political life outlined in the *Great Rhetra*.

## Festivals

Festivals were an important part of Spartan religion. They allowed the people to celebrate particular gods in specific ways. Society was generally very rigid in what was expected at festivals and when they were held, and the Spartans used astronomical observations to determine when the festivals should begin and end (such as the movement of the stars, or the beginning of a new moon cycle). A crucial part of festivals throughout Greece was the concept of the *agon*, or contest, and Sparta was no exception. This could include displays of physical prowess (in the form of athletic contests), as well as musical and poetic contests, which formed an important part of Spartan society. Festivals were also used to mark different stages of life in Spartan society, which was closely associated with different

### **agon**

a formal or informal contest of any sort in Greek society

ages and genders of Spartans (Table 7.1). Alongside this, as noted by the historian M Flower, Sparta's ritual calendar can also be understood in terms of the necessities of maintaining control of the helots.

**TABLE 7.1** Age of Spartans and religious responsibilities

Age	Age grade/Civic duty	Cultic association
Birth	Women bathe newborns in wine and flick it on them to test reflexes Examination by the elders of the <i>phylai</i>	
Infancy		Brought to the image of Artemis Korythalia, during the cult of Tithenidia
0-6	Living in the family	
7-19	The <i>agoge</i> 7-17: <i>paides</i> , informal age grade	Apollo and Artemis; performances of songs and dances during the Hyakinthia and the Gymnopaidiai
7	Separation of the child from the family	
12	Homosexual initiation: introduction to an <i>erastes</i>	Apollo Karneios
14-17	Military training starts	Participation in the <i>paidikoi agones</i> in honour of Artemis Orthia
18-19	<i>Krypteia</i> ; complete inversion of civilised lifestyle, involving the murder of helots. End of the <i>agoge</i> .	
20-29	<i>Hebontes</i> ; informal age grade	Apollo; performances of songs and dances during the Hyakinthia and Gymnopaidiai
20	<i>Eiren</i> ; membership in the army. Given equipment: red cloak and bronze shield	
Between 21 and 29	<i>Sphaireis</i> ; teams of <i>sphaireis</i> in each <i>oba</i> competing with each other	Ball-playing during the Gymnopaidiai Sacrifices to Herakles <i>Karneatai</i> ; responsible for organisation of the Karneia
30	Marriage	Apollo Karneios
30-59	Full citizenship including eligibility to the magistrates and participation in the assemblies of the <i>demoi</i>	Gymnopaidiai: Apollo
60-	<i>Gerontes</i> ; among whom the members of the <i>gerousia</i> were chosen. Most important age grade.	Gymnopaidiai: Apollo
Death		Sacrifice to Demeter, 12 days after death. End of mourning period. Social persona finally obliterated.

Source: M Pettersson (adapted), *Cults of Apollo at Sparta: The Hyakinthia, the Gymnopaidiai, and the Karneia*, ABM Komers, Stockholm, 1992, p 89.

## Hyakinthia

The Hyakinthia was a festival in honour of Apollo, which focused on death and renewal. The festival was undertaken at Amyklai, at the sanctuary to Apollo there. The primary account of its origin myth can be found in the works of the Greek writer of the late 2nd century and early 3rd century AD, Athenaeus (Source Study 7.2).

## Source Study 7.2 Hyakinthia

### Source A: Athenaeus

Polycrates tells us in his ‘History of the Lakedaimonians’, that the Lakedaimonians celebrate the festival of the Hyakinthia for three days, and because of the grief for Hyakinthos (Hyakinthos), they do not wear garlands at their feasts, nor do they serve bread, but rather they offer sacrificial cakes and those sorts of foods. And they don’t sing paeans to the gods or anything of this sort, just as they do in other festivals, but they eat in a very orderly fashion and then leave. On the middle of the three days, there is an elaborate and large festival ... Boys play the lyre with their tunics raised, and sing to flute music, running their fingers all over the strings with a plectrum, singing a hymn to the god ... while others ride through the theatre on dressed horses. Many choruses of young men come in and sing local songs, and dancers mingle with them to perform an ancient dance accompanied by flute music and singing. Some of the unmarried girls make a procession in lavishly ornamented *kannathra* [carriages] made of worked wood, while others process on two-horsed chariots. The entire city is full of the excitement and joy of the festival. They also sacrifice many animals on this day, and the citizens offer feasts to anyone they know, both free and slave. No one misses the celebration, and the city is emptied on account of the festival.

Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 139c-f

### Question

1. List the events and spectacles that happened at the Hyakinthia according to Athenaeus (Source A).

While Source Study 7.2 has a detailed description of parts of the festival, it is based on a source from the 3rd century AD, and it seems that the festival had changed significantly over time. It seems to have originally been a ten-day festival that was slimmed down to three at some point. The first day became a day of mourning for Hyakinthos, the young love of Apollo, killed when Apollo accidentally hit him in the head with a discus. It was a day of sacrifice and simple meals. The festival started with a procession from Sparta to Amyklai along the road known as the Hyakinthian Way. Xenophon confirms that young women were taken to the festival in special carriages called *kannathra*.

The second day was a day celebrating that Hyakinthos was brought back to life. We know that a *paeon* to Apollo was sung by a chorus of men (*Xen. Hell.* 4.5.11; *Ages.* 2.17). It also seems that women could participate in this festival, particularly in two-horse chariot races, though this could be a later Hellenistic innovation. Feasting was particularly sumptuous at the Hyakinthia, and the public feast even allowed foreigners and helots to participate. Wealthy families also held private feasts, and the public display of wealth by families in the form of feasts and highly decorated carriages emphasised that this was a celebration of life. The fact that young men also performed in chorus with their elders and that unmarried girls were a focus in the *kannathara* also indicates that it was a festival that celebrated the coming of age of younger Spartans.

We do not know what happened on the final day of the three-day version of the festival, but it may have been the day that the *chiton* woven for the statue of Apollo was dedicated and presented at the sanctuary.

#### **paeon**

a song associated with the worship of a god

#### **chiton**

the most basic item of ancient Greek clothing for men, similar to a long tunic

## Source Study 7.3 The Hyakinthia at Amyklai

### Source A: Kennell

Words with the suffix *-nth-* are considered remnants of a pre-Greek linguistic substratum dating back as far as the early Bronze Age ... The worship of Hyacinthus at Amyclae has therefore been thought to be a survival of an original Bronze Age cult that in turn allowed the people of early Amyclae to be identified as pre-Dorian. This thesis [may not be correct] ... The festival of the Hyakinthia and the month of the same name are both found widely and almost exclusively in Dorian cities. Apollo Hyacinthius was in fact a typically Dorian god ... After Amyclae fell before or was peacefully taken over by the Spartans sometime in the eighth century, most scholars holds that it was incorporated into the state as the fifth constituent community.

N Kennell, *Spartans: A New History*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2009, p 31.

### Source B: Pettersson

The ... wearing of wreaths was connected with rites of passage, such as birth, marriage and death. It was also associated with sacrifices and could be regarded as a general symbol of divine presence. The prohibition against wreaths during the first part of the Hyakinthia should therefore be interpreted in the light of the structure of the Hyakinthia in two different parts. The lack of wreaths during the first part of the cult was, together with the other prohibitions, a symbol for a negative state connected with the mourning of Hyakinthos. Accordingly, the use of wreaths during the second part of the cult was a positive symbol of the presence of the divinity and was associated with the sacrifices, *thysiai*, to Apollo and the singing of the paean.

M Pettersson, *Cults of Apollo at Sparta: The Hyakinthia, the Gymnopaediai, and the Karneia*, ABM Komers, Stockholm, 1992, p 19.

## Questions

1. What points about the Hyakinthia are being made by Kennell in Source A?
2. Explain how the connection between the Hyakinthia and Amyklai demonstrates how the Spartan state expanded in the Archaic period.
3. Explain how the wearing of wreaths, outlined in Source B, is indicative of the three stages of worship thought to be undertaken at the Hyakinthia.

## Gymnopaedia

The Gymnopaedia ('naked children') was probably the most important festival in Spartan society as it provided an important part of Spartan identity. It lasted between three and five days and was an almost continuous gymnastics contest and competition between choirs. It was so important that during the festival the Spartans are said to have refused to attack Argos in 417 BC, even when it would have been to their significant advantage to do so. The *ephors* also did not inform the Spartans of the disaster at Leuctra in 371 BC as it would have disrupted the festival.

Plato (*Laws* 633c) talks about the Gymnopaedia as being an endurance test, which could be associated with the military commemoration of the Battle of the Champions, when Spartan champions defeated Argive warriors in 546 BC for control of the Peloponnese. It is also possible that the defeat at Thermopylae was commemorated at the Gymnopaedia,

although this is less likely. Historians know that there were naked contests of an athletic nature between youths, including playing a ball game of some sort, which could be the origin of Plato's comment. The nudity was an important part of the *Gymnopaedia*, because it emphasised the equal nature of Spartans, in contrast to the obvious inequality and wealth demonstrated in the *Hyakinthia*. However, like the *Hyakinthia*, it also included lavish feasts that foreigners were allowed to attend at the invitation of Spartans.

As part of the contests there was a significant focus on choral contests, where songs composed by the Archaic poets and lyricists Alcman and Thaletas were performed. Contests between three groups of men took place, with each chorus representing a different stage of life: young, prime of life, and old. Plutarch (*Life of Lycurgus*, 21) tells us:

They had three choirs at their festivals, corresponding to the three ages, and the choir of old men would sing first:

We once did deeds of prowess and were strong young men.

Then the choir of young men would respond:

We are so now, and if you wish, behold and see.

And then the third choir, that of the boys, would sing:

We shall be sometime mightier men by far than both.

These choruses seem to have taken place in the agora, where competitors wore wreaths of palm leaves, symbolising the birth of Apollo in a palm tree on Delos. The focus of the festival was particularly on the transition of young people into adulthood, as they represented the future success of Sparta. It is likely that the singing and dancing that was the focus of the *Gymnopaedia* was done to help the next generation remember the great feats of the past, and they were undertaken in such a way that it became an endurance test, a rite of passage for the next generation of Sparta.<sup>3</sup>



**FIGURE 7.8** A *kalathiskos* dancer, performing at a festival to Apollo Karneios in Italy in the 5th century BC

## Karneia

The *Karneia*, celebrated in honour of Apollo 'the ram', changed significantly over time. The celebration of Apollo in the form of a ram indicates its Dorian origins; this was a traditionally Dorian way to represent Apollo, and carvings of ram's horns representing Apollo Karneios have been found in four cities around Lakedaimonia. Pausanias tells us about a temple to Apollo Karneios in Sparta. A celebration lasted for nine days and finished one month after the *Gymnopaedia*, placing its end between 18 July and 17 August. During the Archaic period, the celebration included a music festival, and the poet Terpander won the first victory in this contest in approximately 676 BC. It seems as though the *Karneia* may have been a fertility festival, celebrating the arrival of the Dorians to the Peloponnese. Later evidence from Hesychius in the 5th century BC shows that *Karneatai* were unmarried men chosen by lot every four years to organise the festival, and that *staphyldromoi* ('grape-cluster runners') formed part of the events. Demetrius of Skepsis, in the 2nd century BC, said that the *Karneia* was an 'imitation of their military training' (Athenaeus, *deip.* 131d), though this may be a reflection of the festival in Hellenistic times. However, the *staphyldromoi* may be an indication of the importance of Dionysus, god of grapes, wine and, importantly, fertility.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What could you expect to happen at festivals in Sparta?
2. Who seems to have been the main god worshipped at festivals in Sparta? Why was this the case?
3. Explain the connection made between festivals and stages of life by Pettersson in Table 7.1.
4. In what way was the Hyakinthia about displaying wealth and a 'love of life'?
5. Explain why the Gymnopaedia could be said to be the most important of the festivals in Sparta. What made it so significant?
6. How does Plutarch's account of the choruses in the extract on page 101 tell us about the importance of the Gymnopaedia?
7. What does the name Apollo Karneios mean? How does this link back to Dorian religious practices?
8. Explain how the god Dionysus may also have been a focus at the Karneia.
9. Copy and complete the following table.

Name of festival	When and where held	What happened and why	Evidence
Hyakinthia			
Gymnopaedia			
Karneia			

## Myths and legends

Myths played a fundamental role in Greek religion because they explained to the Greeks how they were supposed to interact with the gods and worship them, and what would happen if they did not do this correctly. Myths also gave them an understanding of the world around them, explaining how and why things were as they appeared. Legends played a similar role, but they reflected or contained a core of the past in them in some way. It was once believed that the lawgiver Lycurgus may actually have existed and had become a legendary figure. However, the current view is that Lycurgus was probably a local god who was given more prominent status in Spartan religious practices.

An important aspect of Spartan myths and legends is that they provided religious justification for Spartan laws and customs. They also gave the Spartans a foundation for the prominence of the kings, with whom the Spartans had a troubled relationship.

### Lycurgus

The myth of Lycurgus played an important role in Spartan society. The Spartans attached a particular importance to their laws and customs, which were attributed to Lycurgus, who either received them from the oracle at Delphi, or presented them for approval to the oracle of Delphi. In either case, this means that they were given divine approval, which was important for the Spartans (see pp 18–21 for the various accounts told of Lycurgus).

Lawgivers were an important feature of Greek culture. The best-known example of the lawgiver is Solon of Athens, to whom many democratic reforms were (inaccurately) ascribed. However, unlike Lycurgus, Solon almost definitely existed, and there is even evidence of some of his writings. On the other hand, Lycurgus was probably a mythical legislator who was given the status of a god, because of the later importance ascribed to him. This ensured that Lycurgus' authority as a lawgiver was more prestigious than that of any other lawgiver in Greece, made more pre-eminent around Greece by Sparta's success and dominance over such a long period of time.



**FIGURE 7.9** Depiction of Lycurgus the lawgiver, as seen in a relief at the US Supreme Court

Lycurgus was worshipped as a god, with sacrifices being made to him from at least the time that Herodotus wrote his *Histories*. This divine sanction made his myth a powerful tool in Spartan society. It is possible that the elevation of Lycurgus to such a prominent place was a result of political conflict, which allowed the myth of Lycurgus and the *Great Rhetra* to make the role and position of the kings and *gerousia* more prominent.

Throughout Spartan history, the myth was used to achieve various political goals. For example, late in the 6th century BC, there seems to have been a reorganisation of Sparta, with a greater focus on public austerity. The myth of Lycurgus and his laws was used to reinforce the importance of this and give it religious sanction. Similarly, when King Pausanias wanted to discredit the authority and position of the ephorate in the early 4th century BC, he used the myth of Lycurgus to do so. In one variant of the myth, Lycurgus was said to have led a revolution against the tyrannical king Charilaos (Aristotle fr. 611.10), with the key part of this story emphasising Lycurgus' bravery, self-restraint and austerity: key components of the mirage that the Spartans created about themselves. The myth also helped individual Spartans achieve political goals within Sparta, and helped to define the idea of Sparta and Spartans outside of the city.

## The Dioscuri

The Dioscuri were twin brothers, Castor and Pollux (also known as Polydeuces), who formed part of a famous Spartan royal family line – they were brothers of Helen, whose abduction started the Trojan War. They were the sons of Leda, an Aetolian princess who married the Spartan king Tyndareus. Leda had been seduced by Zeus, who appeared to her as a swan. Instead of giving birth to children, she laid two eggs. From the first egg came the women Helen and Clytemnestra, and from the second egg emerged Castor and Pollux. Pollux and Helen were the half-immortal children of Zeus, while Castor and Clytemnestra were the mortal children of Tyndareus.

The twins were involved in some of the most important stories in Greek mythology, including Jason's *Argonautica* to capture the Golden Fleece from the Black Sea, the rescue of Helen from the mythical Athenian king Theseus, and the abduction of the partners (Phoebe and Hilaeira, known as the Leukippides, or 'White Mares') of their cousins Idas and Lynceus.

After the abduction of Phoebe and Hilaeira, all four cousins made a cattle-raid on Arcadia, but Idas and Lynceus tricked Castor and Pollux and took the entire herd they had stolen together, instead of dividing it equally among the four of them. Not long after that, all four cousins were in Sparta, along with Helen and Paris (of Troy). Castor and Pollux saw the opportunity to sneak away and steal the herd of cattle back, which they did. Soon, Idas and Lynceus also left, leaving Paris alone with Helen, the action that led to the abduction of Helen and the Trojan War. Idas and Lynceus returned home and realised what was happening – in the ensuing fight, Castor was wounded and the other two cousins were killed. Zeus gave Pollux the option of ascending to Mt Olympus and living with the gods or giving half of his immortality to Castor (which is what he did). Zeus then set them among the stars and they were made into the constellation of Gemini.

There are several references to the Dioscuri in Alcman's poetry, where they are depicted as skilled horsemen. Pollux was also known as a champion boxer, so they all came to be worshipped in the context of athletic contests, particularly running and horse-racing. They also developed into patrons of hunting, which was a crucial part of Spartiate life.

The Dioscuri are often represented in Spartan art as two pillars of wood connected by a cross-beam, called the *dokana*. They are also frequently represented as a pair of shields or a pair of snakes, both symbols of power. When they were depicted as humans, they were often shown wearing skull-caps, representing part of the shell from which they were hatched. A representation of the *dokana* was carried before the Spartan army when they went on campaign, which indicates that the two Spartan princes and the dual monarchy was important for the Spartans.

## Source Study 7.4

### The Dioscuri

#### Source A: Alcaeus

Come to me, leaving the island of Pelops,  
Strong sons of Zeus and Leda,  
Appear with kind heart, Castor  
And Polydeuces [Pollux] –  
Who on broad earth and the whole  
Sea on swift horses ride,  
Easily rescuing men from bracing death,  
Leaping on the peaks of their well-benched  
Boats, shining from afar, bringing light back to the  
Black ship in a trouble night.

Alcaeus, fragment 34

#### Source B: Parker

Dedications to the Dioscuri are extremely common; they have their own characteristic iconography and symbols. There is, too, abundant literary evidence for the popularity of these 'stewards of spacious Sparta'. On comparative grounds, scholars have often associated the twin sons of Zeus with the two Zeus-descended kings of Sparta. A detail given by Herodotus confirms that such a symbolic connection was sometimes made: if only one king went to war, only one son of Zeus accompanied the army (in effigy, we presume). And the Spartans believed that their dual kingship had its origin in a pair of twins. But there is no reason to seek the basis of the cult's appeal in this occasional association. When sacrificing to the Dioscuri, Spartans are much more likely to have thought of their excellence in young men's pursuits, athletics, horsemanship, warfare and, of course, rape. Even to make the Dioscuri gods of the young Spartiates is perhaps too narrow.

R Parker, 'Spartan religion', in A Powell (ed), *Classical Sparta: Techniques Behind her Success*, London, 1989, p 147.

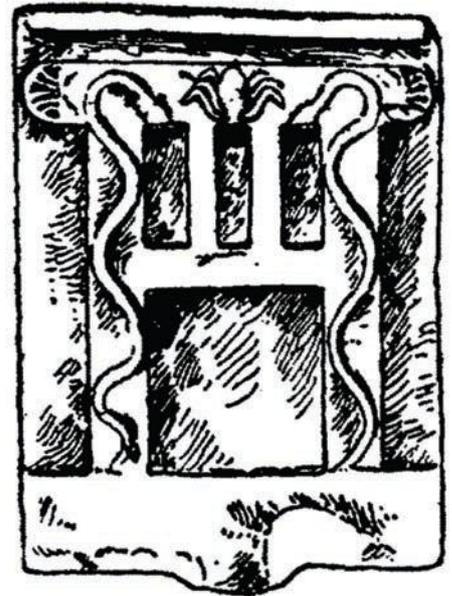


FIGURE 7.10 Representation of the *dokana*, Sparta (5th century BC)



FIGURE 7.11 A votive relief panel depicting the Dioscuri from the 6th century BC

## Questions

1. What does the account of Alcaeus in Source A tell us about the importance of the Dioscuri in Spartan religion?
2. Does Parker (Source B) seem to indicate that the Dioscuri were more important to kings than everyday Spartans? Explain your answer.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between a myth and a legend? How has the idea of Lycurgus changed from a legend to a myth in the modern world?
2. Read the account of Lycurgus on pp 18–21. Outline the different myths of Lycurgus that existed in Sparta.
3. What does the term ‘lawgiver’ mean? How did this apply to Lycurgus?
4. Explain how the myths about Lycurgus were used at different times in Spartan history.
5. Who were the Dioscuri? What about their birth and parentage makes them stand out?
6. Research one of the myths about the Dioscuri and explain what would have made their deeds notable in Spartan society.
7. Why do you think the death of the Dioscuri was an important part of their myth for Spartans?
8. How were the Dioscuri represented? How was this significant for Spartan kings in particular?

## Funerary customs and rituals

Like all aspects of Spartan society, funerary customs and rituals changed significantly over time. In the **Geometric period**, a body was buried in a crouched position in a stone cairn surrounded by a stone wall. Spartans were often buried with grave goods, such as pottery, and evidence has been found of elaborate funerary rituals that seem to indicate a grave cult. There has been evidence in the Archaic period of ‘two-story’ graves, where an important individual was buried in the bottom level and the bones of others buried on the second one, emphasising the importance of family. It seems as though there was not necessarily one consistent way of burying the dead during the Archaic period.

In the Classical period, however, most evidence of the individual was removed from burial and the focus was on the honour of the individual. Burials were simple and with no grave goods; Spartiates were wrapped in their cloaks. According to Plutarch (*Lyc.* 27.1–2), Spartan men were given a funerary inscription only if they died in battle, and Spartan women only if they died in childbirth. Dillon (2007) has argued, however, that the text of Plutarch that tells us that women who died in childbirth were honoured in this way is corrupted and has been incorrectly restored. He believes that only women who died holding religious office were honoured with a funerary inscription. These have been found primarily around Sparta, but are also not uncommon in *perioikic* towns. Even the Spartiates who died in battle at Thermopylae had monuments on the acropolis honouring their sacrifice, but they were given equal honour. Marble urns holding cremated remains or bones of the dead from the Classical period have been found in Sparta, with similar finds located around the *perioikic* territories. Most of the remains of the Spartan dead have been found in various cemeteries in the outskirts of Sparta. This has been interpreted as showing that, unlike Plutarch’s assertion that Lycurgus urged the burial within the city, the cemeteries were originally outside the city and, as Sparta grew, the cemeteries were included inside the city.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Plutarch’s description, however, vases and drinking vessels are evidence that funerary feasts did take place at burial sites.

### Geometric period

an early period of Greek history, defined by the geometric shapes painted or etched onto pottery during this era

The equality seems to have come about late in the 6th century BC, at a time when society possibly underwent a transformation that emphasised public austerity (although, in private, Spartans could enjoy whatever luxuries they wanted). However, there is a small number of tombs and inscriptions for individuals. For example, two Spartiates who died at Thermopylae, Alpheios and Maron, were given a small hero shrine, which was most likely a family cult rather than a state cult, and the Spartiate Dienekes, allegedly the bravest of the Spartans, was honoured with a monument.

To get around this removal of the individual from funeral rites, Spartans found ways to celebrate individuals, primarily through dedications at international sanctuaries and in athletic victories. Both the generals Brasidas and Lysander were given elaborate honours in different parts of Greece (Brasidas was also given a cenotaph in Sparta), and were remembered by others outside of Sparta. To celebrate his family in a different, yet significant, manner, Agesilaus II had a hero shrine built and dedicated to his sister, Kyniska. Dedications found in temples and shrines celebrating the deeds of individuals in the various athletic and choral contests are testament to the individual in Spartan society, almost replacing funerary monuments.

The dead played an important role in Spartan society as protectors. Hero reliefs from the 6th century BC, funeral rites at the grave, the inscribed names of the Spartiates who died at Thermopylae, the hero shrines of prominent individuals, even the 'heroisation' of the kings after their death, all indicate the importance of evoking the dead by name to protect them, and building up a reciprocal relationship with them to guarantee their help should the city need protection.

Historian Nicholas Richer believes that there was a hierarchy of the dead ranging from the lowly anonymous to kings and exceptional individuals. This hierarchy was:

1. the anonymous
2. any helots that had fought for Spartan and been killed in battle
3. any *perioikoi* that had fought for Sparta and been killed in battle
4. women who had been commemorated (for example, who had died in childbirth)
5. Spartiates who had fought and been killed in battle
6. leading members of the elite who had shown their value to society and had been killed in battle
7. Spartan leaders who had demonstrated their worthiness
8. kings
9. exceptional people who had demonstrated a greater degree of worthiness even greater than a king (such as the regent Pausanias who led the Persian forces at Plataea, even though he was exiled)
10. kings who had demonstrated the highest honour (such as King Leonidas, who died at the Battle of Thermopylae in 479 BC).

## Source Study 7.5 Funerary inscriptions for women

### Source A: Dillon

Spartan women who died while holding religious office were entitled to an inscribed gravestone, showing their importance in Spartan religion and in Spartan society more specifically. In the starkest terms, it can be suggested that Spartan women who died in childbirth could be seen as having made no contribution to the state by their attempt, and nothing in the evidence for Sparta indicates that these women were accorded any special status for their death. Yet it is known that

the Spartans placed particular emphasis on religion and were guided by the gods, it could be argued, more so than any other Greek state. It was women who worshipped Sparta's deities who were honoured with an inscribed tombstone.

M Dillon, 'Were Spartan women who did in childbirth honoured with grave inscriptions?', *Hermes* 2007, p 165.

## Question

1. In what way does Source A disagree with the established view about funerary practices for Spartan women?

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe the evidence of a burial in Sparta in the Geometric period.
2. Describe the differences between Geometric and Classical funerary practices in Sparta.
3. How did the Spartans in the Classical period remove the focus from the individual from most burials?
4. Explain how Spartans are thought to have commemorated prominent individuals, even though funerary practices were not supposed to focus on the individual.
5. What is the evidence that the dead were thought of as protectors of the living?
6. Richer (p 106) has developed a hierarchy of the dead. Explain how this hierarchy reflected society in Sparta.

## The burial of a king

While it is clear that kings played significant religious roles in Spartan society, largely because of their connection to both Zeus and the Dioscuri (see pp103-05), this is further emphasised by the funerals of Spartan kings. These were lavish affairs that reflected the importance of the individual king.

When kings died, they became heroes, to be worshipped as such in Sparta. This was probably seen as an important act to undertake to ensure that Sparta would be guaranteed the semi-divine favour of the dead king. Some 40 years after the death of Leonidas at the Battle of Thermopylae, the body of Leonidas was finally returned to Sparta so that he could be worshipped appropriately, showing the importance of this act. This notion of divine favour extended to the protection of Sparta, as the tombs of the Spartan kings were on the outskirts of the city of Sparta – the Eurypontids likely to the south and the Agiads to the northwest.

## Source Study 7.6 Royal and non-royal burials

### Source A: Herodotus

Horsemen announce their death around all of Lakedaïmonia, and in the city women go around banging on cauldrons. When this happens, it is required that two free-born people from each house, a man and a woman, are to wear mourning clothes and, if they do not, they receive a large fine. The custom of the Lakedaïmonians with regard to the death of kings is the same as

barbarians who live in Asia ... When a Lakedaimonian king dies, it is necessary for a certain number of people from all people living around Lakedaimon, apart from the Spartans, to be at the funeral. When they, the helots and the Spartans themselves, gather together with the women in many thousands, they hit their foreheads zealously and wail continually and loudly, claiming the recently dead king to be greatest of all their kings. When a king dies in war, they make an image of him and carry it on a well-prepared ceremonial bier. For ten days after the funeral rites, the assembly does not meet and they do not hold elections, but mourn during these days.

Herodotus, 6.58-59

### Source B: Plutarch

Also, with regard to burials, Lycurgus made a most excellent regulation. Firstly, he prevented all superstition by allowing the dead to be buried in the city, and having memorials of them at sacred places, familiarising the young with this sight and accustoming them to it, so that they were neither troubled by it nor scared by the idea of death polluting those who touched a dead body or walked among graves. Then, he allowed nothing else to be buried there, always covering the body with the red cloak and olive leaves.

Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 27.1

## Questions

1. Describe what happened in the funerals in Sources A and B.
2. In what ways are the funerals similar and different, both in what happened and why you think it was done?
3. Evaluate Sources A and B in relation to the discussion about funerals in this chapter. Explain why modern historians might disagree with the ancient sources.



**FIGURE 7.12** Leonidas was venerated as a semi-divine figure following the return of his body to Sparta. He remains a member of the modern Greek nationalist pantheon today, and this modern statue, close to the ancient city of Sparta, highlights the continuing, albeit more secular, commemoration.

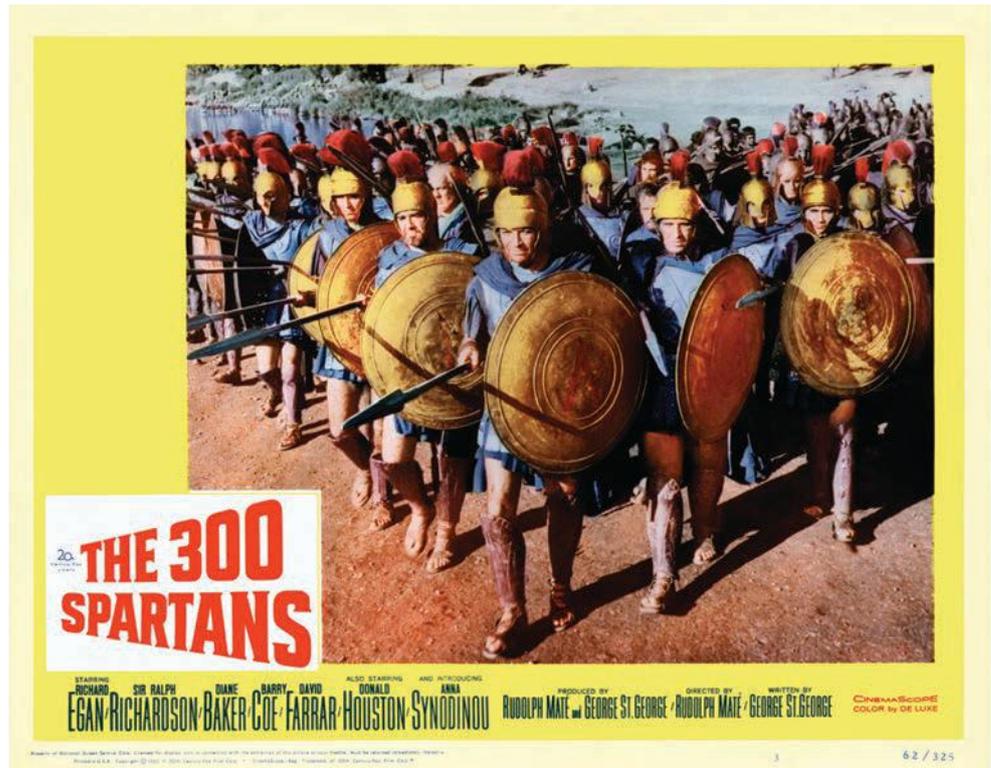


FIGURE 7.13: A promotional poster for the 1962 film *The 300 Spartans*. Starring Richard Egan this telling of Leonidas and the Battle of Thermopylae was very much in the tradition of the swords and sandals genre.

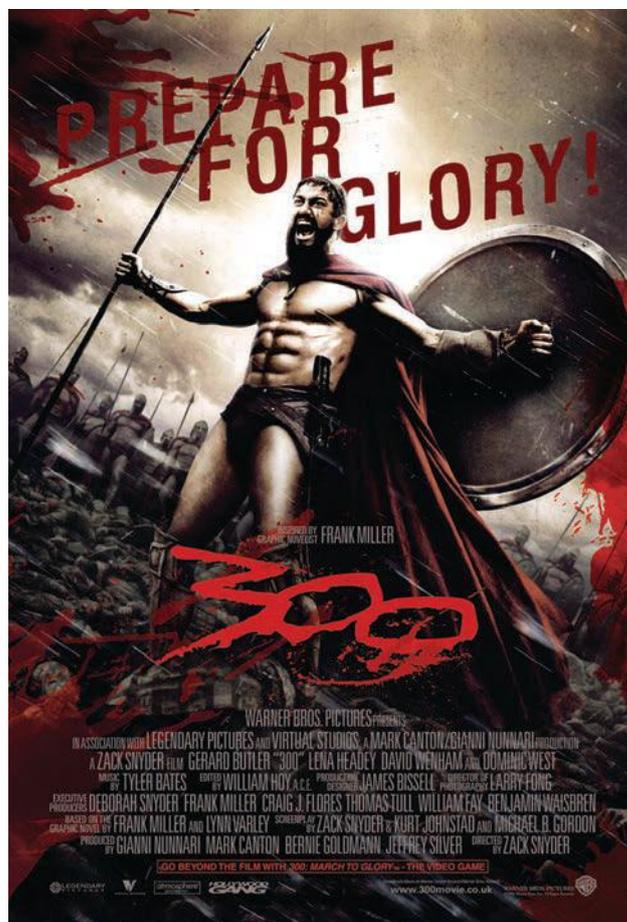


FIGURE 7.14 In the 2006 film *300*, an adaptation of a graphic novel, the character of Leonidas embodies the hyper masculine and highly militarised image created and reinforced by the Spartan mirage.

## Further reading

J Carter, 'The masks of Ortheia', *American Journal of Archaeology* 91, 1987, pp 355–383.

M Flower, 'Spartan "religion" and Greek "religion"', in S Hodkinson (ed), *Sparta: Comparative Approaches*, Swansea, 2009, pp 193–229.

M Dillon, 'Were Spartan women who did in childbirth honoured with grave inscriptions?', *Hermes*, 2007, pp 149–165.

N Kennell, *Spartans: A New History*, Hoboken, NJ, 2009.

R Parker, 'Spartan religion', in A Powell (ed), *Classical Sparta: Techniques Behind her Success*, London, 1989, pp 142–172.

M Pettersson, *Cults of Apollo at Sparta: The Hyakinthia, the Gymnopaediai, and the Karneia*, ABM Komers, Stockholm, 1992.

N Richer, 'The religious system in Sparta', in D Ogden (ed), *A Companion to Greek Religion*, Malden, MA, 2007, pp 236–252.

J Rosenberg, 'The masks of Ortheia: Form, function and the origin of theatre', *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 110, 2015, pp 247–261.

## Activities

### Bringing it together

1. Explain how the following concepts are part of Spartan religion:
  - a. reciprocity
  - b. following rules and customs
  - c. innovation.
2. Spartans were believed to be deeply religious. What examples can you find in the text to support the idea that Spartans used religion for their own benefit as well?
3. What does the worship of 'Spartan' gods tell us about Spartan society?
4. What are the common features or themes of festivals in Spartan society? Why do you think these features are present across these festivals?
5. Myths and legends were often used in ancient societies to teach. What can the myths and legends tell us about what Spartans valued in their society? Why do legends, such as that of Leonidas and the Battle of Thermopylae, remain significant?
6. Are Spartan burials in line with what we know about Spartan society? Are there any differences that might seem unusual? Explain your answer.

### Activities

1. Create a mind map of the different gods of Sparta. In the mind map, begin with three categories: 'gods', 'heroes and ideas'. Include information on how they were worshipped, where their worship occurred, and why they were worshipped.
2. Research a Spartan myth in detail and explain how and why it would have been used in Spartan society.

### HSC-style questions

1. What is known about the Gymnopaedia in this period? (5 marks)
2. Explain the key features of Spartan myths and legends. (7 marks)
3. Analyse the importance of religion in Spartan society. (10 marks)

## Endnotes

1. N Richer, 'The religious system in Sparta', in D Ogden (ed), *A Companion to Greek Religion*, Malden, MA, 2007, p 243.
2. J Rosenberg, 'The masks of Ortheia: Form, function and the origin of theatre', *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 110, 2015, pp 247–261.
3. M Pettersson, *Cults of Apollo at Sparta: The Hyakinthia, the Gymnopaediai, and the Karneia*, ABM Komers, Stockholm, 1992, pp 55–56.
4. N Richer, 'The religious system in Sparta', in D Ogden (ed), *A Companion to Greek Religion*, Malden, MA, 2007, p 250.

Chapter

# 8

## Cultural and everyday life



**FIGURE 8.1** A bronze votive offering to Apollo c.550–530 BC, Sparta. The long hair and pointed nose highlight the Lakonian style of the sculpture.

Cultural and everyday life are two of the most challenging topics to understand when studying ancient Sparta because each is so heavily influenced by the Spartan mirage. Sparta had a vested interest in making it seem as though the only thing that Spartans did was prepare for war, and they were able to do this because they removed all non-military parts of life, such as artistic endeavours, and even marriage taught Spartans to be tough. Archaeological material was thought, until recently, to support this assertion. More recent interpretations of the written sources, and the uncovering of more archaeological material, however, has shown that Sparta enjoyed a thriving culture in the Archaic period, and in many respects this continued into the Classical period.

**By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:**

- explain the different types of Lakedaimonian art and their key features
- explain the key architectural features of the main temples in Lakedaimonia
- explain the importance of the writing and literature of Alcman and Tyrtaeus for Spartan society
- outline the different leisure activities and explain what they tell us about Spartan society
- explain the key features of Spartan marriage practices.

## Spartan art

It was once thought that Spartan art was entirely a reflection of the society and its changes over time, which is still largely held to be true. While the archaeological evidence tells us that Spartan art in the ‘Lakonian’ style flourished in the Archaic period, particularly work in bronze and vase painting, it seems to have all but disappeared by the mid-5th century BC. Historians have considered this a reflection of the focus on military life, and the idea is supported by written sources that emphasise that Spartans took care to remove all artistic endeavours from their life. However, a more sophisticated image of Spartan art has emerged from analysis of recent archaeological finds, and more rigorous questioning of sources and the extent to which they are influenced by the Spartan mirage.

The Spartans, like other Greeks, used art to define themselves, particularly in response to their political enemy, Argos. It seems that as their power increased, Spartans saw less need to define themselves by their art, and the prominence of the Lakedaimonian style of art diminished. That is not to say, however, that it was not influential – it was copied throughout the Mediterranean and at certain religious sites, such as Olympus, resulting in various sub-styles. It is important to understand, though, that while Spartan art may have declined in the 5th century BC, the manufacture of unadorned Spartan handicraft did not.

### Sculpture and metalwork

The most commonly found sculpture in Lakedaimonia is the ‘hero relief’. Often made from local marble or terracotta, these sculptures are found in the context of hero cults from the 8th century BC through to the Hellenistic period. The features of the individuals represented are highly stylised in traditional Lakedaimonian form, consisting of a sharp

nose, large almond-shaped eyes, full lips, a thin neck and an elongated face. The care taken with the other features of the representation, such as the hair, indicate that this was a deliberate representation. There are several examples of Lakedaimonian-style bronze statues from this period also, and they display the same features and are generally of limited types: a *palladium* (or cult statue of a divinity), a hoplite and a naked or semi-naked girl. The marble statue of 'pseudo-Leonidas' is an excellent example of this type, also showing the Spartan feature of a beard with no moustache. Similar features are also found on funerary stelae of the Archaic period.

It is difficult to determine the date that lead figurines started to be manufactured in Lakedaimonia, but there are more than 100 000 examples found in the sanctuary of Orthia and more than 6000 in the Menelaion, with many other examples also from the Amyklaion and various other Lakedaimonian sanctuaries and temples. The earliest examples of these figurines, probably commencing at some point in the 7th century BC, display the features of Lakedaimonian-style individuals. While the lead used was a by-product of silver mining from the Athenian mine at Laureion, they were most likely made close to the sanctuaries at which they were dedicated. They are also found almost exclusively in or near Lakedaimonian sanctuaries.

Metals were found in the *perioikic* areas of southeastern Lakedaimonia. Iron, lead, silver and copper were mined in Lakedaimonia, which were the foundation for the metal industries, particularly in the 8th to 6th centuries BC. The most consistent use of metal throughout the Archaic and Classical periods was for weapons and armour for the Spartan army. Bronze was used for body armour, spears, daggers, swords and the *hoplon* in the Archaic period, though iron eventually became the dominant metal used for weapons.

Beautiful artwork in metal was also produced in the Archaic period. Not only were lead votive figurines found throughout Spartan sanctuaries, there were also vessels, jewellery and adornments made to a very high standard in Lakedaimonia. The metalwork vase industry was very popular in Lakedaimonia and other regions, and pottery decoration was even changed to imitate the very fine examples of metalwork vessels.



**FIGURE 8.2** A cast metal statuette of a lion, c.550 BC. Stylistic elements, such as the short mane and the rounded face and ears, suggest that the statuette, which is about 9 cm tall, was created in Lakedaimonia.

## Painted vases and pottery

Painted vases and pottery had a long and distinguished tradition in Sparta. The Spartan artisans were considered some of the best innovators in the Mediterranean, and their work was traded and copied widely. While scholarship has used the lack of refined Spartan vases and pottery in the Classical period as evidence of implementation of laws around austerity and non-engagement in arts in Sparta, it is more likely a reflection of the growing popularity of Athenian styles of pottery and the political changes in the areas that traditionally imported Spartan pottery of all types.

The production of Protogeometric and Geometric pottery from Lakedaimonia started around the mid-10th century BC and continued into the 8th century BC. These styles have no features similar to the products of other major pottery producers, which indicates the isolation of Sparta from other parts of the Peloponnese and Greece. Designs of this style were simple, such as cross-hatching and simple shapes, such as triangles. Between 750 and 650 BC, a new style of pottery shows evidence of influence from Argos and Corinth, demonstrating that Sparta was becoming more connected to the outside world. There was also the introduction of simple scenes with dancing and horses, which were common in pottery from Argos, showing a closer connection between these two cities.

## Lakonian-style vases and pottery

From approximately the mid-7th century BC, there is evidence of the beginning of Lakonian-style vases and pottery. This was a highly experimental and, from the beginning of Lakonian I style (650 to 620 BC), we can see both rougher and finer examples, with the finer examples including very thin-walled vases, cups and plates in white, possibly imitating metalwork. Decoration was simple, still using geometric-style patterns, but it included Corinthian-style animal friezes and occasional silhouettes or outline figures. This style gave way to Lakonian II-style wares, which were available between approximately 620 to 570 BC. This style comprised cups, mugs and goblets, among other items, and was a very refined product, with thin walls and simple, often abstract, decoration. Again, much of the decoration was based on Corinthian styles, showing a close connection between Sparta and Corinth at this time. Three examples were found in a grave at Taras, the Lakedaimonian colony, and Lakonian II cups with a conical foot were found mostly in the eastern Mediterranean, Taras and Sicily, although Lakonian II 'fruit dishes' with a high stem were found in Lakedaimonia only, and were dedicated at Spartan shrines.

In around 580 BC, black-figure style painting was developed in Sparta. This was a black figure on a primarily white slip. This style was the basis of Lakonian III (art historians used also to talk about Lakonian IV, but this is now thought to be individual styles of Lakonian III style). It features a combination of decorations and styles influenced by Corinthian, eastern Greek and Attic pottery styles. There are 716 known examples of this style of pottery (of which around 600 are high-stemmed cups). It is likely that it came from only two workshops in Lakedaimonia, which may have merged into just one. It is possible that the work is from up to six separate major painters and up to 13 minor ones from this period. The shapes are of all types: cups, vases, plates and various storage vessels, such as kraters. However, the high-stemmed cups were obviously a specialty of this style with only 7.7 per cent of them being found in Lakedaimonia.



**FIGURE 8.3** Lakonian III-style krater. Note the simple pattern at the base which was a feature of this style of pottery.



**FIGURE 8.4** Lakonian black-figure *hydria* (water-jug)

We know that Lakedaemonian-style pottery and vases were found around the Mediterranean, indicating the importance of this product for trade. That pottery was made solely by the *perioikoi* is most likely a part of the Spartan mirage: there is evidence for the creation of pottery in and around Sparta, which was the place it was in the most immediate demand. It is also possible that the potters were originally from other regions, and the eventual decline in pottery production was the result of these potters and painters leaving Lakedaemonia.

Sparta demonstrated influence from the eastern Greeks, particularly at Samos, where Sparta had known political and economic connections, and the Ionian city of Miletus. This pottery showed many scenes that demonstrate this inspiration, with winged demons, and eastern daily life scenes and themes. It is also suggested that the pottery and these scenes were deliberately created and painted for this market. The highly specific artwork on some of these, particularly found in sanctuaries and temples, indicate that the elite of these cities commissioned specific works from Spartan potters and artists to dedicate in their temples. This is important because it tells us that Spartan pottery was considered so valuable that the elite of cities on the other side of the Greek world dedicated them to demonstrate their wealth.

From around the 520s BC, we can see the influence of Attic styles on Lakedaemonian pottery, such as the use of a red slip to imitate Attic clay colour and the use of solid black on the bottom of cups as opposed to the traditional highly decorated bands of Lakedaemonian styles. A return to ornate high-stemmed cups in the later 6th century BC seems as though some Lakedaemonian artists were trying to revive the older style, but this did not last long. Many of the eastern cities that imported high-quality Spartan pottery and vases in large volumes, such as Samos and Miletus, fell under the influence of tyrants (in Samos), and Persia by the end of the 6th century BC, and the demand died down as a result. Also, after seeing the writing on the wall, it seems as though the most renowned of the Lakedaemonian potters and painters left Lakedaemonia and settled in places such as Taras and Cyrene. At Olympia it seems as though Lakedaemonian



**FIGURE 8.5** Lakonian black-figure *kylix* (drinking cup) with a stylised lion

artists and potters settled there to make pottery on demand for those who wished to dedicate it at the temple. While the demand for Lakonian pottery waned, the demand for Attic pottery increased as the next desirable pottery item, which seems to have hammered the final nail in the coffin of Spartan pottery. A more basic style of pottery continued locally in Lakedaïmonia into the 5th century BC, but it was found almost exclusively in Lakedaïmonia and not exported. Pottery was traditionally used by historians to demonstrate that implementation of laws of austerity in Sparta in the final quarter of the 6th century BC. While austerity laws may have been imposed in some way in this period, the decline in the remarkably sophisticated and beautiful Lakonian pottery was more due to commercial and political reasons outside of Sparta.

## Ivory and bone carving

Like pottery, Spartan ivory and bone carving were considered amongst the best in the Mediterranean. Unlike pottery, however, there is little evidence of outside influences on ivory and bone carving in Lakedaïmonia, which means that they were the leaders in this field of artistic endeavour.

Ivory and bone carvings were used as votive items, dedicated to the gods in sanctuaries around Sparta and Lakedaïmonia. They tended not to be exported in large numbers, but ivory carvings have been found around mainland Greece, the eastern Mediterranean, and even north Africa. The style and iconography are reminiscent of Cretan art, so much so that it has been suggested that artists were originally trained there and came to Lakedaïmonia afterwards.

Ivory carving became a speciality of Lakedaïmonian art around the end of the 8th century BC to the beginning of the 7th century BC. The earliest surviving ivory carvings were plates for *fibulae*, which can be dated between approximately 725 and 625 BC. Depictions of animals followed, then representations of women, then men, and finally *ajoure* ivory panels. These were likely created by several workshops located at the sanctuary of Orthia in Sparta, where more than 200 ivory dedications have been found, including four carved ivory reliefs.

The high point of Spartan ivory carving was around the mid-6th century BC. After this, the quality of these items decreased significantly with lower-quality bone replacing ivory. This is possibly because the trade of boar tusk ivory was interrupted by the Babylonian conquest of Tyre, the main trading centre for this commodity. Bone-carving lacked sophistication until the disappearance of ivory in Spartan art, when bone carving increased in complexity. Early carvings included *protome* representations, possibly of Orthia, and simple line carvings of figures and animals. After the disappearance of ivory, this developed into scenes of animals (particularly horses and waterbirds) and individuals (including the depiction of hoplites, often with waterbirds), also developing an *ajoure* style. Many of the reliefs and *ajoure* scenes are thought to have been attached by holes in the corners to wooden boxes.

Like pottery, ivory and bone carving tells us much about Spartan society. It is evidence that Spartan society was not closed off from the rest of the world. Indeed, Sparta had close trading connections to much of the Mediterranean, where it acquired ivory and sold finished goods (though not in the same quantity as pottery). Also, it demonstrates that Spartans were at the cutting edge of artistic endeavours, with their ivory carving seen as particularly innovative.

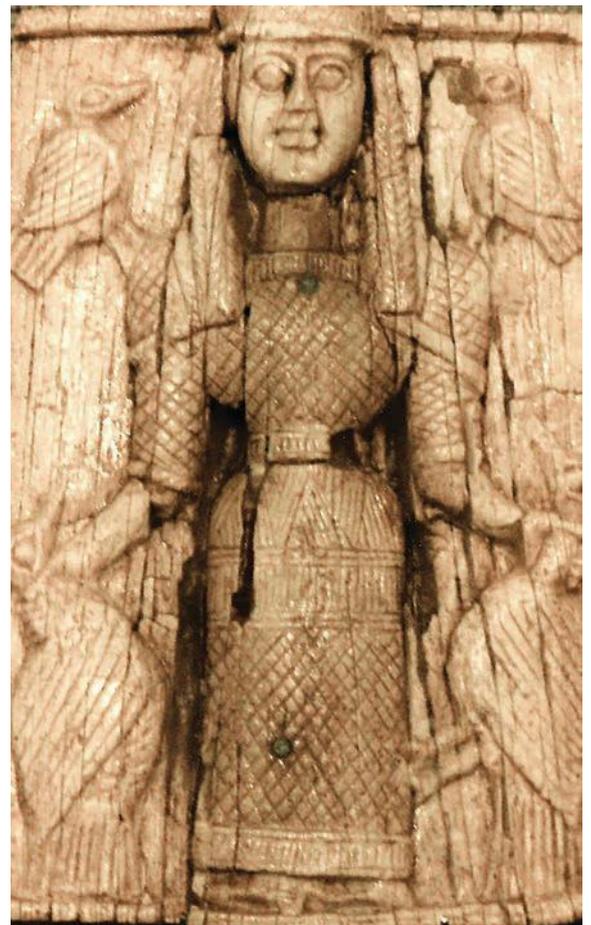


FIGURE 8.6 An ivory carving of the goddess Orthia

### **fibula**

the pin or brooch for attaching garments at the shoulder

### **ajoure**

art style that leaves open spaces in the carved item to create an image

### **protome**

a depiction of a person that captures the head and shoulders

## Source Study 8.1 Bone and ivory carving

### Source A: Carter

The unambitious style of the bone plaques falls much below the usual standards of Lakonian ivory-carving. While ivory was still available at Sparta, the carvers did not invest their best abilities in bone. When ivory disappeared from Sparta, by contrast, the bone-carvings become increasingly sophisticated.

JB Carter, 'The chests of Periander', *American Journal of Archaeology* 93, 1989, p 367.

### Source B: Fortsch

Impressed by their new discoveries in the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, Dickins and Woodward (in 1912) connected the evident interruption in the production of art in Laconia, around the middle of the sixth century, with a Spartan move towards austerity. They saw this upheaval as a distinct event that took place in a relatively short time. This could not fit the conventional dates of the reformist Lycurgus, who was said to have lived in the ninth or eighth century BC. So their main interest focused instead on the figure of the ephor Chilon, who was proposed as the initiator of the *volte-face*.

R Fortsch, 'Spartan art: Its many different forms', *British School of Athens Studies* 4, *Sparta in Laconia: Proceedings of the 19th British Museum Classical Colloquium held with the British School at Athens and King's and University Colleges*, London, 6-8 December, 1998.

## Questions

1. What does Carter (Source A) tell us about why the standard of bone carving improved as ivory carving ceased in Lakodaimonia?
2. What does Fortsch (Source B) tell us about the theory proposed about the change in attitudes towards art in the later 6th century BC? Research Chilon, and explain whether this is a likely scenario for the decline of Spartan art in the late 6th century BC.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are hero reliefs? What are the features displayed in hero relief?
2. How are the characteristics of sculpture displayed in lead figurines?
3. What was the source of the lead used for figurines?
4. What were the features of Geometric, and Lakonian I, II and III styles?
5. What made Lakonian I different from the pottery styles that preceded it?
6. What is Lakonian black-figure ware?
7. What does the distribution of black-figure ware tell us about Sparta and Spartan society?
8. Explain the decline of fine examples of Spartan pottery and painting.
9. Outline the evidence of ivory carving in Lakodaimonia.
10. What does the change of art and artistic styles tell us about the growth of Spartan connections around Greece and the Mediterranean?

# Architecture

Spartan architecture has traditionally been considered negligible. Thucydides says architecture in Sparta was so minimalist that future generations would refuse to believe the Spartans were so powerful. While they built few public buildings in comparison to Athens, and their temples tended to be smaller, Spartans had numerous monuments and temples. Their older buildings and temples were built in the 7th century BC, but many of them were rebuilt and other new ones built during the course of the 6th century BC, reflecting the growing power of the Spartan state.

## The Amyklaion

About 5 km to the south of Sparta is the ancient sanctuary of Apollo Amyklaios. This is also said by Polybius (5.19) to be the site of the city of Amyklai, although an inscription another 5 km away indicates that the ancient town of Amyklai may have been further away than the sanctuary. This sanctuary was the site of the Amyklaion (the temple of Apollo Amyklaios), built by the legendary king Amyklas, son of the mythical king Lakedaimon. The sanctuary was the site of the Hyakinthia, held in honour of Apollo's lover Hyakinthos. It is possible that the festival at Amyklai is evidence of the Spartan conquest of Amyklai by the Spartans, seen in the combination of the Dorian god Apollo and the Amyklaian god Hyakinthos.

The sanctuary consisted of a number of small buildings inside a sacred boundary (most likely a wall), called a *temenos*. The focus of the sanctuary was the throne and statue of Apollo and its surrounding circular altar. The alleged tomb of Hyakinthos was used as the base of a statue of Apollo, which is believed to date back to the late 7th or early 6th century BC (the first phase of building). Pausanias tells us that it was around 14 metres high and made of wood covered in bronze. The stepped pedestal of the statue (around 3 metres high) was used as a circular altar, and was also highly decorated with mythological scenes of gods. The altar was built during the second phase of building. The throne was made by Bathycles of Magnesia in the late 6th century BC (the second phase of building) and was beautifully decorated with figures and scenes from mythology. The remains of its foundation are 4 metres long and 1 metre high. This area was surrounded by an open temple structure, also built in the second phase.

Also at the site was a building (the 'South Building') which was 22 metres long, 8 metres wide and 6 metres high, which can be dated to the second phase of building in the later 6th century BC. Recent excavations indicate that there was a fortification wall that enclosed the sanctuary from the late Geometric or early Archaic period that was 1.1 metre high (meaning that the overall height of the area was 6 or 7 metres), and was 21 metres in circumference. The original entrance seems to have been destroyed in the early 6th century BC, and a monumental entranceway to the precinct was built, probably to reflect the importance and size of the procession of the Hyakinthia. The two phases of building suggest that after the conquest of Amyklai by Sparta and the combination of the two gods Apollo and Hyakinthos, the growth of Spartan power and wealth created the desire to make it one of the most important Spartan festivals and more representative of Spartan power.

## Menelaion

The Menelaion was situated on the eastern side of Sparta, on the other side of the Eurotas River, at the site of the ancient Lakedaimonian town of Therapne. It was located on a high point, the hill Protitis Ilias, and commands a view of the surrounding countryside. This was obviously a highly significant site, as archaeological remains of successive Mycenaean palaces between the 15th and 13th centuries BC have been found, each one destroyed before a new one was erected in its place. However, the site was even important going back as far as the

Neolithic period (4500–3200 BC). This is critical, as it tells us that the Spartans may have been aware that the site was associated with kings, or at least the wealthy elite, and so an association with the mythical king Menelaus, an important figure on the Trojan War (which also fits the approximate time of the palaces on the site) was made.

The temple known as the Menelaion was built in honour of King Menelaus and Helen, who were worshipped sometimes jointly and sometimes individually, at the site. While there is no evidence of sacrifices at the Menelaion, the altar suggests that sacrifices may have been made there. Inscribed dedications were found in abundance. More than 6000 lead votives, most made from moulds, have also been found here, generally in the shape of wreaths, but also of animals, people and, importantly, hoplites (see p 96). Throughout the Archaic and Classical periods, dedications of all sorts were made, indicating that Menelaus and Helen were worshipped as heroes. The presence of dedications in the form of farming implements may suggest that *perioikoi* or even helots made dedications at the Menelaion. It is also clear that both men and women made dedications there.

The Menelaion was constructed in the late 8th or early 7th century BC, probably as a temple on a pediment. The building was later rebuilt at some point in the 5th century BC, with the shrine built on top of a large rectangular mound of earth, which was then surrounded by a wall. There was a ramp that led to the entrance of the shrine. The ‘Old Menelaion’ (the original structure) is the first monumental building to be built above ground level (on a pediment), and it may be associated with the victory of Sparta in the Second Messenian War. Its rebuilding may be a result of the victory over the Persians in the Persian Wars in 479 BC. This means that the structure may have had a powerful connection to military victory, which could explain the presence of dedications in the form of hoplites. As Sparta fell from power in the mid-4th century BC, the temple seems to have held less focus as a place of worship, again suggesting a military connection. By the time of Pausanias in the 2nd century AD, it had become so insignificant that he did not even visit the site.



**FIGURE 8.7** The remains of the Menelaion

## Sanctuary to Artemis Orthia

The sanctuary to Artemis Orthia, or, more accurately, the sanctuary to Orthia (see pp 94–96) dates back to the late 8th century BC and was located on the east side of Sparta, but on the west bank of the Eurotas River. It was the site of the cheese-stealing festival that was such an

important part of the training of *paides* in the *agoge*. At the sanctuary, more than 100 000 lead figurines have been found, often depicting the Goddess Orthia (represented with wings), hoplites and animals (particularly horses). Other forms of dedications, such as ivory plaques and vases, were also found there. It is possible that these dedications were actually made to order on-site. The dedication of domestic and votive deposits of weaving equipment at the sanctuary, found in more recent archaeological excavations, also challenges the idea that Spartan women were not given any training in more traditional domestic duties. *Stelai* erected by boys who won contests held at the sanctuary tell us that the idea of the *agon* was important at this sanctuary.

The sanctuary was connected to other sites by the Aphetais, the processional road, leading from the agora and the temple of Athena Khalkioikos to Amyklai. The temple itself seems to have been 16 metres long and 7 metres wide, reflecting the Spartan desire for smaller temples. The first stone temple dates to the first half of the 6th century BC. It was here that spectacles involving masks took place, but the transformation of rites into the cheese-stealing festival possibly reflects an eventual change in the building itself. The temple itself had an altar, on which the cheeses of Xenophon's time were placed, though it is uncertain when the altar was first dedicated. Plutarch (*Thes.* 31.2) says that Helen was dancing for Spartan maidens in honour of Artemis Orthia when she was abducted by the Athenian king Theseus, which may indicate that women singing and dancing were part of rituals performed here.

**stela (pl. stelai)**

a large stone slab on which an inscription was carved



**FIGURE 8.8** The remains of the temple of Artemis Orthia

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe the features of the Amyklaion as it was thought to have existed between the 7th and 5th centuries BC.
2. What does change at Amyklai suggest about the growth of Spartan power?
3. What is significant about the site of the Menelaion?
4. What does the presence of votives tell us about how Menelaus and Helen were considered in Sparta?
5. Describe how the Menelaion changed.
6. Describe the known features of the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia.
7. What has been found at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia? What does this tell us about Spartan society?
8. How was the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia connected to a larger network of Spartan religious sites? What does this tell us about the sanctuary?

## Writing and literature

The notion that Sparta was a society focused solely on military life and martial values is now seen by most historians as an image deliberately skewed by the propaganda that created the Spartan mirage. Music and the arts were an integral part of every aspect of life, and became the focus of both religion and the military. Early Sparta was even named *Sparta eurokhoros* (Sparta of the wide chorus area) in Homer's *Iliad* (9.478). There is evidence of numerous Spartan poets, male and also possibly female, but no extant records of their works. However, there are numerous **fragments** and **testimonia** of the two main Spartan poets, Alcman and Tyrtaeus, whose poetry became the foundation of much of Spartan life. It is clear from the extracts that remain, and their later importance in Spartan life, that prior to the 5th century BC, Sparta had a strong 'song culture',<sup>1</sup> and the expression of this culture continued into the Classical period. The line from the poet Pratinas of Phleious, 'The cicada is a Spartan, eager for a chorus' bears this out.

### fragment

a part of something one author wrote that was preserved, or copied, by another ancient source that we still possess

### testamonia

quotes, paraphrases and comments on an ancient work

### elegiac

a poetic form in which lines alternate between dactylic hexameter and pentameter

## Alcman

Alcman is said to have come from outside of Sparta, possibly either Sardis in Lydia or Mesoia in Lakedaimonia. Written in the mid to late 7th century BC, his poetry is diverse and is one of the earliest surviving examples of **elegiac** poetry. His most famous poem, the *Partheneia*, is associated with festivals, cultic singing and dancing competitions among women. He also wrote about the Dioscuri and the Lakedaimonian graces Phaenna and Kleta, and he wrote poetry dedicated to Apollo.

His poetry had two likely contexts, festivals and the *syssitia*. Alcman's poetry was used to initiate young Spartan boys into the military at the Gymnopaedia, where the Lakedaimonian historian Sosibus tells us that poetry written by both Alcman and Thaletas was the basis of the celebration songs of the victory over Argos. Similarly, Alcman's poetry was performed by both boys and girls at the Hyakinthia and the Gymnopaedia, and a *scholiast* claims that the poetry was the foundation for the story of the accidental death of Hyakinthos at the hands of Apollo. Thus, Alcman's poetry was performed at all the key festivals in Sparta, making his poetry central to understanding Sparta's religion and festivals.

It is also possible that some of the fragments of Alcman survived in songs that were performed at the *syssitia*. In some of his poetry, Alcman is talking about himself in the third person participating in communal meals, even seeming to organise a meal as part of a *symposion*.

## The *Partheneia*

The longest section of poetry in existence from Alcman is the *Partheneia*, consisting of two long fragments composed in a complex poetic metre called melic. There were six scrolls of his poetry collated in Alexandria by experts at the Great Library of Alexandria in ancient times, and these fragments come from the first two scrolls, possibly indicating their importance in relation to his other poems. The poems are written in the first person and use a tense in Greek called the ‘performative future’, which indicates that they were written to be performed. The individual performers singing and dancing refer to the female chorus leader in a sexual way, and the poems have been compared to the erotic nature of the love poetry of Sappho. This might suggest that they were written to be performed at the Hyakinthia, where the homosexual love of Apollo and Hyakinthos was also celebrated, but this is not certain.

The singers in the poem are also praising two girls engaged in a race, showing the close connection between religion and physical contests common in Spartan culture. This may be a reference to the Leukippidai, the wives of Castor and Pollux. It is also possible that the first fragment ended with a retelling of the death of Hippokoon (who also wished to marry one of the Leukippidai) and the restoration of King Tyndareus to the throne of Sparta, an important Spartan foundation myth. One of the *scholiasts* has commented that the goddess mentioned in the poem, Orthria, is the same as Orthia. It is known that Helen had a very strong association with the sanctuary of Orthia, and she was stunningly beautiful, therefore Calame has suggested that based on the extract of the *Partheneia* below, it was associated with the worship of Helen.<sup>2</sup>

Astymelousa does not reply to me,  
 [but] holding a sacred garland  
 Just like some star in the glittering cosmos  
 Or a golden bough or a soft feather  
 [...]  
 She steps over [...] delicately [...]  
 The perfumed charm of the Cyprian King  
 Sits in her maiden's hair.  
 [...]her young girls  
 by the desire that breaks limbs, she casts me a look  
 That melts more than sleep or death.  
 It is not in vain that she is sweet.

Source: Alcman, fr. 3

## Tyrtaeus

In contrast to Alcman, Tyrtaeus wrote about military and political life. Tyrtaeus probably lived less than a generation before Alcman, writing in the mid-7th century BC. He lived in Sparta during the Second Messenian War, and his songs are dominated by themes of courage, military valour and oppression of the helots. Tyrtaeus' poetry was used as songs in contests in the *sysitia*, as *embateria* (marching songs on campaign) to ensure that the line in battle was maintained. They were usually written to be performed with accompaniment from a double oboe. They were also sung in contest outside the king's tent on campaigns for prizes, no doubt used to fortify the courage and dedication of the hoplites on campaign.

In one famous fragment, Tyrtaeus encourages the *neoi* (young men) to hold the line and master their fear. It is an excellent example of how the hoplite performed as part of the *phalanx*, and it explains the importance of cohesion in the line. In another fragment, there is an account of the helots, demonstrating the attitude of the Spartiates towards their subject class.

Importantly, there is also political poetry from Tyrtaeus. He wrote a poem called the *Eunomia* ('Good order'), and it is likely that his preservation of the *Rhetra* (which does

not mention Lycurgus) comes from this poem. The poem both narrates the creation of the Spartan state and encourages the people to follow the prescribed constitution to ensure that Sparta will continue to flourish. It is possible that it was written to give moral authority to the order that was established in his own day, which became the foundation of the constitution of the Spartan mirage.

## Source Study 8.2 Spartan poetry

### Source A: Tyrtaeus

It is a fine thing for a brave man to die when he has fallen among the front ranks while fighting for his homeland, and it is the most painful thing of all to leave one's city and rich fields for a beggar's life, wandering about with his dear mother and aged father, with small children and wedded wife.

Forgiving way to need and hateful poverty, he will be treated with hostility by whomever he meets, he brings disgrace on his line, belies his splendid form, and every indignity and evil attend him.

If then there is no regard or respect for a man who wanders thus, nor yet for his family after him, let us fight with spirit for this land and let us die for our children, no longer sparing our lives. Come, you young men, stand fast at one another's side and fight, and do not start shameful flight or panic, but make the spirit in your heart strong and valiant, and do not be in love of life when you are fighting men ...

Tyrtaeus, Fragment 10, in Tyrtaeus, Solon, Theognis, Mimnermus. *Greek Elegiac Poetry: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC*. Edited and translated by DE Gerber, Loeb Classical Library 258, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999.

### Source B: Tyrtaeus

... Come, let everyone stand fast, with legs set well apart and both feet fixed firmly on the ground, biting his lip with his teeth, and covering thighs, shins below, chest, and shoulders with the belly of his broad shield; in his right hand let him brandish a mighty spear and let him shake the plumed crest above his head in a fearsome manner. By doing mighty deeds let him learn how to fight and let him not stand – he has a shield – outside the range of missiles, but coming to close quarters let him strike the enemy, hitting him with long spear or sword; and also, with foot placed alongside foot and shield pressed against shield, let everyone draw near, crest to crest, helmet to helmet, and breast to breast, and fight against a man, seizing the hilt of his sword or his long spear. You light-armed men, as you crouch beneath a shield on either side, let fly with huge rocks and hurl your smooth javelins at them, standing close to those in full armour.

Tyrtaeus, Fragment 11, in Tyrtaeus, Solon, Theognis, Mimnermus. *Greek Elegiac Poetry: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC*. Edited and translated by DE Gerber, Loeb Classical Library 258, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999.

### Source C: Tyrtaeus

I would not mention or take account of a man for his prowess in running or in wrestling, not even if he had the size and strength of the Cyclopes and outstripped Thracian Boreas in the race, nor if he were more handsome than Tithonus in form and richer than Midas and Cinyras, nor if he were more kingly than Pelops, son of Tantalus, and had a tongue that spoke as winningly as Adrastus', nor if he had a reputation for everything save furious valour. For no man is good in war unless he can endure the sight of bloody slaughter and, standing close, can lunge at the enemy. This is excellence, this the best human prize and the fairest for a young man to win. This is a common benefit for the state and all the people, whenever a man with firm stance among the front ranks never ceases to hold his ground, is utterly unmindful of shameful flight, risking his life and displaying a steadfast spirit, and standing by the man next to him speaks encouragingly. This man is good in war. He quickly routs the bristling ranks of the enemy and by his zeal stems the tide of battle. And if he falls among the front ranks, pierced many times through his breast and bossed shield and corselet from the front, he loses his own dear life but brings glory to his city, to his people, and to his father. Young and old alike mourn him, all the city is distressed by the painful loss, and his tomb and children are pointed out among the people, and his children's children and his line after them. Never do his name and good fame perish, but even though he is beneath the earth he is immortal, whoever it is that furious Ares slays as he displays his prowess by standing fast and fighting for land and children. And if he escapes the doom of death that brings long sorrow and by his victory makes good his spear's splendid boast, he is honoured by all, young and old alike, many are the joys he experiences before he goes to Hades, and in his old age he stands out among the townsmen; no one seeks to deprive him of respect and his just rights, but all men at the benches yield their place to him, the young, those of his own age, and the elders. Let everyone strive now with all his heart to reach the pinnacle of this excellence, with no slackening in war.

Tyrtaeus, Fragment 12, in Tyrtaeus, Solon, Theognis, Mimnermus. *Greek Elegiac Poetry: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC*. Edited and translated by DE Gerber, Loeb Classical Library 258, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999.

### Source D: Cartledge

By about the mid-seventh century, 'original' epic poetry was beginning to lose its fascination for singers and audiences alike and was being challenged by the more personal genres of elegy and lyric, in which Sparta was excellently represented by Tyrtaeus and Alcman respectively. Apart from citing a few acceptable mythological precedents, including the first surviving version of the conflated myths of the 'Dorian invasion' and the 'Return of the Herakleidae', Tyrtaeus devoted himself to the present in a pragmatic fashion. Through a skilful fusion of old and new, both in language and in ideas, he advocated a moral and political ideal to which future generations of military-minded Spartans paid more than lip-service. Alcman was proud of his pedagogic inventiveness, but he too was largely content to draw on an inherited mythological stock for his themes and may have had the same kind of anti-historical outlook and effect as Tyrtaeus ...

P Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia. A Regional History 1300-362 BC*, London, 2002, pp 46–47.

## Questions

1. What does Tyrtaeus (Source A [fr.10]) say is the most noble thing for a brave man? What does he then say is the greatest evil?
2. How does the second half of Source B teach the Spartans how to avoid the evils described above it?
3. Using Source B [fr. 11], describe what happens in hoplite combat. Why do you think this is being described in the poem?
4. How is Source C [fr. 12] different from the other poems? What is its purpose?
5. What are the themes of the fragments you have read? What impact would it have had on groups of men who performed these poems the night before battle, or in the *syssitia*?
6. What does Source D claim is the reason for the rise in popularity of Tyrtaeus and Alcman? How might this enhance the themes of their poetry?

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does Homer's *Iliad* tell us about the musical nature of Archaic Sparta?
2. What does the term 'song culture' mean? How is it applicable to Sparta?
3. What was Alcman's poetry used for in Spartan society?
4. How does the poetry of Tyrtaeus differ from that of Alcman?
5. Can we account for the different themes in Tyrtaeus' poetry?

## Leisure activities

It should be remembered that Spartans were wealthy by virtue of the land that they possessed. This meant that they had as much time to participate in leisure activities as the elites of other Greek cities would have had (marked out by their long hair, as Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1367 a29-31 tells us that with long hair, one cannot undertake manual labour). Suggestions that Spartans trained all day, or even focused for much of the day, on military exercise, is part of the Spartan mirage. It is considered more likely that they engaged in regular military drill exercises as a group (though we do not know the frequency of this), but spent more time working on their physical fitness and strength at the *gymnasion*. Sessions at the *gymnasion* were supervised by the most senior man present, indicating that there was some form of organisation at their workout.

Related closely to physical fitness for Spartiates was hunting. This was considered an elite pastime around Greece, but Xenophon (*Lak. Pol.* 4.7) tells us that Lycurgus specifically laid down the importance of hunting as the most noble pursuit a man could have. So important was hunting in Sparta that it was considered acceptable to miss dinner at the *syssition* if you were engaged in a hunt (Plut. *Lyc.* 12.3). It was thought to be excellent training for war and a demonstration of a man's skill as a warrior to kill particularly dangerous animals, such as boars. It was expected that wealthy Spartiates who owned many hunting dogs would lend them to friends if they were not using them (Xen. *Lak. Pol.* 6.3), and if a wealthy man was invited but not able to attend, he was expected to still send his hunting dogs. It was expected that the kill of any quarry on a hunt be made in hand-to-hand combat with a dagger, sword or *sarissa*. Such scenes of hunting were a common theme on pottery, particularly black-figure ware of Lakonian III pottery. In addition to more dangerous game, birds such as geese, thrushes and turtledoves were hunted and often contributed to the *syssition* to win the favour of their companions, who would call out their name in appreciation at the meal.

Similarly, Spartans engaged in athletic, singing and dancing contests to demonstrate their skills in competition. This was part of the culture of contest in Sparta, where victory in any contest, whether it was formal (for example, at festivals) or informal (such as between friends) led to the victor developing a reputation for excellence. Not only were athletic contests part of Spartan life, Spartans also participated in athletic contests around the Greek world. For example, Spartans represent more than half of the known victors at Olympic contests between 720 and 576 BC (although the lists were compiled in around 400 BC and may have simply recorded a Spartan name when no other name could be found). Spartans seem to have disliked boxing and a violent hand-to-hand contest called the *pankration*, but they participated in other athletic events, such as running, long jump and javelin. Historians know of a game played by boys in two teams on a bridge at a place called Platanistas (the plane tree grove), where boys were required to get their opposing team in the water by any means necessary. While the evidence for this was from the Roman period, a reference in Plato's *Laws* (633b) to battles with hands has been taken by scholars to mean this game. Xenophon (*Lak. Pol.* 9.4-5) tells us that *tresantes* were left out of wrestling or ball games that used to happen between Spartiates. Again, the importance of the *agon* in both of these activities is fundamental to our understanding of much about Spartiate leisure.

Horses were an important part of Spartan society, and horseracing was a particularly important (and expensive) pastime. Depictions of horses and horseracing, particularly the four-horse chariot racing at major festivals such as the Olympic Games, were frequently used in Sparta. In the 5th century BC, Sparta won almost all of the chariot races at the Olympic Games between 448 and 388 BC, leading Pausanias (6.2.1) to comment that the Spartans were more interested in breeding horses than any other group of people in Greece.

It has been suggested that after the earthquake in 465/64 BC, that wealth became concentrated in fewer hands, allowing people to engage in the expensive pastime of horseracing more freely. Also, after the defeat of Sparta at Leuktra and the loss of the lands of Messene, the reduction of wealth in Spartan hands has been provided as the reason for no Spartan victories in the chariot race at all after 368 BC.<sup>3</sup> Victory in the chariot races at Olympia could lead to significant honours in Sparta, such as diplomatic or military leadership positions, and was regarded very highly in Sparta by their peers.

In contrast to the highly regulated life of the boys in the *agoge*, Spartiates had a significant amount of free time. We hear of Spartiates wiling the time away in conversation on the riverbank of the Eurotas (Xen. *Hell.* 5.4.248), or wandering around the agora, in the company of the kings, *gerontes*, *ephors*, or simply with friends (Xen. *Hell.* 3.3.5). We should also note that there is no evidence for leisure time for other groups within Spartan society.



**FIGURE 8.9** Black-figure artwork of a Spartan on a horse, c. 550–530 BC

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What has the Spartan mirage led historians to believe about Spartiate leisure time? How did Spartans most likely train for battle?
2. Why was hunting an important part of leisure for Spartiates?
3. How did hunting add to the honour of a Spartiate?
4. In which formal athletic contests did Spartans participate? What is the evidence for this?
5. What were some of the informal games that Spartans used to play?
6. Explain the Spartan success in horseracing in the 5th century BC.
7. What could a victor in Olympic chariot-racing expect in Sparta? What might this tell us about what Spartiates valued?
8. What other things did Spartiates do in their extensive spare time? How do we know?

## Marriage customs

The issue of marriage in Spartan marriage is, as always, obscured by the Spartan mirage, which made Spartan society seem far more aggressive even in its attitude towards marriage. It was suggested, particularly during the 1960s and 70s, that Spartan women enjoyed far more freedom than their contemporaries across Greece. However, many historians now emphasise that this was a deliberate representation of Spartan women by Athenian writers

to make Sparta seem more foreign, and nowhere was it more apparent than in marriage.

Marriage was seen as an important time for a girl, and even for the Spartan state. Many festivals were dedicated to girls beginning this phase of life, considered important because it led to the creation of more Spartiates. Festivals for such girls included foot races, and singing and dancing in choruses, seen as fundamentally important aspects of worship of the gods.

Responsibility for the marriage of a Spartan girl rested with the father, or the nearest male relative if the father had died. A dowry was paid to the prospective son-in-law, which the soon-to-be wife seems to have owned as her own possession. Plutarch speaks about the marriage-by-capture ceremony, which had parallels in Athenian practices.

Many historians accept that Plutarch's account of a 'staged capture' when the girl was about 18 years old (significantly older than in most Greek cities) is, in this case, largely correct, and is in keeping with the idea of limiting the public displays of wealth that would have been typical of weddings in contemporary Greek cities. The capture was simply the end part of negotiations between families that may have taken some time, a formalisation of a long process, common across all ancient Greece. Xenophon (*Lak. Pol.* 1.5) confirms that it was shameful to be found sneaking home to be with your wife. Aristotle (fr. 611.13) confirms that girls cut their hair prior to marriage, and it has been suggested that this was done to make the girl seem less threatening to a young man who had spent little time around girls.<sup>4</sup>

Hermippos of Smyrna (fr. 87) gives us a different account of marriage. He claims that boys and girls were simply locked in a room and whomever the boy happened to grab became his wife, citing the general Lysander's swapping of the girl he caught for a more attractive girl. Historian Van Wees suggests this could be evidence that *mothakes* (Lysander was a *mothax*) may have been paired off to be married randomly with girls whose family could provide no dowry to preserve the status of Spartiates.<sup>5</sup>

As in most ancient societies, marriage was rarely undertaken for love, but more for political and economic advantage. That Spartan kings were responsible for determining whom an unmarried heiress should marry indicates the importance that was attached to wealth acquisition in marriages. Should a wealthy woman in possession of much land be found, there is little doubt that a king would reward a supporter or family member with marriage to her. It is also thought by many historians that a strategic marriage to increase wealth was one of the reasons that the numbers of Spartiates declined at the end of the 5th and beginning of the 4th centuries BC, as land became more concentrated in the hands of the wealthy, denying others the chance to possess a *kleros* sufficient to contribute to the *agoge*.

## Source Study 8.3 Marriage

### Source A: Plutarch

When the women were married, they were carried away, not when they were small and unready for marriage, but when they were in the prime of life and perfectly ready. After being carried away, the woman called the bridesmaid took charge, shaving the head close to the skin, getting her into a man's cloak and sandals, and laid her down on a bed, alone and in the dark. Then the bridegroom, not drunk or made weak by debauchery, but sober as always, after dining in the dining hall came in, loosened her underclothes and carried her over to the bed. After spending not a long time with her, he left in a composed manner to his usual quarters, sleeping with the other boys. It continued just like this, spending the day with his peers and sleeping with his wife secretly, moving about with caution, ashamed and fearful should anyone become aware of his visits, while similarly his bride contriving and helping to hide the fact that they may have been

secretly meeting up when the time was right. And they did this not for a short time, but until some had sons, before they saw their wives during the day. Such a meeting was not just training in discretion, but brought them into union when their bodies were fertile when their love was fresh and not stale, not when it was spent and fading from unrestrained lovemaking.

Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 15.3-5

### Source B: Meister

... Plutarch's depiction of the Spartan wedding has no decisive parallel among other testimonies. This alone may serve to cast doubt on so extraordinary an account ... Plutarch was familiar with each of the authors [who discuss Spartan marriage]. In light of this relationship, some of the similarities that scholars have detected between Plutarch and other authors are perhaps significant, not as independent parallels supporting Plutarch's account, but rather as the material from which it is drawn. It is possible that Plutarch extracted a notion of shame and secrecy from Xenophon and Ephorus, the abduction from Ephorus, the masculine appearance of the bride from Aristotle and Hagnon, the setting of the dark room from Hermippus and possibly other aspects from other texts now lost, and combined them with traditional elements of the wedding. Evidence of such a technique might be found in the juxtaposition of the bride's masculine haircut, cloak and sandals with the maiden's girdle ... Plutarch would have created a new and purely fictional vision of the Spartan wedding.

FJ Meister, 'Plutarch and the Spartan wedding ceremony', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 140, 2020, p 210.

## Questions

1. Describe the process of marriage as described by Plutarch in Source A. Explain why you think marriage may have been done in this way.
2. Meister (Source B) believes that Plutarch's account of the Spartan wedding is not correct. How does he believe that Plutarch arrived at his story of the wedding?

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How has the Spartan mirage affected our understanding of marriage customs and married life?
2. How much say did a Spartan girl have about her husband-to-be?
3. Why do you think Spartan women were older than girls in other Greek cities at the time of their marriage?
4. What does Hermippos tell us about Spartan marriage? How have historians accounted for the difference between Hermippos' and Plutarch's accounts?
5. How and why did politics and money come into Spartan marriage?

## Further reading

C Calame, 'Pre-classical Sparta as Song Culture', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 177–201.

JB Carter, 'The chests of Periander', *American Journal of Archaeology* 93, 1989, pp 355–378.

P Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia. A Regional History 1300–362 BC*, London, 2002, pp 46–47.

P Christesen, 'Sparta and athletics', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 543–564.

R Fortsch, 'Spartan art: Its many different forms', *British School of Athens Studies* 4, *Sparta in Laconia: Proceedings of the 19<sup>th</sup> British Museum Classical Colloquium held with the British School at Athens and King's and University Colleges, London, 6–8 December, 1996*.

FJ Meister, 'Plutarch and the Spartan wedding ceremony', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 140, 2020, pp 206–212.

## Activities

### Bringing it together

1. Explain how the Spartan mirage has affected our understanding of cultural and everyday life.
2. Explain how art can help us to understand other aspects of Spartan life, including foreign policy, trade and religion.
3. What do the remains of temples in Sparta tell us about how Spartans saw religion in their lives?
4. Spartan leisure activities tended to focus on the *agon*, a contest. Explain how this is an important part of Spartan and Spartiate culture.
5. In what way are Spartan marriage customs to be expected? Explain your answer.

### Activities

1. Create a timeline of Spartan artistic styles and types.
2. Research representations of everyday life using archaeological and written sources. Create a 'day-in-the-life' account of a Spartiate that outlines what they might do on a typical day in Sparta.

3. Research another religious site in Lakedaimonia. Outline the remains of the sanctuary, shrine or temple, explain what we know about what happened there, and compare this to what we know about the three main religious sites in this chapter, noting similarities and differences.

### HSC-style questions

1. Outline the key features of marriage in Spartan society. (4 marks)
2. With reference to Source A below, what does the poetry of Alcman and Tyrtaeus tell us about life in Sparta? (8 marks)

#### Source A

... like asses worn out by heavy burdens, bringing to their masters out of grievous necessity half of all the produce that the land brings forth.

Tyrtaeus, Fragment 6

3. What does the evidence reveal about everyday life in Sparta? (12 marks)

## Endnotes

- 1 C Calame, 'Pre-classical Sparta as Song Culture', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 178–180.
- 2 C Calame, 'Pre-classical Sparta as Song Culture', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 190–191.
- 3 P Christesen, 'Sparta and athletics', in A. Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, pp 551–52.

- 4 EG Millender, 'Kingship: The history, power, and prerogatives of the Spartans' 'divine' dyarchy', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta (Volume II)*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018 p 509.
- 5 H van Wees, 'Luxury, austerity and equality in Sparta', in A Powell (ed), *A Companion to Sparta (Volume I)*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, p 220.

# Conclusion

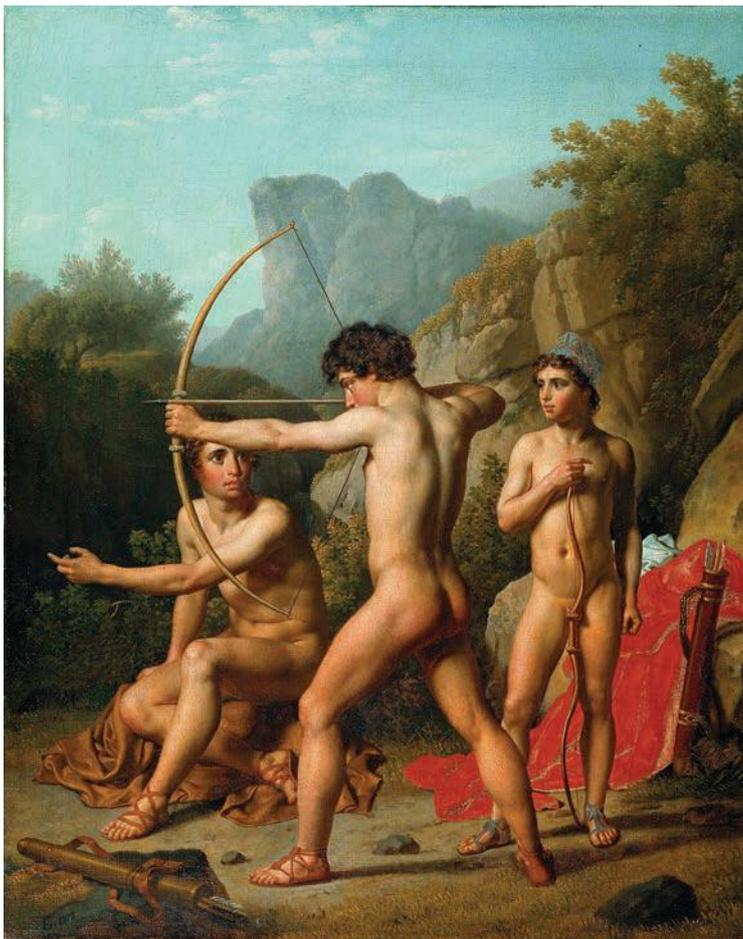
## Spartan legacies?

In 372 BC, a peace settlement had been agreed to end the bouts of fighting that had plagued the Greeks for a decade. In a move by Agesilaus II that was designed deliberately to humiliate the Thebans, he did not allow Thebes to agree to the peace on behalf of all of Boeotia (hypocritically, the Spartans had agreed on behalf of their Peloponnesian allies). To teach the Thebans a lesson, Agesilaus led a full Spartiate army out against Thebes the next year. They arrived at Leuctra in 371 BC full of confidence, but they had not counted on the military and tactical brilliance of the Theban commanders Pelopidas and Epaminondas, who had reformed the Theban army. The Thebans nearly destroyed the entire Spartan army, the most consequential military defeat in Spartan history. The next year, the Theban army marched into the Peloponnese. Expecting to fight, the Spartans prepared themselves, but instead the Thebans established the Arcadian League to limit Spartan power, and liberated the helots of Messene, assisting them in building a new capital, Megalopolis (or 'Great City'). The Thebans knew that they only had to free the helots to destroy Sparta permanently. By doing so, the Thebans ended a way of life that had continued for centuries, as the helots were the most fundamental building block of Spartan power. Aristotle, as

we have read previously claimed that it was the ability of women to inherit land that led to *oliganthropia*, the 'fewness of men' that meant the Spartiate contingent in any Spartan army was a few thousand at best in the 4th century BC. We could, however, look back to the earthquake in 465 BC that probably caused this problem, with much of the population being killed (it was actually a minor miracle that they survived after the earthquake at all). Whatever the reason, after 371 BC, Sparta almost overnight became a minor power, incapable of contributing in any meaningful way to Greek affairs.

Sparta is a fascinating topic to study at any level of education. It presents many challenges of interpretation for scholars and students alike, and has done so for centuries. Our key problem is this: whose Sparta are we studying? It has perhaps become clear that the Sparta in our sources is probably not the historical Sparta. The idea of the Spartan mirage is central to the modern study of Sparta. Much of what was previously understood about Sparta is questioned as a result of the growth of the study of the Spartan mirage and how it affected every facet of Spartan life, and how it seems to have been deliberately disseminated by Sparta as the 'official' Spartan line.

So, are we studying the Athenian representation of Sparta, biased after generations of warfare against each other? Or, are we examining the Sparta of Cleomenes III, who



**FIGURE 9.1** Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg *Three Spartan boys practicing archery* 1812. The mirage casts a long shadow far beyond the Spartan defeat at Leuctra. Neoclassical artists, such as Eckersberg, arguably painted a more realistic portrait of the ancient Spartans than their representation by political activists in the 21st century.

ruled from 235 to 222 BC and seems to have deliberately altered the record of the past to justify his own political actions? Or, are we exploring the Sparta of the Roman period, primarily recorded by Plutarch, which had amplified any aspect of social and military difference to encourage those living in later periods to think of their Spartan ancestors as braver and more exceptional than they really were? In truth we will never know, but it is important for us to continue to try and understand the Spartans on their own terms, as the history of Sparta has never been more important to understand.

As a result of Plutarch's depiction, the Spartans are regarded as living in a militarised society, where their sole focus was military success. This has led to the history of Sparta being used for overtly political purposes. A number of German historians from the late 1800s through to the 1940s circulated historical papers, and gave many public and academic lectures, about how ideal Sparta was as a model for a militarised German state. Study of alleged Spartan ideals became required for the most 'Nazified' of schools in Hitler's Third Reich. Hitler himself claimed that the blood broth that many people ate in parts of Germany indicated that there was a direct connection between Sparta and Germany, making the Spartans part of the 'Aryan' race at the heart of Hitler's racialised world view.

The response of King Leonidas at Thermopylae in answer to the request of the Persians to lay down their weapons was '*Molon labe*,' translated as, 'Come get them.' This is now used as the rallying cry in the United States against those who want to introduce gun control and remove guns from the hands of their owners. It is important for us to understand the impact that the ancient past can have on today. In trying to understand Spartan society, we are trying to understand the problems of history, interpretation and historiography, which are central issues in the study of all history.



**FIGURE 9.2** The reconstructed base of a *tropaion*, or trophy, set-up by the Thebans at Leuctra at the place where they turned the Spartan army in flight.



**FIGURE 9.3** A speedboat in a rally to support the failed 2020 election campaign of then US President Donald Trump flies a black '*Molon labe*' flag.



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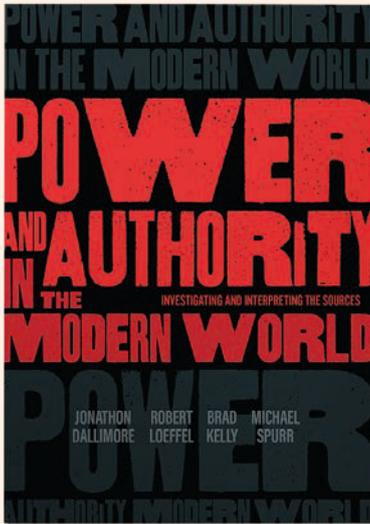
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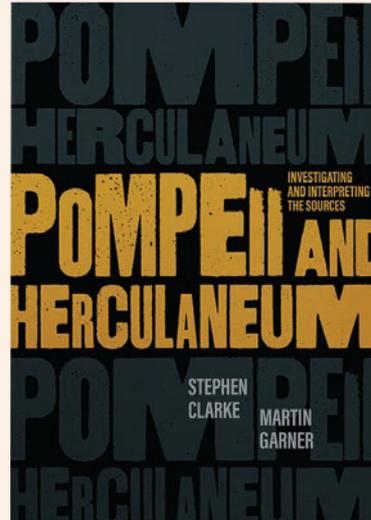
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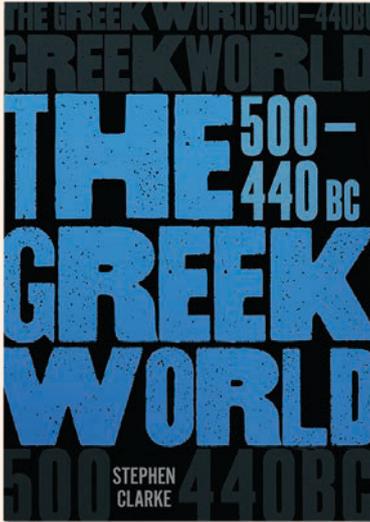
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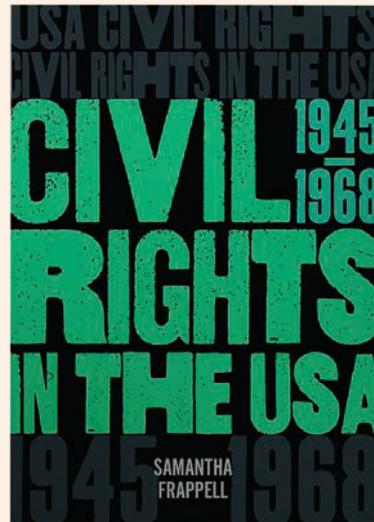
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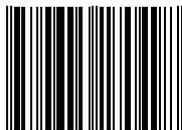
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