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The Riddle of Ancient Sparta: Unwrapping the Enigma

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(Sir Winston) Churchill once famously referred to Soviet Russia as 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma'. My title is a simplified version of that seemingly obscure remark. The point of contact and comparison between ancient Sparta and modern Soviet Russia is the nature of the evidence for them, and the way in which they have been imagined and represented, by outsiders. There was a myth - or mirage - of ancient Sparta, as there was of Soviet Russia: typically, the outsider who commented was both very ignorant and either wildly PRO or - as in Churchill's case - wildly ANTI. There was no moderate, middle way. The 'Spartan Tradition' (Elizabeth Rawson) is alive and - well, 'well' to this day.

To start us off, I give you a relatively gentle, deliberately inoffensive and very British example of the PRO myth, mirage, legend or tradition of ancient Sparta.

In 2017 Terry's of York confectioners would have been celebrating its 150th anniversary, had it not been taken over by Kraft in 1993. A long discontinued but still long cherished Terry's line was their 'Spartan' assortment: **hard**-centre chocolates, naturally. Because the Spartans were the ultimate ancient warriors, uber-warriors, if you like. And their fearsome reputation on the battlefield had won them not just respect but fame - and not just in antiquity: think only of the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE - and of the movie *300*.

But of course the Spartans were no mere chocolate box soldiers - they were the real thing, the hard men of ancient Greece. That, at least, no scholar has chosen to dispute. Yet pretty much everything else about ancient Spartan culture, politics and society has been, from antiquity to this very day, up for furious dispute and debate, including the extent to which the Spartans devoted their lives and shaped their lifestyle more or less totally in accordance with military or militaristic ideals.

The 'Spartan mirage' (a phrase coined by a French scholar in the 1930s), otherwise known as the Spartan myth, or legend, or tradition, is fundamentally a bifurcated tradition, and it speaks with a forked tongue. Either you love the Spartans so much that you wish your own society could be entirely or at least much more like your idea or vision of Sparta, or you so hate them that you look for any last detail to put them down or blacken their image.

To use a more modern analogy, and return to my title, it's something like the situation during the Cold War that broke out between Soviet Russia and the West after WWII (and arguably still goes on ...). For devout Communists and other 'fellow-travellers', the Soviet Union could do no wrong; such devotees are the modern equivalent of the ancient Greek pro-Spartan non-Spartans, the laconizers and laconophiles, beginning in written terms with Plato's older relative Critias, who wrote glowingly about the Spartans in both prose and verse in the later 5th century BCE.

Anti-Communists, however, detested the Soviet Union and all its works, and the ancient historians among them much preferred ancient Athens to Sparta, praising its democracy and freedom and labelling Sparta 'totalitarian'. When Winston Churchill called Soviet Russia a 'riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma', he hit the nail on the head: so difficult was it to get at the truth, precisely because the evidence was so partisan and biased - and therefore tainted. That's no less true of the Spartan 'mirage', making it very difficult for us historians even to get the facts straight, let alone interpret them soberly and persuasively.



Ancient Sparta is a long way away from us. In this lecture (which can of course only scratch the surface) I'm going to be focusing on the period from about 600 BCE to about 350 BCE. Yet this ancient Sparta has left us multiple legacies, living legacies, including in our own English vocabulary: 'spartan' (austere, self-denying), 'laconic' (terse, clipped, military-style utterance), and ... 'helot' (exploited, even unfree, underclass worker). And there are still partisans and devotees, extreme right-wingers in both Europe (the Golden Dawn party in Greece) and the United States (gun-lobbyists toting the ancient Spartan slogan 'Molon Labe'), who worship the memory of the ancient Spartans. Such extremist partisanship is to be avoided. But my point is that Sparta – or if you like ideas and images of Sparta – matters, and still matters very much.

By a happy coincidence, a brilliant sourcebook on Sparta by Melvin Cooley was published just last year (LACTOR 21 - see below), giving excellent English translations of all the main relevant ancient sources together with admirable commentaries and suggestions for further reading. Section F is devoted to the 'mirage'. Under Section D fall Women, the Helots and Education, which are some of the aspects most worth considering. Of each aspect, as of every other, one can ask 'how odd? - that is, how far, in what ways did Spartan practices in those areas differ from those of most/all other ancient Greek states?

It must of course be remembered that 'ancient Greece' was not a single state but consisted of some 1000 separate communities scattered from one end of the Mediterranean to the other and around the Black Sea, with the focal concentration - some 700 - being in the Aegean basin at the Mediterranean's eastern end. As Plato once put it, we Greeks live like frogs or ants around a pond (the Mediterranean and Black Seas).

The Peloponnese peninsula was Sparta's homeland. A strong ancient tradition had it that the Spartans were newcomers, incomers from further north. At any rate historical Sparta was in existence by about 800 BCE, in its topographical configuration a slightly odd combination of 5 villages lying athwart the river Eurotas. But within two centuries, by 600 BCE, Sparta had turned itself into the paradigm conquest state. It conquered and subordinated almost half of the southern Peloponnese, turning the other main groups of population into respectively Helots and Perioikoi.

The Helots ('captives') were a kind of collectively owned slave population who did all the Spartans' agricultural and other work for them. They lived and farmed in the fertile riverine valleys of Lakonia (Eurotas) and Messenia (Pamisos). They too were Greeks, speaking the same language as their masters, worshipping the same gods and goddesses. But they were unfree, and constantly reminded of that by being put under the curse of an annual declaration of war. This turned them into literally enemies within. It was thus okay for a Spartan to kill a Helot if he deemed it necessary – that wasn't considered to be murder but war. The downside for the Spartans was that many Helots yearned to be free – and were prepared to fight and die for their freedom.

For some ancient writers, the Athenian Thucydides for example, the Helots were the linchpin of the entire Spartan polity. They far outnumbered the Spartans. They did the bulk of the agricultural work that fed their Spartan masters, they served as domestic servants in Sparta and as batmen on campaign. Helot women were available for sexual gratification for Spartan men as well as performing essential household services for their Spartan mistresses. It was Aristotle who reported that once a year the Spartans declared war formally on the Helots. There were a few other groups of Greek collective slaves, in Thessaly for instance, but no other similar group suffered such extreme servitude. Yet both some ancient apologists and some modern scholars have held that Helotage wasn't all bad really - Helots had their own families and family life, they say. But at what cost? A series of collective revolts, eventually successful, suggests to me, as it did to Thucydides, that the Helots' lot was not a happy one.

The Perioikoi – 'dwellers around' – were free personally, but politically their communities (50 or so) were totally subordinated to the Spartans to whom they were required to pay taxes and offer military service. They occupied coastal sites and the less favoured agricultural land on slopes and hills. They manufactured and traded as well as farmed. Specifically on more marginal land often on hilly, mountain slopes. Lakonia was bisected vertically by the Parnon range (peak 1935m.). On the west it was bounded by the massive Taygetus range.



The peak of Taygetus rises to 2404m (over 8,000 feet). It casts a shadow over Sparta town. There was no easy route from where the Spartans lived in Laconia through or over the massif into Messenia to the West. Yet the Spartans not only conquered Messenia, but they held it – and the Helots and Perioikoi there, for some 200 to 300 years!

‘Sparta was (nothing but) an armed camp’. They hated art and anything else non-utilitarian. They lived in a boot camp eating off military rations that tasted awful. That was a common outside perception. It wasn’t entirely a misperception – as numbers of Spartan citizens declined in proportion to those of the Helots and Perioikoi, so it became ever more necessary for them to be on constant military alert. But once upon a time – I mean in the 6th century – Spartan or rather Perioikic craftsmen had achieved a very high level. Their fine pottery was widely exported (see the Hunt Painter’s name vase, above), their solid-cast bronze figurines likewise, though these two on the screen both happen to come from home territory.

On the left is a Perioikic hoplite (heavy infantryman, armed to the teeth, fighting in close-order phalanx fashion). Note helmet, breastplate and greaves, and fancy under-tunic. Would also have held a spear. Note also the remains of his faithful hound, a hunting dog probably. He would have fought as back-up to the main Spartan warrior regiments, but he has had himself represented as if he were in all respects a Spartan soldier. The figurine was a religious offering, dedicated to Apollo in a sanctuary in south-eastern Messenia, either in fulfilment of a vow or as a plea for Apollo’s aid. Apollo was also the god most assiduously worshipped by the Spartans, even though their patron god was a goddess – warrior Athena, just like the Athenians’.

On the right is a dour little figure, a ‘sporadic’ (unexcavated) find allegedly from ‘Sparta’ and bought on the market in Athens and now in the British Museum. Look at him from the front, and he could almost be standing in the phalanx next to the figurine on the Left. But ... note his lion-skin tunic, a bit of a clue to his true identity – that of Heracles/Hercules, alleged ancestor of the two Spartan royal families and other aristocrats, and slayer of the Lion of Nemea, one of his 12 Labours. Turn him round – a further surprise awaits. He’s not only a hoplite – but also an archer (that was how he killed that Lion). In real-world battles archers were very much fringe fighters, rather than frontline warriors, but Heracles was a legitimate exception.

What about the other half of the Spartan human population – the female half?

Marriage and the Family

All Greeks were monogamous – in contrast to a number of the peoples who surrounded them in the ancient Middle East and Africa. But one Spartan king exceptionally practised bigamy, and allegedly many other married Spartans slept with and had legitimate children with women who were not their marital partners. Indeed, in Sparta such ‘adultery’ was not the crime and sin it was held to be in all other Greek states and cities. The aim allegedly was to keep up citizen numbers and maintain the quality of the citizen breeding stock. But ancient critics of Sparta, the ANTI, condemned Spartan women as mere whores and trollops. One especially severe critic, Aristotle, even spoke of gynecocracy in Sparta, alleging that the women ruled over the men! But what seems to have irked him most was not their alleged sexual license, but that, unlike in most other Greek cities, Spartan women and wives could own and dispose of landed property in their own right, independently of a male ‘lord and master’.

Education

Paideia (education) was of course universal in ancient Greece, but with the exception of one sole city it was entirely in the hands of the family, a private affair, for boys and girls up to their teenage years. That one exception was of course Sparta, where the *agoge* (a later name, meaning ‘rearing’ or ‘upbringing’) was compulsory for all boys from the age of seven and indeed a condition of the boys becoming full adult citizens and members of the Spartan citizen body and army; and where formal public education was also imposed on Spartan girls until they became wives and mothers.



Sparta was in the fullest sense a community, with state-imposed discipline and social ideals delivered via a comprehensive, centrally directed education system lasting from the ages of seven to eighteen. Aristotle approved of communal education in principle but believed that the Spartans' education of the males was excessively physical and brutal, turning out wild beasts rather than civilized human beings.

Girls too received a public, communal and largely physical education – hence the athleticism of this figurine. Though whether she is running – or dancing – is moot. She was found in what's now Albania and – like 'Heracles' – has a permanent home in the British Museum. Originally she was nailed to the rim of a large bronze vessel (see below): note the remains of a rivet in one foot. The usual view is that she's depicted in the act of running – and Spartan girls and young women were famed or at least noted outside Sparta for their athleticism. But she's looking backwards – not the best move for a competitive runner but quite appropriate for a girl or young woman taking part in a communal round dance. The Spartans were also famed for their female choruses – and 'choros' (ancient Greek) before it meant a communal song meant a communal dance.

Over 5-foot-high and with a capacity of over 300 gallons, this bronze krater (wine-mixing bowl) was excavated from the tomb of a Hallstatt-era princess in southern France (now in the Chatillon-sur-Seine Museum). Gauls were supposed to be dipsomaniacs who drank their wine neat but if this huge vessel was ever actually used it should have been used to mix the wine – locally produced in this case! – with water (one-third, two-thirds was usual). From 'krater' comes modern Greek 'krasi' for wine (ancient Greek was *oinos*).

Scholars disagree on where it was made, and on why and how it got from its place of manufacture to its final resting-place in Burgundy. I'm one of those who believe it was made, on commission, in a Spartan workshop, so that it had to be transported by cart/mule to Sparta's port of Gythion and then transported to the mouth of the Rhone possibly via Massalia/Marseille. From there it went upriver to the Saone then on to the Seine, to Vix.

In the later 1920s the British School at Athens were conducting a second five-year round of excavations at Sparta – the first had been 1906-1910. When this upper part of a life-size male statue in marble from the island of Paros turned up in debris from the Spartan acropolis, the Greek workman who unearthed it instantly baptized him 'Leonidas', and the name has stuck ever since.

Unfortunately in a way, because the Spartans, like all other Greeks, did not then make marble images of real people alive or dead, and because this statue was probably not a freestanding unique image, but part of a group originally attached to some kind of temple or shrine. In other words, he probably represents a hero, a legendary or mythical figure – the Spartans were very keen on worshipping heroes. And this one must have been special, since the marble was imported from the Cycladic island of Paros, and the sculptor was almost certainly a foreigner commissioned specially.

But as I say, the name 'Leonidas' has stuck, and this image has become emblematic of ancient Spartan warrior prowess as encapsulated in the person of King Leonidas I, who fought and died heroically at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE. The mighty Persian Empire had sprung up, based in what's now southern Iran, in the mid-6th century and had quickly expanded west and east so that by 480 it stretched from the Aegean coast of Turkey to Pakistan and Kashmir, and from Afghanistan to Egypt. But even that huge territory wasn't enough for Emperor Xerxes – he wanted mainland Greece as well, and led a humungous amphibious expedition of would-be conquest, only to be humiliatingly defeated.

But not at Thermopylae, which, despite all the subsequent hoo-hah, was actually a very severe defeat for the very few loyalist Greeks who had the guts and gumption to resist the Persian invasion. Many legends grew up around Leonidas and his (originally) 300 picked Spartan warriors – who were backed up by 6000-7000 other Greek resisters, including 1000 or so Perioikoi and several Helot batmen. One of those legends was 'Molon labe!', laconic Greek for 'Come and get 'em yourself', Leonidas's alleged reply to a diktat from Xerxes to lay down his arms and surrender. In the mid-1950s, after Greece had endured first a brutal Nazi German occupation (1942-4) and then a ferocious war of communists vs royalists (1946-9), some American Greeks clubbed together to fund this memorial at Thermopylae itself, with a replica in Sparta, together with a statue of Sparta's supposed founding father Lycurgus.



Sparta's 'Leonidas' statue is where the annual (since 1984) ultra-marathon 'Spartathlon' race (about 250 kilometres or the equivalent of 6 marathons, over a mountain) ends. My friend American-Greek Dean Karnazis, 'Mr Ultramarathon Man', completed the Spartathlon recently and has written a book about it, *The Road to Sparta*. The race commemorates a genuine ancient run, completed in 490 just before the Battle of Marathon, by the Spartan herald and professional distance-runner Philippides. But the story that, after delivering his appeal to Sparta and getting back to Athens, he then also ran onto Marathon AND then ran back to Athens to deliver the news of that victory – that IS just a story. But it is the basis of the modern marathon race, invented (by a German...) for the first modern Olympics of 1896 held in Athens and won by an Athenian water-carrier.

Another, much later legend is captured in this wonderful oil painting by Jacques-Louis David, Napoleon's court painter, now in the Louvre. Napoleon couldn't understand why David should be wasting so much of his time on this bunch of losers. David saw things differently – sexually, among others (he was himself 'gay', as we should now call it, and like the ancient Greeks he had a particular penchant for shapely male buttocks). Note the suggestive positioning of Leonidas's scabbard.

But the strongest point of contact with the Spartan myth, legend or tradition is being depicted at the back upper left: 'Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by//That here, obedient to their laws, we lie'. This epigram composed for Leonidas and the 300 by Simonides is here being nailed to the rock – anachronistically: Leonidas was by then dead – and his corpse desecrated.

The Spartans' refusal to surrender at Thermopylae earned them the reputation – assiduously cultivated by the Spartans themselves – of NEVER surrendering. Like many myths, this one was punctured for good by unpleasant historical actuality 55 years later. We are in a different world from Thermopylae: no long Greek versus Persian, but Greek versus Greek. In 431 there broke out the generation-long 'Peloponnesian war', a prolonged and agonizing civil war between Sparta and its allies (who started it) and Athens and its allies (who eventually in 404 BCE lost it). A sort of world war that blighted more than one generation of ancient Greeks.

What you see on the slide is the sole remaining relic of a famous Athenian victory – and an infamous Spartan surrender, in 425 BCE. This hoplite shield (bronze facing, the wooden interior has long since perished) was excavated in the 1930s from a well in the Agora (Civic Centre) of Athens. But it had originally been carried by a Spartan or Perioikos who had been defeated in a skirmish on the small islet of Sphacteria off the western coast of Messenia. The Spartan garrison posted there had been surprised and, threatened with extermination, surrendered to their Athenian enemies. The 292 survivors of the original 420-strong garrison force were carted off to Athens as booty – and held there, in full public view, as hostages for Spartans' good behaviour until the first phase of the War was concluded by treaties of peace and alliance in 421.

Part of the settlement terms was Athens' repatriation of the surviving hostages to Sparta – but their confiscated weapons and armour were not returned, and their shields were nailed up on a temple for all to see. And to add insult to injury, the Athenians had a scornful dedication punched into the surface of this – and probably every – bronze shield so displayed: 'the Athenians (dedicated this to Athena) from the Lacedaemonians from Pylos' (the nearest Perioecic town to Sphacteria islet). How are the mighty fallen!

So, to end on a more positive note, I show you finally another inscribed victory dedication, but one of a very different kind - a commemoration not for a battle victory but for an equestrian, horse-race victory, won at Olympia in the by definition peaceful Games, and won not by a man but by a Spartan woman. But not just any old Spartan woman, but a princess.

Kyniska, as she proudly refers to herself in the first person, was no shrinking violet. (The inscription is on the surviving base of a long-lost bronze statue.) Daughter of one king (Archidamos II, d. 427 BCE), half-sister and full-sister of two others (respectively, Agis II r. 427-400 and Agesilaus II, r. 400-360 BCE), she was named 'Female Puppy' or 'Little Bitch' by her proud father – probably to reflect his interest in hunting with Laconian hounds; the specially bred females were brilliant scenters, especially of wild boar. At the Olympic Games of 396 BCE Kyniska won the first – and only – prize in the premier equestrian event, the 4-horse chariot race, the 'first woman in all Hellas' to achieve this feat. Of course she didn't actually drive the chariot herself – she hired a



male charioteer to do that. But she did rear and train the horses in her own stables. And thereby hangs a tale/tail.

According to the biographer of her full brother Agesilaus, the Athenian exile Xenophon, it was his idea not hers for her to go in for competitive chariot-racing. And his point was to show that, if a (mere) women could win, well that told you how trivial *race*-horses were – as opposed to *war*-horses. For war was exclusively a man's business – the ancient Greek for 'courage' or 'bravery' was literally 'masculinity' or 'virility' (*andreia*). On that suitably agonistic note (*agon* = contest, *agonia* = competitiveness) I end.

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FURTHER READING

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