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The Akhenaten Temple Project as a Source for the Study of Akhenaten

Who Killed the Kings? An Ancient Whodunnit

Sparta: Deciphering its Ideals

Thucydides on his Historical Method

“The Ways of the Ancestors”: Performing the Roman Ideal

Book Reviews

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SPARTA: DECIPHERING ITS IDEALS

Anton Powell

To understand Spartiate society and its education system, we should recognize that our literary sources, the ancient texts, are too respectful. True, the ancient authors very often criticise the Spartans. But this criticism is embedded in the context of a profound admiration. By being slightly less admiring, slightly more suspicious, we can discover a great deal that Sparta wished to hide.

With regard to Spartiate education, the text that is the most important for us and the most accessible, Xenophon’s *Lakedaimonion Politeia* [hereafter *LP*], begins by posing this question (1.1): the population of this city is amongst the smallest; how then has Sparta become the most powerful and the most renowned city of Greece? Xenophon’s text itself revolves around the contrast between other cities and Sparta; the author is inclined to exaggerate the difference between the Spartiates and others. In brief, it is an idealizing work. And this aspect of the work, in my opinion, is shared—in a less evident, more subtle fashion—by other writers important in this domain: by Thucydides, by Plato, and even by Aristotle who tried to refute the idea that the Spartiate system was worthy of imitation.

For us, the task is to reconstruct Spartan reality, making use of idealizing data. How to do that? The important thing, not always easy for scholars, is to use a technique that is completely commonplace in everyday life. It consists of reading idealizing ‘slogans’ contrary to their professed claim. In Great Britain in the 1950s, for instance, one used often to hear women saying “Big

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* This article in its original French incarnation came about through the generosity of Pierre Brulé. It appeared as ‘Sparte: comment déchiffrer ses idéaux?’, in L. Bodiou et al. (eds), *Chemin faisant: mythes, cultes et société en Grèce ancienne. Mélanges en l’honneur de Pierre Brulé* (Rennes 2009) 71–84. An oral version of the paper was delivered as ‘Sparta’s Scandalous Ideals’ at a Macquarie Ancient History Association HSC Study Day on Sparta on September 5th 2009. The author wishes to thank warmly Tom Hillard for his (exact) translation and Lea Beness for her generous editorial work.
1 e.g. 1.2; 1.10; 2.12–3; 3.1; 4.7; 5.2; 5.5; 6.1; 6.4; 7.1; 8.2; 10.4; 15.1.
2 e.g. 1.18.1; cf. 5.16.3 and Xen. *LP* 15.1 on the extreme antiquity of the constitution of Sparta.
boys don’t cry”.⁵ One understood immediately that, in reality, it was just the opposite: boys did cry, and someone else wanted them to stop.⁶ If, in our days, we encounter a discourse which emphasises safe practice we think automatically, without reflection, of danger. When, at an airport, we read ‘Security’, we hear ‘Bombs’. The expression of an ideal reveals—like a watermark—the outline of fear. Let’s take the case of the ideals of equality and of concord as expressed during—and after—the French Revolution. Who was the citizen who splendidly named himself Philippe Égalité (on whom, more below)? Why name a certain locality ‘La Place de la Concorde’? Should we not turn to what has happened there for an explanation? Consider the events of 1793. The ideal of Concord masks la terreur de la terreur (“the terror of the Terror”); an ideal to conjure away the unnameable. ‘Concord Square’ had been the site of the guillotine.⁷ Sparta, like modern France, prided itself on its revolutionary past, and likewise fought ferociously against the possible return of its ancien régime. For the Spartiates, this too is what we can detect when we hold up their ideals to the light.

The Spartiates lived their lives surrounded by the helots, whose population was enormous and politically unreliable. As a general rule, according to Aristotle (Politics 1269a), these helots were constantly on the watch for any vulnerability on the part of the Spartiates. And the latter recognized that it was dangerous to let any weakness show. Take the case of drunkenness. Plato tells us, in The Laws (637a–b), that at Sparta all drunkenness—amongst the citizens—was strictly forbidden, if not violently punished, even on festival days. Later in antiquity, much later, Plutarch (Life of Lycurgus 28) tells us how this ideal—that of sobriety—was made integral to Spartiate education. Young Spartiates were shown drunken helots: from a living tableau—the Spartiates very often used concrete images in their propaganda⁸—the young men could learn to despise the effects of wine (cf. Plut. Demetrius 1.4). The case of drunkenness demonstrates for us the relationship between the ideal, sobriety, and the fear which gave it birth. But in this case, and this is typical of ideals which concern the Spartiates, our texts say very little explicitly of

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⁵ In the United States, the commonness of the catchcry led in 1962 to the Number One hit for the Four Seasons ‘Big Girls Don’t Cry’.

⁶ I’m told by Tom Hillard that in Sydney there is a saying “Balmain boys don’t cry”. It stems from the time when the peninsula was a tough waterside locality, and the injunction meant that Balmain boys ought not to be caught crying.

⁷ Ed. adds: One could mention here the building by L. Opimius, the consul of 121 BC, of the Temple of Concord to mark the bloody suppression of the Gracchan threat in that year. We are told that graffiti on the temple noted the contradiction: Plut. Life of Gaius Gracchus 17.6.

the fear from which the ideal flowed. It is left to us to reconstruct the fears in question, the non-articulated fears that were at the origin of this remarkable society.

Our texts agree: amongst the Spartiate ideals it was the *ponos* imposed upon the young, the hard labour, which it was reckoned would best inculcate military courage. This courage was expressed by the words *andreion*, *andreia*, that is to say, it was the masculine quality *par excellence*. And the fear which corresponded with this ideal was fear of military softness in the face of the helots and of the enemies beyond Sparta’s borders. In this case, Spartiates were willing to make a spectacle of failure.

The *mise-en-scène*, the public ‘outing’ of cowards, the *tresantes* (the ‘tremblers’) who were compelled to broadcast their misery, to submit permanently to humiliation and insult, served as a lesson to each citizen: at least at the personal level, the risk of military failure was very real. There is a moment, a single moment, when we find reference to a panic amongst Spartiate authorities—it is in the aftermath of the debacle on the island of Sphakteria. Around one hundred and twenty Spartiate soldiers had surrendered there to the Athenians, in 425. And at that point the Spartiate government, according to Thucydides (4.55.3–4), was close to despair. The other Greeks, astonished by this Spartan surrender, doubtless thought of the legendary courage of the Spartiates killed at Thermopylae in 480, and concluded that contemporary Spartiates had gone soft, *malakoi* (Thuc. 5.75.3).

Bound up with this softness, this *malakia*, there was something else to dread: physical pleasure. For pleasure was the chief reason for eventual cowardice; if life was sweet, might the shame of military surrender seem worth it—to regain that pleasure? This opposition, between military courage and sensual pleasures, is well expressed in the anecdote of the man from Sybaris, a city notorious for its luxurious living, who visited Sparta and tasted the soup which symbolized Sparta’s austere communal life in the *syssitia*. The Sybarite said, in effect, “At last I understand. I had thought that the Spartiates were the bravest men in the world. But now I know that this is not the case. For anyone would prefer to die in battle than to live like this.” (Athenaeus 518e) This reprises the formula that Xenophon used when evoking the fate of

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9 e.g. Thuc. 2.39.1, 4; Plat. *Laws* 633b; Arist. *Politics* 1338b.
10 Thuc. 2.39.1 (Pericles); Arist. *Pol.* 1338b.
'tremblers' at Sparta (LP 9.6): “considering the degradation imposed on cowards, it does not surprise me that one would prefer death to a life of such shame.”

The hardness of the life of young Spartiates was built around an instrument that was both a visual symbol and a practical tool: the whip (mastix). Several of our sources speak about these whips, and Plato says that Spartan education depends not on persuasion but on violence (Republic 548b). Among the youth, there were some privileged individuals—doubtless outstanding in some fashion—who were called the mastigophoroi (Xen. LP 2.2) because they carried whips to enforce the obedience of the young. It is thanks to Xenophon that we know of a ritual played out around the altar of the goddess Artemis Orthia: its aim was for some young men to steal cheese set out on the altar under the blows of those whose duty it was to ‘defend’ it. The point of this ritual, according to Xenophon, was to inculcate in the young the notion that glory was worth the discomfort of short-term pain. Let us notice the distinction which Xenophon signals here: the distinction between the comfort, which is corporeal, and glory which is not. It revolves on a rejection of pleasure, but only of physical pleasure—because glory brings its own pleasure, a psychological pleasure. Xenophon himself says of the latter in this regard (LP 2.9): *polun chronon eudokimounta euphrainesthai* ("a pleasure which lasts a long time, that of glory"). If one supposed that the Spartiates rejected all pleasure, it would be impossible to imagine how such a society could have been able to function. The code that they enforced—endeavouring to make men hard but practical—replaced, as far as possible, the influence of physical pleasure with that of moral pleasure.

It is within this framework that must be understood the other austere rules imposed upon the young: the demand that they go without shoes; that they wear only a single item of clothing even in bad weather (LP 2.3 f.). They would also have to endure hunger—though they were permitted to steal food. Any young robber caught red-handed, however, could expect a whipping. What made the theft worthy of punishment? Being caught. The whip was there to teach him to thieve more discreetly (LP 2.8).

We all know the anecdote of the young Spartiate who, having stolen a young fox and hidden it under his tunic, preferred to die from the frantic bites of the animal than own to the theft (Plut. Lyc. 18). Among the English, the most popular interpretation of this story emphasises the courage of the boy. But there is also his deception; he utterly refuses to tell the truth. It appears, then, that young Spartiates, like their elders, were supposed to *mislead* their fellow

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12 Xen. LP 2.8–9; Anabasis 4.6.15; Plat. Laws 633b.
citizens—in certain circumstances. A carefully controlled fraud, to be sure—or, to use an expression found in Plato (Laws 663d), “to lie for an honourable reason.” Xenophon, for example, in his Hellenica (1.6.36–37; 4.3.13–14) recounts two episodes where the commander of a Spartan army had lied to his own soldiers, that is to say to his fellow Spartiates, in claiming that their compatriots had just gained a victory elsewhere, even though they had actually on both occasions suffered a signal defeat (at Arginousai and at Cnidos). In the second case the lie was a success in that it encouraged the soldiers who consequently gained a real victory. According to our formula, connecting ideals to fears, it follows that, if the ideal is to lie, then the object of fears is nothing less than the reality of the past. History was the enemy. Below we shall touch on a great and remarkable Spartan lie which embraced the greater part of the history of the city.

The citizens of Sparta were called the homoioi (e.g. Xen. LP 10.7; 13.1), those who ‘resembled each other’. Normally what interests the members of a society is not what they have in common but the ways in which they differ. And in any event, the more people—or things—resemble each other, the more one learns how to discern fine distinctions between them. The word homoioi is thus an idealizing and (quasi-) official term that is likely to reveal, according to our proposed system of analysis, a major and widespread fear among the Spartans. Of what were they afraid? Evidently, variety. One supposes that at the time when the term homoioi was established, the Spartans were, in reality, alarmingly varied. And this perhaps resembles the case of Philippe Egalité, that emblematically ‘equal’ citizen of the French revolution; all his contemporaries were probably aware that he was the Duke of Orleans. The new name, like the new term homoioi, existed as a slogan, promising an alternative form of behaviour in the future. We shall return to this idea of variety a little later. The desired ‘similarity’ between adults expressed itself in a number of ways in the education which prepared young people for their future. The custom, indeed the constraint, of eating together in the syssitia, and of eating unappetizing food, was reflected in the common life and the enforced hunger of boys. In clothing also. Young people had to be accustomed to wearing insufficient clothing; adult Spartiates wore, in the words of Aristotle (Pol. 1294b), clothing such as a very poor man could afford. In these two fields, food and clothing, we note a system of levelling (and levelling to the lower end of the spectrum). The system of clothing was part of a negotiation. The unassuming clothing worn by the rich was a form of visual propaganda: “We are the same, aren’t we?” It was a way of making all homoioi homogeneous, and of avoiding jealousy.
The system which related to clothing may have also related to its contents, that is to say, the body. And we know of a single case where a Spartiate was obliged to pay a fine because of his obesity. This involved a certain Naucleides at the end of the fifth century (Athenaeus 550d–e). Doubtless there were ulterior motives; Naucleides was an opponent of the great Lysander (Xen. Hell. 2.4.35–6). But, evidently, the rule was there. And behind the ideal, the fear. Why were the Spartiates so afraid of obesity? The goal of homoiotes was not aesthetic but political. And on the political plane obesity signalled something. In Greek, the expression hoi pacheis meant ‘stout men’, the obese, but it also meant the ‘rich’, those who could afford too much food, the oligoi (‘few’), the anti-democrats. Obesity, then, suggested the risk of stasis, of civil war. Plato imagined how this could have played out. He takes the scenario of a battlefield; poor men (consequently thin men) notice that one of their compatriots, a rich man, because of his obesity, is having trouble sustaining the effort of campaigning (Republic 556d). And one thin individual says to another: “people like him, the rich of our city, are not up to it; it would be rather easy to put them down.” Thus, for Plato, obesity had two effects at the same time: it emphasized the social divide (cf. Rep. 422e–423a), and it encouraged the poor to revolt. Perhaps here, as in so many other fields, Plato is influenced by Spartiate ideas. The Spartiates held tenaciously, with mixed but usually remarkable success, to concord; there was no question of them parading social divisions in the face of an enemy who watched for those divisions constantly, the helots.

The similarity between the rich and all other members of society was publicly insisted upon. But there was another ideal to impose, because there was another barrier to break down: that between young and old. In this field too, Xenophon, in his praise of the Spartan system, is conscious of the contrast between Sparta and other cities. While elsewhere the Greeks tended to gather according to their ages, the old with the old, the young with the young etc.—he doubtless thinks of the symposia, the well-oiled soirées of well-to-do gentlemen—the Spartiates insisted on gathering together all citizens (LP 5.5). In contrast to the symposia, the syssitia included men of all ages. In this more controlled environment, the mentality of the old men imposed itself. The authority of the old was advertised even at the institutional level; to belong to the gerousia, one of the most powerful institutions of Sparta, it was necessary to be sixty years old (Plut. Lyc. 26; cf. Arist. Pol. 1270b).

Thus did the Spartiates solve, in part, the inter-generational problem. But of what exactly were they afraid here? In other Greek cities the differences between the generations led to political disagreements. Thucydides reports an Athenian speaker (6.18.6), who asks the assembly (of his city), vis-a-vis a
political decision, not to divide along generational lines. The young people, in Greek, were *hoi neoi*, and from this word arises the Greek word which means “to make a revolution”: *neoterizein*. This way of thinking is not foreign to us. In that revolutionary time that some among us remember (from 1968 to the mid-70s), the most deadly derogatory term in the English student’s rhetoric was neither ‘fascist’ nor ‘bourgeois’, but ‘old’: ‘old fascist’, to be sure, but especially ‘old’. Similarly in France, there was a song:

*Les bourgeois, c’est comme les cochons, plus ça devient vieux, plus ça devient bête.*

The bourgeoisie, they are like pigs, the older they become, the more stupid.

Old age was the enemy of the revolution.

To produce the required *homoioi* among Spartiate menfolk, the Spartan ideal was to minimize family contacts. The *syssitia* were held during the evening; this was the time when, in a normal Greek city, a woman and her husband could spend some time together. But in Sparta this conjugality was undesirable in the ideal citizen. An anecdote tells of King Agis, towards the end of the 5th century, returning from a military campaign, passing an evening with his wife, rather than at the *syssition*. The polemarchoi reacted by refusing to send to him his shares of food (Plut. *Lyc.* 12). Xenophon tells us that married young men were supposed to visit their wives secretly—suggesting that it was difficult for couples to remain for any length of time together. A particularly long absence (i.e. from the *syssition*) would have been noticed. In the *Laws*, a work which was frequently inspired by Sparta, Plato complains that private family life generates too much variety in the characters of children and a “multiplicity of varied tendencies” is produced among citizens (788a–b); their characters are not, he says, *homoia*. This word makes it crystal clear; he is thinking of the State which prided itself on its citizens as *homoioi*.

In diminishing the role of the family, pederasty also had its role to play. Xenophon shows us, despite himself, that this relationship, by which the values and the ideals of a young adult were transmitted to an adolescent, was among the Spartans completely honourable (*LP* 2.13). Here, then, was an ideal; of what, on the other hand, were the Spartiates correspondingly afraid? In this militaristic and hyper-masculine society, where women may seem to have been officially sidelined, is it possible that the general influence of women was feared? Let us recall the ideal that Pericles and Aristotle identified as the goal of Spartiate education, *andreia*—that is to say the

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13 Powell (n.3).
quality of manliness as opposed to a feminine nature: femininity was, then, the quality to be avoided. Is it conceivable that with all these homoerotic liaisons one could fear the influence of women who were loved too much? This is what Aristotle thought in a context which may surprise those modern scholars who emphasise the homosexual side of Spartan life (Pol. 1269b), scholars who let themselves perhaps be distracted by professed ideals. What does Aristotle say? According to him, militaristic societies have a tendency to be far too influenced by amorous liaisons. For some, he says, such as for example the Celts, it is homosexual love affairs. Here one might anticipate a reference to the Spartiates. But no. To be sure, the philosopher evokes the Spartiates in this context, but in their case—he says—there is an excessive tendency to be influenced by women. He uses a memorable word; these militaristic men are gynaikokratomenoi, “dominated by women”; and one can see that this word is being applied by him to the Spartans, because, immediately afterwards, he writes: “Apparently the mythographer had good reason for uniting Ares [god of war] and Aphrodite [the goddess of sexuality] … For this reason it came about that for the Spartans, at the time of their empire, many things were controlled by women.”

The love of women: this was likely to divert or distract a man, to offer him a dangerous choice: instead of beautiful death on the field of honour there was the temptation of finding comfort in the arms of a woman, sheltered there from the disapproving glances of his companions of the syssition.

The young girls of Sparta participated in physical exercises, in public. Xenophon, who for us is the most reliable source on this subject, says that such exercises equipped the girls no less than the boys. For both sexes there were races and contests of strength (LP 1.3–4). Why? According to him, and also according to Critias (32 D–K), who died in 403, these exercises were intended to produce women able to give birth to strong children.14 This, without doubt, is part of the truth. In any event, we know that these exercises were not intended to train female warriors, that is to say servicewomen.15 Instead, these physical exercises for the girls, or the young women, were instituted to make them ‘less soft’, more militaristic, on the moral plane. Girls were utilized in a ritual of praising, or mocking, the young men with the authority of the city (Plut. Lyc. 14), that is to say, to transmit societal values.

15 Powell (n.4) 321–335.
[Lycurgus] freed [the young women] from prudery and delicacy and all effeminacy by accustoming the maidens no less than the youths to marching naked in processions, and at certain festivals to dance and sing when the young men were present as spectators. There they sometimes even mocked—‘helpfully’ (euchrestos)—any youth who had fallen short; and at other times they would sing the praises of those who had shown themselves worthy, and so inspire the young men with great ambition and competitive ardour. For he who was praised for his manliness (andragathia) and held in honour by the maidens, went away exalted by their praises; while the sting of their playful raillery was no less sharp than that of serious criticisms, especially as the kings and the gerontes, together with the rest of the citizens, were all present at the spectacle.

(Plut. Lyc. 14.2–3; trans. B. Perrin [modified])

We also have numerous anecdotes and apophthegms which come to us from post-classical sources, showing Spartiate mothers refusing to comfort, or even to accept, sons who had survived a military defeat through cowardice. They say, indeed, “It would be better if you had died.” Among these anecdotes, there is one which introduces a mother displaying, by way of contempt, her genitals to her sons (Plut. ‘Sayings of Spartan Women’ 4 = Moralia 241b), as if to say “Impossible for you to return by way of this”. One thinks, of course, of the uterus of the mother. But is there perhaps another interpretation, namely that henceforth the whole domain of female sexuality is prohibited to the coward? It will be recalled that for those whom the Spartiate community deemed cowards, marriage was forbidden (Xen. LP 9.5). The women, the girls, were instrumental in transmitting a moral message to men: “Either you risk death in battle, or, in Sparta, you risk moral death, and the death of pleasure; do not imagine that the feminine domain will shelter you.”

Of this system of Spartiate education we have presented here only some selected elements. In what period, and in what circumstances, was it born? Here lies the notorious question—the question of ‘origins’. On the ‘origins’ of the austere Spartiate system there is no consensus amongst scholars as to the date at which this occurred. Around the end of the 7th century? After the beginning of the 5th? The theories are numerous. One of the most important is that which Geoffrey de Ste. Croix developed in his monograph The Origins of the Peloponnesian War. According to his impressive arguments Spartan leaders made the rare—or unique—decision to abandon the quest for

pleasure, the traditional aristocratic life, because they were coming to terms with a unique problem: the sheer scale of the menacing population that they had subjugated. The number of helots exceeded by far that of the citizens, the Spartiates. According to Herodotus (9.28–9), at the battle of Plataea in 479, where no doubt the Spartiates were present in their greatest number, the helots present were seven times more numerous. The abandonment of a life of luxury, then, according to de Ste. Croix (pp. 89–91), the adoption of Sparta’s characteristic austere system, must have come about after the conquest of Messenia in the middle of the 7th century. I have another suggestion, although it too is imprecise. Let us start with—a grand lie. We have seen above how the Spartiates valued social and political coherence, obedience to the elders—in brief, conservatism. Is this how they avoided revolution? That is what Thucydides tells us; according to him, the Spartiates availed themselves of the same system, the same politeia, for “a little more than four centuries” (1.18.1). What precision! And it is an exactness which fits very badly with his general opinion, which he expresses elsewhere, on the obscurity of the past. According to Thucydides (1.1.3), even the history of the decades preceding the Peloponnesian War was impossible to reconstruct. And yet he professes to know the system which existed in Sparta for “a little more than four centuries”. What produced this exceptional confidence on his part? Perhaps it was due to the Spartiates, the homoioi, retailing a homogeneous account of the subject, a party line, coherent and persuasive. Thucydides tells us that the Spartiates claimed to know which were the sacrifices and the choruses that had existed at the time of the foundation of Sparta and its system of royalty (5.16.3), that is to say at a time even more distant than that which saw the birth of the Spartan constitution “a little more than four centuries” previously. Plato, who in his Laws imagines an ideal State that resembles Sparta remarkably, champions a system of lies—in certain circumstances.17 As regards the age of the constitution of this ideal State, he recommends quite simply that the citizens should not know that there ever existed formerly any constitution different from the present; because to know that there was a revolutionary past might encourage revolutionary ambitions for the future (798a–c).

I suspect that, prior to the Classical era, Spartan political life was far more interesting than the Spartiates of the 5th and 4th centuries admitted. In praising Spartan eunomia, obedience to the law, both Herodotus and

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17 Laws 663d–e; Powell (n.3) 284–7.
Thucydides evoke an entirely different past that preceded this “good governance”. According to Herodotus, the Spartans had been almost the *kakonomotatoi*—the most disobedient to their laws—of all the Greeks (1.65.2). And Thucydides reports that the Spartans had lived through a period of serious internal tensions (*stasis*) longer than those of all the other States of which he knew (1.18.1). What if this long period of *stasis* was much more recent than the Spartans wished to admit to other Greeks? What if the idea of “a little more than four centuries” was a grand lie to distance a disquieting reality?

If one wished to test this hypothesis, how would one circumvent the Spartan mirage, the pseudo-history that was perhaps created by the Spartans? Fortunately there exists evidence that has escaped the ideologists of Sparta, because by the Classical period it was already hidden—beneath the ground, or out of reach in other lands, such as Samos; I refer to the painted images that survived on Laconian vases.¹⁸

The modern system of dating Greek vases from the Archaic period is complicated and much debated. But scholars seem to be in broad agreement: the Laconian vases in question here—that is to say, vases made in the territory of the Spartans—belong to the sixth century. According to the respected study of C.M. Stibbe,¹⁹ they come from the period between the years *circa* 580 and 530. The way of life advertised on these vases is completely different from that which was promoted by the austere Sparta of the Classical period. In short, what they show us is a life of luxury. And, in my opinion, it is perhaps from the collective memory of this luxurious and aristocratic lifestyle that there arose the austere ideology and the pedagogical system with which we are familiar.

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Let us examine a few of the vases in question. Figure 1 shows a classic symposion.

![Fig. 1. Laconian Cup: Pipili 194; Louvre E667](image)

Notice the large krater, the vase for mixing wine and water. And the kylikes, the cups which the men hold. On the social plane a symposion was not free of class distinction. It was an aristocratic affair, which excluded the middle classes; this was not homoiotes but distinguished company. And the relationship between the symposion and the syssition? The word symposion denoted an occasion where there was collective drinking (of wine, it is implied); syssition, on the other hand, denotes the place where one eats together—where sitos (nourishment) is taken. The latter was characteristic of Sparta; according to Herodotus (1.65.5), it was Lycurgus who had founded the syssitia there. Was it invented by the Spartans to emphasize precisely their rejection of the symposion? One recalls that, according to Spartan ideology, inebriation was strictly prohibited.
Let us pass on to the well-known ‘Mitra vase’ (Fig. 2). (The mitra refers to the luxury bonnet worn by the young musician.)

At this symposion we see at least two luxuriously equipped musicians. (The second is seen on another fragment of the same vase.) Look at the quality of the clothing of these two musicians and recall the austere Spartiate ideology—that each (man) among them wore clothing such as might be worn by the poor.

Here is also classic pederasty (Fig. 2). We see a very young man, beardless as opposed to his companion, who drinks from his cup, and who holds a cock, the symbolic gift of an adult lover—the young man’s erastes. Is this a form of pederasty compatible with the rules of austere Sparta? Sensual pleasure associated with wine was forbidden there. Xenophon (LP 2.13) says that man-boy couples were accepted there, but for educational reasons; indeed the Laconian legislator praised such relations. Lycurgus thought that this was the noblest form of education, the most beautiful (kallisten paideian). But the rank desire for the body of a pais, a boy, was forbidden by him. That was the
ideal. In the scene on the ‘Mitra’ vase, on the other hand, the beardless young man, who is likely to become as inebriated as the others, or perhaps more than the others considering his age, is probably there for the same reason as the musicians—to participate in a sexual frolic, as was normal in aristocratic Greek circles and as is seen on so many Athenian vases. Such a suggestion could perhaps be resisted if this vase were the only Laconian vase to evoke pederasty. But look at Figure 3.

Fig. 3. Laconian cup, found at Sparta (in the hieron of Orthia); Museum of Sparta. Pipili 179 (a sketch after Lane 1933/4)

This is a well-known, inaccurate line-drawing of a Laconian vase, a vase that can be seen in the Museum of Sparta. It is a drawing that has been used for more than eighty years, through reluctance to publish a photograph. Consequently I visited the Museum to observe, among other things, whether the curve on the chest of the person who is on all fours signifies a woman. It appears not. In fact, looking at the vase, I could not detect *any* curve on the chest. The person in the passive role, just like the three other people who are shown naked, is without breasts: they are all, apparently, young men. It must be suspected that those who issued this drawing, in the 1920s, did not want to acknowledge that this is one of the most explicit, most scandalous *tableaux* of Greek homosexuality.

Compared with the images of homosexuality to be seen on Athenian vases, this Laconian vase contains another remarkable element. Look at the gentleman who penetrates the other: his left arm is altogether normal, but the right arm is not. The other arms in this drawing are of abnormal length, but not nearly as long as this one. The left arm of the gentleman has a hand, but there is no hand at the end of the other … arm. In the Museum I thought I observed on this very small Laconian cup traces of a hand, level with the top of the buttocks of the young person, where in the sketch the lines of the arm
become indistinct. Perhaps, therefore, this very long arm consisted originally of an arm, a hand and a stick—a whip. This is perhaps a scene of pleasure and terror simultaneously: terror—observe what occurs under the buttocks of the naked young man, on the left, as he is chased by a heavily-sexualised monster. And the person on all fours: are the lines on his side traces of the whip?

One can perhaps understand how the use of the whip had evolved in Sparta. Before becoming the symbol, par excellence, of austere education, the whip had been an instrument, and a symbol, of physical pleasure—for some. Similarly, perhaps, the emotional ties between the young men and adolescents. What had begun as physical pleasure evolved, by the Classical epoch, into an educational relationship. From pederasty to pedagogy. Similarly also for the joint meals: we see a development from collective intoxication, the symposia, to collective austerity, the syssitia. Certain forms remained; but the society attempted a change of course, from the physical pleasure of the aristocrats to the moral satisfaction of the entire Spartiate class. Did the scandalous inequality of the archaic culture of Sparta feed the imagination of the Spartiates of the Classical era? The memory, partly censored, partly exaggerated, of a social gap, and of its physical symbols: is this what gave force to the ideal of homoiotes, of equality? One remembers the famous brioche of Marie-Antoinette. Even when a collective memory is painful, certain forms of it can retain their charm, too tempting to be entirely suppressed. From symposion to syssition; from the Louvre as royal palace to the Louvre as republican museum; in both cases a symbol, which was at the same time beautiful and provocative, has been altered to bear an educational character. If one reads professed ideals and public pieties with a systematic eye, one may rediscover a rather lively past.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Figure 1 Laconian Cup: Pipili 194; Louvre E667
Figure 2 Laconian cup; the ‘Mitra Vase’. Pipili 196; Samos K1203, K1541, K2402 and Berlin 478X, 460X (a sketch after Pipili)
Figure 3 Laconian cup, found at Sparta (in the hieron of Orthia); Museum of Sparta. Pipili 179 (a sketch after Lane 1933/4)