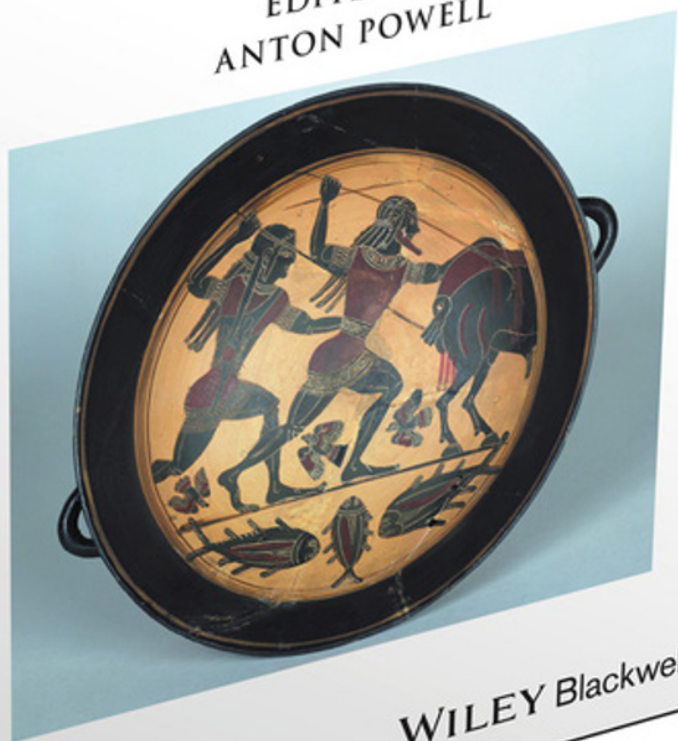


BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO THE ANCIENT WORLD

A COMPANION TO  
**SPARTA**  
VOLUME I

EDITED BY  
ANTON POWELL



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# A COMPANION TO SPARTA

Volume I

*Edited by*

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**Map 1** Mainland Greece and the Aegean world, at the time of Sparta's greatest power, c.400 BC





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# Notes on Contributors

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**Claude Calame** is Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He has also been Professor of Greek language and literature at the University of Lausanne, and has taught at the Universities of Urbino and Siena in Italy, and at Yale University in the US. In English he has published *The Craft of Poetic Speech in Ancient Greece* (Cornell 1995), *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece* (Princeton 1999), *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece* (Lanham 2001, 2nd edn), *Masks of Authority: Fiction and Pragmatics in Ancient Greek Poetics* (Cornell 2005), *Poetic and Performative Memory in Ancient Greece* (Harvard 2009), and *Greek Mythology: Poetics, Pragmatics and Fiction* (Cambridge 2009).

**William Cavanagh** is Professor Emeritus of Aegean Archaeology at the University of Nottingham. His research has focused on three main areas: field archaeology, the archaeology of death and mathematical applications to archaeology. His fieldwork has concentrated on Lakonia, with publications including the *Lakonia Survey* (1996, 2002), the *Lakonia Rural Sites Project* (2005), and, most recently on the excavations at Kouphovouno, ‘Early Bronze Age Chronology of Mainland Greece: New

Dates from the Excavations at Kouphovouno’ (co-authored with C. Mee and J. Renard, *Annual of the British School at Athens*, 2014: 109). Publications on death include *A Private Place: Death in Prehistoric Greece* (co-authored with C. Mee, 1998), and on statistics in archaeology *The Bayesian Approach to the Interpretation of Archaeological Data* (co-authored with C. Buck, and C. Litton, 1996).

**Stephen Hodkinson** is Professor of Ancient History at the University of Nottingham and director of its centre for Spartan and Peloponnesian Studies. He is an internationally recognized authority on ancient Sparta and its modern reception. The author of numerous influential studies, his book *Property and Wealth in Classical Sparta* (London and Swansea 2000) is the leading work in the field. Co-organizer of the International Sparta Seminar with Anton Powell, he has co-edited several collected volumes, including *Sparta: New Perspectives* (London 1999) and *Sparta and War* (Swansea 2006). As director of the research project, ‘Sparta in Comparative Perspective, Ancient to Modern’, he is editor of *Sparta: Comparative Approaches* (Swansea 2009) and *Sparta in Modern Thought* (Swansea 2012). He was historical

consultant to Kieron Gillen's graphic novel *Three* (2014), set in fourth-century Sparta. He has been given Honorary Citizenship of modern Sparta.

**Yves Lafond** is Professor of Greek History at the University of Poitiers and a member of the research team HeRMA. His research interests are in the fields of cultural and social history, with particular emphasis on landscapes and spaces, religious practices in ancient cities and the relationship between memory and representation. He is the author of *Pausanias. Description de la Grèce. Livre VII. L'Achaïe* (translation and commentary, Paris 2000) and of *La mémoire des cités dans le Péloponnèse d'époque romaine (IIe siècle av. J.-C.-IIIe siècle ap. J.-C.)*, (Rennes 2006).

**Marcello Lupi** teaches Greek history at the Second University of Naples. His research interests focus mainly on the social and institutional history of Sparta and, more broadly, on archaic Greece, the Persian Wars and Greek classical historiography. He is the author of *L'ordine delle generazioni. Classi di età e costumi matrimoniali nell'antica Sparta* (Bari 2000) and co-editor with L. Breglia of *Da Elea a Samo. Filosofi e politici di fronte all'impero ateniese* (Naples 2005). An introductory book on Sparta, in Italian, is his *Sparta: Storia e rappresentazioni di una città greca* (Rome 2017). Professor Lupi is also working on a major monograph on villages, civic subdivisions and citizenship in archaic and classical Sparta.

**Massimo Nafissi** is Associate Professor in Greek History at the University of Perugia. His research focuses on the history of Sparta, Olympia and Elis, colonization and South Italy, Greek religion, and also on the epigraphy of Iasos (Caria). He has published numerous articles on Greek history,

and notably is author of the influential monograph on Sparta, *La nascita del kosmos. Ricerche sulla storia e la società di Sparta* (Naples 1991).

**Maria Pipili** is a Greek archaeologist, educated at the Universities of Athens and Oxford (DPhil, 1982). In 1985 she was appointed researcher at the Research Centre for Antiquity of the Academy of Athens where she also served as director from 1994 until her retirement in 2012. Her main research interests are Greek vase painting and iconography, particularly of Sparta. She is author of *Laconian Iconography of the Sixth Century BC* (Oxford 1987), a volume of the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum* for the National Museum of Athens (1993), several contributions to the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* and many articles on Attic and Laconian pottery. She is currently preparing a *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum* volume dedicated to vases from Athenian private collections.

**Anton Powell** founded the International Sparta Seminar, and was the editor of its first volume, *Classical Sparta: Techniques behind her Success* (London 1989). Since then, with Stephen Hodkinson, he has edited most of the Seminar's volumes, including *The Shadow of Sparta* (London and Swansea 1994) and *Sparta: The Body Politic* (Swansea 2010). His introduction to source criticism in Greek history, *Athens and Sparta*, is in its third edition (London 2016), and his monograph *Virgil the Partisan* (Swansea 2008) was awarded the prize of the American Vergilian Society for 'the book that makes the greatest contribution toward our understanding and appreciation of Vergil'. Powell is also the founder of the Celtic Conference in Classics, and of the Classical Press of Wales. He has twice been Invited Professor at the

Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, in 2006 for Greek history and in 2008 for Latin literature.

**Francis Prost** is Professor of Classical Archaeology at the University Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne, and formerly member of the French School of Archaeology in Athens (1994–1998). A specialist in material culture and religious practices of archaic Greece, and in particular of Delos and the heroic sanctuary of the Archegetes Anios, Professor Prost is preparing publication of the corpus of archaic sculpture found on the island. His fieldwork involves excavation of the Delian sanctuary of Apollo, as well as of the Hellenistic city of Euromos in Caria.

**James Roy** held posts at the Universities of Sheffield (1963–1989) and Nottingham (1989–2004). He also enjoyed a year (1969–70) as a Humboldt-Stipendiat at the University of Heidelberg. Since retiring in 2004 he has been an Honorary Research Associate of the Department of Classics in the University of Nottingham. He has published extensively. Main research interests have included the histories of classical Arkadia, Elis and Olympia, and the interaction between these regions and other parts of the Peloponnese.

**Françoise Ruzé** is Emeritus Professor at the University of Caen, where for many years she conducted and directed research

on Greek societies of the archaic and classical periods. Her books include *Délibération et pouvoir dans la cité grecque, de Nestor à Socrate* (Paris 1997); *Sparte: géographie, mythes et histoire* (with Jacqueline Christien; Paris 2007). Professor Ruzé is currently preparing a monograph on *Les législateurs du monde grec archaïque*.

**Daniel Stewart** is Lecturer in Ancient History in the School of Archaeology and Ancient History at the University of Leicester. He has published on the history and archaeology of the Hellenistic and Roman Peloponnese, and has contributed to, and co-directed, archaeological projects in Arcadia, Sikyonia and Crete. He is currently preparing a book on the relationship between archaeology and ancient history, and co-directing a landscape archaeology project on Roman Knossos.

**Hans van Wees** is currently Grote Professor of Ancient History at University College London. He is among the world's foremost experts on the warfare, ethics and economy of Greece, from the time of the Homeric poems onwards. His noted books include *Status Warriors: War, Violence and Society in Homer and History* (Amsterdam 1992), *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities* (London 2004) and *Ships and Silver, Taxes and Tribute: A Fiscal History of Archaic Athens* (London 2013).

# Foreword

---

*Paul Cartledge*

Clare College, Cambridge

## ‘Sparta Lives’

‘We think Sparta will be really popular across a wide range of territories ...’. This quotation is not actually taken from the blurb of an optimistic academic publisher, as one might have thought, but from a promotional statement (in 2016) by a Casino slot games developer, Habanero.

Ancient Sparta does still achieve massive resonance in the modern world, in other words, but not always in the places and through the media that a scholar might perhaps ideally wish. The movie *300* is another prize exhibit in that same category. Happily, the two volumes to which I have the privilege to be writing this Foreword will go a long way towards righting the balance.

I begin by declaring an interest – my own, in studying this peculiar (in at least one sense) ancient community. This interest started with an undergraduate essay on the hoplite ‘revolution’ (if such it was) of the seventh century BC. In its original form this was written in 1968 for my New College Oxford tutor, Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, whom the magnificent editor of this *Companion* boldly but not implausibly styles the modern founder of the scholarly study of ancient Sparta. A much later version was published in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* in 1977 and republished in German translation and with addenda in a splendid 1986 *Wissenschaftliches Buchgesellschaft* volume devoted to Sparta and edited by the eminent Karl Christ. At the back of that volume will be found a comprehensive, calibrated bibliography organized by topic; at its front, a remarkably comprehensive and insightful introduction to modern Spartan scholarship by the editor himself. The modern scholarly literature on Sparta going back to the work of J.C.F. Manso (1800–1805) is simply immense. It is beautifully if only partially placed in context by Elizabeth Rawson’s *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Oxford 1969, 1991), though ‘European’ for her includes ‘North American’.

Ste. Croix was both a colleague and a sparring partner of George Forrest, one of the two examiners of my Oxford doctoral thesis on early Sparta c.950–650 BC, completed in 1975. (The other examiner, since this was a mainly archaeological thesis, was the distinguished Oxford art historian Professor Martin Robertson; my supervisor was John Boardman, then plain ‘Mr’, now Sir John.) In 1968 Forrest had published with Hutchinson a slim, streamlined volume entitled *A History of Sparta 950-192 BC*. It had been read for him in draft by an Oxonian Sparta expert of an earlier generation, H.T. Wade-Gery (one-time lover of historical novelist Naomi Mitchison, author of *Black Sparta*, 1928, and *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, 1933). ‘This account’, its left-wing author confessed – or rather boasted, ‘has not shown much sympathy with Sparta; sympathy is killed by the narrow-minded jealousy she showed for so long to anyone whose power looked like becoming greater than her own and by the utter inhumanity of her behaviour when her own power was supreme.’ It is indeed hard to preserve a pose of objectivity when faced with the Spartan myth, mirage, legend or tradition.

Forrest’s little book was reprinted in 1980 in what the new publisher (Duckworth) was pleased to call a ‘second edition’. This actually came with only the addition of an intriguing new Preface in which the author was kind enough to refer to my 1979 monograph, the book of my DPhil thesis, as a ‘major’ work. But at the end of that Preface Forrest uttered a far more controversial – to me – opinion, that there existed some ‘overall agreement’ as to the ‘kind of society’ almost all students now believed Sparta to have been. Had he been writing that Preface after 1994 (and the second edition of the book was reprinted in 1995, by the Bristol Classical Press), I don’t believe he could possibly have been so blandly confident. For in that year the redoubtable editorial duo of ‘Powell & Hodkinson’ (or, by alternation, ‘Hodkinson & Powell’) published the first of their long-running series of superbly edited collections on themes or aspects of ancient Spartan history that have been crucial in helping to radically transform our scholarly perceptions and representations of this extraordinary community. The present *Companion* is their worthy successor, and indeed rightly contains essays by several of the editor’s previous contributors and collaborators.

By my reckoning eight of the twenty-five *Companion* authors are British or British-based, seven are from the USA, with six French, two Italians and one each German and Greek. Apart from anything else, this reminds us that there are distinct national traditions of Spartan scholarship: especially German (nicely recapitulated in the Christ volume); French (one thinks of the two foundational volumes of François Ollier on what he baptized ‘le mirage spartiate’); Italian (I am proud to own what was once Wade-Gery’s copy of Luigi Pareti’s 1917 *Storia di Sparta arcaica*, to which Massimo Nafisso’s *La nascita del kosmos*, also 1994, is a very worthy successor); and North American (Tom Figueira is a standout); but also Japanese (Mariko Sakurai), among others. It is of course invidious to single out any particular chapters of the present *Companion* for mention ... but I’m going to do so anyhow: those of Hodkinson, Cavanagh, Powell (Chapter 11), van Wees, Flower, Millender (Chapter 19), and Rebenich.

And I shall proceed homerically, *husteron proteron*, starting with **Stefan Rebenich**’s elegant and acute summation of ‘The Reception of Sparta in Germany and German-speaking Europe’ (Chapter 27). Reception studies are hot these days, but we Spartanists or Spartalogues were in on the act right from the very start. Hence all those books and articles on Sparta with ‘myth’ (Moses Finley), ‘mirage’ (Ollier), ‘legend’ (the Swede

Eugene Napoleon Tigerstedt) or ‘tradition’ (Rawson) in their titles. The underlying reasons and motivations for Spartan reception-fixation are fairly obvious: the available written evidence not only is overwhelmingly non-Spartan but also deeply bifurcated either pro or con, with few or no shades of grey in between. Epigraphy can do something to help us correct for this imbalance, archaeology of various kinds an awful lot more. But there remains the fundamental problem of (to borrow the editor’s eloquent formulation) ‘Reconstructing (Spartan) History from Secrecy, Lies and Myth’. One way of avoiding the dilemma is by embracing it head on, as does Rebenich: all history, it’s been claimed, is contemporary history – but there can be few more startling and unsettling illustrations of that useful nostrum than the reinvention of Sparta as the prototype of the new German National Socialist community of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, that reinvention has probably done more than anything else to ensure that at least for the foreseeable future Sparta is more likely to figure as a model or ideal of dystopia than of the (e)utopias of yesteryear.

One scholar who has never underestimated the potentially distorting power of the – predominantly, in this case, Athenocentric – Spartan tradition is the American **Ellen Millender** (Chapter 19). Building on research going back ultimately to her 1996 University of Pennsylvania doctoral dissertation, she brilliantly displays and explicates not only the fascination – and horror – the women of Sparta aroused in, say, Euripides and Aristotle but also the exceptional degree of economic independence and even political power that they were allowed or chose to enjoy and exploit. But before one rushes to feminist-inspired judgement, one must also factor in the overall conclusion she draws from her balanced and profound examination of the – often unsatisfactory – evidence: that ‘Spartan women’s lives did not significantly differ from those of their Athenian counterparts in terms of their fundamental roles and obligations as daughters, wives, and mothers’. Princesses, queens and priestesses were not, after all, ‘typical’ Spartan women.

**Michael Flower** (Chapter 16) too includes ‘Women’ as a special category in his chapter on Spartan religion. The ancient Greeks, notoriously, did not ‘have a word for’ religion: they spoke rather of ‘the things of the god(s)’ or of ‘the divine’. Herodotus, a particularly well informed and committed observer of all things religious, from a specifically cross-cultural comparativist perspective, twice remarked in his *Histories* that the Spartans treated the things of the gods as more significant and serious than the things of men. Well, almost all Greeks collectively and individually did that, so he must have been trying to make a special point about just how exceptional was the Spartans’ attitude to the religious factor in political, military, diplomatic and other public affairs. Flower takes that point to the full and produces a splendid synopsis of Spartan religiosity in all its peculiarity, showing beyond a peradventure that it ‘comprised a coherent, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing set of beliefs and practices that formed a system’.

Besides editing the *Companion* and contributing its opening and concluding chapters, **Anton Powell** also writes an incisive Chapter 11 on roughly the period of Thucydides’s history of the Atheno-Peloponnesian War, from 478 (the foundation of Athens’s Delian League, from which Sparta abstained or was excluded) to 403 (the year in which Sparta, then still hegemon of much of the Aegean Greek world, permitted the Athenians to restore their democracy). Powell takes as his leitmotif what the Greeks called *kairos*, or, to borrow the title of an article he published in 1980 that has more than just stood the test of time, ‘Athens’ difficulty, Sparta’s opportunity’. Again, as in his introductory



chapter, he recurs tellingly to Sparta's unusual 'capacity ... for organized deception on a grand scale' on the international stage, noting its coexistence with a paradoxical combination of austerity with great wealth at home. He concludes with a novel, internalist explanation for Sparta's 'extraordinary forbearance towards Athenian democrats': something which I myself have associated with the rather particular and unusual attitude towards democracy of King Pausanias, who died, from choice in one sense, in the democratic Arcadian city of Mantinea.

London-based Dutch scholar **Hans van Wees** has made immeasurable contributions to our better understanding of pre-classical, Archaic Greek history both in its totality and at the regional or local scale, for example the financing of the late Archaic Athenian navy. Here he is appropriately afforded the luxury of two consecutive chapters (Chapters 8 and 9); the first precisely on luxury, austerity and equality in archaic and early classical Sparta, the second specifically on the distinctively organized system of common messes. The Spartans themselves tended to want to believe, and want others to believe, that their basic political, military, social, economic and cultural institutions had all been invented, possibly simultaneously, at any rate in some dim and very distant past, after which they had changed if at all only minimally. Moses Finley in a game-changing article of 1968 had argued rather for the occurrence of a much later, that is much more recent 'sixth-century revolution'. Van Wees goes further, or rather later, by downdating the introduction of the classical messes to the very end of the sixth century. Plausibly, he sees this measure as aimed primarily to minimize internal class tension arising from extremes of economic inequality within the Spartiate group. Even more plausibly, to me, he argues that 'Sparta's specific solution was extreme'.

Among the archaeologists of several countries (Greece, France, the Netherlands, Britain) working within Lakonia during the past generation, few, if any, have equalled let alone exceeded the range of Nottingham University's **William (Bill) Cavanagh** (Chapter 3). From the continued re-excavation of Neolithic Kouphovouno (co-directed by him with the late Christopher Mee) to an intensive field survey of the extant ancient remains detectable today on the ground within an area just to the east and north-east of modern Sparta, by way of a scientific analysis of Laconian lead artefacts, he has blazed a trail in producing fresh material data and applying the latest techniques of analysis to elucidate them. He properly contextualizes, of course, the very recent discovery and ongoing excavation (led by Adamantia Vasilogamvrou) of what must unarguably be Mycenaean ('Homeric') Sparta, at Ay. Vasileios, and brings readers up to date with the latest archaeohistorical findings regarding the sociopolitically crucial Ortheia and Menelaion cult sites. But, in their way, at least as important for our understanding of archaic and classical Sparta and Lakonia is his summarizing of the results of intensive field survey and his identification of, and emphasis upon, the 'unique character of Spartan popular cult' as attested primarily by votives in terracotta and lead.

Finally, I cite *honoris causa* **Stephen Hodkinson's** typically thoughtful and carefully argued exploration (Chapter 2) of the supposed or alleged domination of Spartan state over Spartan society. The key word of his title is 'exceptional', since this recalls an absolutely key and fundamental disagreement, even dispute, between himself and Mogens Herman Hansen. Hansen and he agree that 'state' is a viable term of analysis, indeed probably more viable for Sparta than for the other thousand or so Greek *poleis* and *ethne* in which capital-S State institutions were typically relatively underdeveloped and

underpowered. (Others believe that even in Sparta the capital-S State was relatively evanescent, at least by comparison with anything that Thomas Hobbes would have recognized.) But they differ, strongly, over Sparta's exceptionality.

This is not the place for me to rehearse the arguments, so suffice it to say here that my interpretative sympathies lie wholly and emphatically on Hansen's side of the argument. (And not just as regards the relation between 'state' and 'society', but across the board – in respect of, among other things, communal educational practice, the status and treatment of women, the place and mode of religion, for example in the disposal of the dead, and so on and so forth.) But if Sparta does indeed still 'live', as my title (pro)claims, that is precisely because of the ongoing fertility of such contentious and yet cogently argued differences of opinion on some of the most important issues to be subjected to what we today – following our original master, Herodotus – call *historia*, critical enquiry.

Cambridge, July 2016

# Preface

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The Spartans, who for long opposed complex literacy on principle, would have disapproved of the present work for many reasons. Above all, perhaps, because our work is willing to highlight change within Sparta, whereas Spartans themselves preferred to think – or at least to tell outsiders – about a timeless Sparta, which had achieved near-perfection through following the rules of a certain Lykourgos (Lycurgus). It was partly to explore the idea of *change* within Sparta that the first of our two volumes has been structured chronologically, whereas the second volume is structured by theme. But even in this respect one cannot be clear cut: the second, thematic, volume also investigates change within ‘Lykourgan’ practice.

We have been fortunate to attract for this project contributions from most of the internationally recognized leaders of contemporary scholarship on Sparta. This has meant that numerous chapters have needed translation into English, a long process. The editor hopes that the long gestation of our project will be found justified by the quality of the resulting papers, in particular from eminent scholars in France, Italy and Switzerland.

Our two volumes are, in the Wiley-Blackwell tradition of ‘Companions’, in part a survey of existing scholarship. But, as happily is inevitable where there is a cast of experts, the work is also intended as an array of new research from our various specialist authors.

The nature of Sparta generated, for Greeks elsewhere, awe, speculation and sometimes incredulity. Ancient disagreement as to what the Spartans were, and what they did, has helped generate much diversity in modern scholarship. Where our own authors have diverged in interpretation we have of course not sought to impose a common position. Instead, we have sought to signal to readers the fact of divergence, and to give free rein to authors in advocating their own positions. Current scholarship on Sparta has, for example, reached no consensus as to the time, or even the century, when Sparta’s famous ‘austere’ constitution came into being, and whether it did so gradually over a long period or – largely – through a revolutionary ‘Big Bang’. There is even debate within these volumes as to how exceptional – or how typically Greek – Sparta’s way of life really was. The Spartans themselves insisted so emphatically, so often, on their society’s uniqueness that we should at least enquire whether in this they ‘protested too much’.

Since living scholarship must always be a work in progress, open to criticism and innovation not least from the young, brief speculation may be justified here as to future developments in Spartan studies. One trend already visible is the study of the special interests and biases of particular ancient sources which have helped to form our compound image of Sparta. How, for example, did classical Athenian mentalities, or Graeco-Roman views centuries later, shape the surviving picture of Sparta? How did particular authors, such as Herodotos, Thucydides, Plutarch and others, have access to, and shape for their own varied purposes, information about Spartans? And, especially with a society so productive of myth-making as Sparta was, there is a need for the anchor of archaeology. Even the Spartans, masters of secrecy and of manipulating the record of their own past, could not thoroughly efface what already lay buried in their own ground or further afield. The present work gives much attention to recent archaeology. But archaeology of the future will much enrich, and no doubt alter the course of, Spartan studies. Here a controversial note may be added. The archaeology of Sparta has sometimes been slow to confront certain sensitive matters. There is the enduring unavailability for study of most of the many thousands of lead figurines found at Sparta and portraying the dress, the ideals, the interests of Spartan men and women. Even the published photographs of these are few, old and often hard to read. The dark places of modern archaeology should be seen not as embarrassments to be avoided, but as sites unusually rich in potential for fresh scholarship.

The study of Sparta through particular non-Spartan authors, and through archaeology, involves the combining of scholarly methods which – as expert studies multiply – otherwise tend to develop in increasing isolation from each other. By insisting on the need to bridge our various specialisms, Spartan studies are well placed to make themselves a model for the study of the Ancient World.

Contributions to this work keep their authors' own choice of English spellings, as between American and British forms. We have, however, sought wherever possible to Hellenize spellings of Greek terms, thus 'Lykourgos' and 'Lysandros' not 'Lycurgus' and 'Lysander', and to reduce established Latinisms, such as 'Thucydides', to the conventional minimum.

The editor wishes to thank contributors for their extraordinary patience over the work's long time in preparation. And this Preface should end, as the work proper begins, with a reference to Paul Cartledge, widely acknowledged as foremost among today's students of Sparta. His contribution to the present work goes far beyond the writing of its Foreword. The influence of his decades of meticulous scholarship is to be found throughout our volumes. The fact that internationally harmonious work on Sparta can be attempted at all is in important part due to the generosity, diplomacy and inclusiveness of Cartledge's *oeuvre*, both written and oral. On this one point we may concur with the Spartans, believers in Lykourgos: the temperament of a single person can, sometimes, help generate an enduring culture.

Anton Powell  
Swansea, September 2016

PART I

# **Reconstructing Sparta: General**

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## CHAPTER 1

# Sparta

### *Reconstructing History from Secrecy, Lies and Myth*

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*Anton Powell*

To understand Sparta involves one of the most fruitful, and difficult, challenges in the study of the ancient world. The techniques which are developed in the process are intensely relevant also to the modern world. They address the question ‘How to understand a secretive foreign state, or organization, an unfamiliar culture skilled in the orchestration of propaganda, visual images and lies?’ More than any other, Sparta was the state which other Greeks, of the classical period and later, admired. That Sparta had achieved something of unique importance is clear to us from two facts. Faced with an uncountably large invasion force led by Persia, in 480, those Greek states which resisted chose to do so under the leadership of Sparta, and of Sparta alone. Seventy-five years after that triumphant resistance, Sparta had crushed a new challenger. She had defeated the Athenian empire. Whether to obliterate Athens itself was, in 404, an administrative decision for Sparta’s leading men to take at their leisure. Sparta at that point held in her hand the future of Greek history. She had the power to abolish Athens, the capital of Greek literacy, of reflection – and of historical writing. From Sparta’s decision to spare the city flowed the survival of those written records which allowed posterity, us, to write the history of Greece, and of Sparta herself. Sparta, in short, was classical Greece’s superpower: the military patron – without knowing, or wishing, it – of what would become western civilization.

The superpower, even in its moments of victory, was not content. In the decade after her conquest of Athens, Sparta twice attempted to conquer the Persian Empire. Yet Sparta was – in citizen population – tiny, small even by the standards of a Greek *polis*. Its citizens, ‘Spartiates’, were the inhabitants of a few southern-Greek villages by the

River Eurotas in Laconia. These men, evidently of extraordinary morale, aimed to defeat an empire which stretched from the eastern Mediterranean coast (today's western Turkey) to Egypt, Afghanistan and the borders of India. Some thirty Spartan officers under king Agesilaos were considered sufficient to command the second, more formal, invasion of Persian territory, in 396. Sparta's confidence, and the culture which generated it, will be one of the themes of this book. Yet, less than thirty years later, Sparta's own hegemony suddenly ended. Beaten in 371 at Leuktra by another Greek army, that of Thebes, Sparta lost about half of her domestic territory, and thereafter her power was confined to the Peloponnese. For the rest of Antiquity, Sparta was never more than a scheming imitator of her former self.

## 1.1 Ancient – and Modern – Views of Sparta

These extremes of power and weakness have led to deeply diverse images of Sparta. In Sparta's imperious days of the fifth century, her power was taken for granted by other Greeks. Our two best sources for that period, Herodotos and Thucydides, nowhere explain at length to what Sparta owed her power. Both those writers make extraordinary, though brief, claims about the extreme stability of Sparta's form of government, and way of life. According to Thucydides (writing around 400 BC), Sparta had been a well-run, stable *polis* for 'slightly more than 400 years, approximately' (1.18.1; compare Hdt.1.65). This internal stability, with its avoidance of turbulent in-fighting, of the *stasis* which plagued so many Greek cities, was, Thucydides believed, the main reason why Sparta was free to direct its energies outwards, towards the control of others. Herodotos, and even sometimes the austere Thucydides, tell colourful anecdotes to Sparta's credit. It is from Herodotos, for example, that we have the story of Spartan warriors calmly combing their hair in the face of death at Thermopylai (7.208). Thucydides, an Athenian who campaigned as a general against Sparta, could make a sweeping negative judgement of Sparta's military qualities. He writes about the Peloponnesian War (431–404), that the Spartans 'proved to be in many ways the most convenient enemies that the Athenians could have had' (8.96.5). But to interpret such negativity we need to remember why writers write. They do not write in order to state only the obvious; they privilege paradox and novelty and, as is very plain in Thucydides' case, seek to correct public opinion. Thucydides was writing for an initial readership which knew that Sparta had defeated Athens (or was likely soon to do so). He wrote to *adjust* public opinion – and that opinion almost certainly was that Sparta had a superlative military machine, made possible by an extraordinary, if ruthless, political system at home.

Much of Spartan history is constructed from passing remarks and hints in Herodotos and Thucydides. Such comment was far easier for contemporary Greeks to interpret than it is for ourselves. Yet since 1970 Spartan studies have been refounded and have developed more rapidly, perhaps, than ever before. This has been made possible above all by the demonstration of how much information about Sparta could be extracted, ingeniously and convincingly, from the scattered remarks of Thucydides. The person who performed that demonstration was Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, in his book *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (1972). Following his work, scholars have looked with new and fruitful optimism for significant traces of Spartan reality not only in Thucydides but also in Herodotos,



Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, and many other writers. Even where Sparta is not named, ancient ideas often turn out to be Sparta-shaped. When in 431/0 Perikles issued his enduring eulogy of Athens (as recorded, and no doubt reshaped, by his Athenian colleague Thucydides), Sparta is present as a defining shadow. Perikles boasts that Athens is an open city, unlike – he says – others (unnamed) who drive out foreigners to hide their military secrets: he means Sparta (Th.2.39.1). Athens is *an* education for Greece, says Perikles (Th.2.41.1). He admits, by implication, that *the* famous education was that of Sparta, where – most unusually – education for citizen boys was provided by the state, with famous and extraordinary results. At the height of Sparta's power, after her conquest of Athens, one question became too clear and important to be ignored. Two Athenians, Kritias and Xenophon, wrote short works to explain Sparta's unique success. The question, as Xenophon posed it in the first sentence of his *Constitution of the Spartans* (*Lak. Pol.* 1.1.), defined ideas about Sparta, both in Antiquity and often today: 'I reflected on the startling fact that the population of Sparta is among the smallest in Greece and yet it has become the most powerful and famous state of all Greece.' To explain that unique achievement, Xenophon's text dwells on, no doubt exaggerates, what was different, or unique, about life within Sparta: how did Sparta form its men and (Xenophon rightly insists) its women? For human character – the Spartans had understood – was plastic. Culture was artificial, ingrained not inborn: education mattered and especially childhood education, *paideia* (the word attributed to Perikles in the Funeral Speech). Analysts influenced by Xenophon have tended to seek to explain Spartan *success*.

The last years of Sparta's hegemony, the 380s and 370s, saw a sharp decline in the state's moral reputation. Spartan officers, employing their city's traditional sense of military opportunity (see this volume, Chapter 11), seized control of Thebes in peacetime (382), and attempted as much against Peiraieus, the port of Athens (378). Such unprovoked aggression severely disappointed even Xenophon, himself a friend and client of a Spartan king, Agesilaos. In a late chapter (14) of the *Lak. Pol.* Xenophon abruptly diverges from the eulogy in earlier chapters, and virtually rants against Spartan moral decadence in his own day. Plato in both of his long, theoretical texts describing imaginary, ideal city-states, gives polarized images of Sparta. Many aspects of Spartan life, such as state education and the limiting of personal wealth, are clearly a source of positive inspiration in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In other ways, these same texts criticize Sparta for falling short of her own ideals, for disobeying her own apparent logic – as, for example, in making girls do aggressive exercises but not letting women become soldiers. Plato lived through Sparta's widest hegemony, then through her loss of moral reputation, then her military humiliation. The deep structure of his political works is shaped by Sparta, in ways which his modern commentators, themselves often unfamiliar with Spartan history, have frequently missed. Clearer, and so more influential today, are the signs of his own disappointment, as Spartans, a community which *could* have done so much, morally, proved too interested in private wealth. On such matters, like Xenophon in the anomalous chapter 14 of the *Lak. Pol.*, Plato may even have been preaching to the Spartans of his own day.

Aristotle, Plato's pupil, lived all his adult life in the period following Sparta's fall. His attitude towards Sparta is less conflicted than Plato's. He argues explicitly in the *Politics* against using Sparta as an ideal. Intimately contradicting his former master, he dwells on what he sees as reasons for Sparta's failure. Rather than advocating more influence for

women, Aristotle argues that Spartan women in several ways were over-assertive and had been responsible for Sparta's decline. Women, for Aristotle, are implicated in Sparta's drift away from official egalitarianism and towards the concentration of wealth in dangerously few hands. Now, Aristotle is – deservedly – of immense influence in forming modern views of Sparta, even though few follow the spirit of his incriminatory remarks about women. His work has tended to encourage in modern scholars the opposite question to that posed by Xenophon: not 'Why did Sparta succeed?', but 'Why did she fail?' However, if we ask why Aristotle made his anti-Spartan arguments with such energy, we may suspect that he needed to counter a still-powerful view in the mid fourth century that Sparta had *not* failed, even that a military comeback by Sparta was possible.

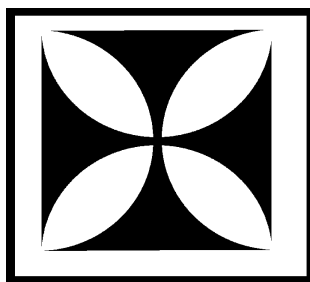
The view that Sparta in the classical period had been, overall, a success was held by sentimental, but still influential, writers of the post-classical period. For philosophers, who also tended to be professional teachers, Sparta fascinated by the example of what education could achieve, if applied widely, rigorously and from an early age. Also, as mainland Greece lost its power and self-confidence, first under Macedonian conquest from the age of Philip and Alexander, then under Roman rule, the idea of bygone Sparta – like that of bygone Athens – provided consolation and a prop to Greek morale.

Plutarch, whose *Life of Sparta's* mythical founder Lykourgos is now the easiest ancient text to use – and *abuse* – to gain a view of life within Sparta, wrote this 'biography' as part of a grand project of recounting the lives of eminent Greeks and Romans in pairs and in parallel. We sense his anxious desire to elevate the Greek past to the rank of the Roman present. In his *Perikles* (ch. 12) he writes that surviving Greek temples are, in his day (the early 2nd century AD), the *only* (obvious) proof that Greek achievement once matched that of Rome; indeed, he claims, Greek architectural splendour excelled that of Rome until the end of the Roman Republic (*Comparison of Perikles and Fabius Maximus*, 3). Bygone Sparta, for Plutarch, was a necessary part of Greece's moral heritage. The enthusiastically positive picture of Sparta given in the *Lykourgos* was profoundly influential in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, modern scholarship has reduced Plutarch's credit in matters Spartan. Respect for his intellect has, if anything, grown in recent years, but alongside that has developed an awareness not only of his patriotic concerns but also of how remote he was from the events he described, how susceptible he was to myth-making about the Spartan past. He visited Sparta, where an enthusiastically exaggerated re-enactment of past glories was in full swing. 'I saw boys whipped to death' (he writes, unambiguously: *Lykourgos*, 18), a proof of local heroism.

With ancient writers encouraging extreme attitudes towards Sparta, whether negative or positive, it is profoundly tempting for modern observers to tend themselves towards one or the other pole. Sometimes the poles subtly reinforce each other. Spartans themselves encouraged the view that they were simple soldiers, ignorant in many matters, relying more on noble practice than on complex thought (e.g. Hdt.3.46, Thuc.1.86.1, Xen.*Lak. Pol.*11.7). In a different spirit Thucydides, as we have seen, wrote of Spartan high military incompetence. Many scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries vigorously condemned Spartan 'folly', 'arrogant stupidity', disastrous ineptitude, 'characteristic ...lack of foresight'. One eminent historian (in 1981) even suggested that there may never have been such a thing as 'a very intelligent Spartan'. Such was, until recently, almost an orthodoxy (for a brief anthology, see Powell (2016, 102), leaving an unsolved puzzle: How could such people, so stupid and so few, dominate Greece for

some 150 years – and defeat the far more numerous and supposedly far more intelligent Athenians? A more modern and fruitful approach, useful whether in international politics or with a neighbour in the street, is to look for the logic even, and indeed especially, of people we may not like. And it is important to note that few modern scholars actually *like* the Spartans.

In other ways too, understanding Sparta involves combining thoughts and feelings which do not go easily together. In the fifth century *both* Sparta and Athens show patterns of aggressive expansion, against the interests of the other (see this volume, Chapter 11). Modern scholars, however, have tended to align morally, seeing *either* blameworthy Athenian expansion *or* blameworthy Spartan aggression. (The best-known representatives of these conflicting tendencies are, respectively, E. Badian (1993), and G.E.M. de Ste. Croix (1972).) Again, how typically Greek was Sparta? Was she – as Xenophon insisted – a unique exception to Greek norms? Stephen Hodkinson well shows ((2009b) and this volume, Chapter 2) that much about Sparta was remarkably normal by Greek standards. Should we then go further and completely normalize Sparta? That might leave Sparta's unique power inexplicable. Likewise, we may be tempted to see Sparta overall as a success or a failure, and in the process to privilege one set of information, one sort of explanation, to the detriment of another. In reality, Sparta – at least in her own terms – was *both* a unique success and a sad failure depending on the period studied, or the *aspect* studied within a single period. To accept such an overall view may seem simple in the abstract. But to apply it in detail to the study of Sparta may be far harder. Our psychology may resist such things, as when we see different patterns in a Maltese Cross. Faced with this (see image below),



at a single moment we focus either on the white segments or the black arms: our brains cannot easily manage both simultaneously. Yet however we focus predominantly, whether on the aggression Sparta suffered or committed, on her normality or her uniqueness as a Greek community, on her success or her failure, we should, as with the Maltese Cross, never forget that the other aspect exists.

## 1.2 Secrecy, Lies and Detailed Stories

Thucydides, the most astute historian of Antiquity, admitted his problem. It was impossible to know certain military details about the Spartans ‘because of the secrecy of their state’ (5.68.2). This recalls Perikles’ implication, reported by Thucydides, that Sparta used formal expulsions of other Greeks (*xenēlasiai*) to hide military secrets, and relied in

military matters on ‘training and acts of deception’ (2.39.1). But in the former passage Thucydides speaks in his own voice: he clearly suggests that the very structure of Spartan politics and community life was normally subject to concealment. Now, such concealment requires an effort, and is likely therefore to be done for a conscious and compelling reason. For Perikles, who was very likely right, that reason was military. Sparta was surrounded and greatly outnumbered by potential enemies. 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 (8.40.2 and see Figueira, this work, Chapter 22). 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. In the Britain of World War II, military research was described as ‘hush, hush’. The population was instructed to ‘Be like dad. Keep mum!’ [i.e., Don’t talk]. Warning posters showed housewives tempted to talk about where their male relatives were serving as soldiers; behind them in the food queue was pictured, ears pricked, Adolf Hitler.

Modern studies of Sparta readily follow Thucydides in admitting that Spartan secrecy existed, and that it poses problems for the historian. Scholars have, however, been far less ready to confront another, kindred, form of behaviour attributed to Sparta on good, contemporary authority: organized lying. Thucydides recounts how the Spartan authorities in the 420s identified and removed the most spirited and impressive helots, those who might one day become formidable as leaders of a revolution. An official announcement was made. Those helots who had distinguished themselves on Sparta’s behalf in her recent wars should come forward, so that Sparta could reward them with freedom. Some 2000 were duly selected. They were allowed to celebrate conspicuously in public. And Sparta then secretly killed them all: ‘No one knew how each of them died’, writes Thucydides (4.80.2–4). But for lying by Spartans, Xenophon, Sparta’s ally and partisan, is our most telling source. He describes, without disapproval, how Spartan military commanders reacted to the news that the Spartan navy, elsewhere, had suffered a crushing defeat (*Hell.* 1.6.36–7, 4.3.13–14). In 406 (after the defeat at Arginousai), and in 394 (after that of Knidos), the bad tidings were deliberately inverted, and a Spartan commander in pretended triumph reported a great victory. In each case, the commander who arranged this, and the energetic celebrations which accompanied it, was almost certainly deceiving his own, Spartan, soldiers, as well as his allies from other cities. He would be sure that his deception would be discovered before long. He evidently assumed that his morale-boosting lies would be accepted by his fellow citizens, with retrospect. Xenophon states that after one of these charades, the troops fought better and won a victory as a result of having been deceived. When eulogizing his patron and friend king Agesilaos of Sparta, Xenophon describes him as more honourable and straightforward than his Persian enemy, Tissaphernes. But, once war was formally declared, ‘deception as a result became religiously permissible and just, he completely outclassed Tissaphernes in deceit’. Xenophon meant this as a compliment: deceit, he says here, was *stratēgikon*, the quality of a good general (*Ages.* 1.10–13, 17). He approvingly records the trick enacted by another Spartan general, Pasimakhos. Enemies might be duly wary of Sparta’s hoplites, with the dreaded lambda (Λ, for ‘Lakedaimonioi’) painted on each shield. But Pasimakhos sought to lure the enemy into complacency, by disguising his men with the

shields of mediocre Sikyon bearing that city's initial, sigma ( $\Sigma$ ). He reportedly said, 'these sigmas will deceive you, men of Argos, into coming to fight us' (*Hell.* 4.4.10; cf. Arist. *NE* 1117a). Here, for Xenophon, was good Spartan strategy.

Athens, Sparta's enduring rival and enemy, generated remarks about Spartan duplicity, such as the comic reference about Spartans being 'little foxes ...with treacherous souls, treacherous minds' (Aristophanes, *Peace* 1067–8). Of course an enemy will say such things, not least because an enemy is commonly a target for deceit, in diplomacy as in war. But Herodotos, a non-Athenian and not disrespectful of Sparta which he had personally visited (3.55), nevertheless writes that Athenians 'knew' that the Spartans tended 'to say one thing and think another' (9.54). Thucydides, in reporting the words of leading men in the Peloponnesian War, regularly depicts without comment their distortion of the truth, their spin. But only once does he say explicitly that someone was 'speaking untruth' – and that was of the Spartan Brasidas (4.108.5 with 85.7). In later times, lying became a quality in the stereotypical idea of Sparta. When Spartan culture was criticized as mendacious, a Spartan supposedly replied: 'That's right. We are free men. But if anyone else does not tell the truth, he will live to regret it' (Plut. *Mor.* 234 f., cf. 229a).

Because lying is widespread in many cultures, and especially between rivals and enemies, we may hesitate to pay attention to the view of other Greeks that Spartans were especially given to uttering systematic untruth. In our own times, we have learned especially to beware of anything that looks like a negative ethnic stereotype. But our modern manners may disarm us in the face of Sparta. Efficient lying may not have been seen by Spartans as negative. It was apparently something that they prided themselves upon; witness Xenophon's approving remarks above. 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' (e.g. Xen. *Hell.* 3.3.5, *Lak. Pol.* 10.7; 13.1). The young were educated in a single compulsory system, adults were aggregated away from their families, so as to be 'typed', stamped and moulded in a common culture. We have no reason to suppose that cultures will not differ sometimes as regards truth-telling. (In nineteenth-century England, an important motive in the reform of the elite Public Schools was a desire to eradicate a culture of lying to authority: see this work, Chapter 29). Modern scholars have disagreed as to how militarized Spartan culture was (see Hodkinson (2009a) and this volume, Chapter 2). But Sparta's special efficiency in military matters is the one aspect of her history about which we can be most certain.

It should be recognized that there need be nothing ethnic, in the sense of inborn, about a tendency to lie; it may be something generated by a culture of war. In English-speaking countries there is a commonplace saying that when war breaks out, truth is always the first casualty. There circulated in Germany, around the time of the First World War, a rhyme which may be especially useful in our own analysis of Sparta:

Kommt der Krieg ins Land,  
Gibt's Lügen wie Sand.

When war enters the land,  
Then lies are like sand.

The image of sand was chosen to suggest that lies were innumerable, but also, perhaps, that – like grains of sand – they could be scattered pervasively and be hard to get rid of. Lying, we should recall, is born of the same motive as secrecy: to withhold truth.

When Perikles, in Thucydides, describes Spartan secrecy, the term ‘acts of deception’ (*apatai*) is used of Sparta in the same sentence (2.39.1). Imitating the imagery of an early Greek poet (Hesiod), we might describe Mendacity as Secrecy’s more enterprising sister. The English language also suggests that active deceit is allowable in a military context. In describing without disapproval a deliberately deceptive arrangement, as of furniture or shop goods, we say that things are ‘strategically placed’. English, that is, uses the same word, with the same range of meaning, as did Xenophon in praising the deceitfulness of a Spartan king.

In approaching Spartan history, we may need to show a more suspicious caution than scholars have traditionally done. But that caution may liberate the historian, and make possible a sweeping new creativity. Knowing that we are likely to be offered lies of Spartan origin is not merely a recipe for scepticism. It may, surprisingly, lead us into new fields of reconstruction – by revealing areas where Spartans feared that the truth would damage them. There are, in two of our most important ancient sources for Sparta, Xenophon and Thucydides, certain internal tensions concerning access to the truth. Xenophon, as ally and client of Spartan authorities, tells enthusiastically of much that was unusually efficient about Spartan society. But for him one aspect of such efficiency, as we have seen, is Spartan deceptiveness. Should we not suspect that his eulogy of Spartan efficiency was itself in some ways issued to deceive? In the work of Thucydides, where active partisanship of this kind is not easily imaginable, a more subtle paradox may be detected. Sparta, in his view, was secretive and hard to know. And yet several of his statements about Sparta amount, when carefully analysed, to a wide-ranging claim to knowledge – sometimes in intimate and sensitive matters.

Thucydides writes that Spartans had no experience in the matter of piracy and guerrilla warfare in their own territory (4.41.3). This amounts to a claim about many years of Spartan history, over many areas of the southern Peloponnese. He makes his claim at a point when such warfare did come to trouble the Spartans, and when Athens happened to know – because Athenian troops had landed in Spartan territory and were deliberately provoking such trouble. And at this point he also notes that two boats manned by Messenian pirates, runaway Spartan helots that is (or just possibly their exiled kin from Naupaktos in the Corinthian Gulf), ‘happened’ to be present to threaten Sparta’s territory (4.9.1, cf. 53.3). Of an earlier episode, the death of the Spartan regent Pausanias, Thucydides writes that the ‘established Spartan procedure [*tropos*, in Greek] was not to punish irreversibly [i.e., to put to death] one of their own citizens without absolute proof’ (1.132.5). How did he know about Spartan custom (that is, behaviour over a long period), in such an intimate and embarrassing matter? Similarly, Spartans later became infuriated (in 418) with their king Agis, threatening to punish him by demolishing his house and imposing a colossal fine. Thucydides states that this was ‘contrary to their normal way of proceeding [*tropos*, again]’ (5.63.2). Agis survived, but the Spartans imposed on him a council of ten ‘advisors’, ‘a practice they had never previously had’ (5.63.4). How did Thucydides think that the secretive nature, as he described it elsewhere, of Sparta’s political system, allowed him to know how Spartans normally – that