SPARTA

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The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Superpower

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Author's Note

Sources

We have no contemporary Spartan sources to tell the true story of Classical Sparta. The only sources written by actual 'Spartans' are a few hundred lines of verse by the poets Tyrtaeus and Alcman, which were written too early, and a few snippets by the third-century BCE scholar Sosibius, which are too late, and are mostly preserved in much later sources. The rest of our sources, ranging from the Classical period to the Byzantine era, were written by non-Spartans – admirers, critics, actual enemies in the case of the famed Athenian historian Thucydides – who typically present Sparta as a radically unique and unchanging society.

Modern scholars often talk of the 'Spartan mirage' – coined as *le mirage Spartiate* by the French scholar François Ollier – to describe the idealised, stereotyped and distorted picture of Spartan society that was created by largely non-Spartan sources. While we cannot simply splice together snippets from sources separated by the best part of a millennium, it would be dangerous to reject all the later ones that focus on the 'otherness' of the Spartans. The very existence of the Spartan mirage tells us that there really was something different about the Spartans.

This book will follow the general principle that most experts today take, by starting with contemporary sources such as Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon who experienced Sparta at first hand, before resorting to later and potentially less reliable sources like Plutarch. Only when we lack more contemporary sources will later writers be used alone. Readers will find that even the most reliable of sources for Sparta have their weaknesses. When it comes to Sparta, we have to take great care when using *all* the sources.

Endnotes have been used to point readers to the key sources of information for the facts and details about Spartan society. They appear less frequently in the narrative elements of the story to avoid overwhelming non-academic readers with notes and references. These references follow a version of the specialised citation method for ancient Greek and Latin sources used by Classicists. Rather than citing page numbers for ancient texts, Classicists provide the name of the ancient author, the title of the work (but not if only one work by the author survives), and then references to books, chapters, sections or line numbers. These divisions differ, depending on whether the author is writing prose or verse, or the length of the work in question. This system works because no matter how long the translation of the Greek text turns out to be, any modern translation of, say, Herodotus' *Histories* will always have nine 'books', and Book 1 of Herodotus will always have precisely 216 'chapters'. Similarly, Xenophon's *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* (*Lac. Pol.* for short) will always have fourteen 'chapters', and Isocrates' sixth speech, *Archidamus*, will always have 111 'sections'. So, when a note refers to 'Herodotus 1.82', Xenophon, *Lac. Pol.* 14, or Isocrates, *Archidamus* 81, any reader will be able to find the exact references, regardless of whether they are reading the original Greek text in a specialist Classics publication, or a translation into English (or any other modern language).

There are two exceptions to this rule: the 'Stephanus' and 'Bekker' systems, which are used for Plato and Aristotle respectively. Plato's works are ordered by title, using a numbering system based on the 1578 edition of Plato's complete works translated by Joannes Serranus and published by Henricus Stephanus. Aristotle's works are likewise ordered by title, with a numbering system based on the edition of his complete works published by the Classical philologist August Immanuel Bekker between 1831 and 1837. Readers wishing to track down references to Plato and Aristotle for themselves will be able to find them using any translation that follows these numbering systems.

Ancient Monetary Values

The ancient Greeks used a monetary system based on the 'drachma', literally 'as much as one hand can hold'. In the Classical period the most universally accepted currency was the Athenian drachma, which weighed 4.3 grams. The drachma was equal in value and weight to six silver 'obols'. The term *obolos* reportedly derived from *obelos*, the Greek word for 'roasting spit', the reasoning being that six roasting spits was the most someone could hold in their hand. The Greeks also used the 'stater', which equalled two drachmas, and the talent (*talanton*), which was equal to 6,000 drachmas.

While it is impossible to calculate exact modern equivalents for this ancient Greek currency, we can produce a rule of thumb based on the fact that a skilled worker's wage in Classical Greece was probably around 1 drachma per day. At the time of writing, an average skilled worker's wage in the UK is £14.53 per hour ($18.72 per hour in the US), which would make a day

rate of approximately £109 (or $150). Therefore, approximate modern values for ancient Greek money will be calculated on the assumption that 1 drachma is worth approximately £100 or $150.

Prologue: Honour and Duty

'Corinthian'-style bronze helmet (*c.* 500–450 BCE) of the sort that Othryadas would have worn at the Battle of the Champions. The nail-holes in the top and cheek-pieces indicate its display as a trophy or victory offering.

As the light faded, his energy ebbing with it, the Spartan soldier Othryadas felt his opponent's shield drop under the pressure of his own. His gaze, scarcely visible beneath the heavy bronze helmet that covered all but his eyes and mouth, met his adversary's. Disciplined for warfare by his city's rigorous upbringing – the world's first compulsory state-run education system – Othryadas knew exactly what to do.

Grunting with exertion, he plunged his short stabbing sword into the exposed flesh between the base of his opponent's helmet and the top of his bronze breastplate. As the fighter from the neighbouring city of Argos slumped to the ground, his soul bound for the underworld, Othryadas realised, to his horror, that he was the only Spartan still standing. After hours of fighting, 299 of Othryadas' fellow citizens had fallen, leaving him to face alone the two surviving Argive champions, Alcenor and Chromius. Spartans may have called themselves the *homoioi* ('peers'), but Othryadas was on his own.[1]

Steeling himself for one last effort, Othryadas planted his feet firmly on the ground, readying himself either to win a glorious victory against the odds, or to join his opponents in what the Spartans called a 'beautiful death' in combat. War poems written many decades before by the seventh-century BCE Spartan elegist Tyrtaeus had taught generation after generation of Spartans that 'it is a beautiful thing for a good man to die, falling in the front ranks fighting for his fatherland'.[2] But the Argives differed. Rather than face Othryadas head-on, Alcenor and Chromius simply declared themselves the winners and ran home to Argos to celebrate their 'victory'.

Othryadas remained on the battlefield, carefully stripping the armour from the bodies of the Argive dead. He then carried these spoils back to his own army's nearby camp, where he remained at his station, as was required of a Spartan soldier. According to the later Spartan king Demaratus, Spartan law called for citizens to remain at their place in the line of battle, and to either conquer or die.[3]

The next day, both sides disputed the result of what would later be dubbed the 'Battle of the Champions'. Around 545 BCE, Sparta and Argos were squabbling over a hinterland between their two city-states known as the Thyrea, which the Spartans had recently occupied. To resolve the conflict, the Spartans and Argives had agreed that both armies would withdraw while two sets of 300 elite champions battled, fearing that if the full armies were nearby, the temptation to intervene would prove too great.[4]

The Spartans would have had no difficulties selecting their 300 champions. The best graduates of the Spartan upbringing were selected to join an elite Spartan infantry unit known as the 'knights' (*hippeis*), which served as an official bodyguard for Spartan kings. The rivalry between this 'special forces' unit and the Spartans who missed out was legendary, with violence regularly spilling out into the streets of the city-state. Any young adults who refused to desist when older Spartans intervened were hauled before the authorities, and stiff fines were dished out to ensure that respect for Spartan law was maintained.[5]

The object of the Battle of the Champions was to avoid a great loss of life on both sides; nonetheless 597 men died – perhaps as much as 5 per cent of the male citizen population of both Sparta and Argos. The Argives, understandably enough, claimed that they had won the duel because more of their men had survived. But the Spartans argued that *they* were the victors, because Alcenor and Chromius had run away. They

stressed that Othryadas had remained on the field of battle and despoiled the dead – a clear indicator of triumph in ancient Greek combat.

With neither side willing to relent, the full-scale pitched battle the Spartans and Argives were hoping to stave off became inevitable. This was likely one of the first significant battles in ancient Greece between heavily armed infantrymen called 'hoplites', a name derived from the 30 kilograms or so of bronze armour (*ta hopla*) each foot-soldier wore for protection. The hoplites fought in a ranked formation known as a 'phalanx' – as the poet Tyrtaeus described it, 'pressing shield against shield, / crest on crest and helmet to helmet / and chest to chest'.[6]

The thousands of hoplites in both armies would have worn a bronze helmet with full face protection known as the 'Corinthian', which was usually topped with a horsehair crest. Allowing in little sensory information, such helmets would have created a state of heightened psychological alertness. Both phalanxes of hoplites would have worn breastplates, made from either bronze or a composite made from layers of linen or hide; bronze greaves would have protected their lower legs. But their primary defence was a large, bowl-like wooden, bronze-faced shield called an *aspis*. Later sources suggest that the Spartans emblazoned the Greek letter *lambda*, for 'Lacedaemon', their own name for Sparta, on the face of their shields. The uniformity would have likely produced a chilling effect on the enemy. Indeed, the fifth-century BCE comic playwright Eupolis describes an Athenian being 'terrified' by the sight of the 'flashing lambdas'.[7] But at the time of the Battle of the Champions, the Spartans probably had personal emblems on their shields.[8] Vase paintings from the time show other Greeks carrying shields adorned with lions, bears, snakes and scorpions.

A hoplite's main offensive weapon was a long, iron-headed ash spear. In case their spear broke, they also carried stabbing

swords. Spartan swords were notoriously short. When a foreigner once asked why this was so, he received the blunt reply, 'So that we might reach our enemies with our hands.'[9] Spartan soldiers all wore red cloaks and tunics – partly because red was considered the manliest colour, and partly because it would conceal bloodstains.[10] The Spartans' use of uniforms for their soldiers was hitherto unparalleled, and focused the enemy's attention on their intimidating conformity.

In the era of the Battle of the Champions, the Spartans fought in five regiments known as *lochoi*. The regimental names that have been preserved vividly convey the Spartan wartime mindset: 'Devourer', 'Ravager', 'Rager', 'Thundercloud' and 'Leader of the Centre'.[11] Later sources tell us that each *lochos* was commanded by an officer known as a *lochagos* (literally 'leader of a *lochos*'), and was divided into smaller units known as 'sworn bands' (*enōmotiai*), led by an officer called an *enōmotarchos* ('ruler of the sworn band'). Orders were passed down from the Spartan king to senior officers called 'polemarchs' (*polemarchoi*), then to the *lochagoi* and finally to the *enōmotarchoi*, who told the rank and file what to do. The formality of this command structure was unmatched at the time, and helped the Spartans to carry out manoeuvres that contemporary professional drill instructors considered difficult.[12] Due to the parallels with modern military practice, many modern translations render the Spartan officers as colonels, majors and captains.

The Spartans' comparative professionalism may have been decisive in the pitched battle that decided the fate of the Thyrea. The fighting was brutal, with heavy casualties on both sides, but this time the Spartans emerged unambiguously victorious.

The Argives were so humiliated by their defeat that they shaved their heads in mourning; they also instituted a new law requiring male Argives to keep their hair short, and denying women the right to wear gold jewellery, until Argos recovered

the Thyrea. It would take two long centuries of keeping their hair cropped and doing without gold adornments before the Argives got the Thyrea back.[13] Meanwhile, to celebrate their victory, the Spartans began wearing their hair long as a kind of uniform.[14] Later sources explained their characteristic long hair as designed to make them look 'freer' and 'scarier',[15] or to make handsome men more handsome and ugly men more frightening.[16] Many ancient artworks represent Spartans with elaborately plaited locks. The best example is a bronze statuette of a Spartan warrior from around 510–500 BCE, now held at the Wandsworth Museum in Connecticut. But not all artworks depict Spartans with neat hair: one Spartan shown on a wine-mixing jug from around 420 BCE has long locks hanging wild and curly over his shoulders and torso.

* * *

After their victory, the Spartans would have buried their dead in a communal tomb near the battlefield where they had fallen, rather than bring them home to Sparta. One of their Argive enemies would later jeer about the fact that there were many Spartan dead – like the men who fell in the Battle of the Champions – buried near Argos. But the Spartans were untroubled, replying, 'But not one of *you* is buried in Sparta.'[17] The message was clear: while the Spartans had fought many battles near Argos, the Argives hadn't once invaded Spartan territory.

Spartans who died in war were permitted to have memorial stones at home; indeed, only Spartans who died in combat were remembered in this way.[18] These memorials were required to be small and largely identical.[19] Archaeologists have found twenty-four small and largely unadorned Spartan funerary inscriptions bearing only the name of the deceased and the words *en polemōi*, 'in war'.

Although the Spartans won the day, Othryadas did not join his fellow citizens in celebrating. Ashamed that he alone of the 300 champions had survived, he committed suicide. Othryadas may have been trying to avoid joining the ranks of men in Sparta dismissed contemptuously as *tresantes* – literally 'those who flee', but often translated as 'tremblers'. These men were compelled to shave off half their beard and to wear patchwork cloaks, presumably to make them look ridiculous and to mark them out; they also tended to be the last picked for ball games, banished to 'insulting' positions in religious choruses, and forced to yield to younger men – a striking inversion of Spartan norms, whereby younger men always gave way to their elders.[20] The treatment Spartans meted out to cowards may well have been intended to shame them into committing suicide, as Othryadas did.

* * *

Over the centuries that followed, many Spartans – especially senior officers – would ensure that they achieved a beautiful death in combat rather than suffer the sting of shame Othryadas felt at surviving his fallen comrades. Most famous is another group of 300 Spartans: the legendary men commanded by King Leonidas, who faced up to hundreds of thousands of Persian invaders before sacrificing themselves for Greek freedom at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE.

A cursory look at the story of the Spartans' doomed attempt to hold off the Persians – whom the Greeks at the time explicitly called 'barbarians' – at the narrow pass of Thermopylae shows why the Spartans are often seen as heroes to be emulated.[21] Leonidas and his 300 were tasked with leading just 7,000 of their fellow Greeks to hold back a massive Persian army until reinforcements could arrive. The invading army was composed of men from across the Persian king Xerxes' vast realm,

which stretched from the Balkans to the Indian subcontinent. There were combatants from forty-six nations, including the Persians, Medes, Babylonians, Assyrians, Bactrians, Indians, Libyans, Egyptians, Ethiopians and Scythians. Popular legend had it that Xerxes' army was three million strong, and that the accompanying pack animals alone drained a large lake.[22]

The Spartan defenders were nonetheless undaunted by the odds against them. When they were warned that Xerxes' army boasted so many archers that their arrows would darken the sky, one of them – Dienekes – responded tersely, 'Good, we'll fight in the shade.'[23] Later, less reliable sources attribute other glorious quips to the Spartans. When someone asked Leonidas why there were so few Spartans at Thermopylae, he responded that there were 'many enough to die'.[24] One Spartan hoplite Leonidas tried to send home with a message retorted, 'I came with you to fight, not carry letters.' Most famously, when Xerxes demanded the Spartans surrender and hand over their weapons, Leonidas reportedly shot back just two words: *molōn labe*, 'come and take them'.[25]

The resilience and good humour shown by Leonidas and his men under such immense pressure was not mere bravado. For two whole days, ensconced in the pass, they repelled wave after wave of Xerxes' best troops, killing tens of thousands of Persians in the process. The narrowness of the pass enabled them to make up for their small numbers by fighting in relays. They even refused to rest, with the older and younger men vying to outdo each other in displays of courage and prowess.[26] The Spartans – whom the Athenian playwright Aristophanes vividly described as fighting like angry wild boars, with 'froth' dripping from their jaws and running down their legs[27] – fought so bravely that Xerxes jumped from his seat three times in fear for his army.[28]

At the end of the second day, however, the Spartans were betrayed by a local named Ephialtes, who told Xerxes about

an alternative route over the spine of the mountain that would allow the Persians to circumvent Leonidas' position. When Leonidas learned of the danger, he dismissed his allies and ordered the Spartans to remain with him and fight to the death in order to buy enough time for their allies to withdraw safely. On that final day at Thermopylae, the Spartans fought bravely to the very end, with only their allies from Thespis in support.

By the end of the day, most of the Spartans had broken their spears and were fighting only with swords or knives. Finally, some fought with just their bare hands and teeth as they faced the Persians, who bore down on them on all sides. Even then, the Spartans proved such formidable opponents that many Persians preferred to shoot them down with the arrows rather than fight hand-to-hand.[29] At the close, the Persians probably did darken the sky with their arrows.

* * *

It is often argued that without the Spartans' iron will defying the Persians at Thermopylae, the glories of Classical Greece that followed – Athenian democracy; the Parthenon; the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; the comedies of Aristophanes; the philosophy of Socrates and Plato; the practice of writing history itself – may never have come to pass. In his essay 'The Hot Gates', the novelist William Golding so closely connected the later flourishing of democracy at 'shining Athens' with the self-sacrifice of the Spartans at Thermopylae that he was moved to write, 'A little of Leonidas lies in the fact that I can go where I like and write what I like. He contributed to set us free.' In a similar vein, in his graphic novel *300*, Frank Miller writes of Leonidas and his men rescuing the world from 'the dark, stupid ways' and helping to 'usher in a future that is surely brighter than we can imagine.'[30]

This image of the Spartans as courageous freedom fighters, the ancient world's fiercest soldiers, has made them popular icons to be revered, even emulated, by many throughout the ages down to today. Lord Byron was so inspired by Leonidas and his men that he sought to summon three proper Spartans to help liberate Greece from the Ottoman Turks in his *Don Juan*:

> Earth! render back from out thy breast
> A remnant of our Spartan dead!
> Of the three hundred grant but three,
> To make a new Thermopylae![31]

Leonidas' famed retort, '*molōn labe*', has become an unofficial slogan for North American firearm enthusiasts campaigning against gun control, and one can buy T-shirts, caps, stickers and guns emblazoned with the phrase. In the United Kingdom, a group of 'Eurosceptic' Members of Parliament styled themselves the 'Spartans,' to symbolise their resistance first to the UK's membership in the European Union, and later to Covid-19 restrictions. Mark Francois MP even self-published a book entitled *Spartan Victory: The Inside Story of the Battle for Brexit* to commemorate what he saw as a heroic emulation of Leonidas and his 300.

In popular culture, Spartan hoplites have starred in feature films such as Rudolph Maté's 'swords and sandals' epic, *The 300 Spartans* (1962), and Zack Snyder's *300* (2006), which stars Gerard Butler as Leonidas. Based on Frank Miller's graphic novel, the latter film grossed $450 million at the box office. The Spartans have also been the focus of best-selling novels; Steven Pressfield's *Gates of Fire* (1998) has sold more than one million copies worldwide and is even a set text at the US Marine Corps Basic School at Quantico, the United States Naval Academy

at Annapolis, and West Point. Popular computer games allow players to virtually embody Spartans – *Assassins Creed Odyssey* (2018) centres on Sparta during the Archidamian War (431–422 BCE), with gameplayers controlling either Kassandra or Alexios, two exiled Spartan mercenaries descended from Leonidas; the *God of War* franchise sees players control Kratos the Spartan, a demigod son of Zeus who battles Greek and Norse gods; and in the first-person shooter video game franchise *Halo*, players control super-soldiers codenamed 'Spartans'.

The Spartans' vaunted physicality has led to countless sports teams across the globe taking their name. The most notable is the Czech soccer team AC Sparta Prague, who have won their national league thirty-three times, and the varsity teams of Michigan State University (MSU) have been known as the Spartans since 1926. The 'Spartans' brand has been so successful that MSU have utilised it for the entire institution, even using a stylised Corinthian helmet as the university logo. There is also the global phenomenon known as the 'Spartan Race' – with 250 events held annually in more than forty countries across the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania – which requires competitors to 'run, crawl, jump, and swim' and overcome a series of obstacles. Explaining the decision to call the event the Spartan Race, founder Joe de Sena wrote, 'The Spartans seemed to personify everything we stood for. They were strong, resourceful citizens with no tolerance for bullshit. They were known far and wide for their ability to defeat much larger military forces through force of will. They focused on mind and body in equal measure.'[32]

Yet all these admirers of Sparta would probably be discomfited to learn that Spartan-style courage in the face of overwhelming odds inspired the leaders of Nazi Germany, too. During the last days of the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943, the Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring invoked an epigram that was

written in memory of Leonidas and his men – 'Stranger, go tell the Spartans that here, obedient to their orders, we lie'[33] – telling German troops from the Sixth Army: 'If you go to Germany, tell them you have seen us fighting in Stalingrad, obedient to the law.'[34] In April 1945, in the closing days of the Second World War, Adolf Hitler himself told his close lieutenant Martin Bormann, 'A desperate fight will always be a worthy example … just think of Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans.'[35]

More recently, the far-right ultra-nationalist Greek political party Golden Dawn (1985–2020) painted itself as the inheritor of the Spartan tradition. The hymn of the party, which was the third most popular in the Greek parliament in the 2015 election, ran: 'Trackers of ancient glories, sons of brilliant struggles, we are the New Spartans.' At the party's annual torch-lit celebration of the Battle of Thermopylae in July 2008, Ilias Kasidiaris, then a Golden Dawn MP, stated: 'We are Sparta's shield, patiently guarding the body of Greece.' Since the party's recent demise (it was banned after being declared a criminal organisation), a new far-right group calling itself 'The Spartans' has emerged, criticising the colonisation of Greece by 'invaders' and the alteration of its ethnic mix by hordes of 'barbarians'. The choice of the latter term illustrates how powerful the story of the Spartans' resistance to the Persians remains in the popular consciousness.

All this raises the question: what did the ancient Spartans 'really' stand for? Does the image of the Spartans as single-minded freedom fighters stand up to closer scrutiny? Was there more to Sparta than these one-dimensional stereotypes suggest – another side to Sparta that modern admirers might like to know about, or another side that they might prefer not to see?

* * *

Indeed, there was far more to Sparta than the relentless focus on its martial prowess and the 300's doomed stand at Thermopylae typically leaves room for in the public imagination. On the positive side, Sparta had what is recognised as the first state-run education system, which was compulsory for all the sons of Spartan citizens. In addition, Sparta is almost unparalleled in the pre-modern world as a city-state where women were permitted to own land in their own right and had a clear voice; Simone de Beauvoir once singled out Sparta as 'the only Greek city in which woman was treated almost on an equality with man'.[36]

The focus on Spartan heroism at Thermopylae has also tended to obscure some horrific aspects of the ancient city-state. Modern 'Spartophiles' may be unaware of the stories of Spartan elders inspecting newborn babies and dumping the weak or disabled unceremoniously off the edge of a cliff, or the fact that Spartan husbands could share out their wives as breeding stock.[37] That the Spartans' freedom was based on the ruthless exploitation of tens of thousands of slaves known as 'helots' should give even the most ardent admirer pause. So too should the *krypteia*, a brutal rite of passage where young men were sent into the countryside armed with a knife and ordered to eliminate the strongest of the helots. With this knowledge, it becomes rather disturbing that the instructors on the Spartan Run's training programme, the 'Agoge' – invoking the Roman-period name for the Spartan upbringing – are called 'Krypteia'.

The Spartans' image as the defenders of freedom at Thermopylae also overlooks the fact that after the Persians' ambitions of conquest in Europe were ended, the Spartans made their own ill-fated attempt at regional domination. In the century that followed the Persian Wars, the Spartans vied with the other great Greek power – Athens – for leadership of the

Greek world. During the so-called Peloponnesian War against Athens (431–404 BCE), a war the Spartans themselves cast as a fight for freedom and autonomy against Athenian tyranny, they shamelessly bargained away the freedom of the Greeks of Asia Minor in exchange for Persian assistance against Athens. Worse still, in 387 BCE, ten years after launching a campaign to re-liberate those Asian Greeks from Persian rule, the Spartans abandoned them for a second time to secure Persian backing for a treaty that guaranteed Spartan dominance over mainland Greece. During this time, the Spartans made it clear to everyone that the only freedom they were really interested in was their own.

If we attempt to peel back the layers of legend, what do we find? This book examines how the city of Sparta grew from a collection of five villages in a remote corner of southern Greece into a world superpower, its rise to power as dramatic as its sudden collapse. It is a story filled with heroic acts like those at Thermopylae, great military victories against the Persians, Athenians and other Greeks, breathtaking arrogance towards Greeks and foreigners alike – as well as the Spartans' delusions of grandeur, their crushing defeats at the hands of their fellow Greeks, and their horrific atrocities, particularly against the helots.

The tale shows why, despite its brief florescence – from only 700 BCE to 371 BCE – Sparta has captured the imagination of so many over the millennia, from poets and politicians to freedom fighters and footballers. It also shows why we should be careful when we choose our heroes.

1

The Origins of the Spartan State

c. 1000–600 BCE

Marble pyramid stele (*c.* 600–570 BCE), with relief depicting Helen and Menelaus. The couple hold a wreath, symbolising their reunion.

To chart the rise and fall of the Spartans, we need to start at the beginning of their story: who were they, and where did they come from? Put simply, the Spartans were the inhabitants of Sparta, a small city in the Peloponnese, a large island peninsula joined to the south of mainland Greece by the Isthmus of Corinth.

Somewhat confusingly for the modern reader, however, the inhabitants of Sparta did not call themselves 'Spartans'. Rather, they called themselves the *Spartiatai* or the *homoioi*. The former name is often rendered Spartiates, and the latter as 'equals' or 'peers', or even 'similars'.

The place name Sparta is also seldom used in our sources. Sparta was usually referred to in writing as 'Lacedaemon'; readers of translations of the great ancient Greek histories by Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon will thus often find references to the 'Lacedaemonians'. This is because Sparta was not merely the villages that made up the city, but a 'city-state' comprising both the urban centre and the surrounding countryside. The ancient Greek term for such a city-state is *polis*; there were more than 1,000 *poleis* (the Greek plural), not just in what we know as Greece but throughout the ancient Mediterranean. Each Greek city-state controlled a territory circumscribed by mountains or sea, or by proximity to another city-state. Each was fiercely independent, and border wars were common. All the Greek city-states seem to have possessed similar institutions: a central marketplace (*agora*), annually elected magistrates, a council of elder citizens, an assembly of citizen-soldiers, and public buildings such as gymnasia, wrestling schools, theatres

and temples to the gods.

Adding another layer of complexity to the identity of the Spartans, the region where the city of Sparta lies was also known as 'Laconia', which it still is to this day; Spartans therefore often appear in our sources not as Spartiates or Lacedaemonians, but 'Laconians'. And if that was not baffling enough, the Spartan *polis* was not only the city of Sparta and the region of Laconia; from around 700 BCE to 369 BCE it also included the neighbouring region of Messenia, to the west of the Taygetus mountain range. This gave the Spartans yet another name for the territory they controlled: the '*Lakōnikē gē*', or 'Laconian land'.

At the height of its power, Sparta would be a truly gargantuan *polis*, comprising roughly two-fifths of the whole Peloponnese. By way of comparison, its great political and military rival Athens – itself vastly larger than most other *poleis* – was less than three times its size. No wonder the Athenian playwright Euripides described Spartan territory as 'large for many, but for twice as many, more than large'.[1] Other famous and powerful *poleis* that were far smaller than both Sparta and Athens included Thebes, Byzantium (the European half of modern-day Istanbul) and Argos, Sparta's great Peloponnesian rival. In fact, research suggests that Spartan territory was nearly a hundred times larger than the vast majority of Greek city-states. In terms of its size, then, Sparta really was an ancient Greek superpower.

In spite of this, the urban centre of Sparta was decidedly unimpressive. Thucydides, an Athenian former general who was living in exile from his homeland, travelled to the city while conducting research prior to writing a history of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE). Expecting to find a grand city that resembled his hometown, he was stunned to find little more than a cluster of four villages – Pitana, Limnae, Mesoa and Cynosoura – built up around a low mound of marls and

clay. Thucydides later claimed that these villages (which Spartans called *obai*) made a 'deficient show'.[2] In fact, he was so unimpressed with what he saw that he predicted, somewhat presciently, 'if the city of the Spartans were to become deserted and only the temples and foundations of building remained', future generations would find it hard to believe that Sparta was as powerful as it was.

Anyone who has visited the remains of both ancient Sparta and Athens would find it hard to disagree. Built on several metres of 'mudstone', the Spartan citadel barely merits the title *acropolis* – literally 'high city' – when compared with the grandeur of the 150-metre-tall Athenian acropolis. Not only did Sparta entirely lack what Thucydides called 'costly temples or edifices' to rival the Athenian Parthenon, it also lacked a circuit wall to demarcate and protect it. The absence of walls was so unusual at the time that a foreign visitor in the fourth century BCE asked the Spartan king Agesilaus how the Spartans managed without them. Agesilaus pointed to the Spartan citizen army and retorted, 'These men are Sparta's walls.'[3]

But what ancient Sparta lacked in architectural grandeur it more than made up for with its breathtaking natural setting. Sparta lies in the heart of the Eurotas valley, an alluvial fan wedged between the Taygetus and Parnon mountain ranges, bounded by the high mountains of Arcadia to the north and the Laconian gulf to the south. The Taygetus mountain range is a spectacular sight, rising steeply to loom over the city. Although its peak is half the height of Mont Blanc at a relatively paltry 2,407m, Taygetus feels more imposing than it should; it is effectively two mountain ranges that run in parallel – a lower range of schist and marble cliffs rises to terrace-like uplands, with even steeper limestone slopes above them. Taygetus extends a hundred kilometres south from the Arcadian plateau to Cape Taenarum. The southernmost point in mainland Europe,

Taenarum was believed to be the site of a gateway to Hades, where the souls of the dead languished for eternity.

The Parnon mountain range to the east of Sparta, a tangle of rocky foothills and valleys topped by limestone peaks, is far less imposing. The range runs ninety kilometres south to the Malea peninsula, and the surrounding seas were notoriously treacherous. The great hero Odysseus was blown off course while rounding Malea on his return from Troy; thus began his decade-long 'odyssey' – which likely explains a saying recorded by Strabo, the ancient geographer and philosopher: 'But when you round Malea, forget your home.'[4]

Situated between these ranges, the Eurotas valley is prime agricultural land, and the river, which reaches the sea in a marshy delta, is one of few in mainland Greece that flows in the summer. In antiquity, Sparta would have been laced with orchards and gardens, and the surrounding countryside would have been sown with barley, wheat and pulses, as well as grapes and olives. Today the main agricultural output of the region is citrus fruit, mulberries and olives, but wheat, barley and maize are cultivated too. The warm climate and fertile soil near modern-day Sparti yield two harvests each year. No wonder, then, that modern scholars think that the name 'Sparta' might derive from the Greek verb *speirō* ('I sow'), making Sparta 'the sown land'.

The Eurotas valley is a rift valley, formed by massive tectonic subsidence. Like much of the eastern Mediterranean, the land around Sparta is also strikingly seismic; Strabo singled the region out as 'good for earthquakes'.[5] Because of this, the Spartans appear to have paid particular reverence to the god Poseidon, who was known throughout Greece as 'the Earth-shaker'. A catastrophic earthquake that struck Laconia in the 460s BCE, reportedly demolishing the whole city of Sparta except for five houses, was thought to be caused by Poseidon's

fury at the sacrilegious killing of suppliants at his temple at Cape Taenarum.[6] A tremor at the wrong time would halt a Spartan army in its tracks, in the belief that the god was expressing his displeasure at the mission.[7] Nonetheless, Sparta's position – described as 'hollow, surrounded by mountains, rough and difficult for enemies to invade'[8] – created a secure home base, providing the real explanation as to why the Spartans chose not to invest the time and resources required to build a wall around their city.

* * *

How did the Spartans come to settle in this fertile-but-earthquake-prone spot in the Peloponnese in the first place? According to varying traditions, the Greek race was born when the god Zeus was so angry that the king of Arcadia had sacrificed a human child to him that he tried to destroy humanity with a great flood. As in the stories of Noah in Genesis and Utnapishtim in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the gods ensured that one family survived: the immortal Titan Prometheus warned his mortal son Deucalion to build a large chest and fill it with sufficient food supplies to ride out the flood. After nine days, the waters subsided, and Deucalion and his wife, Pyrrha, touched down at Mount Parnassus in central Greece. There they regenerated the human race by casting stones over their shoulders, from which people sprang. But Deucalion and Pyrrha also had a biological son, Hellen, who became the progenitor of the race we call 'Greeks', but who called themselves 'Hellenes'.

As with all myths, there are conflicting traditions, but in the most standard version, Hellen and the nymph Orseis bore several children: Aeolus, Xuthus and Dorus. Xuthus in turn went on to father Achaeus and Ion. These two generations include the mythical progenitors of the different Greek ethnic

groups we find in the Classical period: the Aeolians, Dorians, Achaeans and Ionians. The Spartans, like Othryadas and the three hundred at Thermopylae, identified as 'Dorians'. But the earliest Spartans mentioned in Greek myth – the men from 'the swarming hollow of Lacedaemon'[9] who accompanied the Spartan king Menelaus to Troy to recover his wife Helen after her abduction by the Trojan prince Paris – were most definitely 'Achaeans'. Homer's epic poem the *Iliad* tells the story of the ten-year Trojan War between the 'long-haired Achaeans', led by Menelaus' elder brother Agamemnon, and the Trojans, led by King Priam's son Hector.

The story of how the Spartans came to identify as Dorians is wrapped up in a myth about how the 'Achaean' descendants of Heracles – known as the Heraclids – returned to their rightful home in the Peloponnese after being persecuted by Eurystheus, the king of Argos. The legend goes that, after Eurystheus drove them out of the Peloponnese, the Heraclids were initially granted asylum by the Athenian king Theseus. When Eurystheus subsequently attacked Athens, he and his five sons were slain in the fighting; Heracles' eldest son, Hyllus, then led the Heraclids back to the Peloponnese to reclaim the Argive throne. But when a terrible plague struck, Hyllus travelled to Delphi to consult the Pythia – a priestess of the god Apollo who acted as a medium between humans and the god himself. Throughout the Archaic and Classical periods (800–322 BCE), all the Greek *poleis* would consult the oracle at Delphi before making any major decision. The Spartans were especially prone to follow the oracle's advice, even if it meant acting against their better judgement.

Apollo warned Hyllus that the Heraclids would need to wait until 'the third fruit was ripe' before they could return to the Peloponnese. After hearing this, Hyllus led them to Doris, a small river valley wedged between Mount Oeta and Mount

Parnassus in central Greece, where Dorus had reportedly settled his people,[10] and Dorus' son Aegimius, the king of the region, gave them refuge. Hyllus assumed that the 'third fruit' meant three annual harvests, so after three years had passed, he confidently led the Heraclids home to reclaim their kingdom. But it was still not to be: Hyllus was killed in battle. Realising that the 'third fruit' was not three harvests of crops, but rather three generations of men, the Heraclids left the Peloponnese again, returning to Doris to wait it out.

Once three generations had passed, Heracles' great-great-grandsons – the brothers Temenus, Aristodemus and Cresphontes – gathered an army to invade the Peloponnese. This time the Heraclids had grand ambitions. Rather than merely seeking to reclaim Heracles' kingdom of Argos, the three brothers planned to carve up the whole Peloponnese. By this time the king of Argos was Orestes' son Tisamenus, who was also the legitimate king of Sparta as the grandson of Helen and Menelaus. The Heraclids defeated Tisamenus and set about dividing up the Peloponnese. As the eldest, Temenus received Argos, while Cresphontes and the twin sons of their other brother Aristodemus – Procles and Eurysthenes – gained Messenia and Sparta respectively. The myth thus conveniently explained why there were two royal houses – the Agiads and the Eurypontids – who reigned over Sparta simultaneously.

But while this story might explain how the Achaean Heraclids became the rulers of the Peloponnese, it doesn't explain how the Spartans came to be Dorians. The answer to this question lies in a footnote to the myths: the Dorians who had given the Heraclids asylum invaded the Peloponnese with them. The earliest extant source for this story is, in fact, Spartan. The seventh-century BCE poet Tyrtaeus wrote that 'Zeus granted this city [Sparta] to the Heraclids, with whom, leaving windy Erineus [i.e. Doris], / we arrived at the broad island of Pelops'.[11]

This origin story positioned the Spartans and the other Dorian Greeks as outsiders, later arrivals who displaced the Achaeans. Significantly, it made them far later arrivals than their Athenian rivals, who believed themselves to be born from the earth itself, and therefore – as Plato puts it – 'pure-blooded Greeks, unadulterated by barbarian stock'.[12] When a sixth-century BCE Spartan king, Cleomenes, once tried to enter the temple of Athena on the Athenian acropolis, a priestess tried to deny him entry on the grounds that it was illegal for Dorians to enter an Athenian temple. But – invoking the legend that the Spartan kings were Achaeans descended from Heracles, not Dorians – Cleomenes barged straight in, blithely telling the priestess, 'Madam, I am not a Dorian, but an Achaean.'[13]

* * *

Of course, the stories of Menelaus and Helen and of the return of the Heraclids to Sparta are only myths. To fully understand Sparta's origins, we must turn to the archaeological record.

The evidence we need comes from the Bronze Age and the so-called 'palatial' period of Mycenaean culture in Greece (1400–1200 BCE), which roughly coincides with the time when the ancient Greeks believed the Trojan War took place. During this period, at least ten states were likely ruled by a 'lord' or *wanax* from large complexes that archaeologists designate as 'palaces'. The title *wanax* has been found written on clay tablets inscribed with a pre-alphabetic script, known as 'Linear B', composed of syllabograms, logograms and punctuation; they record shipments of goods into and out of the palatial centres. First deciphered in the 1950s, they are now recognised as the earliest attested form of the Greek language.

The Mycenaean palace sites were characterised by monumental fortifications built from massive limestone boulders.