

TRANSFORMING SPARTA: NEW APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF SPARTAN SOCIETY

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This article started life as a talk to the UK Joint Association of Classical Teachers, Ancient History INSET day, at University College, London in September 2012. I am grateful to the editor for inviting me to update and adapt it for the use of teachers and students of Ancient History in New South Wales.¹ My article focuses upon a number of topics central to the NSW Ancient History Stage 6 Syllabus Part II: ‘Ancient Societies’, Option I ‘Greece: Spartan society to the Battle of Leuctra 371 BC’. Some of the material on Spartan life may also be useful background for Part IV: ‘Historical Periods’, Option G ‘Greece: The development of the Greek world 800–500 BC’, section 2 ‘Athens and Sparta’ (which embraces the emergence and development of the *polis* in Sparta).

My article starts with the words ‘Transforming Sparta’; and its main purpose is to communicate and analyse a number of radical new approaches which have transformed academic understandings of Spartan society over the last generation. The article has three parts. Part 1 outlines how Spartan historical studies have developed since World War II and why they are currently in an exciting state of debate. It also discusses the academic and institutional context of the transformation of Spartan studies. Part 2 (the longest part) examines the details of the radical new understandings of classical Sparta mentioned above, focussing on new approaches to the ancient literary sources and on new insights into diverse aspects of Spartan society. Finally, in Part 3, I look at a further new and growing feature of Spartan studies which can enliven teaching and learning in the classroom: the study of modern receptions of Sparta and especially its role in 21st-century popular culture. I conclude with a few words about the recent graphic novel *Three* (2014), the product of collaboration between a comics author and an academic aimed at creating an authentic fictional representation of Spartan society.

¹ It also gives me great pleasure to publish this article in a journal graced by many distinguished Australian ancient historians, in particular by the eminent Spartan expert Douglas Kelly, who contributed a myth-busting article on Sparta to one of the journal’s earliest issues (Kelly 1972/1982). A number of the radical ideas about the character of Spartiate daily life suggested in section 2.4 below have their origins in his revisionist article on Spartan policy-making in the Australian academic journal *Antichthon* (Kelly 1981), which greatly influenced my thinking as an early career scholar.

The NSW HSC examiners regularly report that ‘Spartan Society’ is one of the most popular options within the Ancient History paper. That popularity and enthusiasm are fully matched within the 21st-century academy.

1. The transformation of Spartan studies since WWII

The current state of Spartan studies is nicely summarised in Nigel Kennell’s recent book, *Spartans: A New History* (2010), which briefly incorporates many of the new approaches into its survey of Spartan history.

In recent years ... the traditional view of Sparta has come under increasingly intense scrutiny as historians and archaeologists apply new techniques, perspectives, and even occasionally new pieces of evidence ...

As a result, the long-standing consensus over the fundamental nature of Spartan society has begun to crumble. In its place, intense debate has arisen over each and every facet of what we thought we knew about Sparta and the Spartans ... In other words, Sparta is “hot.” But the ferment in Spartan scholarship has a downside. In no other area of ancient Greek history is there a greater gulf between the common conception of Sparta and what specialists believe and dispute (Kennell 2010, 2).

How has this intense and radical debate come to develop? The reasons go beyond individual scholarly choices and are rooted in 20th-century political history and in changes within the contemporary academy.

1.1 ‘Theme park’ images

The story begins with the legacy of Sparta’s role during the Third Reich, when many Nazi leaders and ideologues appropriated Sparta as a charter for their educational, social and military policies, with the support of certain leading German classical scholars (Losemann 2012; Roche 2012; 2013, chs 8–9). In the generation after World War II, Sparta’s Nazi associations made it an uncomfortable, even a taboo, subject within Western European scholarship, transforming a previously flourishing field into an academic wasteland. Not until the late 1960s was there a partial revival of interest, primarily in Britain, where short books on Sparta were published by scholars such as A.H.M. Jones (1967) and W.G. Forrest (1968).

Despite this mini-revival, serious research on Sparta remained merely an occasional activity. Until the mid-1980s most books were one-off works by senior scholars who, having already made their reputations on other topics, briefly turned their attention to Sparta before moving on to pastures new. It is unsurprising that the depictions of Spartan society in such works were often

superficial and repeated a standard set of somewhat simplistic ‘theme park’ images. The quotations below give a couple of representative examples:

The famous discipline of the Spartans ... is undoubtedly very ancient fundamentally and has close analogies with the customs of many primitive warrior tribes throughout the world (Jones 1967, 34).

... both Spartan and Kretan customs were inherited from their common tribal past ... all these had been handed down through the generations as have similar institutions among the Masai in Kenya, the Zulus or the Red Indians (Forrest 1968, 53).

Note the warrior imagery, the picture of an unchanging society whose institutions were primitive survivals, and the overall impression of peculiarity, reinforced by comparative associations with ‘primitive warrior tribes’.

1.2 Seminal influences

There were, however, two exceptional studies in this period which set new historical agendas and exercised a seminal influence on subsequent research. An article by Moses Finley (originally 1968, but subsequently much-republished) directly challenged the prevalent ‘theme park’ images. Finley argued that, far from primitive survivals, Sparta’s classical institutions were the product of radical change—what he called the “sixth-century revolution”—and that Spartan society continued to be marked by tensions, conflicts and changes. He also argued that few of Sparta’s institutions were in themselves unique: what *was* unique was their combination into a common way of life lived by all Spartiates. A substantial chapter in Geoffrey de Ste. Croix’s book, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (1972, ch. IV), challenged standard images of Sparta less explicitly, but equally effectively, by providing the first close examination of Spartan policy-making and the formal and informal political relationships, such as patronage, which conditioned it. His account blew apart the simple stock images by showing the detailed and complex working of ‘real-life’ Sparta.

However, the impact of these one-off publications was far from immediate. It took the concerted work of Paul Cartledge from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s to make a significant difference. Cartledge was the first post-war ancient historian to make Sparta the central focus of his research, authoring three academic books (Cartledge 1979/2002; 1987; Cartledge & Spawforth 1989/2002) and around 20 articles, many of them collected in his *Spartan Reflections* (2001). His recent works of popular dissemination, such as his *The Spartans: An Epic History* (2002), rest largely on this earlier research. Cartledge’s work transformed Spartan studies by extending Ste. Croix’s close

study of Spartan politics to a range of social aspects, such as literacy, women, and pederasty, providing the first detailed and nuanced understanding of Spartan life. His use of anthropology critiqued notions of primitive survivals and Spartan conservatism: he fully embraced Finley's "sixth-century revolution". Nevertheless, his work held onto certain earlier views, primarily because of his emphasis on the overriding importance of the Spartiates' exploitation of the helots and their consequent class struggle. For Cartledge, Sparta's control over the helots was an exceptional and highly fragile form of domination, which compelled the Spartiates to regiment themselves into a uniquely state-controlled and military way of life. Hence in his work some of the earlier orthodoxies—especially the ideas of Spartan peculiarity and militarism—remained firmly in place.

1.3 Radical challenges

I have highlighted the major legacy of Paul Cartledge's research, partly because of its importance, but partly because the latest approaches frequently critique the orthodoxies he retained. My own research from the mid-1980s onwards has highlighted ways in which Sparta was less peculiar and exceptional than normally believed. My work in the 1980s and 1990s contended, for example, that the major developments in archaic and classical Sparta frequently paralleled similar developments elsewhere in ancient Greece, albeit often taken to their logical extreme (Hodkinson 1997a). I also argued that, despite the public character of the Spartiates' common way of life, their system of landed property remained a normal Greek system of private ownership and inheritance (Hodkinson 1986; updated in 2000, ch. 3). For further details, see Section 2.2.3 below.

In recent years my research has moved towards more radical perspectives, concluding that Sparta's public institutions and austere lifestyle in operation during the classical period were—on the long view—a temporary imposition upon a more enduring privately-oriented, wealth-based society. Already by the later fifth century Sparta was being transformed back into a plutocratic society, as she had previously been before the "sixth-century revolution" (2000, ch. 13). In similar vein, I have challenged the standard belief that a Spartiate's everyday life was dominated by his public duties, primarily geared towards military training and war, arguing that Spartan citizens devoted equal, if not more, time and attention not only to their broader civic duties but also to their private affairs (Hodkinson 2006, 130–47; 2009, 448–55).

The other main radical challenges to traditional orthodoxies have come from the eminent French scholar, Jean Ducat. Mostly written in his native language, Ducat's publications have not had the full impact among Anglophone audiences that they deserve. This particularly applies to his important monograph, *Les Hilotes* (1990). Rigorously exposing the misleading presuppositions of ancient writers, Ducat disputes many of the supposed certainties of Spartiate-helot relations, arguing that the helots were privately rather than publicly owned, albeit that there was a larger than normal degree of communal constraint over what individual Spartiate masters could do with their helots. In his view, this made the helots' overall position typically more favourable than the 'total exploitation' of chattel slaves elsewhere in Greece, despite the occasional predations of the *krypteia*. Ducat's *Spartan Education* (2006a)—happily published in English translation—applies a similar critical method to Sparta's public upbringing, emphasising how, far from constituting the boys' entire education, it covered mainly its physical aspects, running in parallel with private educational arrangements for the boys' *paideia* similar to those in other Greek *poleis*.

Such radical new approaches, with their tendency to 'normalise' Sparta, have changed the face of Spartan studies; but we should not, of course, fall into the trap of assuming that 'new approaches' automatically mean 'better approaches'. In his comments, quoted above, Kennell rightly refers to "what specialists believe *and dispute*": some specialists still hold firm to older views. The lack of native Spartan sources often precludes certainty: hence the difference between newer and older interpretations is frequently one of competing plausibilities. Positively embracing the creative tension between current divergent views, my edited volume *Sparta: Comparative Approaches* includes a debate between myself and Mogens Hansen, former Director of the Copenhagen Polis Centre, for and against recent challenges to the orthodoxy that Sparta was an exceptional *polis* (Hodkinson ed. 2009, chs. 11–13). These fundamental disagreements between leading scholars make Sparta an especially exciting topic for engaging students in thought-provoking debate!

1.4 New research and publishing landscapes

The other main influence that has altered the face of Spartan studies is significant changes in the landscape of academic research and publishing. This new landscape is the product of four main factors. First, as Sparta's Nazi associations have faded with the passage of time, there has been a global resurgence of international Spartan scholarship, which started in the mid-1980s and has continued to grow exponentially. From a low point of only six

books on Spartan history published throughout the entire world in the 1950s, there were around 20 books published in the 1990s and almost 40 in the 2000s.

Much of this resurgence has operated within the traditional model of the lone scholar pursuing his or her individual research. However, the second game-changer over the last generation has been the dramatic growth of collaborative interactions between scholars of different nationalities. Before the late 1980s there had been no major international scholarly gatherings on ancient Sparta. Since then there have been multiple conferences of the International Sparta Seminar, co-founded by Anton Powell and myself, which has now produced seven collective volumes.² Bringing together cutting-edge research on Spartan history by almost 50 scholars from thirteen different countries, one notable feature is that they make available to Anglophone audiences the translated work of leading foreign academics who normally publish only in their own languages. There have also been a number of international conferences and collective publications in the field of Lakonian archaeology, several of them sponsored by the British School at Athens, which include important work by scholars from the Greek Archaeological Service and Greek universities.³

The third new factor has been the creation of two recent formal team collaborations, both at the University of Nottingham. One is my ongoing research project *Sparta in Comparative Perspective: Ancient to Modern*, funded by the UK Arts & Humanities Research Council (2004–10): <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/classics/research/projects/sparta.aspx>>. The project combines the study of ancient Sparta in comparative historical perspective with how modern Western thought has appropriated Sparta as a comparative model.⁴ The other team collaboration is the *Centre for Spartan and Peloponnesian Studies* (www.nottingham.ac.uk/csps), founded in 2005 and bringing together researchers in Nottingham's Departments of Archaeology and Classics. The Centre has held several of its conferences in the city of modern Sparta, communicating recent research to the wider public in the city and working with the local Municipality to support its cultural

² Powell ed. 1989; Powell and Hodkinson eds 1994; Hodkinson and Powell eds 1999; Powell and Hodkinson eds 2002; Figueira ed. 2004; Hodkinson and Powell eds 2006; Powell and Hodkinson eds 2010.

³ Sanders ed. 1992; Palagia and Coulson eds 1993; Cavanagh and Walker eds 1998; Cavanagh, Gallou and Georgiadis eds 2009.

⁴ Hodkinson ed. 2009; Hodkinson and Macgregor Morris eds 2012. For the project's other publications, see <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/classics/documents/sparta/spartaprojectpublications.doc>>.

heritage policies. The Centre has also started moving Spartan research into the digital era by making some of its work freely available as online open access publications: <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/csps/open-source/index.aspx>>.

The final factor has been a greatly increased focus on Sparta within more traditional forms of academic publishing. Leading this trend has been the Classical Press of Wales (CPW), an independent press founded by Anton Powell in 1993. By publishing the edited volumes of the International Sparta Seminar and the *Sparta in Comparative Perspective* project, as well as several single-authored books on Spartan history and reception, the CPW has played a major role in underpinning the renaissance of Sparta as a major field of current research. In France, the ancient history journal *Ktèma*, co-founded in 1976 by another leading Sparta expert, Edmond Lévy, has published collections of articles on Spartan history in several of its issues.⁵

In sum, within the last generation Spartan studies have been transformed from an occasional activity by a handful of mainly British scholars to a global enterprise marked by co-ordinated international collaborations, a dedicated research centre and research project, and its own specialist publisher. This transformation and the intensive exchange of ideas between scholars from around the world, now powerfully facilitated by electronic communications, form the basis for the current exciting ferment in Spartan research.

2. Spartan society to the Battle of Leuctra 371 BC: New Approaches

So what are the key new approaches relevant to the ‘Spartan Society’ option in the NSW HSC syllabus? My discussion will focus above all on Sparta in the Classical period, the fifth and early fourth centuries BC. I will structure my analysis around the following syllabus bullet points, drawn mostly from Section 2 ‘Social structure and political organisation’, but including important elements from Section 3 ‘The economy’, Section 5 ‘Cultural life’ and Section 6 ‘Everyday life’.

- Greek writers’ views of Sparta (section 5)
- Social structure: Spartiates, *perioeci*, ‘inferiors’, helots (section 2)
 - including land ownership (from section 3)
- Educational system: *agoge* (section 2)
- Daily life and leisure activities (section 6)

⁵ *Ktèma* 2 (1977); 12 (1987); 27 (2002); 30 (2005); 32 (2007); 38 (2013).

- including the military and *sysitia* (from section 2)
- Role and status of women: land ownership, inheritance (section 2)
 - including marriage customs (from section 6)

2.1 Greek writers' views of Sparta

I start with the views of Greek writers because, given the limited surviving archaeological and epigraphical evidence from the fifth and fourth centuries, our understanding of Spartan society in this period rests primarily on how we interpret the literary texts. I shall mainly focus on the views of *contemporary* sources. Valuable though the evidence of later writers like Plutarch and Pausanias can sometimes be, the last generation of research has demonstrated that their evidence is frequently distorted by invented traditions originating in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, eras when Sparta's institutions and practices no longer existed in their Classical form. In particular, we must resist the temptation to treat the most complete account of Spartan society—that in Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*—as our most reliable guide to the realities of fifth- and fourth-century Spartiate life. On the surface, its account may appear a model of coherence and plausibility. However, where it can be compared with earlier sources, it frequently proves to be a misleading companion: most notoriously, on the subject of land tenure and inheritance. Although Plutarch was well-read in earlier writings, specialist studies of his working techniques have shown how he often actively adapted and altered his source material, sometimes reshaping its contents, sometimes transferring material to other contexts, sometimes simplifying complex information, sometimes adding made-up detail (Pelling 1980/2002). These comments certainly apply to his lives of Lysander and Agesilaos. Although Plutarch's account is grounded in attested historical events, he selects which episodes to record and interprets their significance in accordance with his moral interpretation of Sparta's decline (D.R. Shipley 1997).

A more authentic understanding of classical Sparta must be constructed primarily from the evidence of fifth- and fourth-century writers; but that itself is no simple task. In the absence of native Spartan sources, our contemporary literary evidence comes exclusively from external commentators, most of them Athenians or writers like Herodotus influenced by Athenian perspectives, during a period when Athens had developed an assertive democratic regime and the two *poleis* were imperial rivals.

The resulting distortions were recognised over 80 years ago in François Ollier's ground-breaking work *Le Mirage Spartiate* (1933–43). However, not until the 1990s did scholars begin to take full account of the implications of