

This is a student paper from a 300-level history course, "Historians and Historical Methodology" which teaches writing and research skills with a focus on historical interpretations. The author was a junior, and his faculty mentor was Professor Dallas DeForest. This historiographical paper is a critical examination of what past historians have had to say about the roles and status of women in classical Sparta. Though formatted slightly differently for this journal, the style guide used for this paper was Kate L. Turabian's Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, which is typical of papers in this discipline.

Roles of Mothers in Classical Sparta

Kevin A. Buenrostro

This paper proposes an examination of the development of women's social status in classical Sparta, particularly investigating how Sparta's unique martial social composition shaped the roles and values of women. The women of ancient Sparta achieved an unparalleled level of fame or, perhaps better put, "infamy" in the ancient world for their brazen disregard for Hellenic patriarchal conventions. Worse yet, to outside observers, male Spartans appeared perfectly content to let their women "run wild." The ancient historian Xenophon observed, "Nowhere else did the state lavish such attention on women than in Sparta."¹ While chauvinistic beliefs were not exceptional in the ancient Mediterranean, it must have seemed like the ultimate paradox to ancient Greeks to reconcile Spartan discipline and piety with laissez-faire sexual norms. Naturally, this paper borrows the same line of inquiry ancient observers adopted: why did this macho warrior society afford such liberties to women? However, when considering the Spartan state's goals and their unique economic system, the rationale behind their egalitarian practices becomes clear. This analysis will substantiate the logic underpinning Laconian law and highlight the unrivaled freedom and status Spartan women enjoyed at the zenith of their civilization.

While the history of ancient Sparta enjoys a great deal of public interest, there is little in the form of primary source accounts to distinguish historical realities and what papyrologist Sarah B. Pomeroy calls the "Spartan mirage."² A "mirage" is perhaps too dismissive of the military and social innovations Sparta developed, but too often, popular accounts gloss over or leave out entirely the numerous failures and shortcomings of Laconia. Moreover, while the story of the "brave 300" and similar heroic tales do lend themselves to the big screen, scrupulous history writers (amateurs included) must be honest with their audience and inform them upfront that we are working for the most part with limited resources. In this sense, Pomeroy is right to note that the task of distinguishing fact and fiction is arduous with a civilization that always preferred the sword to the pen. Indeed, the sources concerning Sparta are minimal compared to their Athenian rivals. Ancient Laconia is obscured further by the primary source writers' proclivity to write prescriptively rather than descriptively.³ Nevertheless, historians like Pomeroy and Paul Cartledge, two leading authorities in the world of classics and ancient history, give credence to the firsthand accounts archivists have at their disposal.⁴ One more final caveat concerning the evidence used in this paper is that the women and men referenced unless

¹ Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Spartan Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), vi.

² *Ibid.*, Viii.

³ *Ibid.*, Viii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, X.

otherwise specified are Spartans of the highest civil order, that is, full-fledged citizens who completed the state-run education system (agōgē). Since little is known about Messinian and Laconian helots' (serfs) daily lives, it is impossible to infer if the customs practiced in Sparta proper extended to them.⁵ However, their functions in Laconian society are well known and are essential to understanding Spartan civilization.

The Spartans immigrated from northern Greece into the lush Laconian valley sometime around 1,000 B.C.E.⁶ They are descendants of the three Doric tribes Gylleia, Dymanes, and Pamphyloi. Spartans continued to revere Doric Olympian Gods, Apollo foremost among them, depicting them with weapons and armor, emblematic of Spartan concerns and values. Upon arrival, the Spartans launched a series of wars against the native inhabitants, succeeding in conquering Laconia and then Messenia. Sparta controlled the largest terrestrial territory in Classical Greece, some 8,000 square kilometers, three times more than Athens and twice the area of Syracuse, the second-largest landowner.⁷ Sparta outsourced all agricultural and domestic work to the formerly free inhabitants of the land, relegating them to a hereditary and immutable state of serfdom. Cartledge argues that the Helot system is the single most consequential institution Sparta developed.⁸ The Helots outnumbered Spartan citizens ten to one by some estimates. Consequently, Sparta created a military master caste forbidden from pursuing any other trade or profession other than war to maintain control over this formidable hostile labor force. Indeed, the fear of slave rebellion informed

the entire Spartan political, military, social and economic structure.⁹ Lycurgus, Sparta's mythical lawgiver, is credited for codifying the legal and educational system. The Lycurgan code's introduction shifted Spartan citizens' psychological makeup, injecting a novel concept of participatory citizenship and overarching communal fealty.¹⁰ Indocination became a prerequisite for inclusion, so every child, boy or girl, entered into the agōgē at the age of seven and remained until the age of eighteen.¹¹

The agōgē entailed different ultimate outcomes for each gender. It functioned as a crucible for males, often breaking the weak, while mentally and physically refining those worthy of donning Spartan crimson. Conversely, the agōgē transformed young girls into patriotic and equally resilient women responsible for providing the state with future generations of hoplites.¹² While females' physical requirements were not as unforgiving as the males', they performed similar daily training in the typical nude fashion.¹³ Women trained in the javelin, discus, sprint, and horseback racing, just like their male counterparts. These Olympic events have a precise application to warfare, in which women did not engage, so it is not self-evident why women were expected to be proficient. Spartan eugenic beliefs likely held that athletic mothers produced athletic sons, but more importantly, Spartan women educated their sons and daughters during their early childhood. Therefore, mothers needed to be exemplary both in virtue and skill. The latter point is particularly relevant to Spartan society since Spartan law forbade husbands from living at home until they

⁵ Ibid., X.

⁶ Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2003), 28.

⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹¹ Ibid., 29.

¹² Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 4.

¹³ Ibid., 14.

turned thirty.¹⁴ This unique Laconian tenet afforded women a great deal of autonomy and independence. Additionally, unlike other Poleis, Spartan girls were not rushed off to marriage at a young age but instead married after turning eighteen. While husbands lived at the barracks with their units, wives managed their families' landholdings and continued to do so even after the husband came home.¹⁵ The division of responsibilities to the state, i.e., mother and steward vs. soldier and husband, produced a healthy level of mutual respect between husbands and wives, which organically seeded egalitarian beliefs in Spartan society.

The work of Xenophon is the single most illuminating synopsis concerning Laconian culture. His careful examination concerning women's lives and roles substantiates most of the observations and arguments made in this paper. As a native Athenian, Xenophon is particularly suited to note Spartan peculiarities. Athens is categorically Sparta's opposite and therefore serves as an excellent point of reference to highlight Laconian divergences from Greek norms. However, to uncover the attitudes of Spartan women, the best source is Plutarch. Few women are quoted in ancient history, but Plutarch makes an exception for Sparta. The fascinating collection of "Sayings of Spartan Women" in Plutarch's history of Sparta provides insight into these legendary women's psychology.

It is revelatory that numerous ancient historians like Plutarch, Xenophon, and even Aristotle (men not renowned for their regard for females) made Spartan women a focus in their dissertations on Laconia. Modern historians likewise are captivated by these extraordinary ancient ladies. Professor

Cartledge goes as far as proclaiming that Spartan women were "The most remarkable women in all of Greece."¹⁶ Aristotle, however, is not as charitable as the professor. In his second book on politics, he remarks with disdain, Sparta is *gunaikokratoumenoi* 'ruled by their women.'¹⁷ Preceding Sparta's dramatic decline following the Peloponnesian wars, Aristotle argued that female emancipation ultimately led to the fall of what was once the most feared poleis in the Mediterranean.¹⁸ Given the extremity of patriarchal social norms in classical Greece, Aristotle's line of reasoning is understandable. However, a careful study of Lyncurgan law and Spartan economic conditions leads to a very different conclusion. Rather than acting as a catalyst for Sparta's fall, women, particularly Spartan mothers, animated Laconian civilization by embracing their maternal duty and imparting the Spartan ethos to future generations of hoplites. If distilled to its essential elements, the entire edifice of Spartan society exists to achieve two interdependent goals. One, to produce elite patriotic warriors, and two, to maintain control over the helot population.¹⁹ Every Laconian convention is a consequence of these two objectives. The institution of Spartan motherhood is one of the most significant in achieving these state goals.

The decision to segment Sparta's female population along reproductive lines mirrors ancient Laconian inter-gender discriminations.²⁰ While the highest calling of every boy born in Classical Sparta was that of a warrior, the noblest pursuit for girls was motherhood.²¹ In these two imperative yet polar roles (givers and takers of life), mothers and soldiers received the same degree of

¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁶ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 32.

¹⁷ Ibid., 125.

¹⁸ Paul Cartledge, "Spartan Wives: Liberation or Licence?," *The Classical Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1981):86.

¹⁹ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 28.

²⁰ Ibid., 125.

²¹ Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 51.

respect and admiration from society. Spartan burial customs best exemplify the ultimate expression of this state of equilibrium. In true Laconic fashion, grave markers were considered too decadent for Spartan taste.²² However, women who died in childbirth and men who perished in battle are the exceptions to the rule.²³ Sparta's famed religious piety makes this gesture all the more meaningful. This custom implies that the loss of a mother or a soldier is of equal significance to the polis. Nevertheless, why revere Spartan mothers to such a high degree if all other Greek women ostensibly possessed reproductive value? It is because motherhood in Sparta went well past the act of childbirth.

The Spartan Oikos (family) model differentiated vastly from other poleis. In the ancient Mediterranean, the family unit concerned itself with the perpetuation of the male line and prosperity.²⁴ Since Spartan law impeded commerce, the economic aspect of marriage is largely irrelevant. Plutarch makes a similar observation noting that all other familial obligations are secondary to reproduction and the common good in Sparta.²⁵ However, rather than diminishing the value of women in the household, economic freedom elevated the importance of motherhood.²⁶ With a permanent servile workforce (helots), Spartan women enjoyed the luxury of free time. With all the extra time and energy, women devoted themselves to fulfilling their sacred duty to the state. Maternal devotion is characterized by education, personal health/wellness, and eugenic-oriented matrimonial selection.²⁷ In these three realms, mothers were active

players, proud of their role and defensive over unnecessary male intervention.²⁸ Thus, while males monopolized military duty, mothers ensured a steady supply of honorable and strong sons joined their ranks.

Laconian marriage customs unfold as a consequence of the two Spartan imperatives (production of elite soldiers and control of helots). As previously mentioned, Spartan girls did not marry until their bodies developed fully, no younger than 18, and married men just a few years older. The underlying motive behind this tenet stems from a Lycurgan decree which admonishes couples to marry at their physical peak.²⁹ It is instructive to keep in mind that Sparta gained a reputation in the Peloponnese for producing excellent hunting dogs and horses.³⁰ Hence, they applied similar principles of animal husbandry to matrimony. Indeed, eugenic beliefs and practices colored much of Spartan society, even down to naming their public education system *agōgē* literally "the raising of cattle."³¹ The practice of polygamy is one of many outgrowths of state eugenic practices.

While the *agōgē* and male infanticide effectively culled the adult male population of virtually all weak or disabled potential mates, some men married later in life or were incapable of producing heirs of their own. Nevertheless, Spartan law compelled such men to find a vigorous suiter for his young wife. Husbands consulted their wives throughout the selection process until they both felt satisfied with their choice.³² In keeping with eugenic assumptions, such couples favored young Olympic champions

²² Matthew Dillon, "Were Spartan Women Who Died in Childbirth Honoured with Grave Inscriptions?" *Hermes* 135, no. 2 (2007): 3.

²³ Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 52.

²⁴ Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, n.d.), 62.

²⁵ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 169.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁷ Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁹ Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, Chapter 1

³⁰ Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 33.

³¹ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 32.

³² Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 44.

and warriors known for their bravery. Conversely, men called "tremblers," who displayed fear in a battle, were not only dishonorably discharged from service but forbidden from marrying or having children.³³ Facilitated by a general egalitarian disposition, the practice of polyamory flourished and maximized the procreative ability of fertile women.³⁴ So important was the reproductive window that Spartan law is conspicuously devoid of adultery restrictions.³⁵ Moreover, women quickly remarried if their husbands met an untimely death. Gorgo, the famous wife of King Leonidas on the day that the 300 Spartan knights set off on the suicidal mission to delay the Persian army at Thermopylae, is quoted by Plutarch to ask her doomed husband what she should do; and he said, "Marry a good man, and bear good children."³⁶ Spartan men (even kings) were replaceable, but a capable mother was not.

The likelihood of early death of her spouse in battle is partially the reason Spartan mothers ascended so high in the social hierarchy. Gorgo herself says nothing that contradicts Aristotle's accusation of "gynecocracy." On the contrary, the queen justifies female authority. In another famous account, Gorgo is asked by a woman of Attica, "Why is it that you Spartan women are the only women that lord it over your men?" to which Gorgo replied, "Because we are the only women that are mothers of men."³⁷ However, it is not the act of childbirth that affords prestige to Spartan mothers but their commitment to maximizing the physical potential of their

offspring and their foundational contribution of imparting Spartan virtue.

As Spartans well understood from horse breeding, well-fed and physically fit mares produce healthy foals. Naturally, females enjoyed a nutritious diet and performed daily physical exercise.³⁸ Conversely, "In other states the girls who are destined to become mothers...live on the very plainest fare, with a meagre allowance of delicacies."³⁹ Not only did female Spartans eat more than Athenian girls, but they even ate better than Spartan men.⁴⁰ Holding the Spartan belief that personal physical fitness contributes directly to eugenic fitness, the implication of purposely feeding females more than males suggests that Spartans believed a good portion of offspring physicality comes from the maternal line. Moreover, the *agōgē* facilitated competition between females in "races and trials of strength for women competitors as for men, believing that if both parents are strong, they produce more vigorous offspring."⁴¹ Women took their physical state very seriously, performing daily calisthenics and Olympic event training even while pregnant or advanced in age.⁴² These social carrots and sticks were designed to populate "Sparta with a race of men remarkable for their size and strength."⁴³ Xenophon assumed his contemporaries were well aware of the superb athleticism of Spartan men from their reputation in war and Olympic games, but he offered to his readers the theory that maternal quality in Sparta was a contributing factor for their domination in sport and battle.⁴⁴ Still, the physical contributions of mothers was only half of

³³ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 163

³⁴ Andrew G. Scott, "Plural Marriage And The Spartan State." *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 60, no. 4 (2011): 413.

³⁵ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 169.

³⁶ Plutarch, *Sayings of Spartan Women*, 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁸ Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 53.

³⁹ Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, 1.4.

⁴⁰ Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 53.

⁴¹ Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, 1.5.

⁴² Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 52.

⁴³ Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, 1.10

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.4.

their role in the development of elite hoplite warriors.

In the critical years of early childhood, mothers exclusively raised and prepared their children for the *agōgē*. Mothers physically and mentally conditioned their sons and daughters to endure the brutal eleven-year curriculum that all youths commenced at the age of seven. A son who failed to graduate or at the very least die in the process brought great shame to his family.⁴⁵ Therefore, mothers likely accustomed them to the lifestyle and physical demands necessary to survive. This assertion better illuminates female habits of martial training and physical fitness. However, primary sources are not ambiguous in the assertion that mothers took care to transfuse the Spartan ethos into their children.⁴⁶ Good moms ensured their sons and daughters understood that their fealty was not to their family but the state. Neither their family nor their polis would tolerate any demonstration of selfishness or cowardice. To the Spartans, the maxim "death before dishonor" was taken literally. Take, for example, the account of one woman who was told by a messenger that all of her five sons perished in battle. To this, she responded, "I did not inquire about that, you vile varlet, but how fares our country?" And when he declared that it was victorious, "Then," she said, "I accept gladly also the death of my

sons."⁴⁷ Of these unbreakable mothers, boys first received their education in what it meant to be a Spartan.

It is no wonder why Spartan women so captivate both ancient and modern historians. Not only were they singular among their peers, but it is impossible to appreciate Spartan history without understanding female societal functions. While the reasons for the fall of Sparta are disputable, Aristotle's "libertine" hypothesis does not recognize the rationale employed by Spartan law that warrants egalitarian gender norms. For Sparta to achieve military supremacy, women could not be marginalized to a domestic existence. In many ways, the role of Spartan men is less complicated than that of women. To the Spartan hoplite, war was all he knew, and he trained himself according to his profession. However, mothers trained for the good of their children and to live an exemplary life based on the Spartan creed. They were willing to sacrifice anything from the physical touch of their husband to the lives of their sons and daughters for the good of Laconia. Far from being the fatal flaw in Spartan society, the autonomy afforded to mothers contributed as much if not more to sustaining Laconian civilization as the deadly phalanx.

⁴⁵ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 169.

⁴⁶ Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 57.

⁴⁷ Plutarch, *Sayings of Spartan Women*, 7.

Bibliography

Primary

Plutarch. "Plutarch, Sayings of Spartan Women."

https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Sayings_of_Spartan_Women*.html#unknown.30.

Xenophon. "Xenophon, Constitution of the Lacedaemonians, Chapter 1."

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0210%3Atext%3DConst.%20Lac.%3Achapter%3D1>.

Secondary

Cartledge, Paul. "Spartan Wives: Liberation or Licence?" *The Classical Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1981): 84–105.

———. *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece, from*

Utopia to Crisis and Collapse. 1st ed. Woodstock, N.Y: Overlook Press, 2003.

Dillon, Matthew. "Were Spartan Women Who Died in Childbirth Honoured with Grave Inscriptions?" *Hermes* 135, no. 2 (2007): 149–65.

Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. Westminster: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Schocken Books, Vintage Digital, 2011.

———. *Spartan Women*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Scott, Andrew G. "Plural Marriage And The Spartan State." *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 60, no. 4 (2011): 413–24.