

Can we ever get beyond the Spartan 'mirage'?

Maximilien Robespierre once said that "Sparta shines like a lightning-flash amid vast darkneses."¹ This quote perfectly encapsulates the far-reaching, long-lasting impact of the Spartans, but from where did Robespierre obtain this glossy, heroic image of Sparta and their hegemony almost 2,500 years earlier? In keeping with their famously Laconic speech, the Spartans published few works of their own, and almost everything we know about them comes from either their contemporaries, or from writers centuries later. Furthermore, the Spartan identity has been perverted and misappropriated repeatedly throughout history. Given all this, is it really possible for us to see beyond what François Ollier coined in 1933 as "Le mirage Spartiate"?

To unravel this mystery, we must begin with the earliest form of the mirage: that seen by the Greek world at the time of the Spartans. Although the "Spartan mirage" is a modern term, the concept was still present in classical antiquity. The external view of the Spartans has been very much influenced by a select few authors, most notably Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and the later biographer Plutarch, but problems arise when using any of these authors as a source on Sparta. Herodotus is prone to exaggeration in order to tell a compelling story, while Thucydides' judgement may have been clouded by his having fought against the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War. Contrastingly, Xenophon, although born in Attica, admired the Spartan way of life to such an extent that he moved there and enrolled his sons in the agoge. While Plutarch is exempt from such accusations of contemporary bias,

¹ <https://medium.com/@meanyp/early-americas-spartan-romance-c3328e38e646>

the fact that he was writing 400 years after the Spartan heyday suggests that his histories may not be as factually dependable as the others who wrote their works based on first-hand experience.

In Herodotus' most famous passage about the Spartans, his account of their last stand at Thermopylae, he describes the '*thaumasta*' (remarkable achievements) of Leonidas and his famed 300 Spartans who sacrificed their lives in order to hinder Xerxes' invasion of the rest of Greece. One way in which Herodotus contributes to the mirage is by describing the Spartans almost as a foreign race whose rituals and practices, such as combing their hair² and wrestling naked before a battle, would need explaining to the rest of the Greeks. This tells us that by this point in history there was already a sense of mysticism surrounding the Spartans. Furthermore, it is possible that through their isolationist policies, such as using brittle iron (which only had value in Sparta) instead of silver as currency, they deliberately separated themselves from the rest of Greek society, and in doing so contributed to their own sense of mysticism.

However, Herodotus spares no expense in painting the Spartans as immensely heroic, saying that they fought so bravely against the Persians that "they made it clear to everyone, especially the king himself, that among so many people he had few *men*."³ Their valiant efforts are even described in Iliadic terms, although while the Greeks fighting the Trojans for Patroclus' body are said to have pushed back their enemy three times,⁴ Herodotus claims that with their "manly virtue," the

² Herodotus, 7.208

³ <https://academic.oup.com/book/42084/chapter-abstract/356005946?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

⁴ Iliad 18.155-8

Spartans repulsed the Persian army four times⁵ in a bid to retain the body of Leonidas. Here, Herodotus elevates the Spartans to the level of the demigods who fought in the Trojan War, in order to make them seem not entirely mortal, and contributing significantly to their "othering".

Herodotus also contributes to our understanding of the Spartans through the anecdotes he attributes to them, perhaps the most famous being Dienece's response to being told at Thermopylae that the Persians were so many that their arrows would block out the sun. In classic laconic fashion, he reportedly replied "Good. We shall fight in the shade."⁶ Another example of Spartan wit which Herodotus records is how, after a lengthy speech by the Samians begging for help, the Spartans replied that the speech had been so long that they did not understand the end because they had forgotten the beginning.⁷ These anecdotes add to the idea that the Spartans were unlike the rest of the Greeks, and especially unlike the Athenians, who were famed for being loquacious, a difference which is clearly shown by Aristophanes' portrayal of the Spartans in his 'Lysistrata'.⁸

Herodotus perpetuated the Spartan mirage by circulating it to an audience wider than he can possibly have imagined. What is fascinating about Herodotus' accounts, however, is that they do not imply that the mirage is his creation, but instead a pre-existing phenomenon that he merely records for posterity. Thus, it becomes apparent that the mirage not only clouded the vision of later historians, but also that

⁵ Hdt 7.225

⁶ Hdt 7.226.

⁷ Hdt 3.46

⁸ Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 74-80, 1093-6

of the inhabitants of Classical Greece, whose perspective of the Spartans Herodotus relates to us.

The second Greek historian to discuss the Spartans at length was Thucydides, whose History of the Peloponnesian War places them front and centre, along with Athens. Perhaps due to his having been defeated by the Spartans at Amphipolis while serving as an Athenian general, Thucydides shows great respect for the Spartans, saying that "The Spartans meanwhile...exhorted each brave comrade".⁹ However, it is unsurprising that Thucydides grants his enemies this compliment, given that he is famed for his objective style of narrative. He also describes the renowned Spartan general Brasidas as "not incapable as a speaker, for a Lacedaemonian"¹⁰, which could be interpreted as a snide remark about the laconic manner of speech, or a genuine compliment to his great adversary, but through which he nonetheless perpetuates the stereotype of Spartans being unrefined speakers. Thucydides also attempted to dispel the mirage through detailed insights such as his description of Pausanias' controversial inscription on the Serpent Column¹¹ which was viewed as him placing himself above the rest of the Spartans and thus compromising their unity and strength. Through his account of the Spartan surrender on Sphacteria, Thucydides certainly calls into question their policy on capitulation, as it was astonishing to the whole of the Greek world that the Spartans were not only defeated, but also forced to surrender, an act which totally subverted

⁹ Thuc 5.69

¹⁰ Thuc 4.84.2

¹¹ Thuc 1.132

expectations. Here, Thucydides does a great deal to dispel the mirage, and through his accounts the Spartans lose some of their deific mysticism.

The third classical writer who played a part in the Spartan mirage was Xenophon. An Athenian-born commander, he led the army of mercenaries that almost captured Babylon in the 5th century BCE. Meanwhile, he developed a close bond with the Spartan King Agesilaus, and even fought against his homeland with the Spartans in the battle of Coronea, resulting in his exile from Athens. Although Xenophon was an historical and philosophical writer, Powell describes his motives as "not literary but political", calling him "a knowledgeable partisan of Sparta".¹² Indeed, Xenophon himself describes Sparta as "evidently the most powerful and celebrated city in Greece".¹³ He then ascribes this status to Lycurgus, the potentially fictional progenitor of the Spartan Constitution, and in doing so, Xenophon buys into the Spartan mirage through his assumption of Lycurgus' dubious existence and distributes it to a wider audience, perpetuating the mirage. On one hand, Xenophon's friendship with Agesilaus would have given him a unique perspective on Sparta, and thus his writings could potentially contain many truths due to his first-hand experience. On the other hand, perhaps Xenophon was a victim of the mirage, meaning his narratives may be marred by an unrealistic idolisation of the Spartan way of life. Either way, we can learn much from Xenophon, both as an historian and as someone who was influenced by, and in turn was essential in influencing, the later reception of the Spartans and their mirage.

¹² <https://classicsforall.org.uk/reading-room/book-reviews/xenophon-and-sparta>

¹³ Xen. Const. Lac. 1

Although our fourth author, Plutarch, wrote about the Spartans over 400 years after Xenophon, his writings are still integral to the mirage. Of his works, the one that pertains most to the Spartan mirage is his *Life of Lycurgus*. This work is fascinating because it attributes all of the qualities associated most closely with the Spartan mirage to one man who was allegedly responsible for Spartan austerity and their military lifestyle, along with their entire educational system. Although Plutarch presents this as factual, Lycurgus' existence is now doubted,¹⁴ and instead of being implemented by one man in a very short space of time, Sparta's constitution was likely more organic in its inception, growing over a number of centuries until the early 5th century BCE.

Plutarch's writings are still useful in exploring perspectives on the Spartans a few centuries after their heyday, especially the myriad of anecdotes which he retells, not all of them entirely believable. To aid his image of Spartan austerity, he tells us that when King Agesilaus saw rectangular-carved wooden beams supporting the roof of a house in Ionia, he sarcastically asked whether trees grew square there,¹⁵ suggesting that the Spartans deemed such practices decadent and unnecessary.

However, Plutarch certainly illustrates the darker side of Spartan life, including the most reviled of all the Spartan practices - eugenics. He tells us that new-born Spartan babies were taken to the council of elders, and if they were thought to be weak or disabled, they were taken to a remote place and left to die.¹⁶ However well-known this story is, it only appears in Plutarch, and thus its credibility is questionable,

¹⁴ <https://www.worldhistory.org/Lycurgus/>

¹⁵ Plut *Sayings of Agesilaus* 27

¹⁶ Plut *Life of Lycurgus* 16.1

as such a practice would almost certainly have been commented on by contemporary authors if Plutarch's claim had any merit. It is more likely that there was an accretion of the stories about Sparta in the 400 years following their heyday, resulting in a heavy distortion of the truth. However, the mere existence of the story, whether factual or fabricated, nonetheless represents views towards Sparta at the time. It is a chicken-and-egg scenario, wherein lies the question: did the stories create the mirage, or did the mirage create the stories? Either way, the mirage is shown to be most prevalent in Plutarch's time.

Plutarch is an excellent example of the Spartan mirage beginning to warp beyond recognition, as in his work we see the condensing of the stereotypical characteristics of the Spartans, such as their love of austerity and their laconic speech, along with a tendency towards stories with little historical foundation, exemplified by Plutarch's biography of a man whom he claims was alive nearly a millennium before him, but about whom we know almost nothing other than what Plutarch tells us. There is a clear contrast between classical Greek authors, even those with strong biases, and later historians living in the shadow of the battle of Leuctra, whose works were influenced by not only the dearth of writing by the Spartans themselves, but also by a kind of nostalgia for the Spartan heyday. However, over the next thousand years, the Spartan mirage would only increase in prevalence, as the image of Sparta would be misused and twisted beyond recognition by those who would appropriate it for their own gain.

One example of the inaccuracies which arose from the fanciful mirage is in John Lydgate's 15th century epic "Fall of Princes",¹⁷ in which he tells us that Leonidas "put proud Xerxes to flight", a ridiculous claim which is nonetheless indicative of the Spartans becoming so far removed from their origins that even apparently irrefutable facts became distorted and misreported. Indeed, the Spartans were deified to such an extent that in the 18th century Jean Jacques-Rousseau called Sparta a "Republic of demigods rather than men."¹⁸

However, the dark truth is that the Spartans have been idolised far beyond the point of historical inaccuracy, especially in the last 200 years, with regard to their alleged practice of eugenics. In 1928, Adolf Hitler lauded the Spartan custom of exposing weak or disabled babies to die, calling it "the best example of the racial policy."¹⁹ In April 1945, just a month before his suicide, he even went as far as to say that "A desperate fight will always be remembered as a worthy example...just think of Leonidas and his 300 Spartans."²⁰ This is perhaps the clearest example of the Spartan mirage being weaponised for ideological purposes, and it is ironic that Hitler so greatly admired Leonidas, who fought against a tyrant, while himself attempting to establish tyranny throughout Europe; in this analogy, Hitler is not Leonidas, but Xerxes.

¹⁷ https://archive.org/stream/lydgatesfalofpr0000bocc_r5o4/lydgatesfalofpr0000bocc_r5o4_djvu.txt

¹⁸

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=zHDuCGAAQBAJ&pg=PA10&lpg=PA10&dq=%22Republic+of+demigods+rather+than+men%22+jacques-rousseau&source=bl&ots=IAW87Q3Qzb&sig=ACfU3U2Z30dq3lL8yTzDO6nNGZdI2eHDJA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiGg4bV3JL9AhWFolwKHW6kAfsQ6AF6BAgiEAM#v=onepage&q=%22Republic%20of%20demigods%20rather%20than%20men%22%20jacques-rousseau&f=false> p10

¹⁹ Hitler, *Zweites Buch*, Section on birth policy

²⁰ Bormann 1981, 51: 'Ein verzweifelter Kampf behalt seinen ewigen Wert als Beispiel. Man denke an Leonidas und seine dreihundert Spartaner.'

Just as we see a condensing of stereotypical Spartan characteristics between the time of Herodotus and Plutarch, the same effect continues up until the present day. When many people now think of Sparta, they think of Leonidas yelling, "This is Sparta!" and kicking a Persian envoy into a well in the 2006 blockbuster "300". Additionally, the most-likely fictitious response from Leonidas upon hearing the Persian demand to lay down their weapons and surrender before Thermopylae, "Molon labe" or "Come and get them" is now an unofficial slogan for the American National Rifle Association, used to oppose attempts to tighten gun control regulations. Whether or not the Spartans would have been in favour of the Second Amendment of the US Constitution is questionable, but it nonetheless shows a misappropriation of Spartan ideas for the benefit of an unrelated cause, directly resulting from, and contributing to, the Spartan mirage.

So, how can we get past the Spartan mirage? In the 21st century, the Spartans have been reduced to nothing more than austere warriors, famed but misunderstood, glorified through ignorance. However, there are still archaeological remains of their civilisation, studied by the Laconia Survey of the British School at Athens, which enables us to peer through the mirage with the use of scientific analysis, which can either corroborate or disprove evidence given by contemporary historical accounts. We must also question what we are told about the Spartans and reject reductive stereotypes. There are still reliable historical accounts of the Spartans, and although many may prove inaccurate in places, these inaccuracies only serve as a fascinating reminder of the outsider's view of the Spartans and the origins of the mirage.

Robespierre was right to call Sparta "a lightning-flash amid vast darknesses", but the brilliance of the light has blinded us to the truth, which is that the Spartan mirage is an immensely reductive and limiting telescope through which we view one of the most famed civilisations in history. The mirage is so embedded in our society that it is incredibly difficult to dispel, although perhaps the Spartans would have preferred us to see them as god-like invincible warriors as opposed to merely an isolated cluster of austere towns. But we nonetheless must dispel the mirage in the pursuit of the truth, and in doing so we may finally, after 2,500 years, see the Spartans for who they truly were.

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