

How was sparta governed

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How was Sparta governed? The Spartan Government Ancient Spartan government was a complex system of intertwined elements, which affected the power control. In many ways, ancient Sparta was a communist state, with the lack of luxuries, other Grecian states enjoyed and the strict control forequalitybut was complicated with the almost religious need for a democratic vote. Sparta had three levels of government; the Kings', the Gerousia, the Ephors and the Ekklesia, each having their own requirements, limitations and powers.

The Spartan monarchy consisted of 2 kings which governed over Sparta. Unlike other Grecian kings, Spartan Kings had very little power and did not have an autocratic rule over day-to-day life. A Spartan kings' duties were classified as religious, military, judicial roles. As the head figure of religion in Sparta, the kings were the priests of Zeus, Lacedaemonis and Zeus Uranius. The kings'familywould also worship these gods. As a monthly ritual, the kings were expected to make an animal sacrifice to the god Apollo, as to maintain the pleasure of the gods.

This was similar to the sacrifice he would make prior to going to war. As a part of his religious role, the king would appoint two Pythioi who would travel back and forth to consult with the oracle (a possessed priestess whom was said to speak the words of the Gods) at Delphi. During a time of war, only one king would be sent with the battalions, and would be the supreme commander of the army. In the field of battle, the king would have ultimate power over his troops, including the life or death of his army. During the course of the war, the king would have a personal bodyguard of 100 men.

Being a part of the royal bodyguard was considered to be one of the greatest honours. Amongst this body guard, 2 members of the Ephor's would be in attendance, and keep an eye on his activities. They would record any failure or misconduct during a military campaign and could lead to the recall of the army, or punishment of the king. As stated above, the Kings' power was strictly limited, which is seen in his judicial role. The king was responsible for all matters pertaining to public highways (e. g. the repairs, conflicts, etc).

He was responsible for all legal matters in regards to the adoption of children and the power to decide upon the marriage partner of an heiress whose father died. Despite the extremities of limits the kings' faced he had privileges which were considered as a 'luxury' in terms of Spartan society, such as the kings' being supported at the expense of the state. They would also receive minor honours such as the best seats at religious festivals. During mealtimes, the kings were given the first seats at a banquet and were served first at the Syssitia.

During the Syssition the kings would also receive double portions of a meal. Another privilege of the kings, following a successful war campaign, the king (who went to war) would be given a percentage of the spoils of victory. The kings could also receive the skins of any animal that had been sacrificed in a religious ceremony. At the event of a king's death, all public business would be ceased for a 10 day period, where civilians would wear mourning clothing. During his funeral, the king's reign would be lauded as being greater than any other previous king.

Herodotus describes the role of the kings in The Histories in Book VI (6) as “ The prerogatives of the Spartan kings are these: two priesthoods, of Zeus Lakedaemon... and the power of declaring war on whom they please”. The kings’ role in governing Sparta was more of figure of status, that maintaining any real power outside the battlefields of war. Following the Kings’ power, were the Gerousia. The Gerousia was a group of 28 members (a total of 30, with addition of the kings’). The requirements to join the Gerousia was to be a man sixty years or older, and considered to be too old for warfare.

Aristotle describes the Gerousia as “ it might be debated whether they should be continued judges for life and so determine matters of the greatest importance, since the mind has its old age as well as the body”. Being a member of this particular government was considered to be prestigious and ensured the high status of the Spartiate as the position carried on until the death of the individual. The Gerousia was a body whose position it was to prepare and debate bills, which were then passed on to the lower levels of government.

Their other main function was to be the head court of justice, and would decide upon treasonous crimes by the citizens. Unlike the kings’ powers having limitations, the Gerousia’s only main limitation was that although it was the court of Justice, it was the Ephors who were the Supreme court of Appeal. From this, the Gerousia is deemed a powerful level of government. The Ephors were next in power, below the Gerousia, but considered one of the most powerful bodies of government. The Ephors were a body of 5 men aged 30 and above who had full Spartiate citizenship.

These men were supposedly representatives for every village in Sparta. The roles of the Ephors were monitoring the kings', interactions with the Ekklesia, controlled the education and the Krypteia. As a part of the Ephors, or Ephorate, the citizen had an enormous power over the king. As such, they could monitor the king in his own home, 2 members would join a king should warfare occur and bring could bring him to an account, should he fail to have a successful war campaign. During a time of war, it was also the responsibility of the Ephors to organise the mobilisation of the army.

A failure could lead him to defend himself in front of a court of Gerousia and Ephorate members, whose role it was to be the deciders of a king's fate if prosecuted for wrong-doing. The Ephors were also the supreme court and supreme court of appeal in Sparta, allowing them significant power over the Spartiates, Inferiors and Helots. In As an Ephor, a Spartiate held much control over the laws in which Sparta was governed. They could introduce legislation, which, without the permission of the Ephors, foreign envoys could not enter into Sparta.

They could also create laws for foreign policies and control when meetings of the Ekklesia and Gerousia took place. They would oversee and preside over the meetings, introduce legislation and check on the numerous magistrates in Sparta. Ephorates had the power to control the Krypteia, a secret police for Spartiate boys aged 19 - 24 whose objective was to hunt and kill Helots. The Ephors also had the power to allocate Helots to Spartiate families, who would work domestic jobs for them as serfs. The Ephors also controlled the run the Agoge, or Spartan education system.

This was a complex system where boys were sent out at the age of 7 until approximately 20 to learn to be warriors. Similar to the Gerousia, the Ephors had limitations to their powers. This included that their time in office was a single year and after that single term, they could not become an Ephor again. After their term in office, the Spartiate would revert to a citizen and it was said that if an Ephor behaved badly during his time in office, he could be trialled for his misdoings. Aristotle provides information on the Ephors stating; "... the Ephorate... has supreme authority in the most important matters", which adds to the belief that the Ephors being a key part in government and the running of Sparta. The Ekklesia or as referred to in older books as the Apella, was the assembly of the Spartiate males, who were involved in Spartan politics. Any Spartiate male over the age of 30 who had retained his citizenship was eligible to sit in the assembly. The Ekklesia had the power for legislations, elections, warfare, kingships and Helots.

When the Ephors presented legislations to the Ekklesia, the assembly had the right to vote on laws; and they could ratify treaties. The Ekklesia is also responsible for the elections of the Gerousia and Ephors, and deciding which king would go to war with the Army. Although it's disputed, it was said from c. 700 BC onwards that the Ekklesia had the right to declare war on enemies. When the families of royal lineage disputed over the next monarch, it was the Ekklesia who would ultimately choose who would take the throne.

Most disputes originated on the laws of succession, as a male son could not take the throne should he be born prior to his father succeeding the throne. Should that situation arise, it would be passed on to the next male heir. Other succession disputes originate from the lack of male heirs, in which

case the throne would be passed on to the nephews of the late king. The Ekklesia was also responsible for the freeing of Helots, should they have done something extremely courageous on the battle front, to earn their freedom.

The Ekklesia had many limitations to their power, as they could not offer amendments to any of the presented legislations. Their democratic votes for laws could be ignored by the higher levels of government (Ephors or Gerousia) or be contradicted by Rider to the Rhetra which was introduced by previous kings, Polydorus and Theopompous. Although the Ekklesia was one of the largest bodies of government in Sparta, it very limited in the influences it could make on Spartan society. Spartan government was a complex set of layers, which had many limitations to the amount of power each layer had.