

# Laws of lycurgus and the spartan society

Law



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Every explorer or Spartan society should bear in mind that Spartan own sources are unavailable for researchers, if they at all ever existed. Our ideas of Sparta as a ruthless totalitarian society that failed to contribute to Greek culture and philosophy rest mostly on the writings of the enemies of Sparta, like Athenians who have lost wars to Spartans and could hardly tell the whole truth of their foes. Talbert correctly notes that Plutarch attempted to be as objective as possible, yet he could not have avoided subjectivism since all the sources available for him were subjective to this or that extent (Plutarch & Talbert, 17).

Thus in my evaluation of the Spartan society I shall rely on facts provided by Plutarch and not on estimations or opinions. I shall attempt to find out what was different in a Spartan society that made it so unusual for other Greeks. Perhaps the most frequent answer is that Sparta was a totalitarian society where men were only warriors and women were only mothers, and this society rested on harsh exploitation of helots. To this it would be added that Spartans were not interested in philosophy or art, and their city is interesting for nothing except for military campaigns.

Yet this view proves to be completely wrong if Plutarch's work is read carefully. Concerning totalitarianism, I would note that Sparta was perhaps only slightly more totalitarian than other cities of Greece, and surely more democratic than some of those polises. All the polises of Hellas were slave-owing societies. Perhaps not all of them benefited from exploiting an entire people, nevertheless, control over helots itself does not make Sparta totalitarian from the point of view of that time.

More than that, the mere fact of existence of Lycurgus's law proves that Sparta was a state ruled by law, not by a tyrant. Hardly a notable difference can be found in the government system of Sparta and Athens. Every man in Sparta was a soldier, and every woman was to become a mother. But the same situation was in Athens where every free man had to go to war if necessary. Physical education of both boys and girls has been favored by many non-Spartan philosophers, most notably by Plato. Spartans paid attention not only to physical, but to mental and artistic development of youth as well.

Plutarch tells about Spartan music and Spartan poetry (Plutarch & Talbert, 34). , while Spartan rhetoric is a model of shortness and pithiness revealing strong logic and elegant reasoning of the Spartans. So, what made Sparta phenomenal? To my opinion, these were not the laws of Lycurgus, but the principles established by those laws. This firstly included the cult of war and everything related to war. A respected Athenian could be a trader or a playwright. A respected Spartan could be a soldier and only a soldier.

This does not mean that all men were soldiers in all times. Otherwise Sparta would lack administrators, farmers and craftsmen. This just means that the listed occupations were secondary to war. The second thing that made Sparta different was its ability to preserve the original principles of Lycurgus, most notably including modesty. Construction of houses with saw and axe, using heavy pieces of metal as money and disregard towards washing and oiling shaped rough characters of the Spartans that contrasted effeminacy of other Greeks.

The third distinguishing feature of Sparta was educational system. What Plato has dreamt about has been successfully established by the Spartans. Plutarch writes of social education of every man and woman in which all the free Spartans are somehow involved. Such common modest lifestyle that rests on farming and craft with little place for trade makes me conclude that Spartan society was an example of socialism in Antiquity.