

Understanding fact from fiction regarding sparta in literary sources

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During most of the Archaic and Classical periods Sparta became an equally feared and dreaded state, which led to their eventual rise as the most powerful city in the Greek world. Despite the Spartans rise to power and glory it is extraordinarily difficult to write about the history of Sparta. The problem does not lie in the lack of sources but whether or not the sources can be viewed as historically accurate.

When looking at literary sources pertaining to Spartan history, there are five issues that must be analyzed and understood if we are to attempt to depict the fact from the fiction regarding the truth of Sparta from both modern day and ancient Greek literary sources. The first issue that must be understood is the Spartans own lack of written historical literature, before the Hellenistic period.

Subsequently, the next issue that must be viewed is the re-telling of Spartan history transmitted orally by non-Spartans, whose sense of awe and wonder of Sparta oft led to embellishment, especially in the case of Aristocrats even Athenian ones. The third issue is the lack of archaeological evidence of Spartan buildings and pottery, which subsequently illustrates a simple Sparta whilst validating the claims from Thucydides. Preceding, the above issue the next viewpoint is that of Xenophon and how he saw Sparta.

Lastly, how the Spartan mirage continues to distort the evidence of Sparta to both the writers from Ancient Greece and the scholars of today. In closing, these five issues must be analyzed before a decision can be made on whether or not a literary source regarding Sparta can be true. The foremost issue that results in most corrupted literary sources against an accurate

account of Spartan history is that the Spartans themselves did not record their own history before the Hellenistic period.

As stated above the Spartans refused to record their own history which lead to differing accounts about what happened when a particular event was recalled. This lack of historical evidence regarding the early years of Spartan history puts scholars of today as well of scholars back then at a disadvantage, as they have to rely on accounts that were only told as after the events they wished to record were finished, most likely resulting in missing and inaccurate information; " Since Spartans did not write historical literature before the Hellenistic period"(Pomeroy et al. 152). From this evidence it can be found that because the Spartans did not record their own history the true accounts of what happened were changed over time, making the information hollow in terms of accuracy to historians when trying to determine fact. Spartans simply refused to record their own history and no move was made to change this until after the Hellenistic period.

In fact even cultural and economic records were not kept by the Spartans. This lack of historical evidence is detrimental to literary sources; " Even Sparta's laws were preserved in memory rather than committed to writing. [. . .] Much of our written evidence for Sparta originated after many of the events described" (Pomeroy et al. 152). From the evidence provided above it can be assumed that the Spartans before the Hellenistic period would rather preserve their culture among themselves, refusing to share it with non-Spartans as per their military society.

In summary, the Spartans lack of literary sources describing Spartan history before the Hellenistic period much leaves much to be desired, forcing <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-fact-from-fiction-regarding-sparta-in-literary-sources/>

scholars to accept that the sources before this time do not have the criteria necessary to be considered accurate. The subsequent issue that must be examined when determining the authenticity of a literary source regarding Spartan history, is the fact that it was re-told by non-Spartans who either looked at Sparta with fear, awe, or a mixture of both.

Because these non-Spartans often marvelled at Spartan society their stories were subject to embellishment turning mere deeds and triumphs into epic legends that were recorded as history; " Spartan legend first became crystallized and as to the manner in which it was enshrined in Hellenic literature: the Spartiates fashioned the legend in the early decades of the fifth century, and Herodotus propagated it in his History" (Hooker 230). This turning of common Spartan deeds into legends and then recorded as history has led to diluted misinterpreted facts that distort the truth behind the actions.

In fact Athenian aristocrats who hated democracy were also known to greatly admire Sparta, with whom they held an extreme grudge. The exaggerated tales have warped much of the truth behind Spartan history which has led to the rise of certain key figures or events in history into becoming legendary battles; " Herodotus heard at Sparta of these men, whose character and career passed into legend: the noble king who fell at Thermopylae" (Hooker 230). As certain Spartans were made legend it also led to the Spartan civilization as a whole to become immortalized and legendary.

The dominant traits of the Spartan legend had been expressed in such a definitive manner during Isocrates' life-time that they were not afterwards lost sight of [. . .] The legend was left unimpaired and even more potent
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than before"(Hooker 237). From evidence above the awe of Sparta, produced legends of this city-state that spread far and wide through Greece gaining prominence and power through each retelling. From the exaggeration that was constantly being circulated about Spartans and their triumphs legends were made that became history to most people making most literary sources from non-Spartans inaccurate.

When looking at these sources scholars are able to dismiss most of the sources as fanciful legends, distorted by time. This has caused the literary sources to lose whatever historical value they had, further dwindling what little literary sources are left that scholars can draw upon when determining Spartan history. Consequently, the third issue that must be reviewed is the lack of archaeological evidence found by modern day archaeologists. This lack of evidence helps prove the legitimacy of Thucydides proposal of a simple Greek culture.

Spartan society as described through Thucydides eyes portrays the Spartan economy and culture as simple when compared to other Greek states. From the lack of archaeological digs and evidence found it appears that Thucydides view may have been accurate; " Archaeological activity at Sparta has been sparse, allowing therefore the well known claim of Thucydides (i 10), that the buildings at Sparta did not have monumental character of the Athenian counterparts to burden Spartan studies" (Raftopoulou 125). From this point of view we are left to look at the evidence or lack thereof found at archaeological digs in Laconia.

From the little found it seems to support his view that Sparta was simple and overrated; " I imagine that people in the distant future would seriously doubt <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-fact-from-fiction-regarding-sparta-in-literary-sources/>

that Sparta's power ever approached its fame [. . .] The Spartans never developed one metropolitan area or built lavish temples and buildings but rather live in scattered settlements in the old-fashioned Greek way" (Thuc. 1. 10; Blanco). The example above is perfect when illustrating that Sparta from Thucydides point of view was nowhere near the utopian city that the rest of Greece thought it to be.

Both of these points of view are subject to debate among scholars, this debate arises as Thucydides was a self-declared Athenian, and may have indulged in artistic license, as said by Cartledge 2001. Unfortunately for archaeologists and scholars alike the limited evidence mainly pottery and poor pottery at that seems to prove Thucydides point of view; " Only when it reached an advanced stage does Attic Protogeometric become known in Laconia; and even then Laconian potters produce something which is only a pale reflection of the originals" (Hooker 82).

In closing, because of the lack of evidence found regarding Spartan culture, and Thucydides account being dismissed by most scholars because of his Athenian heritage we are left to conclude that the literary sources left by Thucydides may be deemed as adequate but hardly exemplarily when trying to determine the truth behind Sparta. Penultimately, another issue that most be reviewed regarding the validity of literary sources are the works proposed by Xenophon. Xenophon's' works are perhaps one of the only trusted literary sources by all scholars that we can consult regarding Spartan history.

Xenophon was an Athenian who was exiled from Athens and found sanctuary in Sparta where he knew many leading Spartans personally; " Xenophon who knew Sparta well at first hand and wrote a laudatory biography of Spartan <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-fact-from-fiction-regarding-sparta-in-literary-sources/>

king (Agesilaos), wrote also a short pamphlet on some Spartan political, social and cultural institutions. [. . .] Records verbatim the oath sworn monthly between, on one hand, the two kings jointly, and, on the other, the board of five Ephors collectively" (Cartledge 59).

From this we can conclude that Xenophon had enough standing among the Spartans to be allowed to record exact copy of the oath that the Spartan kings gave, as well as providing knowledge and customs of Sparta that are invaluable to scholars. It is also a known fact that Xenophon later wrote an essay that showed the truth between how the Greeks viewed Sparta and the 'real' Sparta; " The idea or legend of 'Lycurgan' Sparta clearly emerged in Xenophon's Constitution of the Spartans.

In that work, Xenophon distinguished the Lycurgan ideal (which had no shortcoming whatever) from the contemporary reality, [. . .] The contrast between real and ideal runs like a continuous thread through many of the illusions to Sparta made by the Ancient Greek authors" (Hooker 230). As it is shown above Xenophon is our best source for trusted literary evidence regarding Sparta as he distinguished the fiction from the non-fiction that is Sparta. In summary, Xenophon is our best source when reviewing the validity of literary sources regarding Sparta, in terms of social, political and militaristic views that Sparta adhered to.

It is however, thought that since he knew many Spartans personally his works may have been partially idolized by his admiration for Sparta. The final issue regarding the validity of literary sources on Sparta is how the 'Spartan Mirage' affected the way the Greeks viewed Sparta. The term 'le mirage spartiate' was coined by Francois Ollier and to him the vision of Sparta was <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-fact-from-fiction-regarding-sparta-in-literary-sources/>

an unrestricted and orderly society, that was best shown through their selfless patriotism, and boundless courage in battle.

He believed that this was also how non-Spartan Greeks saw Sparta and thus the utopian society of Sparta was created. " This mirage is really just a series of more or less distorted, more or less invented images through which Sparta has been reflected and refracted in the extant literature by non-Spartans" (Hodkinson and Powell 312). This mirage poses a major historical problem, as almost all of the detailed evidence for what they were really like comes from within this mirage, as said by Cartledge.

From this we can deduce that the opinions regarding Sparta have been influenced perhaps subconsciously into portraying Sparta as the ideal state, making it very difficult for scholars of today as well as back then to find sources that have not been tainted by this mirage and remain accurate. Another problem this mirage forces upon scholars is the way that this mirage can give historians and scholars of today radically different thoughts regarding the same passage; " Controversy about Sparta and its critics, both ancient and modern, continues to present day.

For the past 2400 years, historians and philosophers have put forward views that vary radically, though they are based on readings of precisely the same texts" (Pomeroy 177). This allows us to propose that the mirage that continues to shroud Sparta in mystery has kept scholars and historians from coming to conclusive opinions from the same texts, dwindling more literary sources. In short the Spartan mirage as had the effect on western culture making scholars unable to identify what literary sources can be trusted. In closing, all evidence points to the fact that most of the literary sources <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-fact-from-fiction-regarding-sparta-in-literary-sources/>

regarding Sparta before and after the Hellenistic period are subject to distortion and half-truths. This distortion is caused by the Spartans lack of recording historical literature before the Hellenistic period, which later lead to the distortion and missing facts regarding the lifestyle of Sparta.

Which gave rise to orally disseminated Spartan life by non-Spartans leading to a utopian Sparta with invincible warriors and grand buildings Some of the better literary sources come from outsiders who wrote well after many of the events they described. One of these writers is Thucydides who's proposal of a simple Sparta seems to be backed up by lack of archaeological evidence around Sparta, but dismissed because of his Athenian heritage. The other is the Xenophon, his work is believed to be the best source for literary evidence regarding Sparta.

This stems from the fact that he attempted to separate the truth from the fiction, and was on personal terms with many Spartans. The greatest roadblock in determining literary sources is the Spartan mirage which dazzled non-Spartans as well as scholars of today into adoring Sparta and distorting their history. These five issues must be taken into account before scholars can determine what sources are deemed as acceptable for literary sources.