

# Rites of passage of the spartan youth



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The aim of this paper is to investigate the role of rites of passage in the socialization of Spartan youth. Methodologically, our discussion will be based upon: a) ancient literary sources, in particular Plutarch, Xenophon and Pausanias, b) interdisciplinary approaches initiated by modern historians and sociologists, and c) archaeological evidence. Discussion will begin with an overview of the ancient Spartan educational system and, in particular, an assessment of the evidence for the participation of both boys and girls in festivals. It is concluded that the Spartans incorporated a system of rites of passage in their educational programme with the aim to achieving the greatest levels of socialization of their youth, both boys and girls, the main reason for which was the important role that kinetic activities played in the context of rites of passage.

Key words: Rites of passage, Spartan socialization, Sparta youth.

## **Introduction**

The fascinatingly complex Spartan tradition holds an important place in western political thought, while the influence exercised by the images and the fables of Sparta are still potent today. Amongst the numerous Spartan institutions admiration is caused by the eminent Spartan training [agoge], an education system which was under the guardianship and control of the State, which according to many historians lay behind Sparta's success in becoming the most militarily successful Greek city-state (Kennell, 1995, Birgalias, 1999, Ducat, 2006, Koliopoulos, 2004).

Education was obligatory and uniform for all Spartans, a uniformity that enforced an important institutional restriction on the display of wealth, in

contrast to other Greek city-states, in particular Athens. Uniformity in training and education was regulated in ancient Sparta through a system of Rites of Passage, this being defined as a ritual marking a transitional phase in a person's status in the context of social hierarchies, values and beliefs. Rites of passage are ceremonies surrounding events such landmark events as childbirth, coming of age, menstruation, marriage and death and are characterised by three phases: separation, liminality, and re-incorporation.

Socialization is defined as the adoption of the behaviour patterns of any given culture, describing the process by which people are integrated and incorporated into society. The more effective socialization is, the greater the internalization of prevailing social norms and values. Social pressure and social coercion are not expressed via imitation but via the internalization of collective consciousness, spontaneously and at the same time via the obligation of the individual to accept the social norm (Durkheim, 2000, p. 17).

The result of this public way of life was that each citizen of Sparta should accept the intense pressure of public opinion so that he could cope with the models of behaviour established by the Spartan society.

## **Methodology**

The first category of sources upon we rely is historical evidence even though it contains plenty of voids caused by successive alterations throughout centuries. Subsequently, we will turn upon literary testimonies. At first we shall focus on historiography that provides an overall frame, in order to comprehend an era and secondly on texts of political theory and philosophy

that offer direct testimonies regarding historical facts and thirdly on poetry and rhetorical speeches, (Alkman, Tyrtaios, Aristophanes, Isocrates) that light up Spartan society of the archaic and classical times.

Of importance is the information from Herodotus and Thucydides, even though they present the Spartan structure of their times as very primitive. Lakedaemonion Politeia of Kritias presents the first idealized picture of Sparta, an idea that appears later in Xenophon's Lakedaemonion Politeia. An analysis of Spartan society was also attempted by Plato (Politeia, Nomoi) and Aristotle (Politica). A common feature in both is a critical attitude towards the idealization of Sparta and towards the theory that presents the decline of the city as a result of contemporary political erosion. Additionally, Plutarch's work lays emphasis on the moral aspect of the education. The Lycurgus' work constitutes the foundation stone of the key-elements of modern stereotypes. Since the 19th century and the birth of the science of history, through Muller's, Grotte's, Foustel's de Coulange projects, whose notions form a basis for the interpretation of social-politic character of Spartan society or through those of the 20th century (Nilsson's, Jeanmaire's and Finely's works), the issue acquired specific scientific and historical dimension. During the 20th century these approaches were enriched by the conclusions of comparative ethnology thus allocating the origin of different educational institutions and processes to a common Mediterranean past. A second instructive opinion shifts interest into the political, social and economic objectives of education, placing emphasis on its aristocratic character and on the spirit of contest, on the socialization of the young person and on the value system that youngsters inherit. (Birgalias, 1999, p.

387). Useful tools are the essays of comparative ethnology regarding age-related classes, testing and ceremonies, in order to reconcile literature with the archaeological evidence. Vidal Naque points out that literary, philosophical and historical texts, mythical narrations and social practices, on one hand, and the world of rituals related to political decisions, should be bridged. In his work, St. Hodkinson aims at presenting an overall picture of a complicated society, such as the Spartan, approaching it through diverse levels and different social groups.

Modern scientific studies concerning Sparta attempt to comprehend its internal structures. (Powell 1988, 1989, Richer 1999, Cartledge and Spawforth 1989, Hodkinson and Powell 1999, Kennell 1995, Brigalias 1999, Ducat, 2006).

## **Agogi and Spartan festivals**

Agogi: education of young persons, both girls and boys in Sparta which included, in addition to writing, reading and music, many kinetic activities such as games, gymnastics, sports, dancing, hunting and military exercises. These actions, apart from their incorporation into the daily educational program, were performed during public feasts and religious ceremonies where participation of youngsters constituted part of their agogi and also in the context of the rites of passages where kinetic activities held a leading role. In Sparta the body and the mind were exercised at the same time depending on the age of children. This parallel exercise dictated a concrete system of values. Agogi had clearly a social character and the function accomplished by it, was of great importance. As members of an organized society, i ¶Individuals are affected by the cultural level of the group, accept

the educative effect of the whole and shape their personalities. The State is who determines the objectives and the means of each educational system. Spartan education aimed at infusing common harmony and at cultivating "we" at the expense of "I". Agogi aimed, above all, at the homogeneity of the citizens. ¶

Spartan festivals especially, Gymnopaïdai, Karneia and Yakintheia were the arena for competition between different age groups, and involved the participation of the entire body politic (Hodkinson, 2004, p. 298).

Participation in religious and public events was compulsory for all youth and formed an official part of their training. Performance played an important role in these rituals and the kinetic-physical skills of young Spartans were assessed by the entire body politic (Athenaeus, 14, 630d-631b, Polignac, 2007, p. 70-71, Ducat, 2006, p. 263-265, Panagea, 2001, p. 68-71).

Gymnopaïdai involved the participation of the entire body of citizens. As far as we know, each group participated with four dances: trichoria, a children's choir, one of adolescents and another of adult males. Many scholars consider the contests of the Gymnopaïdai as tests of endurance for the children and an integral part of their education (Pettersson, 1992, p. 45-47). In the festival of the Gymnopaïdai we also identify elements of incorporation, such as dance or nudity, elements that played an important role in the integration of youth into the body politic. The game of sphere was another ritual that was assessed and characterised as a transition from adolescence to adulthood (Kennell, 1995, p. 60, Ducat, 2006, p. 270-274).

At the Karneia, the role of youth was different from that in other festivals: firstly, the age of the participants was from twenty on, a rather marginal physical age for educational purposes; secondly, young Spartans didn't only participate in the events but were also responsible for organising them, which clearly indicates that they were indeed the future of the community.

The participation of young Spartans in dance, contests and games constituted a great occasion of communication. Social bonds were thus strengthened and children spent more time outside, collectively and creatively. In this way young people developed better personal relationships, lived in harmony, rhythm, beauty and practically enjoyed a better quality of life.

The celebration of the Yakintheia the other important religious festival of the Spartans provided a great opportunity for girls to show off their marriageable skills.

In all three important religious festivals the young members of the community played a significant role, not at an individual level, as in the rites of passage, but, along with other participants of different ages, in the context of the body politic where they displayed the achievements of their training and were accordingly evaluated.

The process of socialization was integrated with religious activity from an early age, confirming the socio-religious aspect towards which the educational system was directed. (Ducat, 2006, p. 276-277, Panagea, 2001, p. 68-71, Sigalos, 1959, p. 214-216, Baltrusch, 2004, p. 98).

Exercising the body was the main aim of education. Young Spartans took part in many contests whose principal aim was to increase the feeling of competition amongst them. These contests mainly took place during cultural - religious events, thus connecting the agogi, the education, with religious devotion. Besides the games, though, music and dance played fundamental role in such events. Dance and music had public and pedagogic function within Spartan society. All citizens participated collectively, as members of their own classes, undertaking roles hierarchically structured. Moreover, Spartan feasts were based on the unselfish attendance of citizens. Joint participation in dance under the guidance of the chorodidaskalos (dance instructor) constituted a major feature to the political and social life of Sparta. Distinction in these contests and in dances, success, and physical capacity along with morals were prominent elements of social classification. These factors had primary significance to the rank that someone would occupy in the social conscience. Public praise or reproach, success or rejection of a boy or a girl had decisive impact in their social recognition and status.

## **Discussion**

Commenting on the fact that Sparta had been described as a democratic state, Aristotle (Pol. 1294 b 21-7) recognized that it featured certain democratic characteristics shared among the rich and the poor classes, such as uniformity in education, food provision and dress, sectors of everyday life in which the possession of wealth did not provide any advantage to its holder (Hodkinson, 2004, p. 300-326).



Spartan children spent most of their childhood – from around the age of seven up to the age of eighteen- training with other children, rather than living with their families. The effect of this companionship and co-existence on children was the constant experience of an intense pressure to conform to the social rules and the generally accepted models of behaviour.

(Koliopoulos, 2004, p. 101).

In history of education Sparta certainly possesses a concrete place. Most characteristic of all Spartan products is its constitutional system with which, for the first time, the city-state appears as the force practicing agogi, taking into account the total significance of this term. (Jaeger, 1968 p. 11). Spartan education was considered as a procedure where youngsters should participate in a common system and simultaneously a selected team should be distinguished. The principal objective was their suitable upbringing so that they could cope with their role as citizens – soldiers (Legras 2005, p. 38). P. Cartledge (2004 p. 32) mentions that agogi was a system of education, training and socialization. It constituted an obligatory educational circle; a type of ordeal for young persons in order to reach the level of adults (Cartledge, 2004, p. 129). Jeanmaire (1913) in his article on the Krypteia of Lacedaemonians and in his book of Couroi et Couretes (1939) interpreting the agogi refers to the survival of ancient initiative ceremonies influenced from comparative ethnology. He speaks of the rites of passage, the tests. Everybody, however, underlines the obligatory public character of the agogi and the fact that it was common to everyone. (Levy 2008, p. 76).

Agogi lasted from the age of seven to the age of eighteen. Children spent most of their time living a communal life, especially after the age of twelve,

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and their education was basically divided into three circles based on the child's physical age, namely paides (children), meirakia (youngsters) and epheboi (adolescents). Each cycle included specific ordeals and a specific training program of intellectual and physical exercises.

The Agogi constituted a range of initiative and educational cycle of age-related groups and processes. It was meticulously organized, comprehensive and competitive. Moreover, it accomplished a double function of socialization and education (Cartledge, 2004, p. 195). Exercising the body formed the nucleus of agogi. Young Spartans took part in many contests whose main aim was to increase the sense of competition amongst them. Activities of Spartan education were mainly concentrated on body training. During these festivals, fights and dances took place, where contestants demonstrated their bodily strength, the harmony of their body and their velocity in running. Distinction in these fights, success and physical ability constituted basic elements of social classification. Agogi made use of these contests, games, fights and dance in order for knowledge to be checked and the best one to be selected. The whole education was characterized by a spirit of rivalry in which awards of honors and rewards to the feat of competitions held a significant place, thus limiting discriminations based on origin and wealth. Competitions and processional demonstrations of rites of passage, that determined the physical ability of youngsters, passed also down to agogi. These events included public inspections of the skillfulness of young Spartans during festivals. The results of agogi were evaluated along with the kinetic and physical abilities of boys and girls (Kyle, 2007, p. 183, Kennell, 1995, p. 65-69). Participation in these rituals guaranteed a mutual

recognition of social placement and confirmed the integration in the community, defining the first form of political identity.

Writing and reading, music, poetry, dance, athletic contests, attendance at feasts, as well as participation in activities that to a modern way of thinking seem strange and bizarre, such as, pederasty and ordeals like theft and the Krypteia. All those constituted the diverse fields of expression, acquisition and application of the knowledge gained as well as the means employed for their socialisation. The testimonies we possess, stress the city's efforts to teach young children how to co-exist with children of the same age, older children and adults as part of a whole, as well as to initiate new members into its culture. (Sakellariou....).

The duty of the State and its educational program was to create the perfect citizen who demonstrated a deep sense of political, military and social duty, bore weapons for the defence and the glory of his city, governed its affairs, complied with its rules and maintained its values and traditions. Spartan education thus shaped the model of the ' citizen-soldier' (Birgalias 1999, p. 388, Ducat 2006, p. 168). In addition, compliance to the accepted models of behaviour became subject to constant control, which comprises the totality of rewards and sanctions (praise and disapproval) with which society regulates individual behaviour. (Gizeli, 1993, p. 119, Nova - Kaltsouni, 1998, p. 80-84).

The fact, after all, that education in Sparta was intensively collective contributed to the socialization of children and to the growth of their personality, thus leading to a smooth future incorporation into the society.

During their education young Spartans were obliged to participate in the religious feasts of their city. The significance of such feasts, which were organized by the state, was crucial to their upbringing. In most of them, where the entire city was present, children of both sexes participated (Ducat, 2006, p. 251). Processions, masks, competitions and contests constituted part of Spartan festivals. Athletic events, dance and music the moral aim of which is always associated to the tendencies of constitution, all these are the basic elements of feasts. (Birgalias, 1999, p. 185-187). Most significant festivals were those of Karneia, Yakintheia and Gymnopaidia. Karneia is a rite of obvious importance for the community, Primitive rural ritual. (Brelich, 1969, p. 148).

Basic education included primarily reading, writing, maths and musical acts (music, poetry, singing and dancing). Contests and different sports constituted major part of the agogi. According to Ducat (2006) three were the elements of Spartan education for young persons, the process of rites of passage and education organized by the state, the courses that like in other cities were provided by schoolteachers and the prolonged exposure to social institutions as long as children were in touch with choosing and voting for the best.

Another characteristic feature of this era was the constant competition promoted among youngsters. (Ducat, 2006, p. 333-339).

Thus, the attitude and behaviour of Spartan children was constantly supervised by the Paidonomos, the Ephors, the elderly and the women (Ducat, 2006, p. 162). The historian Plutarch (Lycurgus 14. 5-6) mentions

that in certain religious ceremonies, which were particularly popular as spectacles and in which all citizens of all social ranks participated, including the Kings and the Senate, young girls composed songs which praised or mocked the deeds of the boys. Such songs that formed part of a game were in fact as effective as admonition by the adults. In this case, girls were being employed as an educational means for the amelioration of the boys. Girls learnt to become strict judges so that the young Spartan boys were obliged to make an effort to improve themselves and earn the public praise of the girls (Ducat, 2006, p. 162, Kargakos, 2006, p. 551).

Pederasty was also incorporated into the military, ritualistic and educational system of Spartan agogi. The adult lover, the *eispnilas*, was responsible for the behaviour, the values, the performance and the character of his young beloved, the *aitas*.

The relationship developed between a child and an adult male was in fact contributed to the child's gradual integration into adult society (Kennell, 1995, p. 125-126, Kargakos, 2006, p. 551). Emphasis was placed, therefore, on the process of socialization via the association of children with the older members of the community, during which attendance at political discussions played an important role (Birgalias, 1999).

All decisions governing Spartan adolescence tended to stress the distinction between adolescents and younger children, as a way of integration into adult life. Educational practices and events during festivals, such as the games at *Platanistas* or the ritual stealing of cheese from the altar of *Artemis Orthia*,

were performed at this age. According to Isocrates, successful stealing was publicly declared in order to attract the praise and respect of the others.

Stealing and Krypteia constituted in a way a game of ‘hide and seek’, an exercise teaching children how to live and survive alone depending merely on the powers of nature and exclusively on their physical and mental strength (Xenophon, *Lak. Pol.* 2. 9, Kennell, 1995, p. 122-123, Birgalias, 1999, Ducat, 2006, p. 202-203, Hodkinson, 2004, p. 205).

Reporting on the legislator’s orders in preparation of the new Spartan citizen for war, Plato (*Law* 1. 633 b.) underlines the importance of communal meals, gymnastics, hunting and ordeals of endurance such as wrestling and the ritual whipping on the altar of Artemis Orthia. The game of sphere, the games at Platanistas, the ritual stealing of cheese from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia and the ritual whipping that later developed into the contest of *karteria* (endurance), were competitive games. The city of Sparta organised such public spectacles during which children and young men demonstrated their virtues and courage, and were accordingly evaluated (Ailianus, *Poik. Hist.* 14. 7, Kennell, 1995, p. 65-69, Kyle, 2007, p. 183).

Apart from fighting, dance also played an important role in the education of young Spartans. Dance and ritual were interwoven and inextricably linked to all important Spartan rites of passage, namely the passages to puberty, adulthood and marriage. Practice in dance and song constituted the fundamental means of education and the maintenance of social institutions. The circle dance formed an indirect way for the foundation of the relationship between the citizen and the city, forming, as it did, a microcosm

of the community. The circle creates unity, unifying members of a group with common characteristics (Papadopoulou, 2004). The chorostasio, the area where groups sharing common characteristics (sex, age, order) and common aims (invocation of the divine, celebration) performed dancing rituals, allowed individuals to observe and be observed, choose and be chosen. Consequently, dance and music functioned as social forces, especially in the context of religious ritual, and conveyed messages of uniformity and unity during public events. (Naerebout, 2004).

No doubt, music and dance contests held central place in the most important Spartan festivals, more specifically the Karneia, Yakintheia and the Gymnopaidiai. In the Gymnopaidies, the social/educational role of dance is reflected on the simultaneous participation of individuals of different ages: children, adults and the elderly, all sang the works of famous poets (Athenaeus, 15. 678 b-c).

In Gymnopaidies children had a prominent role as long as the feast mainly included dancing (orchisi) of naked youngsters, where participants, with rhythmical movements, represented scenes of fight and pangratiun. They practiced different gymnastic exercises and moved rhythmically their legs as if they were in the palaistra. (Athenaeus, 15,. 678 b-c). They displayed a competitive character (Xenophon *Ellinika* 6. 4 16). It is in these feasts where we can locate evidence of primitive rites of passage.

The song contests during the festival of the Yakintheia had the character of initiation and aimed at the integration of young people into the adult community. During the second day of the Yakintheia various spectacles took

place. A lavish feast was held in which children wearing tunics played stringed instruments and chanting hymns to the god, groups of young people sang traditional songs and dancers performed to the accompaniment of the pipe and sung hymns (Athenaeus 4. 139 d-t).

Agogi incorporated many elements of such initiative rites of passage moving further on adaptations of crucial importance in order to be functional within the frames of a political society. ¶It converted premature inaugural rituals into a governmental system (Ducat, 2006, p. 181-188, Levy, 2008, p. 147-161). In these festivals the entire society participated, and this was a fact that strengthened social bonds. Young persons demonstrated their bodily - kinetic abilities and were judged by the political body. These religious feasts incorporate and bring people into the heart of society. During these contests adolescents were grouped according to ancestral races and groups and took part in the competitions (Kennell, 1995, p. 51-52).

Song and dancing contests also took place during the third largest Spartan festival, the Karneia (Euripides, *Alkestis*, 445-451). Scenes from the ceremonial ritual are depicted on a red-figured crater from the Spartan colony at Tarentum in southern Italy; dancers, bearing baskets on their heads, perform the kalathiskos dance next to a column inscribed with the word Karneios (Papadopoulou, 2004).

For young persons who participated in the feast of Yakintheia this was equivalent to the passage from adolescence to the status of adult warrior. Processions, dance and fights were some of the activities carried out by youngsters who were taking part. The myth of Hyacinth might have been



related to rites of outbreak in Sparta as many elements of initiative customs exist and this was considered as a festival of resumption of the world (Richer, 2004, p. 77-84). It was a compound complex religious ceremony. Nilsson (1912, 1955) tracks down an invocation of spring within the cheerful moment of celebration Brelich (1969) says that the contrast between joy and sorrow is marking a passage to a new era. The objective of Yakintheia was, maybe, the secure integration of young persons in society.

Special mention should be made to the education of Spartan girls. The establishment of rites and contests for socialisation and the passage to womanhood were immensely important for both them and the Spartan State. Girls' education took place in public and was not restricted to the house, nor were they excluded from the life of men (Birgalias, 1999, p. 256, Ducat, 2006, p. 232-237). Spending a large part of their life in public would have helped them to fulfil their public role as good and responsible wives. (Ducat, 2006, p. 245, Cartledge, 2004, p. 640-641).

State ceremonies, such as religious processions, festivals and competitions, promoted the participation of girls in public life and their equality to men. The education and training of Spartan women gained them Pan-Hellenic fame. With systematic physical exercise girls were trained to be fit, suffer the pangs of childbirth and give birth to strong healthy Spartan warriors.

Xenophon (Lakedaimonion Politeia, 1. 3-5) and Plutarch (Lycurgus, 14) inform us that in certain rituals accompanied by dance and song, women participated naked displaying their fitness, the ideal promoted by Spartan education (Kokkorou-Alevra, 2002, p. 131-133).

Although athletic contests, (e. g. fighting, for girls and women) are testified elsewhere in Greece, those in Sparta constituted not only as part of religious ceremonies (as in the other Greek city-states) but more importantly they were incorporated into the educational system, which included girls from all social ranks.

Various testimonies survive to the fitness of Spartan women: Alcman's Parthenia (11. 58-9, 11. 45-9) gives a vivid account of the athletic contests; a bronze figurine dated to c. 500 BC (now in the British Museum) which depicts a young Spartan athlete or dancer is indicative of the freedom and the robustness of the girl; Pausanias (3. 13. 7) also mentions female contests during a festival in honour of Dionysus Kolonatas; Hysichius reports that women competed in racing (Ducat, 2006, p. 231). Similar reports can be found in Theocritus's Helen's Epithalamios (11, 22-5) in which young girls participated in racing contests that took place near the baths of the River Eurotas. Plutarch suggests that exercise was an antidote to lethargy and adolescents were prepared for harmonious marriages because of the successful co-existence of boys and girls in the playground, a common training that inspired the Edgar Degas in his 'Spartan Girls Challenging Boys' (c. 1860-1862, London National Gallery).

Such training aimed to create women with a strong sense of responsibility and conscience. In no other Greek city-state were women so actively involved in public affairs, nor was their attendance in public assemblies so decisive. Spartan women, even though they weren't official members of governmental and institutional bodies, took part in important decision-making acts, being allowed freedom of speech and able therefore to

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influence decision making. It follows, then, that they were not considered inferior to men.

If the rites of passage were significant for a boy in order to become the ideal citizen-soldier, for girls such rites were important in order to make them good mothers and capable supervisors of their households. Marriage was for the girl what war was for a boy; both situations mark the perfection of their nature and the means of entry into a situation in which each one participates in the life of the others. (Vermant, 2003, p. 40-41).

The participation of children in festivals was obligatory in ancient Sparta. Such occasions, in which elements of ancient rites of passage can be discerned, enhanced communal cohesion (Kitto, 2002, p. 278-280) with the establishment of public ceremonies incorporating adolescents into adult society, organised by the community and common for all young participants (Ducat, 2006, p. 182). If any young individual failed in the ordeals, he/she was considered incompetent to become a full member of the community.

During the rites of passage the young person refrained from communal life and had to fight to survive in the wild, guided by certain rituals and teachings. By incorporating certain elements of these archaic rites of passage into communal life, Spartan education succeeded in forming them into a strong political system.

The innovative contribution of this article is the way the subject is approached by examining physical and kinetic activities and the role played by these elements, in the socialization of a young person. ¶Living in an era of globalization and individualism, in a world lacking of exercise and of wise

management of free time and, above all, in a period deprived of social coherence, it is Spartan agogi that teaches us the value of exercise and physical activities, the culture of the body, the opposition to materialism, the value of tradition and public feasts and its effectiveness in socialization and social cohesion

## **Conclusion**

What this paper has set out to establish is that rites of passage, interwoven with kinetic activities, were incorporated into the agogi; the educational system of Sparta that played a pivotal role in the socialisation of youth. Sparta was a Greek city-state unique in the interrelationship between its educational system and its political, social and economic life, a system which conveyed and propagated a complete system of values that fully expressed Spartan society: education obligatory and uniform for all; both boys and girls; by not promoting 'me' against 'us', learnt to define themselves as part of the whole rather than at an individualistic level, a way of upbringing and teaching inspired obedience, bravery, discipline and professional military ability.