

ANCIENT HISTORY

Greek Writers' Views On Sparta

Sparta was a Greek city not like any other. Its military efficiency, which was able to arise from its solid social structure, was deviant from those of all other Greek-states. Its history has been recorded by many including Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon.

Herodotus of Halicarnassus is widely referred to as the 'Father of History'. He was the first man we know of that was concerned with the preservation of the memory of past deeds of renown. **Cartledge** refers to him as “the Father of comparative ethnography, a learned and enlightened student of human mores in all their bewildering complexity”

Herodotus provides one of our earliest surviving accounts of Sparta. He speaks of their courage, nobility and honour.

“The Spartans fought in a way worthy of note, and showed themselves far more skilful in fight than their adversaries ... the Spartans would wheel around, face their pursuers, in this way destroy vast numbers of the enemy”

From this extract, which relates to the Battle of Thermoplae, it is noteworthy that the Spartans were cunning and fierce soldiers who were not only strong in their attacks but also in their methods. Herodotus suggests and admires that they were experts in military affairs and although were outnumbered, outsmarted their enemies systematically and mentally.

The remembrance of this answer, I think, and the wish to secure the whole glory for the Spartans, caused Leonidas to send the allies away. This is more likely than that they quarrelled with him, and took their departure in such unruly fashion”

This quote insinuates that the Spartans maintained a strong relationship within their army. Herodotus evokes a sympathetic tone towards the Spartans and in particular, Leonidas. Herodotus acknowledges the nobility and bravery of the Spartans in the quote: “*Thus nobly did the whole body of Lacedaemonians*”. Because of Herodotus' recount that

“Soon, Leonidas fell fighting bravely, together with many other famous Spartans whose names I have taken care to learn on account of their great worthiness, as indeed I have those of all the three hundred”, it is also clear that he respected the Spartans and took his time to learn the names of all 300 Spartan warriors as he felt that they deserved honour and recognition. As **Simonides** states, *“and dying, died not”*.

Besides Sparta's military affairs, Herodotus appeared to have appreciated and highly regarded Sparta's system of government. He stated that: *“Spartan government was put upon a sound basis”*

However, Herodotus' personal affiliations with Sparta must be considered. It is likely that Herodotus spent time on Samos after Halicarnassus expelled him and that Herodotus' friends on Samos were the descendants of the Samians who appealed to Sparta.

Thucydides is regarded as the father of 'scientific' history. A former Athenian military officer, he spent his time in exile writing the History of the Peloponnesian War.

Thucydides suggests that *“Suppose the city of Sparta were deserted, distant ages would be very unwilling to believe a great power existed there”*. He does so because, perhaps, because he thinks that their lifestyle was so different and deviant from the other Greek states at that time, that it would not be plausible to think that such a society would have existed.

He also praised Spartan soldiers such as Brasidas, even though he was considered his 'opposition'.

"... the present valour and conduct of Brasidas ... was what many created in the allies of Athens a feeling for the Lacedaemonians. He was the first who went out and showed himself so good a man at all as to leave behind him the conviction that the rest were like him"

From this, it is evident that he viewed the Spartans as brave and courageous warriors, and as he is speaking from a military background, it hints that he must have highly regarded them to give them such praise.

Thucydides states that Sparta was *"from the earliest times subject to eunomia ... it has possessed the same form of government for more than four hundred years, reckoning to the end of the late war, and has thus been in a position to arrange the affairs of the other states"*. This implies that he viewed Sparta's government as stable, well-constructed and beneficial to the people; that the Spartans were not only good in military affairs but also in political matters. It can also suggest that Sparta was 'subject to eunomia' because of its strict military regime. Such an army would require strong order and discipline so that there would be neither a rebellion nor disapproval from the people; it was for the greater good of the Spartan society.

However, although he admired the *eunomia* of Sparta, Thucydides did not speak highly of their culture. He states *"the arts and learning never flourished"*.

Also, like Herodotus, Thucydides has his flaws and potential reasons for bias. **Buckley** states that "some caution must be exercised when using Thucydides". In relation to Sparta, because he was exiled from Athens, he may have held a grudge against Athens and therefore, would allow for Sparta to appear in a good light. Also, he spent his exile in Sparta and therefore may have been influenced by them and, in appreciation of their hospitality, subconsciously praised Sparta. Furthermore, because he wrote mostly of the Peloponnesian War between rivals Athens and Sparta, which Sparta won, perhaps it is why he admires the methods Sparta used.

Xenophon wrote a work called The Constitution of the Lacedaemonians in the fourth century BC which provides information about the Spartan military system; it is full of praise for the Spartan constitution and generally uncritical of it. Although he does give some insight into social customs and the law, he was an unashamed admirer of the Spartan military and the system that produced it. **A Andrewes** noted *"... all the admiration lavished on Spartan military virtue by Xenophon ..."*.

As **Fitzhardinge** argues, Xenophon offers a romanticized perception of the city, because of the need to glorify her institutions due to the reduction in her glories. It is obvious that the myth of Sparta was widely accepted, the famous quote that "if the Persians block out the sun, then we shall have our battle in the shade" offering a glimpse into the idealistic view of Sparta that so many writers adopted.

He opens his description of Spartan society with a tone of awe:

"Now once it had struck me that Sparta, despite having one of the lowest populations, had nonetheless clearly become the most powerful and most famous in Greece, I wondered how this had ever happened. But I stopped wondering once I had pondered the Spartiate institutions, for they have achieved success by obeying the laws laid down for them by Lycurgus."

This quote: *"None the less I do admire Lycurgus, the man who established the laws under which they flourished; I consider him a remarkably wise man. Not merely did he not imitate other states, but he adopted opposite institutions to the majority with outstanding results"*

Also reflects Xenophon's admiration for both the Spartan government and Lycurgus. It is evident that he is amazed and impressed with its constitution and the Spartans in general – their strength, courage and dedication to the Law and the State.

Consequently, Xenophon has presented Sparta in a positive light by shunning the other Greek states. He does so in this quote

“In other cities, the girls who are to become mothers, and are brought up in the approved fashion are ... expected to imitate the usually sedentary life of craftsmen and to work their wool quietly. How could one expect girls brought up in such a way to produce outstanding offspring?”

From this, it can be extrapolated that Sparta was the wiser State who was able to produce the ‘outstanding offspring’ due to its different approach to women and their ‘supposed’ role in society. He recognises that Sparta had the more intelligent method of producing offspring. His tone in the rhetorical question evokes a condescending and arrogant tone towards the other Greek states.

However, because Xenophon was an exile from Athens, his description of Spartan society may be clouded with prejudice. It could have been an attempt of a disillusioned politician to find order and stability.

Views on Sparta have differed from historian to historian. However, there are many factors that influence each of these historians, whether for the better or worse. Though, in all, it is unanimous that Sparta was a state of *eunomia*.