

ANCIENT HISTORY

‘The real political leadership of Sparta rested with the elders and the ephors’ (C. G. Thomas). To what extent is this an accurate description of the government of Sparta?

According to both ancient and modern sources on Sparta, its’ political leadership could be perceived to be in the control of the elders, the dual kingship and the *Ephors* alone. However, for one to completely agree with C. G. Thomas and confirm the accuracy of his statement, the political significance of the *Apella* and the democratic system in ancient Sparta would have to be ignored. It is the nature of the ‘balance of power’ between these four groups, and the extent of power that is given to each, that ultimately decides the validity and truthfulness of the statement made by C.G. Thomas.

One aspect of the Spartan political sphere which holds some significance is the *Apella*; the assembly attended by those over the age of thirty who held full citizenship. They: elected the *Ephors*, elders of the *Gerousia* and other magistrates, were responsible for passing measures put before it, such as appointments of military commanders, decisions about peace and war, resolutions for problems regarding kingship, and the emancipation of helots. However, the assembly did not debate; instead, they listened to the Kings, *Ephors*, and councillors. It also did not decide on the issues that would be voted on, for this was a power of the *Gerousia*. It would seem that however important and democratic the *Apella* were, they did not truly hold power. Modern historian Cartledge explains that, ‘It is hardly likely that an assembly whose members have been trained from earliest childhood to respect and unquestioningly obey their elders would easily reject a proposal of the *Gerousia*.’ Consequently, it would seem that the *Apella* is almost an unnecessary body, intended to give the feeling of order and equality amongst the Spartiates without giving any true power. According to modern historian Rabbitt, ‘the ruling elite could ignore any of the Assembly’s decisions.’ Still, they remain an important part of the government, as they ultimately made decisions and the groups that do hold power – the *Gerousia* and *Ephors* – were voted from within their ranks.

The *Gerousia*, consisting of the elders in the society, was another powerful body. It formed an aristocratic elite group, based on age, within a society that was supposedly equal, although held considerable influence and prestige. According to Plutarch, it consisted of twenty-eight of “the best and most deserving men past sixty years old” plus the two kings, and once chosen for the *Gerousia*, a man held his office for life. The *Gerousia* was responsible for preparing and deliberating on the bills that would be presented to the assembly for voting. If the *Gerousia* was not happy with the assembly’s vote on an issue, they could decline accepting it. They would then adjourn and that meant that the bill was not passed. Thus, the assembly’s vote would be ineffective over the *Gerousia*’s. Also, if the Kings did not agree with the *Gerousia* on a certain matter, the Kings were not in a position to just make a decision in their favour, as they were outnumbered by the votes of the *Gerousia*. Consequently, their main role was to organise the political agenda– that is, proposing the bills to be put before the assembly. From this role sprang a high level of power. Because the *Gerousia* decided what the *Apella* voted on, they decided what the issues were, and what was passed. In this sense, the *Gerousia* held almost unchecked power over the manifold political layout of Sparta.

In relation to Spartan kings, Herodotus suggested that they and their twenty-eight elders were the most powerful figures involved with politics in ancient Sparta. When referring to two kings in his book ‘The Histories’ he states that they have, “the power of declaring war on whom they please. In this, no Spartan may attempt to oppose their decision”. Yet this claim is contradicted by historians who explain that the role of *Ephors* to be above that of Spartan kings. Aristotle explains that ‘the Ephorate has supreme authority in the most important matters.’ From this, it can be assumed that war comes under the description of ‘most important matters’, and that it was not the Spartan kings leading the troops into a war so decided by a king or kings. Instead, it was more of a war declared under the ultimate jurisdiction of the *Ephors*. Hence, despite whatever decisions were made by the

supposedly supreme rulers – the Kings – it was in fact the *Ephors* that wielded the power and made the decisions.

This view of the Spartan kings being inferior to the *Ephors* in terms of absolute power is further reinforced in Rabbitt's 'Sparta', where he explains, 'Some of these kings did try to act like tyrants in the fifth century but they were quick to discover the true extent of their power and were punished like any other citizen.' Thus, Spartan Kings had the same rules and regulations regarding law and punishment imposed on them as on a regular citizen. This view shows us that the Spartan kings did not hold true power, as in a system where the monarchs are leaders and diplomatic immunity is usually placed upon them, this was simply not true for the Spartan kings. This belief is further reinforced by Xenophon, who concludes a statement on the Kings with the quote 'These, then, are the prerogatives granted to a king during his lifetime – nothing much above the level of private citizens.'

The *Ephors*, despite what obscurity about their position, seem to have been a highly powerful group – overruling the king, and so powerful that they only served for one year. This one year rule does very little to tarnish the impression that the *Ephors* were a very powerful group, in any sense. Although the *Ephors* could not be re-elected, they possessed enormous power. They: were chief administrators and executives of the state, advised the kings and kept a check on royal powers, called meetings of the *Gerousia* and the assembly, controlled over Spartan magistrates, were responsible for most civil and criminal cases, could arrest and imprison a king, and could banish foreigners from the state. Their various administrative, organisational and judicial roles within the government are focused towards the good order of Sparta. Barrow explains that even as the kings (through the assembly) declared war, the *Ephors* decided how many troops would go, and the actual details. They had essentially full logistical and organisational control of the Spartan military, even accompanying the general-king into battle.

According to Xenophon, they "have the power to fine anyone they wish, the right to secure payment on the spot, the right also to dismiss officeholders, and actually to imprison and put them on trial for their lives". Thus, the *Ephors* had immense control and domination over the Spartan government system. Herodotus further states in his book 'The Histories', that the *Ephors* "sit with the twenty-eight elders in the council chamber, and, in the event of their absence from a meeting, those of the elders who are nearest of kin to them take over their privilege and cast two votes, in addition to their own", further exemplifying their privileges paralleling their extreme power.

As a result, it can be deduced that neither the *Apella*, *Gerousia* or the kings, despite their number or title, held the real political leadership in ancient Sparta. Instead, the *Ephors* held the role of executives and administrators of the state, and the bulk of the judicial, military, organisational and political power. It is this political power that, when combined with the power of the *Gerousia* (the elders) in their proposal of bills and political dictation, that leads to the truth that the *Ephors* and elders did indeed hold 'the real political leadership of Sparta', as C. G. Thomas initially confirmed.