

## ANCIENT HISTORY: *SPARTA*

**With reference to ancient sources and prominent historians of the time, assess (make a judgement of value, quality, outcomes results or extent) the roles and privileges of kings in Spartan society.**

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As a concept, kingship in Sparta is unique as it incorporates a functioning monarchy within a constitutional framework (Bamber, 2001). Supposedly laid down by the legendary Lycurgus in the "Great Rhetra" the monarchs of Sparta were among the highest ranking members of society. However, the power enjoyed by these kings was far from absolute and their actions, decisions and even position were not above question. If considered incompetent, a king could be sent into exile or be punished for crimes against the state. Despite these evident limitations, kingship brought with it certain privileges as well as important royal duties. These roles and privileges extended across many aspects of the Spartan social sphere as shown in written sources by some of the most prominent historians in the ancient world.

At any one time, there were two kings in Sparta. They represented separate families, the Eurypontids and the Agiads. Unlike in other Greek City States, where monarchies were overthrown early (Hurley, 2008), kingship in Sparta remained virtually unchanged for about 600 years. The historian Xenophon, writing in the 4th century BC, expresses the belief in his *The Polity of the Lacedaemonians* that Spartan diarchy is "the sole type of rule which still preserves the original form in which it was first established." (p67). Similarly, Aristotle at about the same time says in his *Politics* of Aristotle, the kings are "perpetual generals" (fordham.edu accessed November 2012). While, in the context of his work this is demonstrated by Aristotle as an unfavourable concept and a "cause of much dissension" (fordham.edu accessed November 2012), his observation demonstrates the military nature of the Spartan kings' roles and privileges. Within Spartan society, the kings undertook the role of the military commanders. They were expected to lead their troops into battle and often partook in the battle themselves (Bamber, 2001). One of the most notable examples of a Spartan king in battle is Leonidas I, whose expedition to and succeeding demise at Thermopylae was famously recorded by Herodotus in his *Histories*. The kings were traditionally expected to march out of the city first and return home last. However, while they were away on military expeditions, kings were allowed certain privileges to assist them on their journey and to increase comfort and safety. They were assigned 100 bodyguards and had the privilege to take on expeditions as much cattle as they wished. Also, they were given the skins of all the animals slain in sacrifice. Plutarch in his *Lycurgus* makes mention of the kings also of having "about his person someone who had been crowned in the Olympic games.". Arguably, one of the greatest military privileges of Spartan kings was the ability to wage war on whomever they chose (Herodotus, c. 430 BC). However, while this was a steadfast right, it was not an unquestionable one. The kings, in all their decisions, including military ones, were answerable to and could be judged by the members of the Ephorate. While they were not in war, the kings were expected to eat in the *syssitia* (military mess) and were always served a double portion. This was usually done not so that they would eat twice as much, but so that they could share food with their favourites, including their *tuthoi* which was a 'mess mate' a king could have the privilege of selecting (Xenophon, c 375 BC). The kings' sons similarly had certain privileges of a military nature. As the future rulers, they were not required to attend and complete *agoge* training as all sons of other full Spartan citizens had to. It was only later in the polis's history that it was decided that only one of the kings would undertake military expeditions, while the other would remain in Sparta to oversee domestic responsibilities. These were commonly political and judicial in nature.

The judicial power of Spartan kings was decidedly limited. They were themselves subject to the law along with other people of Sparta. This is demonstrated in the case of the Agiad ruler Cleomenes III who, during his reign in the 2nd Century BC, attempted to reform the Spartan state. Following his defeat at the Battle of Sellasia he was exiled and sought refuge in Alexandria where he committed suicide after a failed revolt. According to Herodotus writing in *The History of the Persian Wars*, it

was the role of Spartan kings to mainly oversee legal cases regarding unbetrothed heiresses, issues on public roads and the adoption of sons. While the latter could have wider implications for Spartan society, these issues were mostly considered minor. Regarding other judicial matters, except for the two votes that the kings contributed by right, they generally had no say in major legal cases. One exception to this was Agesilaus, whose life is well documented by both Plutarch and Xenophon in *Life of Agesilaus* and *Agesilaus* respectively. Both historians agree that his long reign, that spanned about four decades, gave him great influence over policy making. His power is highlighted in his ability to influence the vote in the trial of the general Sphodrais in 378 BC. (mrsgraham.net accessed November 2012). As with judicial matters, the kings' political rights were limited. It was both their role and their privilege to preside over the Gerousia, and they were the only two members under 60 years of age that were allowed on the council. As members of the Gerousia, the kings could assist with the making of laws and actions, as well as contribute votes on significant matters. Another role of the Kings was to deliver a monthly oath to members of the Ephorate, swearing to serve "in accordance with the established laws of the State." Throughout Sparta's history, the only way a king appears to gain more political influence was through a long reign that allowed him to oversee the appointment of many members of the Gerousia. For example, Cleomenes I, when tried for treason towards the end of his 30 year reign was speedily pardoned by the State. Unlike their restricted power in court and in parliament, the kings were very significant to the Spartan religious sphere.

In Spartan society, the kings were often viewed as religious figures that played an important role in communication with deities. There are various mentions in the surviving works of the Spartan poet and soldier, Tarytaes to the kings being "beloved or "esteemed by the Gods" (ancientgreekbattles.net accessed November 2012). By virtue of birth; Spartan kings were promoted to the priesthood of Zeus, this gave them unique access to the principal oracular temple at Delphi. They were expected to perform sacrifices, both on and off the battlefield. In the *History of the Peloponnesian war* by Thucydides, many sacrifices done by kings during battle are detailed. By right, according to Plutarch in *Lycurgus* the kings were given "a piglet from every sow's litter, so that he should never lack victims with which to consult the gods,". At religious feasts, as well as performing their sacrificial duties, kings were allowed special privileges. Specifically, they were served food first, got double the regular portion and were often given the hides of the animal slain in sacrifice. Another privilege of a religious nature was that of special funerary arrangements. Once a king is dead, Herodotus details in *The History of the Persian Wars* "horsemen go around and announce that which has happened throughout the whole of the Spartan land..." (p 56). The funeral ceremony, Herodotus claims, was attended by thousands, including members of all classes. At least two members of each household had to go into mourning and for 10 days, no council or magistrate meetings were held. Only for the deaths of kings were such rituals observed. Lastly, in their lifetime the kings of Sparta had other social privileges. For example, at sports games, the two kings were reserved seats of honour and also, on the grounds of their allotted lands was a pond that provided and unrestricted supply of fresh water.

In conclusion, Spartan kings, as members of the ruling class, the kings were expected to fulfil a number of military, judicial, political and religious roles. However despite their many privileges, their power was limited by the State in its attempt to maintain the singular governmental system that so defined Sparta in this famous period of its history. The kings were seen not as absolute rulers, but rather as social, military and religious figureheads, or in the words of Tyrtaeus as "guardians of.... Sparta's city gates,". (mrsgraham.net accessed November, 2012).

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