

ANCIENT HISTORY: SPARTA

With reference to the sources and other evidence, what does the evidence reveal about the importance of religion in Spartan society?

Religion, as in most other Greek city states, was integral to Spartan society, supporting its militaristic ideals and identity, providing social cohesion and conformity and allowing a disruption of the commonplace rigidity. This information can be gained from ancient historians, including Plutarch, Pausanias and Xenophon, as well as archaeological sources including Source A, scattered religious sites and statues of Greek gods and goddesses.

Although Sparta, being a more simplistic society, did not house the large religious structures as in Athens, they were extremely devoted and obedient to most Greek gods and goddesses, reflected in various festivals. Ken Webb states “Worship of the various gods often reflected the nature of the society doing the worshipping,” and this is evident through Hephaestus, god of craftsmanship, and Dionysus, god of wine and celebration, not being held in as high esteem. Instead, deities related to warfare, athletics and fertility were worshipped, and they were all armed to reflect Sparta’s military nature. This is evidenced by the Apollo statue at Amyclae and the armed Aphrodite statue. One such goddess who was significant to many groups in Spartan society was Artemis, goddess of hunting, wild animals and childbirth, who was combined with an earlier Spartan goddess, Orthia, of which little is known. The cult of Artemis Orthia was most important to women and boys in the agoge system. Her sanctuary was near the river Eurotas, east of the acropolis, and archaeological artefacts uncovered here provide valuable information about how much this goddess contributed to Spartan society. Thousands of votive clay, ivory and clay offerings have been discovered at her temple and sanctuary, as depicted in Source A. Sacrifices and offerings, which could be conducted at the home or at religious sites, were made to obtain divine favour and illustrate the Spartans’ dependency on the gods for good fortune. At this particular temple, these offerings may have been given by women who were pregnant or barren in hopes for a successful birth. The fact that women would have devoted their time to offering these objects convey the importance of delivering a healthy Spartan warrior, and in turn, the significance of the transaction-like relationship between gods and Spartans.

In addition, Plutarch and Xenophon refer to a rite of passage undergone by young boys in the agoge system in which they would attempt to steal cheese from an altar at the Artemis Orthia temple, and were then whipped brutally. Michell, however, states it was a “blood-bond between gods and human beings...they became united with the divinity” by their blood being shed on the altar. In this instance, religion was utilised to distinguish the better from the poorer warriors.

Religious festivals such as the Karneia, Gymnopaedia and the Hyakinthia were integral to Spartan society, fostering a sense of community and cohesion whilst continually reinforcing their devotion to the gods and mythical heroes. In fact, these festivals were so paramount to the Spartans that Herodotus explains three occasions in which Sparta declined to send their military until a religious ceremony had taken place or was completed. For this, they were often mocked by other Greek states. One such occurrence is mentioned in Source B, describing that only three hundred soldiers were sent to the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC. This was due to fear that if they did not complete the harvest festival Karneia, the Spartans would “[take] the field in the ordinary way”, emphasising the connection between the military and religion and emphasising the Spartan belief that success relied on the hoplites and the deities.

These festivals were enshrined into Spartan law, as referenced by Herodotus, “did not wish to break their law”. The Great Rhetra, as detailed by Plutarch, stemmed from a religious oracle of Delphi, and thus, religious influence supported most aspects of the government system. Herodotus mentions that the Spartans worshipped their kings as gods, and that they were semi-divine. By positioning the

kings as 'messengers of the gods', a connection hence formed between the gods and ordinary people. The power to consult the gods was only allowed to those with the most authority, and thus, religion was also a means of demonstrating and maintaining power and influence over the people.

Ultimately, from examination of both archaeological and written sources, although they contradict on some levels, it is clear that Sparta was extremely devoted to religion and its influence was present in most aspects of citizens' lives.