
Sparta: A Steadfast Rock Among the Poleis

Nick Waller

Nick Waller, from Salem, Illinois, wrote this paper about the ancient Spartans for Dr. Lee Patterson's His 3140 class in the fall semester of 2014. He earned his BA in history in May, 2016, and will return to EIU in the fall to pursue a Master's Degree in history, with a focus on ancient history.

The two phalanxes look at each other across the field that will soon be bathed in blood. On one side stands the military super power known as Sparta. On the other side stands the creators of democracy and owners of the most powerful navy in Greece: the people of Athens. The two armies soon clash in the *othismos* causing the ground to shake from the force.¹ After several hours of intense battle the Spartans stand victorious as the Athenians retreat, another victory on the land for Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. The Athenian dead would be remembered by Pericles later that year in his great Funeral Oration, a speech that gives a false light into the society of Athens. Yet, in three long decades, the Peloponnesian War would end the same as this battle did, with the utter defeat of Athens and with yet another change: one of the many in a long series of changes throughout the history of Athens, to the society of Athens.²

The Sparta and Athens have had two very different journeys throughout history. From their early days in existence to the very end of the independence of each Greek polis. The societies and governments of Sparta and Athens were inherently different: one was like iron, unyielding, and the other was clay, ever being changed and remolded. Thucydides shows us just how far down society can collapse thanks to the atrocities brought on by war, and the greatest of which is the collapse of government, which we see in 411 with a coup by the aristocrats and hoplite social classes. However, the Spartan side of the war failed to show a complete collapse in government, or even a collapse on the societal scale that Athens has during the plague that ravaged the city of Athens. This paper will discuss how the Spartan government and society was built on a much sturdier foundation than that of Athens, even with the lowest population in the Greek world. The oligarchical, totalitarian form of government and society of Sparta, in contrast to that of the democratic form of the Athenians, has been in a more stable state, in terms of society and governmental structure, since the early days of the polis.

Athens. The birthplace of democracy, philosophy, and the defenders of Greece against the great threat known as Persia.³ The rise of this polis, which would be considered the most powerful of Greece, was as long and bumpy one with many turns. The people of Athens are of the descent of the Ionians, a people that is native to the lands of Greece.⁴ Like all of the polis, they evolved from a system under a *basileus*, a term for a “king” or a chief of a town in Dark Age Greece, to an oligarchy led by the aristocrats. Early on in Athens’ history they were subject to *stasis* over and over again.⁵ So, like every other Greek polis that was subject to *stasis*, they would bring a tyrant into power to fix the problems that the aristocrats either could not or would not fix.

¹ Othismos is the initial clash between two phalanxes in battle.

² The Peloponnesian War lasts from 434 – 401 BC.

³ Democracy was created in 508 BC by Cleisthenes.

⁴ Herodotus 1.56.

⁵ *Stasis* is a Greek word meaning a period of civil strife.

The first man to attempt to take over Athens and create a tyranny was Cylon. An Olympic winner, Cylon was able to persuade a group of people to help him seize control of the Acropolis and with it gain power of Athens for themselves. In the end, the people rise against him and he is forced to flee, while the rest of his men were killed by the opposing aristocratic family, the Alcmaeonidae.⁶ While this example is different from the other tyrannies, mainly because this one was unable to actually succeed in gaining power, it does show how in the early years of Athenian society there were conflicts between the elite families who were ruling Athens. The polis of Sparta on the other hand did not have conflicts that resulted in one elite family attempting to form a tyrannical form of government.⁷

A few years later Draco, an archon of Athens, attempted to fix the current stasis taking hold of the polis. Because there had been large scale fighting between factions in Athens seen in c. 620 BC, Draco created laws that were extremely harsh to those who would break them.⁸ Draco believed that these harsh laws would help fix the stasis that was present in Athens during his time.⁹ However, something interesting about Draconian law was that it applied to everyone, whether they were of the aristocratic status of the more common people. It is interesting to note that the stasis at this time was so bad that the need for incredibly harsh law to be necessary. Not only are the laws harsh but they also apply to everyone, even the aristocratic families. When Athens is thought of by people it is always about how they created democracy, or how Athens was the seat of knowledge and philosophy in the ancient Greek world. What seems to be forgotten the most in common knowledge is the fact that before Athens got there they were stuck in a state of affairs that is seen here with the reforms of Draco. An Athens that is so much turmoil, some of the harshest laws seen are to only seen solution to solving such social turmoil.

When Croesus was attempting to gain support against the growing threat of the Persian Empire he looked to the Greek poleis for who was the most powerful.¹⁰ The choice was between Sparta and Athens, and seeing how Athens was embroiled in stasis between two aristocratic families Sparta was chosen as the ally.¹¹ With the stasis being a conflict between two aristocratic houses a third party saw a chance to come in and take control. This party was led by Pisistratus, son of Hippocrates. Through some scheming to gain the support of the people of Athens, Pisistratus was able to get control over the Acropolis and also have control over all of Athens itself.¹² While Pisistratus did not change any of the customs of Greece he brought an end to the stasis, until he was driven out by the two other parties. What we see this time is that instead of the stasis arising between the different levels of the society it is merely a struggle for power over Athens between two aristocratic families.

Pisistratus would eventually pass down his seat of power to his sons.¹³ The sons would not last long however, because Hippias the son of Pisistratus would be driven out of Athens by the Spartan King Cleomenes.¹⁴ This would open up a power vacuum in Athens that would be fought over by two aristocrats, Isagoras and Cleisthenes. Gaining the support of the people Cleisthenes

⁶ Herodotus 5.72.

John Henry Wright, "The Date of Cylon," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, no. 3 (1892), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/310410> (accessed November 19, 2014).

⁷ Sparta was not free from the aristocratic family getting in conflicts between each other. The way that it happened was done in a more political way, as opposed to the bloody attempts to gain power as seen through Cylon.

⁸ Hence the term "Draconian" meaning extremely harsh and cruel.

⁹ Robin Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian* (New York: the Penguin Group, 2006), 60.

¹⁰ Herodotus 1.53.

¹¹ Herodotus 1.59-70.

¹² Herodotus 1.59.

¹³ Herodotus 1.60-64.

¹⁴ Herodotus 5.64-65.

was able to seize power over Isagoras.¹⁵ Similarly, with Pisistratus and Cylon, the stasis is one between aristocratic families merely vying for power. So what can be learned from this change in what caused the stasis? Solon's reforms worked. Because the reforms worked then the aristocrats would no longer have to worry about the lower classes rising up against them. Thus freeing them to spend more time attempting to gain power for their respective families. However, under Cleisthenes a dramatic change in the history of mankind took place, the birth of democracy. In the year 508 BC democracy is born under a decree that begins with the simple words, "It seemed good for the people."¹⁶ And from this moment on the society and government of Athens will be constant, for the first time since the birth of the polis, for almost a hundred years.

Birthered from the fires of war, the people of Sparta would come to be known as the greatest fighters in Greece. The people of Sparta are not natives to the land of Laconia, but are instead from northern Greece. Once they established themselves in the Eurotas River Valley they would soon expand their territory to include all of Laconia and Messenia, c. 735 BC.¹⁷ With this acquisition of land, and with it a large number of slaves, Sparta would need to have to worry about a revolt from these conquered people. To counter this Lycurgus made changes to the system of government that Sparta was using.¹⁸ This change in social and governmental policy would be called the Great Rhetra.¹⁹ This change in policy turned the oligarchic government into one that had a system of checks and balances. The Spartan government had a dual kingship, the Agiad and Eurypontid lineages, the council -Gerousia- that was seen throughout all of Greece, but also he added the ephors. The ephors were a way to "curb the power" of the oligarchic form in the government.²⁰ Spartan government worked as follows, the two kings of Sparta had been downgraded to only being members of the Gerousia. However, they did still have leadership when it came to leading an incursion into enemy territory. The Gerousia was made up of 30 men, including the two kings, and the role of the Gerousia was to decide what the Assembly would vote on for that day. The Gerousia could even override the decisions made. Crimes committed by kings would end up in front of the Gerousia for deciding on. While the Assembly, made up of only adult age Spartan males, voted on what laws would pass or actions that Sparta should take; actions like going to war or not.²¹

The ephors held the power to decide whether or not a Spartan king had broken the laws or not. Ephors were also the ones in charge of how the agoge, the training program for Spartan children, was enacted. With these powers they were equal to, and as stated before, and even above the Spartan kings in power. That said someone could only serve as ephor once in their life, and the term in office was merely a year long.²² With a system of government where each "branch" had a way to control each other so that there was no way for a tyrant, or one person, to gain power, that government would have a long lasting rule of stability.

With a basic understanding of how the Spartan government works it is clear that the government had a hold in every aspect of the life of a Spartan citizen. Sparta was created into a totalitarian society, a system where everything is controlled by the government. But before these reforms made it is generally believed that Sparta was in fact in a time of stasis, a time worse off than

¹⁵ Herodotus 5.66.

¹⁶ Robin Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian* (New York: the Penguin Group, 2006), 88.

¹⁷ Paul Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia: A regional history 300-362 BC* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 2002), 97.

¹⁸ Plut. *Lycurgus* 3.1.

¹⁹ Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 64.

²⁰ Plut. *Lycurgus* 7.1.

²¹ Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 65.

²² Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 70-72.

any other polis.²³ Even with this time of stasis Sparta has never had a tyrant take over the government like Athens.²⁴ With the government run state the men of Sparta, the demos, never had a conflict between them and the aristocratic leaders.²⁵ This added with the fact that Sparta was an egalitarian society and the threat of a helot revolt, which would have severely harmed the society if ever succeeded, helped to keep the demos of Sparta away from ever having a total collapse in their society due to stasis.

We must not fall prey to the “Spartan Mirage” when talking about Spartan society, however. Even though they seem to be a perfect and well run “utopian society,” they were anything but perfect. The reason why Sparta was such a totalitarian and militaristic society is that was what was necessary for their survival. After they conquered Messenia in c. 735 BC, the demos of Sparta were incredibly outnumbered by slave to full citizen ratio.²⁶ And to combat this the Spartan citizens were at a constant state of war with the helots. Even with the government everything was not perfect. The leaders would scheme against others to consolidate more power to their favor, sometimes even forcing others into exile and appointing leaders that they wish to be in power instead.²⁷ So while it seemed to be perfect and whole on the outside, Sparta was at a constant state of keeping the power they gained within their own hands. Important to note is how even within the elite class of Spartiates, the only true citizens in Sparta, that there were groups who were higher and lower in that class. Therefore, while the Spartiates were on top of the social class the aristocrats of the Spartiates were even higher in class than most of the other Spartiates. Since Sparta is a militaristic state the majority of the Spartiates would have been in the hoplite class.

Having both found a system for their societies that was stable, these two soon grew to become the two most powerful city states in all of the Greek world. The Athenian Empire and the Spartan hegemonic league, the Peloponnesian League, would soon come to blows and shake the very foundations of Greece. By the end of this only one would be left standing, while the other had fallen into chaos and disorder. Beginning in 431 BC the Peloponnesian War was the culmination of growing tensions between Athens and Sparta, mainly due to the imperialistic policy that Athens had adopted under Pericles. Warring against Sparta was a matter that Pericles came up with an idea to neutralize their superiority in land engagements, he would use the Athenian fleet and the Long Walls to keep Athens as a citadel.²⁸ And while this was an excellent plan for negating any advantage Sparta would have over them it would cause a problem for the Athenians in the future.

In the years 430-429 BC a massive plague would sweep through Athens, causing the death of thousands and showing how Athenian society could collapse in such a hard way. Originating in Ethiopia, the plague swept through the Persian Empire before suddenly appearing in Athens during an incursion of Spartans under King Archidamus.²⁹ This plague caused the death of the great leader Pericles, showing that everyone in Athens was in danger of dying, from the poor to the rich. There was such a large amount of deaths of the rich population that the poor were inheriting the wealth, and with the fact that they would soon die they spent a lot of it on indulgences.³⁰ And in spirit of this knowledge that death could at any moment take them, people would be headless about the

²³ Paul Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia: A regional history 300-362 BC* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 2002), 115. Herodotus 1.65., Thucydides 1.18.

²⁴ Thucydides 1.18.

²⁵ Demos in the Greek word for the people, or those who had citizenship.

²⁶ Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 28-29.

²⁷ Cleomenes with regards to co-king Demaratus in the 490s BC. For further reading refer to Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

²⁸ Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 60-61.

²⁹ Thucydides 2.47-48.

³⁰ Thucydides 2.53.

laws.³¹ The collapse of society was so bad that the people failed to give even the basic burial rights to their dead.³² While Athens had been able to come back from the plague with enough strength to not only continue fighting the Peloponnesian War but even take the advantage in the war at times they did not come out of the plague unscathed. Athens lost their leader, Pericles, to the plague. With the loss of Pericles, Athens would find itself without someone to direct the people to decide which actions would benefit Athens. Which, as we will see later, could be the greatest cause of the demise of the polis of Athens.

Sparta's tribulation was different than the plague that Athens suffered from. In 464 BC there was a massive earthquake that killed nearly 20,000 Spartans. Seeing an opportunity, the Messenian helots revolted against the Spartans causing the Third Messenian War to begin.³³ With the help of their allies, including from Athens, the Spartans were able to put down this rebellion and regain control over their territory. So with a comparison of two events that shook the very grounds of society we see that the Spartans were not only able to keep control over their society, but also put down a rebellion of a people that before the massive loss of life outnumbered them greatly.

The ability to stand up and fight in a war the likes of which has never been seen in Greece is clearly seen in both Athens and Sparta. The only difference between the two poleis is that Sparta was better equipped to deal with the war long term. For Athens to decide on a course of action for the war, one that would not have to be made in the heat of the moment during battle, the decision would fall onto the demos. When reading the History of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides, a theme is routinely observed. The demos are a very fickle. For example: how the Athenians dealt with the Mytilenian revolt. Located on the island of Lesbos the people here had been wanting to revolt from Athens for some time.³⁴ After having the revolt crushed by Paches, an Athenian in charge of putting down the revolt, the Assembly voted to "put to death... the entire adult male population of Mytilene, and to make slaves of the women and children."³⁵ The next day the demos of Athens had a sudden change of heart, they had a debate as to whether to change their previous decision. After many Athenians gave their opinions about what to do the vote was taken and the Assembly decided to only put to death the Mytilenians who were "chiefly responsible for the revolt", take over the Mytilenian navy, destroy their fortifications, and divided the whole of the land of Lesbos into 3,000 holdings to distribute among the Athenians.³⁶

The greatest example of the fickleness of the demos is of the way the demos handled the Sicilian Expedition. The polis of Egesta sent for help from Athens to help them against the polis of Selinuntines, and to do so they brought sixty talents of silver to pay for a fleet of ships to be sent to Sicily. The Athenians, believing that Egesta was a very wealthy polis agreed to help. The Athenians agreed to send a total of sixty ships, commanded by Alcibiades, Nicias, and Lamachus to go to Sicily to help the Egestaeans.³⁷ Nicias was openly opposed to this expedition, and he tried to persuade the Assembly away from such a course. Nicias tried to convince the Assembly that it would be useless to go because the Sicilian poleis were so powerful, and the only way to take them would be to send an overwhelmingly large force.³⁸ The Assembly agreed to send the large force. Not only did they vote for the original armada but when Nicias needed help, he asked to either have the force withdraw or to send in another force. The vote was a yes to sending in reinforcements. The

³¹ Thucydides 2.53.

³² Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 78.

³³ Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 151-152.

³⁴ Thucydides 3.2. The people of Lesbos had wanted to revolt before the Peloponnesian War had even begun.

³⁵ Thucydides 3.36.

³⁶ Thucydides 3.50.

³⁷ Thucydides 6.8. They also wanted to see if any wealth could be brought back to be used to help the Athenians win the Peloponnesian War.

³⁸ Thucydides 6.19-23.

combined forces would end up being nearly obliterated, the survivors becoming slaves forced to work in mines.

The year is 411 BC and the democracy which had been in place since 508 in Athens has finally been squashed by an oligarchy. Thanks to the events of the drastic failure of the Sicilian Expedition taken by Athens, along with the other failures of the war, has caused the demos of Athens to look for guidance in a different body of government.³⁹ Yet again we see just how fickle the society of Athens is, the Spartan society had continued even though they suffered heavy losses during this war.⁴⁰ For the Spartiates we fail to see such a drastic failure to act logically during the war. This stems from the fact that the decisions were not made by the demos, but rather by the aristocratic few who lead Sparta. What this fact means is that the leadership of Sparta is in the hands of those who are educated, wealthy, and tend to have a better understanding of what is best to do in dire situations.

The end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC saw the end of the Athenian Empire, and along with it the democracy that it had believed was its greatest asset.⁴¹ The iron hard strength of Sparta is clearly seen throughout the whole history of the age of the polis. While Athens on the other hand had floundered for several hundred years, and then when the going got difficult in the Peloponnesian War they fell apart yet again. Today we see a different scene, the totalitarian societies are the more unstable and fail to last as long as the democracies. A lesson learned from these two poleis is that while you may believe that your ideals of government are the best, your society must be able to survive along with them.

³⁹ Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 361.

⁴⁰ This fact is all the more important because of the low population Sparta had at this time. Evidence can be seen at the Battle of Pylos and Sphacteria.

⁴¹ The democracy would be reestablished by the Spartan kings to stop Lysander from, what they believed was his plan of, creating it as his own seat of power. This all happened in the year 403 BC.