



Barber, A. (2017) 'The Spartan *hippeis*: A comparative approach'

Rosetta **Special Edition: CAHA Colloquium Extended Abstracts: 11 - 16**

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/CAHAColloquium2017/Barber.pdf>

---

## The Spartan *hippeis*: A comparative approach

Alex Barber

Sparta has often been seen as a unique state, whose distinctive qualities arose from the policies of its legendary law-giver Lycurgus<sup>1</sup> and were manifested in both the upbringing<sup>2</sup> and institutions<sup>3</sup> of its citizens and in the physical structure of the city itself.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, however, there has been a growing movement in scholarship which is arguing that Sparta has historically been treated as too much of an outlier in the ancient world. This line of research suggests that the reality of life in Sparta was less unique than has previously been understood.<sup>5</sup> The appearance of uniqueness was encouraged by Athenian writers, keen to portray Sparta as the 'other', as well as by the Spartans themselves to whom a veil of mystery and otherness could be a useful propaganda weapon.

This thesis aims to use an in-depth examination of the Spartan military and social unit of the *hippeis* to add to the debate regarding to what extent Sparta was unique or atypical. The proposed methodology is to compare and contrast the *hippeis* with similar units in other societies, both contemporary and later, to draw out indications of Sparta's uniqueness or typicality.

The current paper will first introduce certain key aspects of the *hippeis*, specifically their selection process and roles in military and civic contexts. It will then outline in further detail the proposed thesis methodology, before providing some preliminary conclusions and the direction of future research.

Firstly, the key aspects of the *hippeis* were as follows. The unit consisted of a group of 300 men,<sup>6</sup> selected annually from those aged 20-30<sup>7</sup> who had successfully passed through the *agoge* education system. The *hippeis*

---

<sup>1</sup> Xenophon *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 1.2.

<sup>2</sup> Xenophon *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 2.

<sup>3</sup> Xenophon *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 6.

<sup>4</sup> Plutarch *Sayings of Spartans: Agesilaus The Great* 29.

<sup>5</sup> Hodkinson 2009: ix.

<sup>6</sup> Xenophon *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 4.3.

<sup>7</sup> "τῶν ἡβώντων" Xenophon *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 4.1.

selection process was a useful way for the Spartan state to encourage the continued demonstration of the competitive behaviours fostered among Spartan men from an early age.<sup>8</sup> The selection of the *hippeis* took place in public, and the selectors (the *hippagretai*, ‘takers of the *hippeis*’) explained to the spectating Spartiates why they had chosen certain men and passed over others.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that the *hippagretai* had to explain their reasons emphasises the Spartan focus on communal life and the (superficial) levelling out of social status encouraged by regulations such as communal messes<sup>10</sup> and the replacement of the typical family unit with multiple parental figures.<sup>11</sup> An analysis of contrasting attitudes and behaviours between Sparta and other states will be a key element of the proposed research approach in terms of drawing conclusions about Spartan uniqueness. For example, the focus during the *hippeis* selection process on peer opinion contrasts to behaviours in Thebes, where the Theban Sacred Band (another military unit comprised of 300 men, here 150 pairs of lovers)<sup>12</sup> were said to fight so well as to avoid losing face in front of one specific individual - their lover<sup>13</sup> - rather than the peer group as a whole.

A further key element of the *hippeis* is their role and function in Spartan society. The group had several duties within and outside Sparta including forming a

---

<sup>8</sup> “extreme tension...intended and organised by the laws themselves” Ducat 2006: 17.

<sup>9</sup> “stating his reasons for preferring one and rejecting another” (“διασαφηνίζων, ὅτου ἔνεκα τοὺς μὲν προτιμᾷ, τοὺς δὲ ἀποδοκιμάζει”) Xenophon *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 4.3.

<sup>10</sup> Xenophon *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 5.2; Herodotus *The Persian Wars* 1.65.

<sup>11</sup> Xenophon *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 6.1.

<sup>12</sup> Plutarch *Life of Pelopidas* 18.

<sup>13</sup> Plutarch *Life of Pelopidas* 18 gives the example of a Theban man wishing to be killed through the breast rather than through the back to avoid his beloved feeling shame at the appearance of his having been running away. By contrast, Tyrtaeus fragment 12 relates how a Spartan speared through the front brings glory more widely “to his city, to his people and to his father” (“ἄστῳ τε καὶ λαοῦς καὶ πατέρ’”).

bodyguard for the two kings in battle,<sup>14</sup> acting as an elite military unit<sup>15</sup> and also in smaller detachments as an internal quasi-police force.<sup>16</sup> This internal ‘policing’ role, undertaken by a select group of the *hippeis*, does not typically fall within the duties of similar groups and points to the *hippeis* being a unique and atypical institution. ‘Graduates’ from the *hippeis* often went on to have a diplomatic or other civic role.<sup>17</sup> This research will examine, from a prosopographical perspective, whether this is consistent with the ‘career trajectory’ of elite individuals in other states.

As identified above, the thesis methodology must consider the so-called ‘Spartan Mirage’<sup>18</sup> which acts as a barrier between the ‘Sparta’ as seen in the written sources and the reality of Spartan life. However, the mirage is not necessarily opaque. This thesis will propose that by comparing ancient perceptions of Sparta with perceptions of other states it is possible to identify whether Sparta really was as unique as it has been portrayed. These wider cross-cultural comparisons will bring into perspective aspects of other ancient cultures to produce a more nuanced approach<sup>19</sup> than simply presenting the Sparta/Athens or Sparta/Crete dichotomic comparisons which were favoured in the ancient sources<sup>20</sup> and earlier modern scholarship.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to this, one can make full use of the surviving information through sociological analysis with reference to post-classical societies and structures,

---

<sup>14</sup> Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.72 “and especially in the centre, where King Agis was, and about him the three hundred who were called knights” (“καὶ μάλιστα τῷ μέσῳ, ἥπερ ὁ βασιλεὺς ἦν Ἄγις καὶ περὶ αὐτὸν οἱ τριακόσιοι ἵππῆς καλούμενοι”).

<sup>15</sup> Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.72.

<sup>16</sup> Xenophon *Hellenica* 3.3.9. In Xenophon’s description of the rebellion of Kinadon, one of the *hippagretai* and 6 or 7 *hippeis* are sent to trick Kinadon into giving himself up. Although not explicitly stated, Figueira (2006) quite convincingly demonstrated that these men who are at hand to the *hippagretai* are likely to be *hippeis*.

<sup>17</sup> Herodotus *The Persian Wars* 1.67.

<sup>18</sup> Ollier 1933.

<sup>19</sup> For example the incorporation of material from the Hellenistic Near East (Millender 2009) puts Spartan kingship within its wider contemporary context.

<sup>20</sup> Such as Plutarch *Life of Lycurgus* 12.1 on the public messes.

<sup>21</sup> Such as Jones 1967: 34 on Sparta and Crete having a “common primitive origin”.

which has been a particularly interesting aspect of recent publications.<sup>22</sup> This research project will incorporate comparisons between the selection and role of the *hippeis* with modern military and sporting structures, total institutions, and cults, to identify whether the Spartan *hippeis* were unique absolutely or just in their time. Comparisons can be drawn, for example, between the training of US special forces and the Spartan *krypteia* system. Both practices involve enforced time spent in the wild, tasked with procuring one's own resources.<sup>23</sup> More conceptually, they both comprise elements of a rite of passage, with periods of separation, liminality and re-integration into society.<sup>24</sup> This type of comparison will give rise to conclusions regarding to what extent Sparta was exceptional when taken out of its immediate temporal context.

Preliminary findings of the research indicate that by way of traditional comparison with contemporary Greek states such as Athens and Thebes, the Spartan *hippeis* do display unique or atypical qualities. However, once the scope of comparison is increased to non-Greek and post-classical states, similarities increasingly arise. Extrapolated from the *hippeis* to Spartan society more widely, this is suggestive that while Sparta may have been presented as unique in its time, certain social structures bear similarities to the post-classical world. This indicates that there was not an inherent 'uniqueness' about Sparta, and that Sparta's atypical qualities appear less so when viewed from a wider perspective.

---

<sup>22</sup> For example Tyrell's analysis of how characteristics of Spartan society functioned like a cult (Tyrell 2011) and Luraghi's comparison of the Spartan slave system with serfdom in sixteenth- and seventeenth- century Russia and medieval Korea (Luraghi 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Plutarch *Life of Lycurgus* 28.

<sup>24</sup> The three key elements of a rite of passage as identified by van Gennep 1977.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary Sources**

Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, trans. A. D. Godley [Loeb Classical Library], 3 (Cambridge, MA 1922).

Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, trans. B Perrin [Loeb Classical Library] (Cambridge, MA 1914).

Plutarch, *Life of Pelopidas*, trans. B. Perrin [Loeb Classical Library] (Cambridge, MA 1917).

Plutarch, *Moralia: Sayings of Spartans*, trans. F. C. Babbitt [Loeb Classical Library], 3 (Cambridge, MA 1931).

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. C. F. Smith [Loeb Classical Library], 1 (Cambridge, MA 1928).

Tyrtaeus, *Fragments*, trans. D. E. Gerber [Loeb Classical Library] (Cambridge, MA 1999).

Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians*, trans. E. C. Marchant [Loeb Classical Library] (Cambridge, MA 1968).

Xenophon, *Hellenica*, trans. C. L. Brownson [Loeb Classical Library], 1 (Cambridge, MA 1918).

### **Secondary Literature**

Ducat, J. 2006. *Spartan Education*. Swansea.

Figueira, T. 2006. 'The Spartan *hippeis*', in S. Hodkinson (ed.), *Sparta: Comparative Approaches*. Swansea. 57-84.

Hodkinson, S. (ed.) 2009. *Sparta: Comparative Approaches*. Swansea.

Jones, A. H. M. 1967. *Sparta*. Oxford.

Luraghi, N. 2009. 'The helots: comparative approaches, ancient and modern', in S. Hodkinson (ed.), *Sparta: Comparative Approaches*. Swansea. 261-285.

Millender, E. 2009. 'The Spartan dyarchy: a comparative perspective', in S. Hodkinson (ed.), *Sparta: Comparative Approaches*. Swansea. 1-68.

Ollier, F. 1933. *Le Mirage Spartiate : Étude sur l'idéalisation de Sparta dans l'antiquité grecque de l'origine jusqu'aux Cyniques*. Paris.

Tyrrell, W. 2011. 'The Spartiates as a Charismatic Cult', *International Journal of Cultic Studies* 2, 1-18.

Van Gennep, A. 1977. *The Rites of Passage*. London.