

Jacob Farmer
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A Brief Visit to Ancient Sparta

Though Mom was not initially onboard with the idea of my two little brothers and me spending half a month alone in ancient Sparta, the deals I had found on TimeTravelocity.com were just too good to turn down, and I finally convinced her to buy us tickets. Less than two hundred dollars each, the tickets guaranteed places to stay in the fifth century B.C.E. and enough iron spits to finance our venture for at least two weeks upon arrival.¹ My brothers, Jaxon and Judson, were lucky enough (at least as I saw it beforehand) to train as soldiers in the Spartan military, as they were eight- and ten-years-old at the time, respectively. Certainly that would be the safest place for them to learn about the ancient world as children. I, on the other hand, was told that I was too old at eighteen to be put through the proper “prescribed state upbringing”² and start afresh as a soldier, and so I took on the role of a helot in the home of an upper class military general and his wife. My brothers and I arrived in the city after an easy trip wearing clothes the company had provided us based off the movie, *300*, the authenticity of which I was highly skeptical. My suspicions were immediately confirmed as we began walking the streets of the ancient city; we were met with many a doubtful and disgraceful glance. “Foreigners,” I heard someone mutter under his breath in Greek.

¹ H. Michell, “The Iron Money of Sparta,” *Phoenix* 1, (1947), 42. Hellenistic Spartans used iron spits, skewers, and disks to purchase goods and services. It would be centuries before the use of gold and silver became standard, as in the Hellenistic Age only Spartan nobility were known to possess it.

² Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece, from Utopia to Crisis and Collapse* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2003), 66. Young Spartans were taken from their homes upon turning seven-years-old and raised by the state to become hoplites, or Spartan soldiers.

A man with crazed eyes in the city square chastised us for our clothing and chased us with a wooden cane; apparently tourists were not welcome in Sparta, at least not poor ones.³ Jud and Jax and I felt entirely out of place. Most of the men we passed in the streets wore more traditional tunics, while we were dressed in mere capes and loincloths.⁴ We found a quaint little shop selling more appropriate clothing, and I traded a handful of iron spits for three thick cloaks.⁵ Soon after, we were headed to the Agoge, where Jud and Jax were to be educated as young Spartan hoplites⁶ and where the crimson capes made a comeback. Dropping them off was easy enough; Jud and Jax interjected themselves into a large pack of boys, and I left.⁷

I headed for the home of my new mistress, for I was to pose as her helot, carrying out domestic chores and serving at her pleasure.⁸ Just over a week in, I was struck by my mistress's perpetual idleness; I had not once seen her comb her silky hair, fetch her own food, or even bathe herself without an attendant present. She simply lounged.⁹ What I truly found most surprising, however, was her apparent aversion to clothing. The boys and I had seen very few women in the streets of the city, but here inside the house my mistress's near entire body was on display, from her arms to her legs to everything in between.¹⁰ Apparently there was no such thing as modesty

³ A. J. Holladay, "Spartan Austerity," *The Classical Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1977), 120. The only tourism common in ancient Sparta was that of foreign diplomats from other Greek city-states. There were few incentives for poor Greeks to travel from one region to another, and their presence in city-states other than their own was generally frowned upon.

⁴ Paul Cartledge and Antony Spawforth, *Hellenistic and Roman Sparta: A tale of two cities* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1989), 41. The traditional wear of Spartan hoplites was that of a crimson cape/cloak, while the traditional everyday wear of commoners was a tunic and sandals.

⁵ Michell, "The Iron Money of Sparta," 42.

⁶ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 69.

⁷ Ibid. Spartan boys studying at the Agoge were "organized in 'packs' and 'herds'", "placed under the supervision of young adult Spartans", and "encouraged to break the exclusive ties with their own natal families".

⁸ Paul Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300-363 BC* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979), 161.

⁹ Ibid., 163. Cartledge here paraphrases an excerpt from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and claims "the Spartans were the 'freest' of the Greeks because they had taken the exploitation of slave labour to its logical limit and contrived to perform no productive labour themselves whatsoever."

¹⁰ James Redfield, "The Women of Sparta," *The Classical Journal* 73, no. 2 (1978), 148. The women of Sparta were unlike other Greek women in that they "exercised and displayed their limbs like men".

in ancient Sparta. One day, as I worked in the yard, tending to the garden out back and trimming hedges, I saw an unfamiliar man enter the house. I had yet to see my mistress's famed husband, the military man, so I headed inside to investigate. Upon closer inspection, it was evident this man was no soldier, let alone a general. He had smooth skin, rather pale for a Greek, and long hair tied up high in a ponytail that fell almost to his waist; like my mistress, he looked as though he had never worked a day in his life.¹¹ Almost instinctively, the two set off to my mistress's private quarters, an attendant quickly closing the door behind them. I turned to a fellow helot and asked who this gentleman was. "Her second husband," he replied. "For when the first is out of town."¹²

It was roughly midday when I was told to run to the butcher's shop in the city square. I could not wait to spend time back in the streets. Along the way, I passed very few red capes; the city was filled with none other than helots like myself, and hundreds of them at that.¹³ Looking around the square, I noticed that not one of them was bound or tied. I had assumed I was only allowed to remain free from bondage because I was confined to the house, and those who regularly left and ventured into the city I had expected to be treated like the slaves of the Antebellum American South, kept on a tight leash and constantly surveilled. Much to my astonishment, however, we were not treated like cattle at all.¹⁴ We were certainly not equals by any means, but we were not so much lesser as we were simply serving our purpose.

¹¹ Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia*, 163. "The wearing of long hair in the Spartan manner is the mark of a 'gentleman', since long hair is incompatible with manual labour."

¹² Redfield, "The Women of Sparta," 148. "There is some (scattered and opaque) evidence that the Spartan women were allowed certain sexual freedoms even within the bounds of recognised propriety" and "could have, under special circumstances, more than one husband."

¹³ Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia*, 163. As the number of helots in ancient Sparta began to rise, the free population of Sparta was dwarfed in comparison.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Helots were unlike the more modern notion of chattel slaves and were only "properly called slaves in [a] basic economic sense."

As I walked, busy staring at a relief in the middle of the square of twenty or so naked men and women,¹⁵ I accidentally bumped into a stranger. The man introduced himself as Hegemachos; he had been born a helot in the home of a nobleman.¹⁶ He seemed a kindly fellow, so I saw it fit to ask him the questions I was dying to know about Spartan society, religious life, and the Agoge. I especially wanted to know more about how Jud and Jax were doing. I first asked this Hegemachos about the relief and what it depicted; he said he did not know, but it had been there for years and was one of the very few public art pieces in the city.¹⁷ When asked about the religious offerings of the city, Hegemachos told me there were few altars or statues. Instead, one of the city's main attractions was a supposedly massive war memorial.¹⁸ Evidently, Spartans were not nearly as devoted to their gods as they were to their wars.

I inquired about the Agoge. Hegemachos told me I was just in luck, as his master had formerly been a hoplite in charge of one of the school's packs of youth.¹⁹ Unfortunately, he could not share with me anything I did not already know (he was only a helot, after all), except for the fact that the Agoge could be intensely brutal, to which fact I winced. I hoped my brothers were going to be okay. A thought then popped into my head, and I asked the helot about Spartan women and where they were educated. Hegemachos told me that they were kept as far from military culture as possible.²⁰ They were expected to serve as wives, first and foremost, and birth future Spartan warriors;²¹ they were also, according to the helot, expected to enforce the code of

¹⁵ Larissa Bonfante, "The Naked Greek," *Archaeology* 43, no. 5 (1990), 30.

¹⁶ Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia*, 162. "Spartan citizen-rights were tied strictly to the ability to contribute a certain amount of natural produce to a common mess in Sparta. This produce was procured by helots who were bound, under pain of death, to hand it over to the individual Spartan on whose land they worked."

¹⁷ Holladay, "Spartan Austerity," 120. Following the Persian Wars, Sparta produced very little artwork and sculpture and instead focused on military conquest.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 69.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Redfield, "The Women of Sparta," 149.

conduct that governed Spartan warriors upon their husbands and their various children. After taking a moment to digest this new information, I bid the kind Hegemachos adieu. “It was very nice to meet you,” he offered in response before inviting me to a “special meeting” he and a couple dozen others were attending at nightfall. He said they were discussing big plans,²² but I was unfortunately going to be busy. I started on my way to the butcher’s.

I realized that I had had no contact with Jud or Jax this entire time, and I began to worry. Returning to the house with meat from the butcher in tow, I overheard my mistress conversing with her attendants in her bedchamber. I put the meat down and hid behind a column as she spoke of meeting her thirteen-year-old son’s “inspirer”²³ for the first time last week. According to her, this man was a young hoplite who had been assigned to her son upon turning twelve; he was to serve her boy as a mentor, a partner, and a lover. I was immediately repulsed, even more so when I found this to be a government-sanctioned practice.²⁴ My mind jumped straight to Jud, already nearing eleven years of age, and the mere possibility of my own baby brother in that position in just over a year absolutely pushed me over the edge. Suddenly, I felt pangs of guilt and terror; I knew it was time to depart this brutal world.

What if I had waited to schedule this trip, put it off another year or so? Jud would have been on the receiving end of a pederastic relationship, no doubt. Jax would have probably been fully indoctrinated into the ways of Spartan military culture. No amount of time or consolation or counseling could have undone the damage this trip might have inflicted then. I could not wait to return to 2019. At least there, my brothers could receive a liberal education. At least there, I would have no master. At least there, women would be treated as equals.

²² Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 73. The helot population of Sparta would soon stage a massive revolt against the ruling class.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

But as I gathered my few belongings, the irony of these thoughts hit me. I was taken aback by their utter falsity. Sure, my brothers were receiving a liberal (state-sanctioned) education in America, far more liberal than that of ancient Sparta, but have they not been taught from kindergarten onward that America is the greatest nation on earth? Do they not pledge allegiance to the American flag every morning before math class? I serve no master, but surely, I am expected to serve the government, or could in the case of a military draft. Women are not considered equals in 2019; what a foolish thought! They “make 80 cents for every dollar earned by a man;”²⁵ moreover, men regulate what women may or may not do with their bodies and with their lives even now. Times really have not changed, have they? Millennia have passed, and what do we have to show for that? Tall buildings and a flag on the moon? As it turns out, I had learned much more about my own world than the one I had visited.

Regardless of these revelations, it was evident I would be facing an even bigger problem when I returned home: my mom. She would never trust me to book another vacation for my brothers ever again. In the dark of night, I left my mistress, rounded up my battered and bruised baby brothers, and the three of us traveled back to 2019. “How was your trip, guys?” I asked the boys as we hopped into my car and headed home. Jax stayed quiet. “Bubba,” Jud said as seriously as I have ever heard him, “do not ever take us back.” I let out an anxious chuckle. “Do not laugh,” said Jax. “I was punched in the teeth on day one, and when I cried, they beat me with a stick. I almost died.”²⁶ I had no words. I gulped, then offered up a silent prayer to Zeus,

²⁵ Kelly Reising, “Women in Corporate America: Is the Deck Stacked Against Us?” *Women of Color Magazine* 16, no. 1 (2017), 27.

²⁶ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, 69-70. During the “regular brutally physical contests that punctuated progress through the Agoge” there was an unspoken “code of self-disciplined silence”, the punishment for breaking which was a beating.

Poseidon, Athena, Jesus Christ, and every other god I could think of. I was going to need all the help I could get when I walked through my front door.