Spartan Society and Values

Jessica Schaub

History 100-09

Fall 2016

Frisbie-Fulton

The primary sources “Spartan Creed” and “The Laws and Customs of Spartans” will be used in this essay to explore the mysteries of Spartan society and values. The poem “Spartan Creed” was written by the Spartan poet, Tyrtaeus. It was written in 650 B.C.E. and the full text was included in the primary source. The “Spartan Creed” was an important form of poetry to the warriors of Sparta because of the influence it had on the warriors to fight courageously for their country. He was almost like a modern day motivational speaker for them. It is important historically because it focuses on the specific ideals of the warriors in the society. The other primary source is “The Laws and Customs of Spartans.” This primary source was written by Xenophon, who was an Athenian follower of Socrates. It was written in 400 B.C.E. and the primary source includes a description of the full text. “The Laws and Customs of Spartans” is important historically because it describes in great detail the everyday life of a Spartan man, woman, and child. These sources conclude that Sparta’s society was based a majority on military characteristics. “Among all the Greek city-states, Sparta was distinguished by the military ethic that governed virtually every aspect of its society” (Brophy 85). These characteristics of Spartan society displays their ideals and values.

Sparta is located in southern part of Peloponnesus. It was a single polis but also the most militarized in Greece. Its government consisted of a monarchy. Sparta was unique due to the fact that they had two heredity Kings from two different families that both ruled. They chose to have two different families in power so that they may counterbalance any irrational actions. The Spartans also had enslaved indigenous people of Messenia called Helots. These helots were a state-owned serf who were essentially servants and played a vital role in Spartan society. The people of Sparta trained both the boys and girls at an early age. They took gym classes during school to prepare them for the Spartan life they were to live. This is just one example of how the society was organized for war (Frisbie-Fulton 9-5-16).

The general importance of the first primary source, the “Spartan Creed,” is to have a unitary source that they could base their ideals and way of life off of. In this case, it was all about the military. The Spartan society only cared about being a good warrior and thus being able to compete with other nations in war and keep the overwhelming number of helots at bay. One can see that the poem flows in a way that goes from demanding the Spartans to be a valiant fighter to honoring the ones that have fallen. This flow describes how even though Sparta wanted a perfect military to win every battle, they still honored the people who fought for them and massacring other people was not the only idea they worried about. “For no man ever proves himself a good man in war unless he can endure to face the blood and the slaughter” (Tyrtaeus 85), displays that a man in Sparta has to prove himself in war to be known as a “good man” in society. Only the men who can make it through the harsh life of war will be considered enough to the people of Spartan society. A man cannot be a good warrior without killing someone, seeing the effects of killing the, and enduring the cost of killing them. Because these men have to have the endurance to face these bloody fights, they also must have courage. “Here is courage, mankind’s fines possession” (Tyrtaeus 85). Since Sparta believed in militaristic views and values, it is important for the people fighting to have courage. If these warriors were not brave, they would not make it through the many wars that Sparta fought in. Courage is a big characteristic the Spartans had. With this courage, the Spartan man “Has well trained his hear to be steadfast and to endure” (Tyrtaeus 85) anything their enemy could throw at them. With the Helot people outnumbering the Spartan’s by almost three to one we can see why they couldn’t show any fear. “Here is a man who proves himself to be valiant in war” (Tyrtaeus 85) along with not showing fear the Spartan man had to stay valiant at all times. Through the life and training they had the ability to show their courage. The Spartans had great courage and determination to win because their society was based off of these views. The Spartans were one of the most feared military forces in the Ancient Greek world because they had armies full of valiant fighters. Even though the Spartans are an intimidating militaristic group of people, they still honor the ones who have fell through the quote “And he who so falls among the champions and loses his sweet life, so blessing with honor his city, his father, and all his people” (Tyrtaeus 85). The honor that comes with dying in the battle was one of the most sacred and noble awards that could be bestowed upon a Spartan man. Not only did his wife not mourn but celebrate the life of her fallen warrior. “His shining glory is never forgotten; his name is remembered…No one tries to interfere with his honors or all he deserves” (Tyrtaeus 86). The people who fought for Sparta will always be remembered if they were a good warrior. The Spartans appreciate their fighters and every single fighter who dies for Sparta deserves the same honor.

Lycurgus was a Spartan philosopher who contributed his great knowledge to the laws of Sparta. He was a very wise man and “made ordinances contrary to those of most governments” Therefore, he was a unique thinker. Lycurgus went against the traditional ideals that typical rulers followed at this time in Ancient Greece. “The Laws and Customs of Spartans” goes through and describes the general lifestyle of the different people living in Sparta. First, men played a dominant and very important to the Spartan society. Lycurgus “Appointed that they should contract marriages only when they were in full bodily vigor” (Xenophon 87). Lycurgus did this so that the men would produce “excellent offspring” (Xenophon 87). Women, on the other hand, were only important because they could produce strong men. Lycurgus even suggested that if men were not satisfied with their wife that they could go and steal another man’s wife and have a child with her to produce the best offspring for their militaristic society. Lycurgus said, “If, again, a man was unwilling to associate with his wife…he might, on obtaining consent of her husband, have children by her (Xenophon 87). Women were important to society for the reproduction of the best male. If a male was not satisfied with his wife, then he was allowed to find a woman who fit his needs to provide an adequate child with the consent of that woman’s husband. In this case, since the women were cherished for birthing strong children, “As soon as the children can understand what is said to them, and send them, at the same time, to schoolmasters, to learn letters, music, and the exercises of the palaestra” (Xenophon 87). A palaestra is essentially a gymnasium in Ancient Greece. At this young of an age, the children of Sparta are already preparing their minds and bodies to fight. They learn other subjects, but their main focus is to learn how to fight. In addition to the ideals that Lycurgus had about the people in Sparta, he also had opinions on what they should wear and how this impacts their everyday life. Lycurgus said, “Instead, also, of making their feet soft with sandals, he [Lycurgus] enacted that they should harden them by going without sandals” (Xenophon 87). This was so they could “leap skip and run faster” (Xenophon 87). The Spartans were forced in their everyday life to not wear shoes to make them stronger.

So how do these primary sources compare and display the general values and ideals of Spartan society? Well, both texts describe the militaristic views of the Spartans. However, “The Spartan Creed” is more about the traits of a single warrior and “The Laws and Customs of Spartans” is more about Sparta as a whole and digs deeper into the people, values, customs, and lifestyle. A great Spartan warrior shows no fear, is courageous and valiant, and can kill and feel no guilt. It is his life goal that one day he becomes a great warrior and has a son that can succeed him. Not only is this the goal for each individual, but for everyone in the Spartan population. It all comes together because each individual has the desire to become great and because they have the drive as an induvial, they come together as one and make a strong militaristic society. Sparta was not strictly a militaristic society, although it seems this way. They worked on their survival and own preservation (“Sparta and Spartan Society”). Through the primary sources, it is seen that, although there are different characteristics of Spartan life, we see how a strong militaristic background influence.

Works Cited

Hodkinson, Stephen. "Property and Wealth in Classic Sparta." *Property and Wealth in Classical Sparta* (n.d.): n. pag. The Classical Press of Wales. Web. 11 Nov. 2016. <http://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/36041172/Hodkinson\_\_Property\_and\_Wealth\_in\_Classical\_Sparta\_\_prelims\_\_\_Introduction\_.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJ56TQJRTWSMTNPEA&Expires=1479492712&Signature=aZDu829WDlP%2BrRcrcq%2FfAV%2FuiUk%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DProperty\_and\_wealth\_in\_classical\_Sparta.pdf>.

"Sparta and Spartan Society." Problems De La Guerre. Ed. J. P. Vernant. Paris: Mouton, 1968. 24-40. Sparta and Spartan Society. Web. 6 Sept. 2016. https://books.google.com/books?id=wxhEC4rOqioC&pg=PT394&lpg=PT394&dq=%22Sparta+and+Spartan+Society.%22+Ed.+J.+P.+Vernant&source=bl&ots=ggcq9o4jsx&sig=SZPRHV48go6n9dYVz\_u9407PNXs&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjnoMiW5rLQAhXI7IMKHcHaBsgQ6AEIGzAA#v=onepage&q=%22Sparta%20and%20Spartan%20Society.%22%20Ed.%20J.%20P.%20Vernant&f=false

Tyrtaeus. “Spartan Society and Values” excerpt. Perspectives From the Past. Primary Sources in Western Civilization, eds. James Brophy, et.al., 5th ed., vol.1, W.W. Norton and Company, 2012, pp. 85-86.

Xenophon. “The Laws and Customs of Spartans” excerpt. Perspectives From the Past. Primary Sources in Western Civilization, eds. James Brophy, et.al., 5th ed., vol.1, W.W. Norton and Company, 2012, pp. 86-91.

Additional Sources

Frisbie-Fulton, Michelle. Class lectures. HIST 110-06, Fall 2106, Longwood University,

Farmville, VA.