

Xenophon

The Polity of the Spartans (375 BCE)

In the text below, Xenophon gives a brief description of some aspects of the Spartan state and society created by laws of Lycurgus, a lawgiver from the 8th century. More of a legend than an historical figure whose historicity can be proved, he is still given credit for creating Sparta's unique constitution, which, although often seen as rigid and culturally stultifying, contributed greatly to the tradition of constitutionalism and "mixed" government.

I recall the astonishment with which I first noted the unique position of Sparta among the states of Hellas, the relatively sparse population, and at the same time the extraordinary powers and prestige of the community. I was puzzled to account for the fact. It was only when I came to consider the peculiar institutions of the Spartans, that my wonderment ceased.

When we turn to Lycurgos, instead of leaving it to each member of the state privately to appoint a slave to be his son's tutor, he set over the young Spartans a public guardian--the paidonomos---with complete authority over them. This guardian was elected from those who filled the highest magistracies. He had authority to hold musters of the boys, and as their guardian, in case of any misbehavior, to chastise severely. Lycurgos further provided the guardian with a body of youths in the prime of life and bearing whips to inflict punishment when necessary, with this happy result, that in Sparta modesty and obedience ever go hand in hand, nor is there lack of either.

Instead of softening their feet with shoe or sandal, his rule was to make them hardy through going barefoot. This habit, if practiced, would, as he believed, enable them to scale heights more easily and clamber down precipices with less danger. In fact, with his feet so trained the young Spartan would leap and spring and run faster unshod than another in the ordinary way. Instead of making them effeminate with a variety of clothes, his rule was to habituate them to a single garment the whole year through, thinking that so they would be better prepared to withstand the variations of heat and cold. Again, as regards food, according to his regulation, the eiren, or head of the flock, must see that his messmates gather to the club meal with such moderate food as to avoid bloating and yet not remain unacquainted with the pains of starvation. His belief was that by such training in boyhood they would be better able when occasion demanded to continue toiling on an empty stomach....On the other hand, to guard against a too great pinch of starvation, he did give them permission to steal this thing or that in the effort to alleviate their hunger.

Lycurgos imposed upon the bigger boys a special rule. In the very streets they were to keep their two hands within the folds of their coat; they were to walk in silence and without turning their heads to gaze, now here, now there, but rather to keep their eyes fixed upon the ground before them. And hereby it would seem to be proved conclusively that, even in the matter of quiet bearing and sobriety, the masculine type may claim greater strength than that which we attribute

to the nature of women. At any rate, you might sooner expect a stone image to find voice than one of these Spartan youths...

When Lycurgos first came to deal with the question, the Spartans, like the rest of the Hellenes, used to mess privately at home. Tracing more than half the current problems to this custom, he was determined to drag his people out of holes and corners into the broad daylight, and so he invented the public mess rooms. As to food, his ordinance allowed them only so much as should guard them from want.....So that from beginning to end, till the mess breaks up, the common board is never stinted for food nor yet extravagantly furnished. So also in the matter of drink. While putting a stop to all unnecessary drink, he left them free to quench thirst when nature dictated.....Thus there is the necessity of walking home when a meal is over, and a consequent anxiety not to be caught tripping under the influence of wine, since they all know of course that the supper table must be presently abandoned and that they must move as freely in the dark as in the day, even with the help of a torch.

It is clear that Lycurgos set himself deliberately to provide all the blessings of heaven for the good man, and a sorry and ill-starred existence for the coward. In other states the man who shows himself base and cowardly, wins to himself an evil reputation and the nickname of a coward, but that is all. For the rest he buys and sells in the same marketplace with a good man; he sits beside him at a play; he exercises with him in the same gymnasium, and all as suits his humor. But at Sparta there is not one man who would not feel ashamed to welcome the coward at the common mess-tables or to try conclusions with him in a wrestling bout;....during games he is left out as the odd man;....during the choric dance he is driven away. Nay, in the very streets it is he who must step aside for others to pass, or, being seated, he must rise and make room, even for a younger man....

Lycurgos also provided for the continual cultivation of virtues even to old age, by fixing the election to the council of elders as a last ordeal at the goal of life, thus making it impossible for a high standard of virtuous living to be disregarded even in old age....Moreover he laid upon them, like some irresistible necessity, the obligation to cultivate the whole virtue of a citizen. Provided they duly perform the injunctions of the law, the city belonged to them each and all, in absolute possession, and on an equal footing....

I wish to explain with sufficient detail the nature of the covenant between king and state as instituted by Lycurgos; for this, I take it, is the sole type of rule which still preserves the original form in which it was first established; whereas other constitutions will be found either to have been already modified or else to be still undergoing modification at this moment. Lycurgos laid it down as law that the king shall offer on behalf of the state all public sacrifices, as being himself of divine descent, and wherever the state shall dispatch her armies the king shall take the lead. He granted him to receive honorary gifts of the things offered in sacrifice, and he appointed him choice land in many of the provincial cities, enough to satisfy moderate needs without excess of

wealth. And in order that the kings might also encamp and mess in public he appointed them public quarters, and he honored them with a double portion each at the evening meal, not in order that they might actually eat twice as much as others, but that the king might have the means to honor whomsoever he wished. He also granted as a gift to each of the two kings to choose two mess-mates, which are called tuthioi. He also granted them to receive out of every litter of swine one pig, so that the king might never be at a loss for victims if he wished to consult the gods.

Close by the palace a lake affords an unrestricted supply of water; and how useful that is for various purposes they best can tell who lack the luxury. Moreover, all rise from their seats to give place to the king, save only that the ephors rise not from their throne of office. Monthly they exchange oaths, the ephors on behalf of the state, the king himself on his own behalf. And this is the oath on the king's part: "I will exercise my kingship in accordance with the established laws of the state." And on the part of the state (the ephors) the oath runs: "So long as he (who exercises kingship), shall abide by his oath we will not suffer his kingdom to be shaken."

Source:

From: Fred Fling, ed., *A Source Book of Greek History*, (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1907), pp. 66-75.