

Part I  
Sparta-Watching



## ‘Sparta-Watching’: General Introduction

The fascinatingly complex Spartan ‘tradition’<sup>1</sup> has been central to western political thought since antiquity, and images or myths of ancient Sparta – ‘the Spartan mirage’ (see Chapter 12, below) – are still unusually influential today. Sparta thus serves as a constant source of cultural reference and inspiration. Happily, this has now lost most of its peculiar association with authoritarian regimes, but alas the British National Party and the French Front Nationale still draw inspiration for their racist attitudes from their idea of Sparta.

When I began my doctoral research on the archaeology and history of early Sparta (1969-75), there was a cant Pentagon-inspired phrase, ‘China-watchers’, for American political analysts who specialised in Chinese affairs. China then, just about to be ‘opened up’ to the West through President Nixon, seemed to most of us a remote, alien and terrifying country. Winston Churchill’s famous earlier description of Soviet Russia as ‘a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma’ could equally well have been applied to China. And, so it seemed to me, pretty much the same would have been said of ancient Sparta, by most non-Spartan Greek contemporaries. Though clearly Greek, Sparta yet seemed to many non-Spartan Greeks a place apart, in more than just a geographical sense.

I once had the notion that by using authentic, contemporary archaeological and epigraphical evidence I might somehow penetrate the smokescreen of the mirage to get to the ‘real’ Sparta concealed behind it. That notion now seems to me utopian (in the commonplace meaning of that abused word). Yet for all that, Sparta remains one of the only two ancient Greek cities (the other is of course Athens) for which there is anything like the right kind and amount of evidence for the historian even to contemplate attempting a convincing social portrait in the round. Modern scholarship on Sparta, as opposed to propagandistic exploitation of its image, began with the volumes of J.C.F. Manso (1800-1805), and continues with unabated vigour to this day (Baltrusch 1998; Meier 1998; Richer 1999; Hodkinson & Powell eds 1999).

I have already given several indications of how my general approach interacts with those of other scholars.<sup>2</sup> After some thirty years of practical

experience, on and off, I would now still recommend, as I did in 1980, just four main approaches as being both practicable and fruitful, singly or, ideally, in combination. The first is to confront the idea or legend or myth of Sparta directly, acknowledging that Spartan history must always be in a sense and up to a point the history of the idea, and then tracing in greater or less detail, more or less comprehensively, the genesis and evolution of the Spartan mirage.

Second, although archaeology may not permit access to unmediated actuality of a usefully reconstructible kind, there is still room for a full-scale monograph on Spartan or Lakonian artefacts (the regional nomenclature keeps open the question of the identity of the craftsmen – Perioikoi, Helots, or even déclassé Spartans: see Cartledge 1976a), from the Iron or Dark Age to the Hellenistic period, interpreted sociologically and not just art-historically or iconographically. More centrally, archaeology, especially in the form of intensive field-survey (see the next Chapter), must provide the basis of the regional approach to which the history of Sparta lends itself (cf. Cartledge 1979).

A third possible line is to apply the comparative method comprehensively. Succession to high office and royal patronage (Chapter 5), the age-graded educational cycle (Chapter 7), the *Krypteia* or 'secret service' (Chapters 7 and 10), institutionalized pederasty (Chapter 8) and the elaborate military organization (Chapter 11) are some of the topics that I have myself tackled from this point of view. Perhaps the key methodological points to keep in mind, however, are that comparison often most fruitfully serves to highlight difference, and that evidence from other *ex hypothesi* comparable cultures or societies may never be used as a substitute for the evidence we lack and shall always lack for ancient Sparta.

Finally, a quasi-biographical approach may recommend itself in one or two cases. My *Agesilaos* was written on the premise that, although we do not have the right sort of evidence to write a modern-style, inner-life biography of Agesilaos or any other Spartan – indeed, any other ancient, apart perhaps from Cicero, Julian and Augustine – the life of a powerful, central and relatively well documented figure like Agesilaos may act as a prism to refract the light intermittently reflected from the various facets of Spartan society, politics and culture.

I conclude with some remarks about historiography in general rather than the historiography of ancient Sparta in particular. Since I began studying and writing about Sparta, the most important single intellectual development within my general field of History (I call myself a historian who happens to study the ancient world rather than an 'ancient' historian) has been the 'linguistic turn' taken in so many of the social sciences and literary disciplines to which history in some form or forms is closely allied. Not so much what you say, but how you say it, and the status of the truth-claims behind what you write, have become of compelling, frontline concern. To such an extent indeed that a Cambridge colleague of mine has

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felt the need to come out fighting 'in defence of history' (Evans 1998), that is, of his sort of non-postmodernist historiography.

I share that concern entirely. I applaud the debate that 'postmodernism' (an inexact but evocative term) has provoked, even within ancient history (see Morley 1999). I have myself written from within this po-mo perspective on Gibbon's *Vindication* of 1779, a brilliant treatise on the historian's calling as Gibbon presented it (Cartledge 1995a). But there too often remains a gap, as I am uncomfortably aware in my own case, between professions of historiographical faith and actual practice. I cannot prove that any of the events and processes I write about below actually happened, let alone as and why I think they did; and from some points of view that they they did or did not happen that way and for that reason is less important than the critical thought involved in reflecting upon them. Benedetto Croce's dictum that all history is contemporary history seems to me to have a particular resonance within this conceptual framework. Nevertheless, I do still have an ineradicable if sneaking desire to believe that they did, and the unquenchable hope that I will persuade others to share my point of view. It is in that spirit that the following essays are presented to and for their readers' reflection.