

## The Spectacular Nature of Spartan Austerity: An Oxymoron?

**1) Herodotus 9.82:** Πausανίην ὦν ὀρῶντα τὴν Μαρδονίου κατασκευὴν χρυσῶ τε καὶ ἀργύρῳ καὶ παραπετάσμασι ποικίλοισι κατεσκευασμένην κελεῦσαι τοὺς τε ἀρτοκόπους καὶ τοὺς ὀψοποιούς κατὰ ταῦτα [καθῶς] Μαρδονίῳ δεῖπνον παρασκευάζειν. ὥς δὲ κελευόμενοι οὗτοι ἐποίουν ταῦτα, ἐνθαῦτα τὸν Πausανίην ἰδόντα κλίνας τε χρυσέας καὶ ἀργυρέας εὖ ἐστρωμένας καὶ τραπέζας τε χρυσέας καὶ ἀργυρέας καὶ παρασκευὴν μεγαλοπρεπέα τοῦ δεῖπνου, ἐκπλαγέντα τὰ προκείμενα ἀγαθὰ καλεῦσαι ἐπὶ γέλῳτι τοὺς ἐσωτοῦ διηκόνους παρασκευάσαι Λακωνικὸν δεῖπνον. ὥς δὲ τῆς θοίνης ποιηθείσης ἦν πολλὸν τὸ μέσον, τὸν Πausανίην γελάσαντα μεταπέμψασθαι τῶν Ἑλλήνων τοὺς στρατηγούς, συνελθόντων δὲ τούτων εἶπεῖν τὸν Πausανίην, δεικνύντα ἐς ἑκατέρην τοῦ δεῖπνου τὴν παρασκευὴν· Ἄνδρες Ἕλληνες, τῶνδε εἵνεκα ἐγὼ ὑμέας συνήγαγον, βουλόμενος ὑμῖν τοῦ Μήδων ἡγεμόνος τὴν ἀφροσύνην δέξαι, ὅς τοιήνδε δίκαιταν ἔχων ἦλθε ἐς ἡμέας οὕτω οἰζυρὴν ἔχοντας ἀπαιρησόμενος.

(It is said that) when Pausanias saw the tent of Mardonius decorated with gold and silver and embroidered hangings, he ordered the bakers and cooks to prepare a meal of the same sort that they were accustomed to prepare for Mardonius. And they did as they were bidden; and when Pausanias saw gold and silver couches beautifully draped and gold and silver tables and the magnificent preparation of the feast, he was astonished at the good things set before him and, for a joke, commanded his own servants to prepare a Spartan dinner. And when the meal, which was so different from the other, was made, Pausanias laughed and sent for the Greek generals. And when these had assembled, Pausanias pointed to the preparation of each supper and said, “Men of Greece, I gathered you together in order to show you the folly of the leader of the Medes, who, although he enjoyed such a way of life, came here to rob us of our poverty.”

**2) Herodotus 9.71.2-4:** καὶ ἄριστος ἐγένετο μακρῶ Ἀριστόδημος κατὰ γνώμας τὰς ἡμετέρας, ὅς ἐκ Θερμοπυλέων μῦνος τῶν τριηκοσίων σωθεὶς εἶχε ὄνειδος καὶ ἀτιμίην . . . καίτοι, γενομένης λέσχης ὅς γένοιτο αὐτῶν ἄριστος, ἔγνωσαν οἱ παραγενόμενοι Σπαρτητέων Ἀριστόδημον μὲν βουλόμενον φανερώς ἀποθανεῖν ἐκ τῆς παρεούσης οἱ αἰτίας, λυσσῶντά τε καὶ ἐκλείποντα τὴν τάξιν ἔργα ἀποδέξασθαι μεγάλα, Ποσειδώνιον δὲ οὐ βουλόμενον ἀποθνήσκειν ἄνδρα γενέσθαι ἀγαθόν· τοσοῦτῳ τοῦτον εἶναι ἀμείνω. ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν καὶ φθόνῳ ἂν εἶποιεν· οὗτοι δὲ τοὺς κατέλεξα πάντες, πλὴν Ἀριστοδήμου, τῶν ἀποθανόντων ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ μάχῃ τίμοιοι ἐγένοντο, Ἀριστόδημος δὲ βουλόμενος ἀποθανεῖν διὰ τὴν προειρημένην αἰτίην οὐκ ἐτιμήθη.

The bravest man by far was, in my opinion, Aristodemus – the man who had suffered censure and dishonor for being the sole survivor of the Three Hundred at Thermopylae. . . . However, when after the battle there was discussion as to which of them had most distinguished himself, those of the Spartans present judged that Aristodemus, who plainly wished to die because of the guilt hanging over him and so acted like a madman and abandoned his place in the line, achieved great deeds. Posidonius, on the contrary, who did not wish to die, proved himself a courageous man and so in this way was the better man. It may be that they said these things merely out of envy, but all of those who died in that battle that I mentioned were honored except for Aristodemus. Aristodemus received no such honor because he wished to die because of the guilt previously mentioned.

**3) Thucydides 1.84.2-3:** καὶ δύναται μάλιστα σωφροσύνη ἔμφρων τοῦτ' εἶναι· μόνοι γὰρ δι' αὐτὸ εὐπραγίαις τε οὐκ ἐξυβρίζομεν καὶ ξυμφοραῖς ἤσσον ἐτέρων εἴκομεν· τῶν τε ξὺν ἐπαίνῳ ἐξοτρυνόντων ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ τὰ δεινὰ παρὰ τὸ δοκοῦν ἡμῖν οὐκ ἐπαιρόμεθα ἠδονῇ, καὶ ἦν τις ἄρα ξὺν κατηγορίᾳ παροξύνῃ, οὐδὲν δὴ μᾶλλον ἀχθεσθέντες ἀνεπίεσθημεν. πολεμικοὶ τε καὶ εὐβουλοὶ διὰ τὸ εὐκοσμον γιγνόμεθα, τὸ μὲν ὅτι αἰδῶς σωφροσύνης πλεῖστον μετέχει, αἰσχύνης δὲ εὐψυχία, εὐβουλοὶ δὲ ἀμαθέστερον τῶν νόμων τῆς ὑπεροφίας παιδευόμενοι καὶ ξὺν χαλεπότητι σωφρονέστερον ἢ ὥστε αὐτῶν ἀνηκουστεῖν, καὶ μὴ τὰ ἀχρεῖα ξυνετοὶ ἄγαν ὄντες τὰς τῶν πολεμίων παρασκευὰς λόγῳ καλῶς μεμφόμενοι ἀνομοίως ἔργῳ ἐπεξιέναι . . .

“The quality that they condemn is really nothing but sensible moderation; on account of it, we alone do not become insolent in success and give way less than others in misfortune. We are not carried away by the pleasure of hearing ourselves praised when people are urging us towards dangers that run counter to our judgment; nor are we, when annoyed, more likely to be persuaded by an attempt to goad us through accusation. We are good at both war and deliberation because we are well-ordered; warlike because self-control is largely based upon a sense of honor, and a sense of shame is largely based on courage. And we are good at deliberation because we are educated with too little learning to despise the laws and too severely trained in self-control to disobey them. And we are trained to avoid being too clever in useless matters – such as being able to produce in words an excellent criticism of the enemy’s preparations and then failing to proceed against them with equal success in practice . . .”

**4) Thucydides 2.39.1, 4:** καὶ ἐν ταῖς παιδείαις οἱ μὲν ἐπιπόνῳ ἀσκήσει εὐθύς νέοι ὄντες τὸ ἀνδρεῖον μετέρχονται, ἡμεῖς δὲ ἀνειμένως διαιτώμενοι οὐδὲν ἤσσον ἐπὶ τοὺς ἰσοπαλεῖς κινδύνους χωροῦμεν. . . . καίτοι εἰ ῥαθυμία μᾶλλον ἢ πόνων μελέτη καὶ μὴ μετὰ νόμων τὸ πλεόν ἢ τρόπων ἀνδρείας ἐθέλομεν κινδυνεύειν, περιγίγνεται ἡμῖν τοῖς τε μέλλουσιν ἀλγεινοῖς μὴ προκάμνειν, καὶ ἐς αὐτὰ ἐλθοῦσι μὴ ἀτολμοτέρους τῶν αἰεὶ μοχθούντων φαίνεσθαι . . .

“And in education, while our rivals from earliest boyhood pursue manliness by painful training, our relaxed way of life makes us no less ready to face like dangers. . . . And yet if we are willing to face danger with an easy mind rather than diligent toil and with courage inherent in our character rather than produced by law, we have the advantage of avoiding the suffering of hardships which are still in the future and of facing them when they are upon us as courageously as those who are forever undergoing hardship. . . .”

**5) Critias fr. 6 Diels-Kranz (ap. Athen. 432d); cf. fr. 33 (ap. Athen. 463e):** καὶ τόδ' ἔθος Σπάρτηι μελέτημά τε κείμενόν ἐστι/πίνειν τὴν αὐτὴν οἰνοφόρον κύλικα,/μηδ' ἀποδωρεῖσθαι προπόσεις ὀνομαστὶ λέγοντα/μηδ' ἐπὶ δεξιτερὰν χεῖρα κύκλωι θιάσου/. . ./ οἱ Λακεδαιμονίων δὲ κόροι πίνουσι τοσοῦτον,/ὥστε φρέν' εἰς ἰλαρὰν ἐλπίδα πάντας ἄγειν/ἔς τε φιλοφροσῆν γλῶσσαν μέτριόν τε γέλωτα./ . ./ ἢ Λακεδαιμονίων δὲ δίαθ' ὁμαλῶς διάκειται,/ἔσθιν καὶ πίνειν σύμμετρα πρὸς τὸ φρονεῖν/καὶ τὸ πονεῖν εἶναι δυνατούς· οὐκ ἔστ' ἀπότακτος/ἡμέρα οἰνώσαι σῶμ' ἀμέτροισι πότοις.

**Trans. Sprague 1972:** And it is a habit and established practice at Sparta to drink from the same wine cup and not to give toasts mentioning someone by name and not to pass it round, as is customary in Athens, moving to the right in a circle around the company. . . Lacedaemonian youths, however, drink only enough to direct the thinking of all towards cheery hopefulness and the tongue towards friendliness and temperate laughter. . . The way of life of the Lacedaemonians is evenly ordered: to eat and drink the appropriate amount to render them capable of thought and labour. No day is set aside for soaking the body through immoderate draughts.

**6) Xenophon, *Lacedaemoniōn Politeia* 5.3-4:** καὶ σῖτόν γε ἔταξεν αὐτοῖς ὡς μήτε ὑπερπληροῦσθαι μήτε ἐνδεεῖς γίγνεσθαι. . . καὶ μὴν τοῦ πότου ἀποπαύσας τὰς [οὐκ] ἀναγκαίας πόσεις, αἱ σφάλλουσι μὲν σώματα, σφάλλουσι δὲ γνώμας, ἐφῆκεν ὁπότε διψῶν ἕκαστος πίνειν, οὕτω νομίζων ἀβλαβέστατόν τε καὶ ἥδιστον ποτὸν γίγνεσθαι. οὕτω γε μὴν συσκηνοῦντων πῶς ἂν τις ἢ ὑπὸ λιχνείας ἢ οἴνοφλυγίας ἢ αὐτὸν ἢ οἶκον διαφθείρειεν;

The amount of food he prescribed for them resulted in their becoming neither overfull nor underfed. . . . And having put a stop to compulsory drinking, which is the undoing of both body and mind, he allowed everyone to drink when he was thirsty, thinking that drink is then most harmless and most welcome. How then would one of those messing together destroy either himself or his estate through gluttony or drunkenness?

**7) Xenophon, *Lacedaemoniōn Politeia* 1.5:** ἐπεὶ γε μὴν γυνὴ πρὸς ἄνδρα ἔλθοι, ὁρῶν τοὺς ἄλλους τὸν πρῶτον τοῦ χρόνου ἀμέτρως ταῖς γυναιξὶ συνόντας, καὶ τούτου τὰναντία ἔγνω· ἔθηκε γὰρ αἰδεῖσθαι μὲν εἰσιόντα ὀφθῆναι, αἰδεῖσθαι δ' ἐξιόντα. οὕτω δὲ συνόντων ποθεινοτέρως μὲν ἀνάγκη σφῶν αὐτῶν ἔχειν, ἐρρωμενέστερα δὲ γίγνεσθαι, εἴ τι βλάστοι οὕτω, μᾶλλον ἢ εἰ διάκοροι ἀλλήλων εἶεν.

Seeing that during the time immediately after marriage others engaged in an immoderate [OR unceasing] amount of intercourse with their wives, he decided upon the opposite course of action. For he established that the husband should be ashamed to be seen entering or leaving his wife's room. In this way the desire for each other of those engaged in intercourse was bound to be increased, and any offspring were bound to be more vigorous than if they were satiated with one another.

**8) Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 27.1-2 (cf. *Mor.* 238d):** Καὶ μὴν καὶ τὰ περὶ τὰς ταφὰς ἄριστα διεκόσμησεν αὐτοῖς. πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ ἀνελῶν δεισιδαιμονίαν ἅπασαν ἐν τῇ πόλει θάπτειν τοὺς νεκρούς, καὶ πλησίον ἔχειν τὰ μνήματα τῶν ἱερῶν οὐκ ἐκώλυσε, συντρόφους ποιῶν ταῖς τοιαύταις ὄψεσι καὶ συνήθεις τοὺς νέους, ὥστε μὴ παράττεσθαι μηδ' ὀρρωδεῖν τὸν θάνατον ὡς μιαίνοντα τοὺς ἀψαμένους νεκροῦ σώματος ἢ διὰ τάφων διελθόντας. ἔπειτα συνθάπτειν οὐδὲν εἶασεν, ἀλλὰ ἐν φοινικίδι καὶ φύλλοις ἐλαίας θέντες τὸ σῶμα περιέστελλον. ἐπιγράψαι δὲ τοῦνομα θάψαντας οὐκ ἔξῃν τοῦ νεκροῦ, πλην ἀνδρὸς ἐν πολέμῳ καὶ γυναικὸς τῶν ἱερῶν ἀποθανόντων. χρόνον δὲ πένθους ὀλίγον προσώρισεν, ἡμέρας ἑνδεκα· τῇ δὲ δωδεκάτῃ θύσαντας ἔδει Δήμητρι λυεῖν τὸ πάθος.

Furthermore, Lycurgus made the most excellent regulations in the matter of their burials. First, he did away with all superstitious fear by allowing them to bury their dead within the city and to have memorials of them near the sacred places, thereby making the youth familiar with and accustomed to such sights, so that they were neither agitated by them nor feared death as polluting those who touched a corpse or walked among the graves. Next, he allowed them to bury nothing with the dead; instead they wrapped the body in a *phoinikis* [= dark-red military cloak] and olive leaves when they laid it away. To inscribe the name of the deceased was not permitted for those carrying out the burial, except for a man who died in war and a holy woman [*text still disputed*]. And he fixed a short period of mourning, eleven days; on the twelfth they had to sacrifice to Demeter to cease their grieving.

**9) Thucydides 1.86:** Τοὺς μὲν λόγους τοὺς πολλοὺς τῶν Ἀθηναίων οὐ γινώσκω· ἐπαινέσαντες γὰρ πολλὰ ἑαυτοὺς οὐδαμοῦ ἀντεῖπον ὡς οὐκ ἀδικοῦσι τοὺς ἡμετέρους ξυμμάχους καὶ τὴν Πελοπόννησον· καίτοι εἰ πρὸς τοὺς Μήδους ἐγένοντο ἀγαθοὶ τότε, πρὸς δ' ἡμᾶς κακοὶ νῦν, διπλασίας ζημίας ἄξιοί εἰσιν, ὅτι ἀντ' ἀγαθῶν κακοὶ γεγένηται. ἡμεῖς δὲ ὁμοιοὶ καὶ τότε καὶ νῦν ἐσμέν, καὶ τοὺς ξυμμάχους, ἢν σωφρονῶμεν, οὐ περιοψόμεθα ἀδικουμένους οὐδὲ μελλήσομεν τιμωρεῖν· οἱ δ' οὐκέτι μέλλουσι κακῶς πάσχειν. ἄλλοις μὲν γὰρ χρήματά ἐστι πολλὰ καὶ νῆες καὶ ἵπποι, ἡμῖν δὲ ξύμμαχοι ἀγαθοί, οὓς οὐ παραδοτέα τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις ἐστίν, οὐδὲ δίκαις καὶ λόγοις διακριτέα μὴ λόγῳ καὶ αὐτοὺς βλαπτομένους, ἀλλὰ τιμωρητέα ἐν τάχει καὶ παντὶ σθένει. καὶ ὡς ἡμᾶς πρέπει βουλευέσθαι ἀδικουμένους μηδεὶς διδασκέτω, ἀλλὰ τοὺς μέλλοντας ἀδικεῖν μᾶλλον πρέπει πολὺν χρόνον βουλευέσθαι. ψηφίζεσθε οὖν, ὧ Λακεδαιμόνιοι, ἀξίως τῆς Σπάρτης τὸν πόλεμον, καὶ μήτε τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἔατε μείζους γίγνεσθαι μήτε τοὺς ξυμμάχους καταπροδιδῶμεν, ἀλλὰ ξὺν τοῖς θεοῖς ἐπίωμεν ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀδικοῦντας.

“I do not understand these long speeches of the Athenians. They praised themselves a good deal, but they nowhere denied that they are injuring our allies and the Peloponnesus. And yet if they behaved well against the Medes then but ill against us now, they deserve double punishment, since they have ceased to be good and have become bad. We, on the other hand, are the same men then and now, and if we are sensible, we will not allow our allies to be wronged or wait to help them; they are no longer waiting to suffer. Others have a lot of money and ships and horses, but we have good allies, whom we ought not to betray to the Athenians. Nor is this a matter which should be decided by lawsuits and words, since it is not in word that we ourselves are being injured. Instead we must assist our allies quickly and with all our might. And let no one instruct us that it is fitting for us to deliberate when we are being wronged; long deliberation is rather fitting for those intending to do wrong. Vote, then, Lacedaemonians, for war, as the honor of Sparta demands, and do not allow the Athenians to grow greater nor let us betray our allies, but with the gods' help let us advance against the aggressors!”

**10) Plato, *Protagoras* 342d-e:** γνοῖτε δ' ἂν ὅτι ἐγὼ ταῦτα ἀληθῆ λέγω καὶ Λακεδαιμόνιοι πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν καὶ λόγους ἄριστα πεπαίδευνται, ὧδε· εἰ γὰρ ἐθέλει τις Λακεδαιμονίων τῷ φαυλοτάτῳ συγγενέσθαι, τὰ μὲν πολλὰ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις εὐρήσει αὐτὸν φαῦλόν τινα φαινόμενον, ἔπειτα, ὅπου ἂν τύχη τῶν λεγομένων, ἐνέβαλεν ῥῆμα ἄξιον λόγου βραχὺ καὶ συνεστραμμένον ὥσπερ δεινὸς ἀκοντιστής, ὥστε φαίνεσθαι τὸν προσδιαλεγόμενον παιδὸς μηδὲν βελτίω.

“And you can know that what I say is true and that the Lacedaemonians are the best educated in philosophy and rhetoric by the following: If someone wishes to converse with the meanest of the Lacedaemonians, he will find him appearing, at first he will find him making a poor show in the conversation. But then, at some point or other in the conversation he inserts a notable remark that is terse and compact, like a deadly javelin-thrower, that makes the one he is talking with seem no better than a child.”

**11) Plato, *Laws* 641e:** τὴν πόλιν ἅπαντες ἡμῶν Ἕλληνες ὑπολαμβάνουσι ὡς φιλόλογός τέ ἐστι καὶ πολύλογος, Λακεδαίμονα δὲ καὶ Κρήτην, τὴν μὲν βραχύλογον, τὴν δὲ πολύνοιαν μᾶλλον ἢ πολυλογίαν ἀσκοῦσαν.

“All the Greeks share our belief that while our own city is both fond and full of speech, Lacedaemon is given to brevity in discourse, while Crete is inclined to cleverness rather than wordiness.”

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