



The Spartan Regime: Its Character, Origins, and Grand Strategy by Paul Rahe.

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Paul Rahe (Hillsdale College) has diligently reread the literary sources for Spartan history, written mostly by non-Spartans and strewn widely over the wreck of antiquity. The history of the peculiar institutions of this unique polis—not state, according to Rahe (38)—attracts scholars in inverse proportion to the evidence. The Spartans themselves compounded the problem by intermittently expelling foreigners (*xenelasia*) and prohibiting citizens from traveling beyond their distant borders (Thuc.¹ 5.68.2). Tyrtaeus and Alcman wrote lyrics of manliness that Spartans marched and danced to for centuries. Herodotus affords the Spartans a unique ethnography, because they were as full of wonders in their institutions and style of living as Scythian nomads or African stone-age gatherers.² Thucydides, frustrated by Spartan systemic secrecy (5.68) and misleadingly modest material structures (1.10), praises their stability and censures their murderous repression of conquered Hellenes, perhaps Achaean farmers and craftsmen (1.128, 4.80). Plato finds them good to think with, Aristotle has some harsh judgments in response. Elements of official Spartan myths (Zeus donations, charter myth of putative sons of Heracles, no surrender), nevertheless deceived many writers, even after the Peloponnesus suffered depopulation beginning in the fifth century and survived on into the Roman Imperial period as a mere shadow of a great military power.

By the time of Plutarch (fl. 70–120 CE), Spartans were still regaling visitors with reenacted (or invented!) whipping-endurance festivals with real children. Polybius, Cicero, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus cite Sparta of Yore for comparative purposes. Rahe regards the “hyper-skepticism [about extant sources] now fashionable” to be “presumptuous” (6); he does not address “hyper-credulity.” Some might tar the whole lacunose field of Laconian historical studies with such a brush. Herodotus’s awesome dramatization of King Leonidas’s three hundred kamikaze warriors’ heroic, sacrificial death³ has induced captivated Western readers (on the left and right) to approve the king’s questionable decision. Future progress will depend on archaeological surveys, excavations, and historical interpretations of their results.

Xenophon, the fourth-century BCE Athenian cavalryman and Socratic, actually lived among the Spartans, hobnobbing with King Agesilaus, whose encomium he wrote. The Spartans honored him with an estate in Elis. He may have agreed that the Spartan regime was “fundamentally defective” (5) from origin, and his frequent praise is tempered by observations of decline from the Golden Age (134; cf. Xen. *Constitution of the Spartans* 14).

The tone of Plutarch, the genial biographer and Delphic priest, in his *Lives* of Spartan luminaries varies from laudatory and imaginative (*Lycurgus*), to caustic (*Lysander*⁴ and *Agesilaus*) and disapproving (*Agis* and *Cleomenes*). The widely read Boeotian also wrote essays on Spartan institutions, habits, and proverbs.

1. Note the following abbreviations: Hdt. (Herodotus), Thuc. (Thucydides), Plut. (Plutarch), Xen. (Xenophon).

2. Herodotus’s portrait of Spartan mores and “do or die” mystique is not always “nuanced, balanced, and sound” (148n2).

3. Historians mostly ignore the seven hundred Thespian allies and many helots who died alongside the Three Hundred (Hdt. 7.202, 222).

4. Rahe’s 1977 Yale dissertation examines “Lysander and the Spartan Settlement.”

Rahe has distinguished company in blithely mixing evidence and literary data points from 500 BCE to 100 CE. But the vaunted continuity of enigmatic Sparta and its elite Spartiate class is contradicted by their revolutionary inventions, ad hoc developments, shifting necessities, proverbial avarice, and violations of the “Lycurgan” rules.⁵ Scholars find the Sparta they want, colored by their Laconian,⁶ Athenian, or totalitarian⁷ biases.

“Paideia”⁸ and “Politeia,”⁹ are appropriate titles for the first two of *The Spartan Regime’s* four chapters.¹⁰ Rahe is preoccupied in them with constitutions, ruling orders, and ideology rather than material culture or economic and environmental conditions. The final two chapters (“Conquest” and “Politics and Geopolitics”) “explore the genesis of the Spartan ... regime ... and trace the Spartans’ gradual articulation of an ingenious grand strategy” (xv). Rahe neither demonstrates the relevance of the concept “grand strategy” to Spartan thought, nor explains how it was variously manifested in Spartan history. His approach to sources is naively fundamentalist, at least in certain places; he is capable of writing, for example, “What they [fifth-century Greeks] thought they knew is, *of course*, quite likely to be true” (106; my emphasis).

Running a garrison state on the backs of conquered “natives” required restricting or denying everyone’s freedom. In the Aegean world, slavery was normal, infanticide was the only (comparatively) safe means of “family planning,” and defeated enemies lived or were enslaved at the pleasure of their conquerors. Spartan mores and laws may seem simply “the extreme example” of Hellenic (e.g., Theban, Corinthian, or Athenian) customs, but harsh treatment of the native Laconian and Messenian populations that outnumbered the Spartans as much as four-to-one or seven-to-one was difficult to sustain. As Rahe notes, the *perioikoi* or non-Spartiate Lacedaemonians who “retained in privilege a measure of local autonomy” (11)¹¹ often committed acts of disobedience and revolt.

Rahe overrates Spartiate post-reform equality, whereby full citizens were *homoioi* or “similars.”¹² Xenophon (*Hellenica* 3.3.6) speaks of downgraded *hypomeiones* (inferiors),¹³ who, along with the more severely disenfranchised, one-cheek shaven, officially labeled *tresantes* or “tremblers” (Hdt. 7.231), could not be counted on for support in a society where honor was paramount and disgrace ubiqui-

5. See Michael Flower, “The Invention of Tradition in Classical and Hellenistic Sparta,” in *Sparta: Beyond the Mirage*, ed. Anton Powell and Stephen Hodkinson (London: Duckworth, 2002) 191–217: all changes were attributed to Lycurgus by Xenophon and Plutarch.

6. Sparta was the polis of the larger territory of Laconia, also known as Lacedaemon; the Spartans also conquered and pacified neighboring Messenia early on and reduced its inhabitants to helot status, a condition between free and slave.

7. Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring liked to praise the Spartans’ communal self-sacrifice. Cf. Stefan Rebenich, “From Thermopylae to Stalingrad: The Myth of Leonidas in German Historiography,” in *Sparta* (note 5 above) 323–49.

8. I.e., formal and informal education and acculturation.

9. I.e., institutions of the state and citizens’ sense of what it meant to be a community “by nature.”

10. They are substantially the same as the prologue and two of the chapters in Rahe’s *Republics Ancient and Modern*, vol. 1: *The Ancien Régime in Classical Greece* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr. 1994). He justifies the iteration as a response to his frequent disagreement with the newer scholarship that he often quotes in his notes.

11. Such vague exculpatory phrases conflict with cited evidence that the loyalty of *perioikoi* was ensured by fear (Xen. *Hellenica* 3.3.6; cf. Thuc. 1.101.3 and Plut. *Agésilas* 32.12). Even allies often resented the haughty orders of Sparta’s commanders and government.

12. Not “Equals” (Greek *isoi*). Rahe writes that the “gap between rich and poor was not profound” (10), but on the same page states that more and more land became private, women concentrated ownership of property by inheritance, and severe sumptuary laws were needed to control public display of riches (exceptions were made for breeders and racers of horses).

13. The Elders struck misbehaving younger citizens with their staves, and Spartan generalissimos overseas sometimes did the same to disrespectful or outspoken allied officers.

tous.¹⁴ Rahe recognizes that desperate fear held together the nine to ten thousand male beneficiaries of their oppression (12). Thus, a temple to *Phobos*, Fear (Plut. *Cleomenes* 9.1–2). He acknowledges the Spartiates' constant fear (151n18) and routine humiliation of the helots, who were whipped and killed without trial, as well as forced to sing degrading songs, wear demeaning costumes, and drink to stupefaction. "Sports, music, and dance" offered insufficient charms for the arc of human maturity, and the curtailment of the domestic lives of children, "thigh-flashing" nubile, wives, and even warriors went against human nature. Shame and dread governed spousal relations;¹⁵ marriage existed solely for procreation, paederasty for the small-unit cohesion of messmates. "Lycurgus" advised husbands to secure new family members by willingly lending their wives to other sperm producers. Rahe acutely notes that bridal transvestism and cropped hair "no doubt eased ... an awkward transition to heterosexuality" (27), when reproductive obligations intruded on military drill. Dates are few and often vague: for example, Rahe writes of "compelling evidence that, early on, the archaic city established archives" (3), but cites no compelling evidence. His claims for a Spartan sacerdotal aristocracy, the ephors as nonentities, and early Dorian ethnocentrism are likewise unsourced.

Rahe thinks "there was no Greek state" in the *poleis*, as distinct from Greek societies (37), no long-tenured magistrates (what of Spartan kings? Athenian Areopagites? Delphic or Theban priests?), no bureaucracies (what about the ten *Hellenotamiai* who collected Athenian imperial tribute?), no professional armies (were the Spartiate battalions "amateurs"?). He does avoid the old mistake of calling the institutions of shifting allegiances "political parties." But such political associations as "friends of Kimon" or *hetaireiai*,¹⁶ which espoused various causes, such as overthrowing or restoring the Athenian democracy, were more than "exclusive social club[s]" (40). Rahe makes surprising claims, for instance concerning high-level universal Spartiate literacy (3), solely for "common-sense" reasons. He excoriates the work of the "oblivious" (159n67) scholars who differ with him, deploying a rich lexicon of disparagement and vituperation: "pompous academic jargon" (65), "no shred of evidence," "implausible presumption," "deliberately ignoring," "false presumption," "special pleading," etc.

Rahe also airs strong opinions on hotly disputed issues like Homeric and hoplite warfare and the dependability of oral traditions, even in the case of Spartan legends about the Dorian invasion, Heraclid kings, and the Spartan King List. He does not attempt to determine the precise nature of the *Partheniai*—"sons of the virgins ... somehow conceived ... during the first Messenian war" (79) in the absence of the Spartiate army. He says little about the pre-reform Spartan elite and never doubts the existence of the First Messenian War. The archaeological record suggests unexpected continuities and discontinuities. Why was seventh-century Laconia so empty, before the expansion into Messenia? Rahe observes that the problem of few Spartiates and much land (3,300 sq. mi.) demanded innovative thinking and even a "populist political and military reform" (93). He argues elegantly that Chilon and his compatriots had to "find some way to leverage the manpower of their neighbors" (122), but makes no case that they shaped the past into an innovative legendary history and ideology to suit their revised polity. He sees oral traditions as conflated and telescoped, yet preserving basic truths ("truthy?") (71, 95).

14. Other Spartan statuses included the mysterious *mothakes*, demoted full Spartiates or promoted non-Spartiates; and *neodamodeis*, perhaps enfranchised helots (Thuc. 5.34.1, 7.19.3, 8.5), not mentioned by Rahe. Such terms suggest greater social mobility than is generally attributed to this community of unequals.

15. See Plut. *Lycurgus/Numa* (3.4, 4.1) on marital *apatheia* (freedom from passion).

16. These competitive drinking fraternities or buddy-groups sometimes had more startling names: e.g., the "Big Pricks" and "Tramps" (Demosthenes 54.14).

Rahe reasonably argues that the “Messenian Wars” and the Spartans’ defeat by the Argives at Hysiae (ca. 669 BCE) necessitated the “military revolution” that produced peculiarly Spartan institutions, although better attested dates for these events are too late for Lycurgus (776 or 750 BCE)¹⁷ or for Chilon the Ephor (epigraphically attested as a “hero”). Rahe, following Aristotle, is noncommittal about the former ghostly lawgiver and sees the Spartan system—“grand strategy” or not—as the product of “compromises and adjustments” (99), not to mention the Great *Rhetra*, a controversial document whose existence assumes a Greek writing system and Spartan literacy. Archaeologically, the cessation of imported luxury goods and impressive pottery and sculpture, if related to the imposition of the stern “educational system” (*agoge*), came later yet, perhaps ca. 550 BCE. The huge, bronze, possibly Laconian “Vix Krater,” is a masterpiece of Greek sculpture. But Rahe ignores the efflorescence of Spartan arts (his book’s dustjacket exhibits hoplites marching on the *Corinthian* Chigi pitcher) that could have bolstered his case for art-appreciating Spartiates. Spartan uniqueness cannot be untethered from developments fifty or a hundred miles away.

Rahe is fully conversant with the scant archaeological research on the Peloponnesus but makes little use of it. His maps omit elevations, roads, and the routes mentioned in his text. Since “we know next to nothing about Sparta’s ... organization of ... Messenia” (113–14), the endless speculation on the subject seems otiose.¹⁸ Spartans expanded their territory, driven by need and greed, by conquest and enslavement (Amyclae and Helos in Laconia, Messenia), alliance (Arcadians, Corinthians), and more rarely by colonization (the Nedon valley, Tarentum, Thera, Cyrene, Melos, and Heraclea in Trachis).

Rahe’s evaluation of the Spartan polity is often imprecise and defensive. After describing its many defects, he admires its “orderly, restrained, and sane” (97) character, marked by “intense piety” (122, 155n25). His Spartans were neither “bereft of refinement,” nor “characterized by ... grim austerity” (121–22). He deems the ephorate a democratic element but, on the same page (41), calls those “Overseers” a “vigorous inquisitorial tribunal” with concentrated powers. Sober men wonder whether these five elders had time every tenth day to examine the entire Spartiate army, naked, and their bedding every day (49).¹⁹

The double kingship, too, has long puzzled observers: Rahe stresses their notorious manipulation of religion (44), featured in Herodotus, over their dyarchic quarrels. Ancient historians, from Herodotus on, noted the duplicity of Spartan commanders and administrators, at home and abroad.²⁰ If the Spartan community was a “constitutional government,” “grounded in law”—an unwritten law, admittedly—then its vaunted “political equality” was a closely held privilege, or a persuasive myth. Acknowledging the long success of the unique Spartan polity, Rahe fails (inevitably, given the scarce evidence) to explain how so few kept so many terrorized, inside and outside Laconia.

17. W.G. Forrest plumped for early seventh century, if we accept a mortal lawgiver—*A History of Sparta, 950-192 B.C.* (London: Hutchinson, 1968) 60.

18. See Nigel Kennell and Nino Luraghi, “Laconia and Messenia,” in *A Companion to Archaic Greece*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub and Hans van Wees (2009; rpt. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell 2013) 239–54.

19. Following Agatharchides in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 550c-d, on pot-bellies.

20. Thucydides devotes a chapter to the intelligence, incorruptibility, and decency of the Spartiate commander Brasidas—and the envy his successes stirred in the Spartan administration (4.81, 108). Even Thucydides, however, here betrays Athenian prejudices (Hdt. 9.54.1, found also in Euripides, Aristophanes, and Xenophon) about Spartan intelligence and capabilities (cf. his comment on the Spartans as the Athenians’ most convenient enemy: 8.96.5). Spartan mendacity at home and abroad became a topos of Hellenic literature: see Alfred S. Bradford, “The Duplicitous Spartan,” in *The Shadow of Sparta*, ed. Anton Powell and Stephen Hodkinson (NY: Routledge, 1994), 59–85. Kings Cleomenes and Pausanias and later General Lysander offer additional examples. Granted their foxy willingness to lie and deceive by appearances, other Greeks (to go no further) were often no better.

Nearly a third of the book's pages comprises small-print notes.²¹ The index has serious omissions—for example, “imperialism” and “power.” Rahe's anti-historicist approach puts the cart before the horse, the institutions before the events that produced and shaped them, and generally ignores political evolution and sharp policy changes inside the “man-subduing” polis. Colorful writing about making “mincemeat of enemies” lapses into clichés about leaps and bounds or hearth and home, time out of mind, “hook, line, and sinker,” and even “fond of the dame” (117). References to “gentlemen farmers” (e.g., 92) are better suited to Jeffersonian or Edwardian discourse than Doric. Ex cathedra pronouncements—“In history, there is but one iron law” (93)—will irritate serious readers.

This review appears in these pages because any account of Spartan life must feature its unrelenting military discipline (“charms of army camp”), internal policing (i.e., murder) of “menacingly robust” helots (49; see Thuc. 1.128, 4.80), undependable *perioikoi*, boy “herd-mates,” and man messmates. But, in fact, Rahe has produced a “character study” of a bizarre community that remains two-dimensional to us. His learned, eighteenth-century-style discourse, top-heavy with polemical endnotes, by so often contesting sensible inferences from newly excavated material, forgoes the chance to correct ancient and modern biases and fantasies about archaic origins and institutions. The Spartiates were intentionally un- and dis-informative. Spartan developments eventually disillusioned even their Athenian enthusiast Xenophon (*Constitution of the Spartans* 14). Digs and surveys on the ground²² will confirm or disprove later, often much later, literary accounts. This pessimistic conclusion informs historians better than another ingenious rebuild of misled foreigners' Laconian mirages.

21. Disciples of Leo Strauss and Rahe's teacher Allan Bloom will recognize the methodological and rhetorical inclinations of Rahe's nostalgic “take” on Spartan customs and policy. The overpacked endnotes, e.g., instruct readers on the (often reverse chronological) order in which to read the densely referenced texts. Since fourth-century Greek and subsequent Enlightenment political philosophers did not concern themselves with the minutiae of Spartan administration of land and allotments, terrorism, grain supply, or assembly procedure, their accounts require many grains of salt. The Spartans' own actions better illuminate the regime Rahe seeks to describe, and their propensity for physical violence and extortion trumps their supposed piety and justice. The objections M.H. Hansen raises (at *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2006.01.32) to Loren J. Samons II, *What's Wrong with Democracy? From Athenian Practice to American Worship* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2004), might well be applied to *The Spartan Regime*, specifically its author's over-reliance on books assigned many decades ago.

22. Southwestern Greece is notoriously under-excavated.