

## SpartaLive! event: Sparta and Philosophy, Thursday 16/7/2020, 5pm (BST)

### Sparta and Philosophy

Ancient Greek philosophers had lots to say about Sparta. Socrates, in a conversation with his old friend Crito portrayed as occurring in his death cell, refers to his own frequent insistence that Sparta is a city living under good laws. Sparta and Spartans and their lawgiver Lycurgus figure strongly in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle too. In the political systems discussed by Plato in the *Republic*, Sparta is considered to be what Plato categorises as a 'timocracy': a flawed polity (but superior to democracy) in which the dominant motivation is the pursuit of honour and victory. The later dialogue the *Laws* has a cast consisting of a Cretan, a Spartan, and an unnamed Athenian, and in effect stages a debate, a complex dialectic, between Doric and Athenian values. Plato's pupil Aristotle appears to have had rather less sympathy for Spartan institutions and the Spartan character. In his eyes, what drove Spartan aggression was economic gain more than honour, and the Spartan militaristic ethos brings them very close to sheer barbarism.

But did the Spartans themselves do philosophy? There is one entertaining passage in Plato's *Protagoras* in which Socrates makes out that Spartans and Cretans are the supreme original philosophers. 'The Spartans', he says, 'have the best education in philosophy and debate' (*Prot.* 343d). What is his evidence? It consists of two connected points:

- 1) When you first talk with a Spartan, he seems hardly able to speak at all. But then he fires in a terse remark that you'll never forget, and makes *you* look like a mere child.
- 2) The Seven Sages all emulated the Spartans. They are known especially for those famous inscriptions in Apollos's temple at Delphi: pithy maxims (of 'Laconic' brevity), characteristic of Spartan wisdom, like 'Know thyself' and 'Nothing in excess'.

Quite a lot of Socratic leg-pulling is going on in this section of the *Protagoras*. Is this more of that again?

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