

Why is the Spartan image so alive today?

I think there are lots of reasons Sparta has such a strong place in our imaginations. The earliest reason is probably the work of the ancient historian Herodotus. Although he was, and is, known as the “father of history”, he was also also known as the “father of lies”, and he was far from being a perfect historian. However, as a story teller he has few equals. The stories he told of the Spartans capture the soul. From the self-sacrifice of Leonidas and the 300 Spartans at the battle of Thermopylae (most recently brought to life by Zack Snyder’s epic film, 300) to Amompharetos stubborn refusal to retreat in the face of the enemy at the battle of Plataea (against his commander’s orders), Herodotus’ tales of Spartan bravery enflame the imagination.

Equally, the wit and short, cutting, cleverness of the Spartans’ words reported by Herodotus make them wonderfully likeable. When Pausanias finally defeated the Persians at Plataea and captured their camp he had the Persian commander’s servants prepare a typical meal in the Persian commander’s tent. Astonished at the luxury, he gathered his men together and said to them “I have brought you here that I may show you the folly of these Persians, who, living in such style, came to rob us of our poverty.”

It is not just the men who were famous for their wit and cutting replies. We are told that when an Athenian woman asked Queen Gorgo of Sparta why they were the only Greek women who ruled their men, Gorgo replied, “As we are the only ones who give birth to men.”

These stories helped to make the Spartans an object of fascination, across Greece, Rome, and beyond. The apparent ideals of bravery, self-sacrifice and opposition to luxury as well as their clever wit have made them an appealing model, even to the present day.

What kind of values is contemporary looking for in ancient history?

The contemporary reaction to the Spartans is very complex. The Golden Dawn, in modern Greece have used the Spartans as an image of militant authoritarianism (and the National Socialists used them in the same way in the 1930’s in Germany). Contrastingly, socialist and communist groups have looked to the Spartan ideals of equality and frugality as proof that it is opposition to luxury and extreme disparity of wealth which makes communities successful. In a period such as the current one, when some people see the indulgence of the banking sector and the political elite as having brought great hardship to the population, it is unsurprising that people might turn to a group like the Spartans whose ideals opposed opulence and great disparities of wealth. More traditional observers can still be inspired by the stories of Spartans’ dedication to their homeland. Equally, the power and cleverness of Spartan women can be inspirational for young women in today’s society who might still feel that they are treated as secondary to men.

What is the difference between the today's image of Sparte and real ancient Sparta?

The contemporary image of Sparta is based largely, not on the work of Herodotus, but on later writers such as the Greek biographer and philosopher Plutarch. He was a Roman citizen, probably writing under the Flavian Emperors. Plutarch sought to demonstrate how to live well through narrating the lives of “great men”. His portrayal of Spartan life is typical of the sort of mythic Sparta which people are now familiar with. If you believe Plutarch then all Spartans were full time soldiers, who thought the greatest thing was to die in battle. They were all equal, with allotments of land and public slaves and there was no room for display of wealth of any kind as they dressed the same and ate simple meals together every night in public mess halls. The *polis* (city-state) controlled every aspect of their life from their birth to their death.

In reality the picture was far more complicated. The series of victories by various Spartans in the four horse chariot race in the mid-5th century demonstrates that many Spartans were able to expend vast amounts of money on breeding and training horses. Although the ideal at Sparta may have been for equality of wealth in reality it is clear that some Spartans were much richer than others, and some may have been amongst the richest men in Greece.

The idea of the Spartans as full time soldiers, and of Sparta as a particularly militant state, is not borne out by the earlier evidence. Greek *poleis* in general were quite bellicose but there is no reason to think Sparta was more so than any other. Also, its citizens seem to have spent a very small amount of their time engaged in military duties. The majority of the time the Spartans seem to have spent on their farms or hunting.

The Spartan slaves were known as helots. And although there were no “public” slaves, the helots of any Spartan were considered to be available for use by another Spartan if they should have need of them. This was also true of hunting dogs and horses.

What is the, so called, "Spartan mirage"?

François Ollier coined this phrase in his book, *Le mirage spartiate*. It refers to the way Spartan self-representation and the use of the Spartans by ancient authors for ideological *exempla* has produced a picture of Sparta within which it is very difficult to separate myth from reality.

What do you think about Lycurgus in this regard? What does the figure of Lycurgus represent?

What Lycurgus represents to outside observers is very simple, he was the Spartan lawgiver. A deified individual who made Sparta everything it was. He was the Spartan tradition. Much as the Risorgimento is represented, in the minds of non-Italians, solely and in its entirety by the figure of Garibaldi.

What Lycurgus represented to the Spartans themselves, however, is much more complicated. Just as to the Italian people names such as Pepe, Pellico, Mazzini and Victor Emanuel represent, in a far more complex way, the struggles in Italy in the 19th Century.

My own research covers a period during which Sparta has lost much of its land, manpower, and wealth. In the late third Century BC, Sparta was surrounded by enemies and struggling to prevent civil war. Then came three revolutionary kings: Agis, Cleomenes and Nabis. These three completely changed the history of Sparta. They cancelled all debts and attempted to redistribute land to impoverished citizens and to members of lower social groups who they deemed to be suitable and, perhaps more importantly, able to fight. The interesting thing is that it was very difficult to enact reform in Greece, as it was inherently very conservative. Therefore revolutionaries had to sell their reforms as a return to some lost tradition. Plutarch believed that this tradition was that of Lycurgus. However, Plutarch was writing several hundred years after the events, and probably only from a single source, the lost Phylarchus. No contemporary evidence survives showing the use of Lycurgus as a model for these reforms. We do, however, have evidence for the use of other traditional Spartan figures by these revolutionary kings. On their coins, for example, they place images of Castor and Pollux, mythical princes of Sparta. They also use the image of Hercules, from whom the two Spartan royal families claimed descent. It seems that these kings were appealing to elements of the Spartan tradition but not necessarily to Lycurgus.

Just as Outsiders might associate the creation of Italy only with the name of Garibaldi, it may be that outside writers looking back at the Spartan revolution, might have confused “Spartan traditions”

with “Lycurgus.” For the Spartans, however, it was simple to separate elements of their tradition; Just as an Italian would not associate the Risorgimento simply with Garibaldi.

What is it like doing research at the Centre for Spartan and Peloponnesian Studies? And being a young scholar at a British University?

CSPS supports a wide range of scholarly activities in the study of Sparta and the Peloponnese. The centre contains Archaeologists, Philologists, Art Historians and others and has strong and growing links to scholars studying these areas across the world, and particularly in Greece and the Peloponnese. This makes it a very exciting environment in which to study as you are constantly surrounded by scholars of the Peloponnese from across the world. At the CSPS postgraduate conference last year, for example, there were scholars from over 15 countries in attendance, from America, to Poland, to Portugal. The conference was also attended by Trento’s own Elena Franchi and her work will be joining the work of many of the others from the conference in a volume of proceedings to be published in the New Year.

I would say the biggest difference between studying at a British institution and studying in the Mediterranean is the informality of the system. During my PhD, for example, I would always address my supervisor, Professor Stephen Hodkinson, simply as “Steve” and to address him as “professor” would seem very strange. At research workshops young scholars, even undergraduates, are encouraged to question and even criticise the work of even the most senior of scholars. I think to some who have experienced education in the Mediterranean, this would seem rather odd. For myself, it encourages a climate of mutual respect and enquiry which has helped me to move forward as a scholar. And I am very proud that my work, encouraged by the CSPS and the University of Nottingham has led me to be invited to an institution with such a strong international reputation, the University of Trento.