

# 1

## The Name, the Land, and the Sources

We begin with the name – or rather names – because, as with virtually everything connected with Sparta, what the city and its territory were called is more complicated than it first appears. There is a welter of names – Sparta, Spartans, *Spartiatatai*, Laconia, Laconians, Lacedaemonia, and Lacedaemonians – each with a slightly different connotation and history. In the Classical period, the southern Peloponnese under Spartan control was commonly called *hê Lakônîkê* (probably *gê*), “the Laconian (land)” (Hdt. 1.69.4; Thuc. 5.34.1). The territory we call Laconia was also referred to as *Lakedaimôn*. Unfortunately for clarity, the city of Sparta was also called *Lakedaimôn*, while the official designation of the Spartan state was *hoi Lakedaimonioi*, “the Lacedaemonians.” In addition, the so-called *perioikoi*, who were free and lived in small civic communities around Laconia without enjoying the rights and obligations of full Spartan citizens, were often included among the Lacedaemonians as well. From time to time, the ambiguous designation “Laconian” (*Lakôn*) also crops up (e.g. Hdt. 1.68.2, 8.2.2; Thuc. 3.5.2). Thus, “Lacedaemonia” might designate either the Spartan civic center or all of Spartan territory, and “Lacedaemonians” could be Spartan citizens, the non-Spartan *perioikoi*, or a combination of the two. “Proper” Spartans, those adult males who maintained their commitments to the state, were *Spartiatatai*, “Spartiates.” Unlike *Lakedaimôn*, which has resisted etymological explanation, *Spartê* (Doric *Sparta*), is generally agreed to be connected with the verb *speiro* (“I sow”) and mean something like “the sown (land)” – a suitable name for a newly founded community. The name is appropriate, as there is no archaeological evidence for settlement on the site before the early Iron Age. An exciting discovery in the early 1990s has

added another layer to the history of these names. Excavations on the acropolis of Thebes in Boeotia uncovered a cache of clay tablets from the Mycenaean period, the Late Bronze Age (roughly 1400–1100 B.C.E.), written in Linear B. Several of these tablets mention men called either “the Lacedaemonian” (*ra-ke-da-mi-ni-jo*) or “the son of the Lacedaemonian” (*ra-]ke-da-mi-ni-jo-u-jo*), who may have played some role in cult activity. From these tablets, we now know that *Lakedaimôn* is the oldest geographical designation, dating back to the second half of the second millennium B.C.E., which inhabitants of Sparta may later have adopted in order to project an image of themselves as the guardians of the old Lacedaemonian heritage, a process underway by the eighth century.

The modern province of *Lakônia* is (very) roughly equivalent in its extent to ancient Lacedaemon. But present-day Laconians have to be content with the permanent loss of some of the most contentious real estate in ancient Greece – the Belminatis and the Sciritis, the uplands between the plain of Arcadian Tegea and the Eurotas valley, and the Thyreatis, in which the modern towns of Astros and Leonidion are located, not to mention the rich fields of Messenia, the economic foundation of Spartan might. Even without Messenia, though, ancient Laconia was vast in Greek terms, encompassing two major mountain ranges, Taygetus on the west and Parnon on the east, which terminate in the two large promontories of Cape Taenarum and Cape Malea. The forbidding east coast of the Malea peninsula, with few good anchorages, contrasts with the calmer waters of the Laconian gulf, around which lie a number of small coastal plains. Small to medium-sized towns cluster on them around the coast, many of them on or near the sites of ancient communities. The largest of the plains is that of Helos, where the river Eurotas flows into the sea, its sediments extending the land so much that the present coastline has little to do with the ancient. On the gulf’s western side lies Cape Taenarum, known today as the Mani, an area with a fearsome reputation for its rugged landscape and population.

The heart of Laconia is the valley of the river Eurotas, which flows from mountain springs in the north before entering the Laconian gulf through the southern marshland. The almost sheer fastness of Taygetus provided raw materials such as animals for the hunt and probably some timber, but little opportunity for settlement, while on the opposite side of the valley Parnon’s gentler slopes cradle many upland and coastal plains that could, and still do, support modest-sized communities.

Communication between these towns themselves and with Sparta has until recently been quite difficult, however. The paving and expansion of roads over the last few decades has made travel much quicker within Laconia, but the mountainous terrain still imposes long detours. In antiquity, the sense of isolation in communities several mountain passes and many kilometers away from the Eurotas valley must have been strongly felt, making the fact that ancient Laconia remained unified for so many centuries all the more impressive.

The Spartan heartland extended outwards from the banks of the Eurotas in a valley approximately 12 km wide at its greatest extent and 22 km long. Formed by a massive subsidence before the Pliocene era (more than 5.332 million years ago) and subsequent erosion on the valley's sides accompanied by flooding by the sea, the valley floor was covered by marine deposits, which were in turn overlaid by fans of alluvial sediment. Soil derived from this layer was the basis of agriculture in the region during antiquity. Fertile and well watered both by the Eurotas itself, one of the few Greek rivers that still flows during the summer, as well as by streams flowing from Taygetus, the valley today produces abundant crops of olives, citrus, and a variety of vegetables, using large-scale irrigation.



1.1 The Eurotas river south of Sparta

In antiquity, agriculture may have been hampered by the ridges formed by erosion and the several prominent hills that break up the terrain, though the question of how much the present landscape of the Eurotas basin resembles the ancient does not have a clear-cut answer. Recent research indicates that the deposit of sediment throughout the Mediterranean took place sporadically over an extended period from before the Bronze Age down to about a century ago and was probably due to single catastrophic events like earthquakes or flash floods rather than to climate change or even human activity. The landscape of Laconia has thus been in continuous flux, with some areas disappearing under flood sediment and others turning into cliffs from sudden erosion or slumping of parts of hills. The intense earthquake that hit Sparta in 465/4 B.C.E. likely had profound effects on the surrounding landscape.

The valley today is shut off from the sea by a line of hills, known as Vardounia, which springs from Taygetus on the west and ends at the course of the Kourtaki near the modern village of Krokeai. The main ancient and modern route through these hills reaches the port town of Gytheum on the Laconian gulf, which was Sparta's major maritime outlet. The dramatic topography of the northern part of the Eurotas valley, where the two mountain ranges draw together, is best appreciated on the modern highway to Sparta, which after climbing slightly to leave the Tripolis plain and threading through the rocky uplands



1.2 The Eurotas valley from the north



### 1.3 Sparta and Taygetus from the Menelaëum

descends rapidly along the western foothills of Parnon to the valley floor, thus affording a magnificent view of the valley, with Taygetus' southern peaks towering over.

Modern Sparta spreads out from several hills clustered around the southeastern extremity of a long spur of Taygetus. The river Eurotas flows by on the east, its tributary the Magoulitsa describing a great arc to the south, while the hills of the ancient acropolis and Palaikastro to the north form natural boundaries which even today constrain the city's sprawl somewhat. Refounded on the site of its ancient predecessor, the modern city has disappointed those who dreamt of uncovering major archaeological finds, validating the Athenian historian Thucydides' prediction of Sparta's potential as a major destination for archaeologically inclined tourists.

Suppose, for example, that the city of Sparta were to become deserted and that only the temples and foundations of the buildings remained, I think that future generations would, as time passed, find it very difficult to believe that the place had really been as powerful as it was represented to be.

(1.10.5)

In Thucydides' time, Sparta probably did look unimpressive compared to Athens. Spartans lived scattered into separate settlements called *obai*

("obes") or "villages." Four obes were located around the hill forming the acropolis. Limnae ("Marshes"), probably the oldest inhabited area of the city, was situated along the western bank of the Eurotas and derived its name from the high water table in that area. To the west and north of the highest point of the acropolis, where the Roman-era theater can be seen today, was Pitane, apparently Sparta's most desirable neighborhood. The locations of Mesoa and Cynosura are less definite, but most specialists would place them side by side to the south of the acropolis. Amyclae, a community about 5 km to the south of the city, is usually considered to have been incorporated into the city as an obe in the eighth century, though the only direct evidence for its obal status is Roman in date (*IG* V.1 26).

Of all the buildings, monuments, and sites in ancient Sparta, only three can be identified with any certainty – the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia beside the Eurotas, the temple of Athena Chalcioecus ("of the Bronze House") on the acropolis, and the early Roman theater just below it. Outside the city proper some sanctuaries have been excavated, while a recent surface survey has considerably enlarged our knowledge but also raised some unexpected but vitally important new questions. On the whole, though, Laconia remains remarkably underexploited in archaeological terms. Only since the 1990s, for instance, has systematic excavation been carried out at the site of one of Sparta's dependent communities, Geronthrae – a project that has the potential to nuance significantly our present picture of Sparta's relations with its dependent communities.

This brings us to the literary sources. Constructing a history of Sparta is bedeviled by two complicating factors – the lack of a corpus of writings by Classical Spartan authors that might illuminate the inner workings of Spartan institutions and the mindset of Spartans themselves and the existence of a large corpus of writings by non-Spartans claiming to do just that. This is the famous "Spartan mirage," through which the image of the historical city gradually became transformed through the work of philosophers, biographers, historians, and romantics into that of a radically unique state unlike any other in Greece and often in seeming contradiction to fundamental laws of human behavior.

The image of Spartan uniqueness fostered the preservation down to our time of remnants of poetry from as early as the seventh century. The fragments of the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus (F1-24 West<sup>2</sup>), along with the partial survival of poetry by his contemporary Alcman, represent the largest cache of primary literary evidence for Sparta from any century

in antiquity. Tyrtaeus' poems are mainly concerned with encouraging young Spartans to fight vigorously in the lengthy and harrowing conflict with their neighbors, the Messenians, and are consequently of major importance in dating the Spartan wars of conquest, as well as in providing information on martial ideology (F10, F12 West<sup>2</sup>; cf. F11, lines 4, 23–9). Another important fragment seems to have been composed at a time of social unrest connected with the war and may be closely related to one of the earliest surviving Greek constitutional texts, the so-called Great Rhetra (F4 West<sup>2</sup>). If Tyrtaeus' poems conform to our expectation of what Spartan poetry was like, Alcman's do not. His poetry reflects a sophisticated society reveling in the good life: Song, dance, physical beauty, splendid textiles, and the brightness of gold figure prominently. The most significant surviving poem of Alcman's, on a papyrus found near Saqqara in Egypt in 1855, is a song for a chorus of maidens (*Partheneion*), participating in a dawn ritual of re-clothing an image of a goddess, perhaps to be identified as Artemis Orthia (PMGF F1). Archaeological finds, notably from the shrine of Orthia itself, also attest to a love of luxury, humor, and even frivolity in the early Archaic period that hardly jibes with the dour, militaristic Spartans of the ancient (and modern) imagination.

A gap of about two hundred years separates Tyrtaeus and Alcman from our next major source, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, who completed his *Histories* around 425 B.C.E. Herodotus' immediate subject, the repulsion of two Persian assaults on Greece in 490 and 480/79 B.C.E., led him to a wide-ranging oral inquiry (*historiê*) as to the underlying causes of this ancient "clash of civilizations." Whenever an area first comes into contact with a major eastern power, either the Persians or their predecessors, in the course of his narrative Herodotus uses the occasion to supply background information on the history and culture of the peoples dwelling there. Croesus of Lydia's appeal to Sparta for aid against the Persians in the sixth century (1.65–77) is just such an occasion, when Herodotus provides an outline of early Spartan history and we first encounter what later became essential elements of the Spartan mirage – a terrible period of unrest ended only by the divinely sanctioned constitutional and social reforms of the legendary lawgiver Lycurgus (1.65–6). Sparta's leading position during the later sixth century and its command of the coalition of Hellenic states in the 480/79 war against the Persians meant that Herodotus often had occasion to sketch the historical circumstances behind incidents preceding and during that war. As a consequence, Herodotus is our major, and indeed

our only source for most Archaic Spartan history. But history in the narrow modern sense was only one of Herodotus' interests, so he also describes certain Spartan social customs. His catalog of the privileges enjoyed by kings in peace and war and life and death ranks among the more valuable accounts of Spartan institutions surviving from antiquity (6.56–9). Once seriously impugned, Herodotus' claim to be presenting material gathered from personal autopsy and word-of-mouth inquiries of oral sources is now overwhelmingly accepted. Sometimes we can even glimpse traces of social or political tension behind the accounts he collected. A case in point concerns Cleomenes I, who, when first introduced is described as behaving as "the most just of men" (3.148.2), only later to be characterized as "without restraint, actually a maniac" (5.42.1). The conflicting perceptions of the long-dead king perhaps reflect family or, more likely, political differences among Herodotus' informants.

In Herodotus' younger contemporary Thucydides, author of the account of the Peloponnesian War, we meet a different sort of historian altogether. Thucydides' subject, a war being fought as he researched and wrote most of his book (1.1, 5.26.1), differed profoundly from that of Herodotus, the great conflict of a previous generation that had fast acquired quasi-mythic dimensions. His approach to the task of communicating the results of his research also differs. Instead of recording several versions of a story, at letting the reader decide between them, Thucydides sifted through his material to find what he saw as the truth (1.22.2). When he does admit the existence of alternative versions of events, it is to show them up as misconceived or plainly false. For instance, without naming him, he alludes to Herodotus' assertions that the Spartan kings cast two votes in council and that there was a contingent of troops "from Pitane" (1.20.3) in order to affirm their falsity. His twenty-year exile for losing Thracian Amphipolis to the Spartan general Brasidas in 424/3 (4.104–8, 5.26.5) allowed him access to the city and its inhabitants. At Sparta, he was able to read the inscription above the tomb of Pausanias, victor of Plataea (1.13.4) and the sight of its unremarkable public buildings must have inspired his famous statement, quoted above, that Sparta's and Athens' architecture were almost inverted reflections of the two cities' power and influence (1.10.2). He also appears familiar with significant distinctions of social class among the inhabitants of Laconia, and knows something of Spartan legislative procedure. Thucydides penetrated the secrecy of the state sufficiently to uncover the story of the "disappearing" of two thousand helots (4.80.3–5), though



the veracity of this event has recently been doubted. Thucydides knew Sparta and strove to be as accurate as possible, though even he fell victim to the allure of the Spartan mirage, when he repeated one of its shibboleths – that the Spartan way of life had remained completely unchanged for four hundred years (1.18.1). Other early flickerings of the mirage have been discerned in his statement that the Spartans were the first to adopt a modest lifestyle in which the wealthy differed little from the rest of the population (1.6.4).

Our next major source, Xenophon, presents yet another contrast, since for a significant portion of his adult life he was a soldier, and apparently quite a good one. Born in the later fifth century, perhaps around 430 B.C.E., Xenophon lived through the bloody, confusing years following the defeat of Athens and the establishment of Spartan hegemony, only to see Sparta itself laid low by the disaster at Leuctra in 371 B.C.E. and the subsequent humiliation of Thebes' invasion of Laconia. He died sometime after 356/5 B.C.E., in the decade after Thebes' brief hegemony ended at Mantinea (362 B.C.E.), when the shadow of Philip II was beginning to lengthen over Greek affairs. Among his literary productions are two items of paramount importance to the study of Sparta – his *Hellenica* (*Hellenic Affairs*), the history of the rise and fall of Sparta from 411 to 362 B.C.E., and the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, the only study of Spartan public and social institutions to survive intact from antiquity.

Much denigrated in the past as an unworthy successor to Thucydides, Xenophon's skills as a historian have recently undergone intense reevaluation. In particular, Xenophon's supposedly pro-Spartan bias has been reinterpreted as a focus on Sparta's actions both good and bad in order to illuminate the pitfalls of grasping at political domination. Still, the *Hellenica's* failings have resulted in scholars' often resorting to the fragments of another fourth-century historian, Ephorus, who based his narrative on the almost completely lost work of an anonymous figure known as the Oxyrhynchus historian. Despite its drawbacks, the *Hellenica* provides a unique glimpse into Spartan internal affairs through the eyes of a privileged outsider. Even more information is provided by the short *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, in whose 15 chapters Xenophon tried to account for Sparta's eminence as a result of their laws and customs in peace and war. Written at some date between 394 and 371 B.C.E., the *Constitution* presents Spartan institutions in an overwhelmingly positive light, except for the fourteenth chapter which Xenophon devotes to a bitter denunciation of the current

Spartan lifestyle. This chapter's jarring tone, so at odds with the rest of the book, has led scholars to question whether its present location in the *Constitution* is correct and even to propose that it was added later by a disillusioned Xenophon after the defeat at Leuctra in 371 B.C.E. But most now believe that the chapter is where Xenophon originally wanted it, which raises the interesting question of the *Constitution's* relationship to the contemporary reality of Sparta. Xenophon's emphatic denial in chapter 14 that in his time – he twice uses the word *nun* (“now”) – the Spartans held to the Lycurgan line points to the preceding account being at least partly idealized and colored by nostalgia. In all likelihood, Xenophon never experienced a Sparta living in harmony with all the features of the Lycurgan system he describes in the *Constitution*, if indeed Sparta ever did.

A massive thirty-book universal *History* written by Ephorus of Cyme (c. 405–380 B.C.E.) was also influential in antiquity. Ephorus' work was well known and used as a source by many later authors. It is preserved only in fragments, although large sections, apparently quoted verbatim, appear in Strabo's *Geography* and in the *Bibliothèque* of Diodorus Siculus, another Roman-era author, where they provide much information about the very early history of Sparta and Laconia. Care is needed, however, since Polybius accused his predecessor of distorting the image of certain Spartan institutions (Polyb. 6.46.10).

In Plato (c. 429–347 B.C.E.) and his pupil Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) we encounter the first and only complete extant works in which Sparta appears as an object of political and philosophical inquiry. Allusions to Spartan constitutional and social practice run like a thread throughout Plato's works, a legacy of his intellectual apprenticeship in the pro-Spartan circle of Socrates. Plato did not undertake a thorough, systematic analysis of Spartan society. That was not his aim. Rather, he approvingly noted many aspects worthy of emulation, such as respect for the old and authoritarianism, while sometimes leveling criticism, for instance against what he saw as an over-emphasis in citizen training on inculcating physical courage alone. The virtues of Plato's Sparta far outweigh its faults; thus, in the *Republic* it appears as an example of the second-best type of constitution, lacking just a little of the best (yet unrealized) constitution, that of aristocracy (*Resp.* 545a–c). As a timocratic constitution, Sparta's still possessed admirable features – obedience to the law and a distaste for agriculture among them (*Resp.* 548d). But the cancer of individualism had already begun to infect the body politic in the form of greed for wealth and lust for military

glory, which leads to obsessive militarism and secret accumulation of riches, in defiance of the law (*Resp.* 547e–548b). Timocracy inevitably degenerates into the next lower type of constitution, oligarchy. The failings of the timocratic state echo criticisms of contemporary Sparta, especially as regarding the display of wealth, about which we have already noticed Xenophon complaining. For Plato, as for Xenophon, the city of his day had declined from its pristine state under the laws of Lycurgus, but the philosopher, unlike the soldier-historian, viewed all decline as inexorable and not a problem peculiar to Sparta. Sparta figures most prominently in the *Laws*, Plato's latest work, in which a trio of travellers in Crete discuss the laws for a new city called Magnesia. As they traipse on, they propose and argue over the right sort of constitutional arrangements for Magnesia, drawing heavily on perceived Spartan precedents for the training of citizens, and the role of music and gymnastics. Plato was no uncritical fan of Sparta, however: he acutely finds a fatal flaw in the Spartan tendency to elicit good behavior from its citizens through compulsion rather than persuasion and education (*Leg.* 666e).

Compared to Plato's approach, Aristotle's treatment of Sparta is motivated more by taxonomy than idealism. In the *Politics*, he shows how the human good, discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, can be attained through the practical science of political theory. Aristotle collects previous theories of the best state, along with examples of political and constitutional practice from contemporary states, and subjects them to analysis. Sparta, as a much-praised exemplar of the best sort of constitution (*Pol.* 2.3.10 [1265b]), one that is a mixture of oligarchy, monarchy, and democracy, is a natural focus of his attention. Thus, the *Politics* contains a wealth of references to specific Spartan practices, which Aristotle either praises or (often) condemns. The number and specificity of these descriptions may well be a result of the research carried out for *The Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, part of a research megaproject to examine the constitutions of major Greek states (and Carthage), of which only the *Constitution of the Athenians* now survives. Aristotle is interested in classifying Sparta's constitution correctly and investigating the city as it existed in the later fourth century rather than in using it as a model for the perfect state. He makes a useful though acerbic guide. His assessments of the procedure for electing ephors as "childish" (*Pol.* 2.6.16 [1270b]), the power of Spartan women as detrimental to the state (*Pol.* 2.6.5 [1269b]), and Spartan citizen training as overemphasizing savagery (*Pol.* 8.3.3 [1338a]) are well known.

But he also praises the training system for being under state control (*Pol.* 8.1.3 [1337a]), notes that the Spartans, because of their training, are said to be good judges of music (*Pol.* 8.4.6 [1339b]), and provides the surprising information that fathers with three or more sons were exempted from military service (*Pol.* 2.6.13 [1270b]). Aristotle regarded the Spartan constitution, so admired by theorists, as fundamentally flawed – the very reason for the city’s fall. In contrast to the essentially positive viewpoint of Xenophon and Plato, Aristotle saw the laws of Lycurgus as harboring the very worm of Spartan decay. He did not consider contemporary Sparta’s reduced standing as a sign of decline from an earlier pristinely Lycurgan state either because of wilful abandonment of the laws or due to an immutable law of corruption. Failure was built into the system by the decisions of the lawgiver himself: “And yet it is clear, since the Spartans now no longer have an empire, that they are not fortunate, nor was the lawgiver a good one” (*Pol.* 7.13.12 [1333b]).

After Aristotle, the next extant source of any substantial relevance to Sparta is Polybius (c. 200–c. 118 B.C.E.), who wrote his history of Rome’s rise to superpower status after 146 B.C.E. In his famous comparison of Rome and Sparta as exemplifying types of the much-sought-after mixed constitution, Polybius represented Lycurgus as the rational guiding force behind Sparta’s traditional laws. But his immediate concern was with the more recent history of Sparta, especially its revival under king Cleomenes III and the later career of Nabis, Sparta’s last king (or tyrant) and enemy of Rome, which prepared the ground for Sparta’s unhappy membership in the Achaean League and her subsequent role as the *casus belli* for the conflict that resulted in Rome crushing the League and establishing permanent control over Greece. The parts of his history that survive in Greek and the large section which lie behind Livy’s Latin version provide us with a vital, albeit selective, picture of the city during its last years as an independent actor.

A few chapters of the *Geography* written by Strabo of Amaseia during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius shed spots of valuable light on Sparta in the early years of Roman rule. His reference to the constitutional settlement of Laconia after the fall of Nabis in the early second century B.C.E. provides information found nowhere else (8.5.5), while our understanding of the fate of Gaius Julius Eurycles, Sparta’s ruler in the later first century, depends to a great extent on Strabo’s text (8.5.5). Short though his account is (8.4.10–8.5.7), Strabo has also

provided much fuel for debate on Sparta's history and social institutions in the Classical period, because he preserves Ephorus' version of the origin of the helots (8.5.4) and, alone of ancient writers, refers to an important pamphlet of King Pausanias (8.5.5).

The influence of Plutarch of Chaeronea (c. 42–c. 120 C.E.) on perceptions of Sparta endured for centuries. His voluminous output of biographical, philological, and philosophical works made him one of the most significant shapers of early modern political and historical thought. His Spartan lives – of Lysander, Agesilaus, Agis, and Cleomenes, and especially Lycurgus – as well as collections of notable sayings supposedly by Spartans, represented Spartan society as disciplined, obedient, focused on physical culture, and deeply conservative, an image that remains powerfully affecting even today. As a biographical subject, Lycurgus presented a nearly insurmountable problem – he almost certainly did not exist. Even in antiquity, debate accompanied every aspect of his life and activity, leading Plutarch to admit, “concerning Lycurgus the Lawgiver absolutely nothing can be said that is beyond dispute. His ancestry, his foreign travels, his death, and above all his activity concerning the laws and the constitution, all are reported differently. And there is the least agreement about the chronology of the man's life” (*Lyc.* 1.1). On the other hand, Plutarch could draw upon a rich, but varied, “biographical” tradition about Lycurgus that had developed since the Classical period, as historians and other writers elaborated and conjectured from meager evidence when they did not simply invent plausible details. Thus, the part of the *Lycurgus* purporting to describe his life and political activity is outright fiction, based on the work of these lost writers who constructed a life for their subject that would account for the received image of early Sparta. Plutarch's Sparta of the eighth century B.C.E. comes dressed in late Hellenistic garb, complete with palace intrigue (*Lyc.* 3.2–4), a coup (*Lyc.* 5.5–9), and – the most obvious anachronism – silver and gold coinage (*Lyc.* 9.2).

Of greater, though not indisputable, value are the passages ostensibly reporting Lycurgus' constitutional and social reforms, beginning with the document known as the Great Rhetra (*Lyc.* 6.2). All the famous institutions of Classical Sparta are on display, endowed with a pronounced Platonic cast: the Gerousia (*Lyc.* 5.11–14); the ephorate, considered by Plutarch as post-Lycurgan (*Lyc.* 7.1–2), equal distribution of land and banning of precious-metal coinage (*Lyc.* 8–9), common messes (*Lyc.* 10, 12), and physical education for girls and inducements for marriage (*Lyc.* 14–15). Plutarch then describes in some detail the citizen training

of young male Spartans (*Lyc.* 16–19.5) and lists various worthwhile Spartan sayings that prove its efficacy (*Lyc.* 20). The later chapters of the *Lycurgus* are also the source for such mainstays of Spartan scholarship as the method of electing members to the Gerousia (*Lyc.* 26), intramural burial (*Lyc.* 27.1), and Spartan abuse of the helots, including the infamous Crypteia (*Lyc.* 28.2–13).

Apart from the *Lycurgus*, Plutarch wrote two other biographies of Classical Spartan figures, Agesilaus and Lysander, about whose existence there is no doubt whatsoever. Because of the prominence of these two figures in the events that shaped Greece from the end of the Peloponnesian War to the disaster at Leuctra, Plutarch's narratives have special importance, as he drew on sources other than Xenophon, whose idiosyncratic approach has so frustrated historians. Plutarch's narratives thus often serve to correct or supplement deficiencies in Xenophon's. His other Spartan biography is the joint one of the reformer kings Agis IV (reigned 245–241 B.C.E.) and Cleomenes III (reigned 235–220/19 B.C.E.). Drawing principally on the work of the Athenian historian Phylarchus, who was contemporary with the events he describes, Plutarch fashioned a dramatic narrative of reformist zeal confronting deeply entrenched, and corrupt, special interests. Despite its obvious bias, which is due more to Phylarchus than to Plutarch himself, the *Agis and Cleomenes* provides a few glimpses into life in Hellenistic Sparta. Rounding out the Spartan-centered content in the Plutarchan corpus are the collections of sayings attributed to famous Spartan men and women (*Mor.* 208a–242d), among which is also an odd set of passages on various customs commonly called the *Laconian Institutions* (*Mor.* 236f–240b). The sayings of famous Spartans belong to a flourishing and popular Hellenistic genre of quotations called *apophthegmata*, in which edifying, moralizing, or just amusing sayings were attributed to well-known historical figures. The first collections of Spartan *apophthegmata* seem to date from the early third century B.C.E., while the latest historical figure to appear in them is Agis IV (*Mor.* 216c–d).

After Plutarch, Pausanias is the most important Greek writer of the imperial period to contribute to our knowledge of Sparta. In his *Periegesis*, Pausanias provides a complex and richly textured picture of Greece, its cults, festivals, monuments, and thriving local traditions at the middle of the second century of our era. Pausanias' utility as a guide for archaeologists has long been acknowledged, but only relatively recently have his aims as a writer been recognized, let alone

appreciated. Pausanias describes a Sparta brimming with monuments attesting to its great past: the stoa built from the spoils of the Persian Wars, adorned with figures of Persians that held up the roof in place of columns (3.9.3); the Aphetaid road, on which Odysseus raced for the hand of Penelope (3.12.1); the cenotaph of Brasidas and the graves of Leonidas and Pausanias the victor of Plataea (3.14.1) among many others – so many, in fact, that Pausanias was at a loss to describe them all (3.11.1). Unfortunately, as I have noted earlier, only a tiny handful of these have been identified with any certainty.

Unlike Plutarch, obviously, his aim was to describe the contemporary city, but Pausanias was also concerned with situating the sights he described within their historical context. In so doing, he preserved fragments of earlier historians' work that would otherwise have been lost. He in fact begins his fourth book, on Messenia, with a lengthy digression on that territory's conquest by Spartans in the Archaic period. Negligible though its evidentiary value may be, the account preserved by Pausanias provides a useful insight into how the later Messenians constructed their past at a time when elite Greeks conventionally defined their place in the contemporary world almost exclusively in terms of their Archaic or Classical history. His introduction to Book 3, on Sparta and Laconia, is sounder, due for the most part to its being largely derived from Herodotus, whose style of historiography strongly influenced Pausanias' own.

In addition to the literary sources, inscriptions can play a small and unevenly distributed part in constructing Sparta's history. It is true that surviving epigraphical texts from the Classical period can be counted almost on the fingers of one hand. Official documents relate exclusively to what we would call foreign affairs, including one of the best known Spartan inscriptions, the Spartan War Fund. Among the private inscriptions is the single victory dedication from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia that dates from before the Roman period (*IG* V.1 255) and a series of inscriptions from the sanctuary of Poseidon on Cape Taenarum, the southernmost tip of Laconia, that attest to the freeing of Spartan slaves (*IG* V.1 1228–33). The best known inscription erected by a private individual is the lengthy stele of Damonon (*IG* V.1 213), in which he records his victories and those of his son in a variety of chariot races and other athletic events in local festivals throughout Laconia.

Epigraphical evidence comes into its own during the Roman period, when the literary sources largely evaporate. A few fragmentary

decrees (e.g. *IG* V.1 18–20) are supplemented by inscribed careers (*IG* V.1 31–47; *SEG* 11 476–501), catalogs of magistrates (*IG* V.1 48–212; *SEG* 11 502–647), and many honorific inscriptions for civic worthies of both sexes (*IG* V.1 455–613; *SEG* 11 761–70), all of which provide us with a wealth of prosopographical information. For instance, thanks to these documents, we know the names of far more women from the Roman period than from any other period of Sparta's history. Since the honors recorded by these texts are couched in a highly evolved, richly encoded language of praise common throughout the Greek East, much of the dynamics of civic life can be discerned through these inscriptions. Most important, however, is the series of dedications found at the Orthia sanctuary, erected by victors in contests of the Roman-era citizen training system, the *agoge*, which constitute the largest concentration of evidence for this sort of institution in the Greek East outside Athens. The texts accompanying the iron sickles that were the prizes in the contests enable us to reconstruct the workings of this important public institution in more detail than at any other time.

From all these texts, fragments of texts, artifacts, and barely visible remnants of material culture scattered over almost a millennium, the historian's task is to construct a Sparta that is consonant with the surviving evidence and to people it with Spartans who, with any luck, are more than historically determined ciphers or philosophical allegories.