

*Memory and Mirage***Introduction: Why Sparta? Why Now?**

Sparta needs no introduction, let alone a justification for why it is worth studying. As ancient Romans visited Sparta centuries after its heyday and were treated to an exaggerated theme park of sorts of what Classical Sparta was really like, so, too, does much of the modern world retain a fascination for these strange Greeks – from Enlightenment political theorists, to modern Greek nationalists fighting for independence from the Ottomans, and to popular culture today. Ancient Sparta grabs our imagination because it was so *weird*, even to its fellow Greeks. Phalanxes of social equals fighting with peerless skill and bravery even in the face of certain death is bound to compel, and is an image drawn from carefully crafted propaganda, a public relations campaign initiated by the Spartans themselves. I am not prepared to go as far as Myke Cole, who, in his recent book, *The Bronze Lie*, argues that Sparta's military prowess and invincibility were entirely fabricated by the Spartans and repeated by credulous sources.<sup>1</sup> I do agree, however, that we need to examine this ancient society and its image with a critical eye. Even once we have done so, I believe we can still understand the Spartans as different, as outliers. Military commemoration is one subject in which this difference is starkest.

Sparta is, next to Athens, the second-most studied Classical Greek polis. It is a distant second, though, since Athens has left an overwhelming profusion of evidence by comparison – literary, architectural, artistic, archaeological, and epigraphical. Since at least the time of the Periclean Funeral Oration in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Athenian commemoration has been better understood and the inspiration for more works of scholarship than any other Greek society. Brilliant recent studies, such as Nathan Arrington's *Ashes, Images, and Memories: The Presence of the War Dead in*

<sup>1</sup> Cole 2021.

*Fifth-Century Athens*, continue to offer new insights into and interpretations of Athenian commemoration, and the relationship between soldiers, their families, and the state for which they fought and died.<sup>2</sup> Scholars such as Polly Low have begun to take these scholarly approaches to parts of Greece beyond Athens, including Sparta, but a lot more work needs to be done.<sup>3</sup> Untangling Sparta's commemorative past is a different business than doing so for Athens, but there is some interesting evidence to work with and we can make use of some illuminating comparisons.

This is a moment in history at which memory, monuments, and commemoration have never been more important and more controversial. How we think about the past is in the news every day, from the fight to remove Confederate monuments in the United States to the ideological battles waged over the history and ethnicity behind claims to eastern Ukraine while Russia continues its assault on that country as I write these words. Modern military commemoration tends to straddle the awkward divide between celebrating heroism in order to inspire patriotic service in future generations and revealing the horrors of war in order to discourage peoples and states from taking up arms. I want to investigate how one of history's most supposedly militaristic societies commemorated war, and the links that commemoration had to whether and how often that society went to war. In the process, we will learn more about the Spartans and the ancient Greeks, but we will also have occasion to think about our own forms of commemoration and our own relationship with armed conflict. The commemoration of war, ancient and modern, both reflects and forms a society's attitudes towards war. In the case of Sparta, that particular ancient society has often been brought to bear to comment on wars today.

In what follows we will consider some ideas about commemoration, remembrance, and collective memory, and how these ideas can be used fruitfully in a study of ancient Sparta. We will next take a look at the "Spartan Mirage," namely the sources we have for Spartan society and the unique challenges those sources present. This introductory chapter will conclude with some basic principles of Sparta's commemoration of war, particularly how they relate to the ideas of their fellow Greeks. These principles will be explored in depth and complicated by the chapters that follow. We will also take a tour through Classical Sparta and pause to

<sup>2</sup> Arrington 2015. For Athens, see also Low 2010; Kucewicz 2021b; Pritchard 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Low 2003; 2006; 2011; Kucewicz 2021a.

consider the topography and monuments an ancient Spartan would have encountered, and what those monuments might have meant to the observer.

### A Note on Terminology

Before moving on, I must clarify some of the most important terms I will use throughout this study, since just what the terms “Sparta” and “the Spartans” mean is more complicated than in the case of other Greek peoples. First, Sparta was a strange polis in that it was unwallled and was more an amalgamation of villages than a central urban core surrounded by rural hinterland as other poleis (the plural for “polis”) were. Sparta was located in the southern Peloponnese in a region later called Laconia, separated from Messenia to the west by the formidable Taygetus mountain range. The Spartan state was technically called Lacedaemon in antiquity, and its free residents the Lacedaemonians. This term was the source of the famous lambda, or inverted “V,” eventually emblazoned on Spartan hoplite shields. Sometimes, therefore, the terms Lacedaemonian and Spartan are used interchangeably in the sources, and in this book.

Classical Spartan society was stratified into three main tiers. At the top, representing a minority of the population, were the full citizens, the Spartiates, sometimes called the *homoioi*, or “similar.” These were the Spartan men who trained continuously for war and who lived as if on campaign, dining together every day in common messes, even while at home and at peace. The Spartiates were eligible to serve in important offices, such as the oversight body of five annually elected ephors, and in an assembly that ratified laws and other state actions and policies. The participation of these Spartiates in government means we can understand Sparta as an oligarchy, rule by the few, even though Sparta also had two kings, so was at the same time a type of monarchy or diarchy.

The female family members of the Spartiates had more privileges and freedom than their counterparts in places like Athens, a state exceptionally restrictive to women, but, even so, women played no formal role in Spartan government or on military campaign. Spartan women and girls, however, had an important place in Sparta’s military culture and its commemorative practices. Girls, for example, could exercise in public just like boys, and, as part of a compulsory public training, were expected to observe and mock the boys in order to spur Spartan males to greater martial excellence. A large percentage of the famous aphorisms, or sayings, attributed to the Spartans by Plutarch and other authors come from women, and many of

these aphorisms are statements of Spartan attitudes towards war and memory. After the Spartans lost at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BCE, Spartan women who lost husbands and sons walked around the city with joyful expressions, happy that their male family members had died gloriously rather than survived shamefully after surrendering. Spartan women, at least as portrayed by Greek male authors, were important for Spartan commemoration.<sup>4</sup>

Free non-citizens who lived in Spartan territory were called the *perioikoi*, or “dwellers-around.” The *perioikoi* typically lived in their own villages in Laconia. They outnumbered the full Spartiates, probably by a significant margin. They were required to serve in the Spartan army and took care of many of the state’s necessary economic tasks while the Spartiates trained for war. The term Lacedaemonian usually refers to both the Spartiates and the *perioikoi*. The ancient sources tend to specify when they mean only Spartiates instead of both groups together.<sup>5</sup>

At the bottom tier were the helots, unfree laborers who (the men, at least) mainly worked the agricultural land controlled by Sparta. We might best understand the helots as serfs, or perhaps persons enslaved by the state rather than owned as chattel by individual Spartiates and their families (as was the case with slavery in other Greek poleis, such as Athens).<sup>6</sup> Some helots came from Laconia, while others were from neighboring Messenia to the west, which Sparta conquered in the Archaic period. The helots were the backbone of Spartan power, providing all the produce and other essentials for the survival of the state. Many ancient sources claim that a need to control the helots, and the fear of helot rebellion, drove much of Sparta’s policy and way of life.<sup>7</sup>

This book deals primarily with what we might call the “official” commemoration of war in Sparta – poems recited at religious festivals and remembrance ceremonies, monuments erected in public spaces,

<sup>4</sup> See Millender 2018 for a general treatment of Spartan women, with further bibliography. See also the foundational monograph on the topic by Pomeroy 2002. For a discussion on Spartan women and war, see Powell 2004.

<sup>5</sup> For the *perioikoi*, see Ducat 2018. For non-Spartans in the Spartan army, see the recent article by Pavlides 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Athens had publicly enslaved persons too. A main difference seems to be that Spartiates did not own privately enslaved persons, whereas Athens had both categories of slavery.

<sup>7</sup> The best resource on the helots is the edited collection of Luraghi and Alcock 2003. Luraghi 2008 discusses the Messenians in particular. For an up-to-date discussion of the state of helot scholarship, and a comparison of helotage with other slave systems in antiquity, see now Lewis 2018: 125–146. For a general overview of the political and social structure of Sparta as compared to Athens, with suggestions for further reading and sources, see Sears 2022. See also Humble 2022, in the same volume, for a closer look at Sparta.

inscriptions commissioned by “the Spartans” as a state, and so on. While I will refer to some individual monuments, dedications, and perspectives, for the majority of this study we will be considering what “the Spartans” did to remember their wars and their war dead. The sources for Sparta are lacking as it is, and it is accordingly much more difficult to assess the ideas and practices of individual Spartiates, not to mention women, *perioikoi*, or helots. These non-elites, or marginalized populations, had agency of their own (if within the confines of various systems of oppression), which would have had a bearing on commemoration. We must keep that fact in mind even as those non-Spartiate and non-“official” perspectives get lost in the shuffle. In addition to the studies pointed out in notes 4–5, I for one eagerly await further work on marginalized peoples in Lacedaemon, including in the sphere of war.

This book deals primarily with the Archaic period, dating from roughly 700 BCE (or whenever the Homeric epics were first composed, perhaps fifty or so years earlier) to 479 BCE, when Xerxes’ Persian invasion was repelled from mainland Greece; and the Classical period, which runs from 479 to 323 BCE, the year Alexander the Great died. The Hellenistic period (323–30 BCE) follows the Classical, from which several of our sources derive, as they do also from the Roman period following the death of Cleopatra VII in 30 BCE. Unless otherwise stated, all dates are BCE.

Finally, a word on the terms “commemoration” and “militarism”, which will feature prominently throughout the following chapters. Commemoration often conjures up images of formal monuments or ceremonies, such as the Remembrance Day observances held each November 11 in Canada (with analogues in many other countries). Marching bands, parades of veterans, and official services around the town cenotaph, a monument inscribed with the names of the war dead and the battles in which they fought are obvious examples of commemoration. I, however, take a far more expansive view. Wars and war heroes, battles and battlefields, permeate our discourse and our public and private spaces far more than formal commemorative activities would indicate. As I write these words, I have just returned from a lecture tour for which I spoke on Spartan topics at Canadian universities with names like “Waterloo,” the famous battle between Napoleon and Wellington, and “Brock,” a prominent general from the War of 1812. As debates rage about the nature and importance of “Western Civilization,” and Canadian or British “values,” wars past and present tend to feature prominently, if sometimes indirectly. Wars can be commemorated in speaking about Canada as a “peacekeeping nation” or the United States as being a great “experiment in democracy” just as much

as through a recitation of the names of the war dead. I will therefore consider Spartan attitudes towards war, including, but not limited to, attitudes stemming from the reception of certain military events, as part of a broad phenomenon of commemoration.

In a similar way, I conceive of militarism as a broad subject. The eminent scholar of Sparta Stephen Hodkinson cautions against the use of the term militarism in a Spartan context, since Sparta, like other Greek states, had no clear boundary between military and civic life. Modern nation-states, with clearly demarcated militaries, on the other hand, can be properly described as more or less militaristic, depending on the prominence of those militaries in various spheres.<sup>8</sup> I think of militarism differently, in a way that applies to ancient Greek societies. By militarism, I mean the extent to which war and attitudes towards war inform a society's view of itself and lie behind both real policies and actions and how those policies and actions are understood and portrayed. In this sense, Sparta was more militaristic than other Greek states. The Athenians surely thought about war a lot, but for them it was less of a preoccupation and less of a crux of their identity than it was for the Spartans – whether or not there were strict divisions between the military and other spheres. A Greek state could be militaristic without military institutions or leaders having clear distinctions or any greater constitutional power. As I will argue, a greater degree of militarism did not even necessarily entail a greater degree of formal military activities.

### How Societies Remember

My city of Fredericton is replete with monuments to Max Aitken, better known as Lord Beaverbrook, a Canadian newspaper baron who had prominent positions in the British War Cabinets of both world wars. Next to the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, centrally located along the city's riverfront, is a bronze statue of Beaverbrook himself in academic regalia. One passes the Lady Beaverbrook Arena on the way to the campus of the University of New Brunswick, which boasts the Lady Beaverbrook Residence, the Aitken University Center, and the Beaverbrook Room in the main library, containing volumes from Beaverbrook's own personal collection. Beaverbrook would be most happy that he is profusely memorialized, since he understood the power of physical and spatial monuments. As Lloyd George's minister of information during the First World War,

<sup>8</sup> Hodkinson 2006.

Beaverbrook spearheaded the commissioning of war art, specifically to commemorate the achievements of Canadians on battlefields such as Ypres. He remarked that, “[i]n the years following the war Canadians will expect to be told what Canadians have done in the war. They will want the younger generation to be taught the glory of Canada.”<sup>9</sup> Beaverbrook’s sentiments are in accord with Herodotus’ opening lines, in which the “Father of History” says he undertook his monumental literary project so that great and marvelous deeds might not be without their due share of glory.

The much-commemorated Beaverbrook set out to ensure that the era-defining wars of the 20th century were properly commemorated. “Commemoration,” as the literal meaning of the word suggests, pertains to remembrance, to ways in which people, events, and ideas are remembered, even long afterwards. To understand what commemoration is, how it works, and what its purposes are, we need to think about memory itself, and how it operates not merely on the cognitive level of an individual but at the collective level of a society or a people. Memory is related to history but operates differently. I am partial to Jennifer Wellington’s definition, which she outlines in her study of First World War memorials:

By “memory” I mean the sensation of a proprietary, emotional connection to the past, and the community of the dead, buttressed by broadly accepted impressions of that past, as opposed to “history”, which requires the recitation of facts based on verifiable evidence . . . . The contours of war memory may shape a population’s willingness or reluctance to go to war in the future.<sup>10</sup>

The line between “history” and “memory” for the ancient Greeks was more nebulous than Wellington’s, as suggested by, for instance, Herodotus’ insistence that his work is itself a commemorative exercise. Her definition is helpful nonetheless, as is her insight that a people’s memory of war affects their present attitudes to war.

Human individuals have memories of their own experiences and what has been related to them by others. It seems uncomplicated to say that a given Spartan remembered war, in the sense that the Spartan could have participated in wars or at least heard about wars from others; those memories would inform that Spartan’s thinking about war. But can a people, as opposed to an individual person, have memory at all? In other words, is it accurate or useful to speak about Sparta’s commemoration

<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Wellington 2017: 52. <sup>10</sup> Wellington 2017: 7.

of war as if Sparta itself remembered its battles, its soldiers, and its war dead? By far the most influential theorist tackling this question is the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who pioneered the concept of “collective memory.” In short, while a collective does not remember like a human mind does, individuals are able to have memory at all only in a collective context. Through several case studies, Halbwachs argues that individuals can have very different memories of the past based on their participation in various collectives. The group affects and shapes the memories of the individual.<sup>11</sup> In a Spartan context, then, the way the community commemorated war would be vitally important for how individual Spartans remembered war and thought about current wars and their own roles in them.

There was quite a bit of pushback to Halbwachs’ idea, as influential as it is. Some even denied the existence of collective memory altogether, since a collective cannot actually remember anything, memory being a neurological process. Jan Assmann has softened the idea of collective memory into what he calls “cultural memory,” and in so doing has made Halbwachs’ insight both more palatable and, I think, more accurate. Assmann concedes that the subject of memory must be the individual, but the individual can organize and make sense of this memory only by relying on the “frame” provided by culture.<sup>12</sup> Assmann elaborates on the relationship between the individual and the collective in terms of memory:

Just as an individual forms a personal identity through memory, maintaining this despite the passage of time, so a group identity is also dependent on the reproduction of shared memories. The difference is that the group memory has no neurological basis. This is replaced by culture: a complex of identity-shaping aspects of knowledge objectified in the symbolic forms of myth, song, dance, sayings, laws, sacred texts, pictures, ornaments, paintings, processional routes, or – as in the case of the Australians – even whole landscapes.<sup>13</sup>

All of the factors Assmann marks as “identity-shaping” aspects of culture vis-à-vis memory were operative in ancient Sparta, and we will be looking at them throughout this book. Jay Winter, himself deeply indebted to Assmann, argues that memory and commemoration have a profound impact on a society’s view of war, including whether war is a good or legitimate choice. Today, Western Europeans tend to think of war as an

<sup>11</sup> Halbwachs 1992 is a good English edition of Halbwachs’ most important work and includes critical notes and interpretive material by the editor, L. A. Coser.

<sup>12</sup> Assmann 2011: 22.

<sup>13</sup> Assmann 2011: 72. See also Winter 2017: 205, who says succinctly that “how we remember affected deeply what we remember.”



illegitimate abomination, which is reflected in many forms of commemoration that stress war's horrors. Eastern Europe and the United States, by contrast, cling to older forms of commemoration and therefore tend to be more militaristic and see war as a viable, even good option. We will consider the extent to which Winter's paradigm holds true for Sparta.<sup>14</sup>

Of particular interest in a Greek context are Assmann's observations regarding a society's treatment of the dead, which he separates into retrospective and prospective categories. The former pertains to a society continuing to live with the dead as part of the community. The latter are actions by which the living make themselves unforgettable after they die.<sup>15</sup> The dead were a ubiquitous presence in ancient Greece, including for the Spartans, as we will see. Anyone seeking to understand how the figurative and literal presence of the dead affects society and culture would do well to read Thomas Laqueur's beautiful book on the subject, which meditates on the power of the dead "in deep time to make communities, to do the work of culture, to announce their presence and meaning by occupying space."<sup>16</sup> Many Greeks, Spartans especially, were motivated by the desire to be remembered and commemorated. Homer's heroes certainly acted as if being remembered was of paramount importance, and so, too, did historical Spartans.<sup>17</sup>

Those who study commemoration in the modern period tend to emphasize the importance of democracy. This makes sense, since if the people doing the fighting have little or no say over wars and warfare, it is much less important to have a commemorative regime that influences popular attitudes. Even though Sparta was not a democracy, Spartiates did participate in the running of the state to a marked degree – as opposed to the subjects of early modern European monarchies. For our purposes, it is reasonable to apply the observations made about modern democratic commemoration to the Spartans, since the Spartans, especially those in the phalanx, represented a genuine community with a great deal of agency (no matter how many residents of Laconia were excluded from Spartan society). The eminent historian Eric Hobsbawm sees the rise of mass politics in modern Europe as instrumental in the invention of official traditions meant to galvanize the people for war. In post-Revolutionary France, Marianne came to embody the Republic itself for which the people fight, and local notables, from the past and present, emerged as symbols in many communities. Hobsbawm notes that French democracy led to a veritable "statuomania" in which

<sup>14</sup> Winter 2017, especially 202–208. <sup>15</sup> Assmann 2011: 45–46. <sup>16</sup> Laqueur 2016: 21–22.

<sup>17</sup> As Ferrario 2014: 232 points out in relation to Brasidas in the 420s. For more on Brasidas and his desire to make himself remembered, see Chapter 4.

countless public monuments were commissioned. All of this “invented tradition” was designed to get the people on board with whatever projects, including wars, the nation was undertaking.<sup>18</sup> In his book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson traces the phenomenon of modern nationalism as a means to convince the people of horizontal comradeship, regardless of how inegalitarian a society really is, in order to persuade millions of people to kill and especially die for their country.<sup>19</sup> Official nationalism is understood by Anderson to be “an anticipatory strategy by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community.”<sup>20</sup> “Imagined communities,” “invented tradition,” and “cultural memory” are related ideas that help us understand why the people and those who seek to maintain influence over the people engage in commemoration, especially of war.<sup>21</sup>

Several scholars of classical antiquity have begun to engage with these types of analyses, and some are applying them specifically to ancient Greece. A new volume edited by Giangulio and colleagues, *Commemorating War and War Dead*, engages with the work of Halbwachs, Assmann, and others, and provides case studies from Greek antiquity and other periods. The book is an invaluable resource for assessing the state of the field of commemoration and memory studies.<sup>22</sup> We will have occasion to assess Roel Konijnendijk’s contribution on Sparta’s use of their fearsome reputation as a weapon of war.<sup>23</sup> On a broader level, readers are directed to Giangulio’s own chapter, which argues that a key part of being social is the ability to draw on group experiences, even ones from very long ago that did not affect the individual directly. He adds that “the past is therefore a social construct resulting from a society’s need for meaning, and from its frames of reference.”<sup>24</sup> In the same volume, Elena Franchi, herself a scholar of Sparta, draws our attention to a study demonstrating that a Vietnamese parent’s traumatic memories of the Vietnam War could be transmitted to their offspring, a sort of “vicarious memory.”<sup>25</sup> She also reflects on commemoration as a means of preserving a military culture and promoting a state’s military reputation abroad – which, I would add, the Spartans most certainly did.<sup>26</sup> In a related volume, Michael Jung

<sup>18</sup> Hobsbawm 2012, especially 267–272. Assmann 2011: 20 might take issue with Hobsbawm’s use of “tradition,” since, in his formulation, memory is a richer concept: “Dead people and memories of dead people cannot be handed down. Remembrance is a matter of emotional ties, cultural shaping, and a conscious reference to the past that over-comes the rupture between life and death. These are the elements that characterize cultural memory and take it far beyond the reaches of tradition.”

<sup>19</sup> Anderson 2016: 7. <sup>20</sup> Anderson 2016: 101.

<sup>21</sup> See also Evans 2019 for an illuminating discussion of public art in democratic societies.

<sup>22</sup> Giangulio et al. 2019. <sup>23</sup> Konijnendijk 2019. <sup>24</sup> Giangulio 2019: 26.

<sup>25</sup> Franchi 2019: 39. <sup>26</sup> Franchi 2019: 50.

applies Pierre Nora's influential idea of *lieux de mémoire*, "places of memory," to the memory of the Persian Wars, especially Marathon and Plataea. Jung's work is important for tracing how war is remembered differently by different societies and in different eras.<sup>27</sup> Vincent Azoulay's work on the Tyrant-Slayers of Athens is an important resource.<sup>28</sup> He helps us understand how collective or cultural memory worked in ancient Greece and how it changed over time. He also explores how the commissioning of and subsequent interaction with physical monuments in addition to literary texts and other commemorative devices shaped and reflected a society's view of past and present. The way was made open for democracy in Athens when the last tyrants, Hipparchus, the son of Pisistratus, and his brother, Hippias, were, respectively, assassinated and thrown out of the city. This was a long and complicated process that entailed more than a few reversals, but most Athenians credited the assassination of Hipparchus with liberation and the subsequent democracy. Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the two men who killed Hipparchus, were revered as the Tyrannicides and honored with the first statue of mortal humans to be erected in the Agora, the heart of Athens. The original statue group was carried off in the Persian invasion of Greece in 480–479, to be replaced by a new commission, which survives only in the form of later copies (most famous in Naples) but which is a reference piece in the history of Greek art nonetheless. Azoulay traces the twists and turns in the remembrance of the Tyrannicides throughout Athenian history, and pays special attention to how the physical monument itself was received and in turn shaped Athenian ideas. Engaging with the theoretical work of Foucault, Azoulay affirms that "a monument does not simply illustrate events, but itself marks an epoch: it is an active symbol, a historical fact in its own right which, far from illustrating some reality that is independent of it, actually 'creates' and makes history."<sup>29</sup>

Turning from Athens, which, as I have already mentioned, received the lion's share of scholarly attention, we will think about how Sparta's monuments and other commemorative materials both reflected Spartan society and helped to create it, especially in the sphere of war. Since I think there is value to understanding this work in the context of the broader phenomenon of cultural memory, I hope we begin to think anew about how we ourselves commemorate war, how our own cultural memory operates, and whether our commemorative ideas make war more or less likely to happen.

<sup>27</sup> Jung 2006. For more on the Persian War context, see also Proietti 2021, who examines the role of memory especially before the account of Herodotus rose to prominence.

See also Nora 1997, whose monumental work explores the centrality of these "sites of memory" to French nationalism.

<sup>28</sup> Azoulay 2017. <sup>29</sup> Azoulay 2017: 6.

### The Spartan Mirage

Athenians wrote a lot, from the history of Thucydides to the comedies and tragedies of Aristophanes and Sophocles, and from the speeches of Demosthenes to the philosophical dialogues of Plato. Literary works that have come to us through the manuscript tradition were by no means the only things Athenians wrote. They also wrote inscriptions on stone. Other Greeks inscribed laws, decrees, and the like in permanent form, but not in the sheer volume the Athenians did. Athenian inscriptions tell us about diplomatic missions, wars, and the bestowing of honors on important benefactors. Inscriptions also illuminate more mundane matters, such as how much different workers were paid while building the Erechtheum on the Acropolis, or who was responsible for taking care of the outrigger on a trireme warship. Athenians built a lot of lasting monuments, too, which both gave archaeologists more material to study and also drew archaeologists to the city in the first place, meaning that excavations have been going on in various parts of Athens for longer and more continuously than most other sites in Greece. Athenian ideas spread around the Mediterranean too, including in the material form of Attic painted pottery that was in demand across the ancient world. A majority of the most famous Athenian vases actually come from Italy, not Athens, a neat demonstration of Athens' cultural reach. Many students of Greek antiquity, and not a few scholars, often equate Athens with Greece itself, so thoroughly does that polis dominate the sources with which most are familiar. War monuments are no exception.

Spartans wrote very little, either in literary form or on stone and other permanent materials. Many other ancient Greeks wrote about Sparta but were not themselves Spartans and in many cases were either openly hostile to Sparta (usually in favor of Athens) or, as some scholars have alleged, overly enthusiastic about singing Sparta's praises. To make matters worse, our fullest accounts of Spartan society come from sources written hundreds of years later and from distant lands. During the Roman Empire, when Sparta had no meaningful power or influence to speak of beyond its borders, the once-great polis was nonetheless the stuff of legend and attracted the curiosity of those wanting to learn about the society that produced the Three Hundred who stood up to Xerxes. Several writers obliged this curiosity, and their works about Sparta were correspondingly popular. Students of ancient Sparta therefore confront a double obstacle: nonexistent or much later sources, and deliberate propagandistic distortions in the sources we do have. These distortions likely originate from the Spartans themselves, eager to trade on and supplement their reputation. In 1933 François Ollier coined the term *Le*

*Mirage spartiate*, the “Spartan Mirage,” to describe the fog through which scholars approach ancient Sparta.<sup>30</sup> Ollier’s phrasing has stuck.

Sparta’s own literary output, at least that which survives in any quantity today, boils down to two 7th-century lyric poets, Alcman and Tyrtaeus. We will consider the latter of these two extensively in the chapters that follow, since he wrote poetry to exhort Spartans to fight in war, and thus touches directly on our topic. Alcman is also an invaluable source given that he tells us about various Spartan rituals and his poems were sung at several Spartan festivals. There were other Spartan writers, but their work only survives as sources referred to by later, non-Spartan authors. Herodotus wrote a lot about Sparta, but while he was from Halicarnassus on the other side of the Aegean Sea, he spent a great deal of time in Athens and produced a decidedly Atheno-centric version of events – at a time, the 430s, when Athens and Sparta were moving headlong towards war with each other. The most famous historian of that war, Thucydides, was himself an Athenian, and though he was exiled by his home polis and harbored some hard feelings towards certain elements of the Athenian democracy, he expresses his frustration at how secretive the Spartans were about themselves (Thuc. 5.68.2). The third great historian of the Classical era, Xenophon, was an Athenian like Thucydides. Also like Thucydides, at some point Xenophon was exiled from Athens. He became a close comrade with the Spartan king Agesilaus, lived on an estate in the Peloponnese, and enrolled his own sons in the Spartan education system. We will explore Xenophon’s philo-Laconism, or pro-Spartan leanings, later.<sup>31</sup> In addition to telling the history of his area from a Spartan, or at least pro-Spartan, perspective, he wrote a flattering biography of Agesilaus and a treatise on Spartan government and society, which are crucial sources for us.

The fullest and most influential sources for Spartan society are the most problematic, primarily because they are so late. The biographer Plutarch, writing mostly in the early 2nd century CE, devotes several works to Classical Spartan leaders, including a biography of the semi-mythical lawgiver Lycurgus. He also compiled a list of Spartan sayings, which have done more than any other source to color the image of Sparta held by subsequent generations. Pausanias was a travel-writer also working in the 2nd century CE, who gives a detailed topographical description of Sparta along with lengthy excursions on Spartan history to explain what he sees. Both of these later sources had access to material now lost to us, but we must be cautious when reading them for Archaic and Classical Sparta, since many of the things they describe might be from the later Hellenistic and Roman periods.

<sup>30</sup> Ollier 1933–1943.    <sup>31</sup> See Chapter 6.

The extreme scholarly positions are represented by Nigel Kennell, who thinks the majority of Sparta's most infamous practices and quirks derive from late sources, and Paul Rahe, who argues that a fixation on the idea of the "Spartan Mirage" has become a mirage itself, causing scholars to discredit perfectly good sources.<sup>32</sup> Sensible middle ground is found in the work of Jean Ducat and Thomas Figueira, who argue that later distortions do affect the literary sources, but those distortions are based on genuine historical facts and ideas present in Archaic and Classical Sparta.<sup>33</sup>

In terms of literary sources, we will proceed with caution, especially as pertains to writers like Plutarch and Pausanias. We will pay special attention to sources that are contemporary or near contemporary with events to which they relate, including Tyrtaeus and epigrams and elegies commissioned by the Spartans to mark their wars. That said, the distortions themselves are a vital source, since how the Spartans wanted to be remembered, what they wished their reputation to be, is of course crucial to understanding their attitudes towards commemoration. Instead of focusing on what the Battle of Thermopylae was "really like," we will consider how it was remembered, and how that remembrance changed from the time immediately following the battle to the time Herodotus wrote about it, and even later as it morphed into legend.

Pausanias likely got a lot wrong in his historical digressions on Sparta. He also misidentified plenty of the monuments he saw, either because he made a mistake himself, or his local guides were drawing on distortions and a misremembered past (which is itself an interesting thing to consider). His account of the landscape and material culture of Sparta and Spartan dedications at other sites such as Olympia and Delphi is invaluable all the same. Panhellenic sanctuaries where the Spartans made their mark, alongside other Greek states vying for recognition, have been thoroughly and continuously excavated since the 19th century, yielding inscriptions, works of art, and other dedications that speak to Spartan commemoration. The site of ancient Sparta itself, where the modern town was founded in 1834 as a deliberate re-foundation of the Classical city, has also been studied by archaeologists for well over a century, and excavation and survey work continue to shed new light on the city's past.<sup>34</sup> Though not as famous as

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Kennell 2018, in which he covers the reception of Sparta in the Roman period and recapitulates much of his earlier work. Rahe 2016: 1–6 provides a concise discussion of the "Spartan Mirage" (which he calls the "Spartan Enigma") and his rationale for accepting most sources.

<sup>33</sup> Ducat 2006a; Figueira 2016.

<sup>34</sup> For an overview of excavations and finds at Sparta, see Waywell 1999–2000; Sanders 2009; and Cavanaugh 2018.

Athens' Acropolis or Agora, Sparta has yielded material finds of immense importance, from monuments and burials, to inscriptions and dedications found in Sparta itself and overseas in places like Samos. We will consider the form of Spartan commemorative monuments but also their location, since most of them were meant to be seen and experienced in specific contexts. We will also include in our analysis the evidence for how and where the Spartan war dead were buried, how and where Spartans made dedications, especially of a military character, and how non-Spartans responded to the materiality of Spartan commemoration.

One element of the Spartan Mirage I should address here is the trend in recent scholarship to downplay Sparta's uniqueness. Because the sources are supposedly so distorted, the things that make Sparta so different from other Greek states, especially the various expressions of Spartan militarism, are perhaps no more than the products of later mythologizing. The leading voice in this revisionist approach to Sparta is Stephen Hodkinson, who has done a great deal to bring Sparta to the forefront of scholarly attention. In a recent chapter, for example, Hodkinson questions whether Sparta was a militaristic society at all and concludes that it was much more typical as a Greek polis than the (especially later) sources imply. For Hodkinson, not only is militarism a modern term anachronistically applied to Greek antiquity, but also reports of Spartans constantly training for war are overblown and Sparta's frequent reluctance to march out to war tells against a militaristic society.<sup>35</sup> Against Hodkinson, I would argue that, just because ancient Greek poleis tended not to separate civic and military life rigidly, it does not follow that one Greek society could not be more militaristic, or focused on warfare, than another. I think Xenophon's comment, written in the 4th century BCE rather than during the Roman period, concerning Spartan professionalism *as compared to other Greeks* is pretty hard to overcome: "Seeing these things [Sparta's sacrificial practices in preparation for battle], you would reckon that others were mere novices in military matters, while the Lacedaemonians alone are in fact craftsmen in the art of war" (Xen. *Lak. Pol.* 13.5).<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Hodkinson 2006. See also Hodkinson 2023 for an illuminating discussion of how Plutarch downplays Sparta's military characteristics in the life of Lycurgus, only in turn to emphasize them in the section comparing Lycurgus with the unwarlike Numa. Hodkinson argues that, in the case of Lycurgus, Plutarch preferred to emphasize political reforms and civil-oriented subjects, and in so doing was reacting against earlier accounts of Sparta from authors such as Xenophon. Hodkinson's arguments here are compelling, but in no way detract from the possibility, or I think probability, that Archaic and Classical Sparta really was a militaristic society in most senses of the term.

<sup>36</sup> ὥστε ὁρῶν ταῦτα ἠγήσαο ἄν τοὺς μὲν ἄλλους αὐτοσχεδιαστὰς εἶναι τῶν στρατιωτικῶν, Λακεδαιμονίους δὲ μόνους τῷ ὄντι τεχνίτας τῶν πολεμικῶν. In a more recent publication,



The sources, often focused as they are on strange or marvelous things and keen to drum up interest in Sparta and their work on Sparta, do distort and overemphasize, which has led some scholars astray in the past.<sup>37</sup> But one of the themes of this book is that, when it comes to commemorating war, the Spartans were at key points and in key ways different than their fellow Greeks.

### **How Spartans Commemorate War: Some General Principles**

In this section, we will go over some basic ideas and practices of the Spartan commemoration of war, especially the war dead. The rest of this book will explore many of these topics in much more detail, especially how commemoration changed over time through the Archaic and Classical periods. Here, however, we need to lay the foundation, recognizing that our sources for much of this material are frequently late and problematic, and that some of these commemorative practices were more prominent in some chronological periods than in others. At the outset, we must keep in mind that ancient Greek ideas of death and memory were far different from many of our ideas. In short, for the Greeks, being remembered was the paramount concern. Although he is dealing primarily with Athens, Nathan Arrington's words on this point are equally relevant for this study: "where the modern memorial may tap into notions of a blessed, peaceful afterlife or make allusions to a Christian theology of sacrifice, the ancient memorial operates in a religious context where few welcomed death. The greatest glory for the dead was not their status in the underworld, only their continued memory among the living."<sup>38</sup>

One of the most famous passages in all Greek literature is the Funeral Oration delivered over the collective tomb of the Athenians who died during the first year of the Peloponnesian War, as portrayed by Thucydides

Hodkinson 2020 allows for a degree of Spartan specialized training in comparison to other poleis, but mostly in the sphere of physical fitness rather than in technical military drills or tactics. "Professional soldiers" is therefore an anachronistic mislabeling of what the Spartans really were. I take Hodkinson's point but maintain that even their higher level of physical fitness, and their more cohesive organization, which Hodkinson also highlights, rendered the Spartan qualitatively different from their fellow Greeks on the battlefield, "professional" or otherwise.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Rahe's 2015, 2016, 2019, 2020 recent four volumes on Sparta are the most forceful expression of Spartan uniqueness. For an example of how new evidence can shed light on the similarities Sparta shared with other Greeks, sometimes surprisingly so, see Christesen 2018, who argues by means of a comprehensive survey of Spartan burials in the archaeological record that the Spartans shared more burial practices with their fellow Peloponnesians than had been known to previous scholars (and implied in the sources).

<sup>38</sup> Arrington 2015: 8.



(Thuc. 2.34–46). To set up the speech, Thucydides outlines the standard Athenian burial customs, the *patrios nomos*, or “ancestral custom.” In typical cases, the remains of the Athenian war dead are brought back to the city to be buried *en masse* in the *dēmosion sēma*, or “public cemetery,” located in the vicinity of the Kerameikos, which was long the site of many prominent burials.<sup>39</sup> Thucydides lists one important exception to mass burial in the city: Because of their exceptional valor, the Athenian dead from the Battle of Marathon in 490 were buried on the battlefield itself – their resting place is still visible today as the *soros*, or mound heaped up over their bodies.<sup>40</sup> This *in situ* burial, a singular honor for the Athenians, was a far more typical practice for other Greeks, including famously the Spartans.<sup>41</sup>

Spartan kings, as Herodotus tells us, were brought back to Sparta if they died abroad, and were afforded lavish funerary rites that would make any Greek envious (Hdt. 6.58).<sup>42</sup> If a king’s body could not be recovered, he was honored by a cenotaph in Sparta, as were certain remarkable Spartans such as the general Brasidas. In addition to prominent tombs, Spartan kings and a select few prominent figures were given statues in their honor, sometimes several statues, which were noted by Pausanias as he walked through the city (Paus. 3.14.1–2). The most famous piece in the Archaeological Museum of Sparta, the so-called “Smiling Hoplite,” might be one of these representations of a Spartan king, perhaps even Leonidas himself, though it was found buried under parts of the later theater and therefore not visible when Pausanias visited the site (Figure 1.2).<sup>43</sup> Typically dated to the 470s, or perhaps a bit later, this slightly larger-than-life sculpture displays the entire head and torso of a hoplite, including parts of his helmet crest (which has now been largely reconstructed) and even pieces of the legs and other body parts that are not included in the current display.<sup>44</sup> First identified as made out of Parian marble, Jacqueline Christien has recently demonstrated that it was carved

<sup>39</sup> Foundational works on this Athenian custom are Clairmont 1983; and Loraux 2006. See the more recent studies by Arrington 2015, especially 19–90 (for the Classical period); and Kuczewicz 2021b, who turns the analysis back to the Archaic period and concludes that much of the *patrios nomos* was already in place in the 6th century.

<sup>40</sup> For the *soros* and its relation to the battle, see Krentz 2011: 111–136; Butera and Sears 2019: 3–18.

<sup>41</sup> The best survey of Greek customs for the burial of the war dead is still Pritchett 1985: 94–259. See more recently Bérard 2020, who stresses the remarkable parallels among Greek burial customs.

<sup>42</sup> Cartledge 1987: 332–337 offers a good discussion of the funerals for Spartan kings.

<sup>43</sup> The fullest discussion of this statue is still the original excavation report from Woodward and Hobling 1924–1925: 253–266.

<sup>44</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Stewart for discussing this sculpture’s possible dating with me.

from stone quarried locally in Laconia.<sup>45</sup> The muscular and powerful soldier looks up and to his left, his head protected by a helmet of remarkable workmanship, its cheek-pieces carved to represent rams' heads. Whoever was represented by this statue – either a king like Leonidas or someone of similar stature, such as the regent Pausanias who won the Battle of Plataea, or even a mythological figure erected to honor the accomplishments of a Spartan leader – enjoyed a monument in Sparta that would hold its own among monuments erected anywhere in Greece.

When regular Spartans died abroad in war, however, they were buried on the spot, usually in a mass grave, or *polyandria*, like the Athenian *soros* at Marathon (though not necessarily as monumental). Such *polyandria* were common in the Greek world, stretching back into the Archaic period and continuing until at least the end of the Classical period in the late 4th century.<sup>46</sup> We will have occasion to discuss several of these burials abroad in the chapters that follow, but here it will suffice to mention an important passage on the subject in Thucydides. In 427, when the people of Plataea pleaded with the Spartans to spare them and their city, the Plataeans adduced in their favor the fact that the tombs of the Spartan dead from the Battle of Plataea in 479 were in their territory, and that they had dutifully attended to and honored these tombs over the past half century. If the Spartans destroy Plataea, they will leave the tombs of their ancestors unattended and in hostile territory (Thuc. 3.58.4–5). The Plataeans' appeal failed – but this rhetoric might not have moved the Spartans much. The dead at Plataea were special, but plenty of Spartan war dead were buried abroad in the lands of their enemies.

Sometimes the names of the Spartan war dead might have been inscribed and displayed at Sparta itself, but it is far from clear whether or to what extent this happened. Herodotus claims to have learned the names of all the Three Hundred who died at Thermopylae, which suggests a monument of some kind, though some scholars argue that such a list of names was present only at a later period and Herodotus must have learned them by some other means.<sup>47</sup> No material evidence for a list of Spartan casualties has been found, a marked contrast with Athenian

<sup>45</sup> Christien 2018: 627–628.

<sup>46</sup> Kucewicz 2021a argues that Spartan battlefield burial developed in the Archaic period as a response to the Spartan hoplites gaining power over the aristocrats, who had initially enjoyed prominent burials in Sparta itself. The evidence for these earlier burials at Sparta, however, is flimsy. For *polyandria* and their relation to other types of burials, see Bérard 2020, who begins with a *polyandria* from Paros dating to the 8th century, and ends with the Theban and Macedonian *polyandria* at Chaeronea from 338.

<sup>47</sup> For the existence or lack thereof of a *stèle* commemorating the Three Hundred, see Low 2011: 3–4.

archaeology, which has uncovered a wealth of epigraphical material for the war dead.<sup>48</sup>

Archaeology has furnished, however, several examples of Spartan funerary monuments with the simple inscription ΕΝ ΠΟΛΕΜΩΙ, or “in war,” accompanying the soldier’s name. These markers of individual war dead are the only such monuments that survive for regular Spartan soldiers and *perioikoi*, and are from a variety of periods and found throughout Laconia, including in the center of Sparta.<sup>49</sup> This material evidence lines up nicely with a passage from Plutarch’s biography of the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus that says the only Spartans who could have their names inscribed on a tombstone were men who died in war and women who died while holding religious office (or in childbirth) (Plut. *Lyc.* 27.3).<sup>50</sup> The Spartans set apart the war dead for special honors because they considered all deaths in battle to be a species of the “beautiful death,” the *belle mort* in the words of modern scholars.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike Athens, which had cemeteries such as the Kerameikos where a number of private burials were located for individuals and families who died in all manner of ways, in Sparta only kings and famous leaders received lavish tombs, while the ordinary war dead (and select women) could have their names added to simple monuments. Another difference from Athens – and most other poleis – is that the Spartans could bury their dead, including their war dead, inside the city and even close to sacred areas, whereas most Greek cemeteries were outside of the city walls to avoid any religious pollution and other taboos relating to death and burial (Plut. *Lyc.* 27). Archaeological evidence confirms the presence of burials in Sparta, usually along major roads where they could be seen regularly.<sup>52</sup> In a culture that privileged memory as much as the ancient Greeks did, it is all the more remarkable that the Spartans limited something as basic as a person’s name on a tombstone to the war dead.

<sup>48</sup> For which, see Pritchard 2022.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of these monuments, including their chronological range and geographic distribution, see Low 2006.

<sup>50</sup> For the clause concerning women, which mentions religious office in the manuscript tradition but has been emended to mean childbirth, see Dillon 2007, who argues against this emendation. For Dillon, Sparta’s exceptional piety and reverence for the gods makes special provisions for women in religious roles especially suitable. Unlike the inscriptions for the male war dead, as Dillon points out, no examples for women dying in childbirth have been found dating certainly to the Archaic or Classical periods.

<sup>51</sup> Used most famously and paradigmatically by Loraux 1977, 2018; and Vernant 1991.

<sup>52</sup> For the types and locations of Spartan burials, see Christesen 2018, who points out that there were also extra-communal (rather than “extra-mural,” since Classical Sparta did not have walls) cemeteries, as recent excavations have revealed.

Whether and how the war dead in Greece were treated posthumously as heroes, that is, given cult honors as demigods or minor divinities along the lines of the heroes from myth, is a major topic in classical scholarship.<sup>53</sup> While shrines to heroes abounded all over the Greek world, in the Archaic and Classical periods it was unusual for the recent dead to be treated as heroes, with a few exceptions such as the founders of colonies and some famous athletes. Sparta, however, seems to have been different. Michael Flower argues that the Spartans were much more likely to recognize their dead as heroes, including those who died very recently.<sup>54</sup> As we considered in the prologue and will consider again in Chapter 4, the Spartan general Brasidas was the recipient of heroic honors abroad, at Amphipolis, and might have been similarly honored in Sparta. The honors he received stand out in Thucydides' *History*, but might have been expected by ambitious Spartans given their city's penchant for heroization.<sup>55</sup> Spartan soldiers and generals, therefore, could have been motivated in part by the posthumous rewards their city offered to the glorious dead, to a greater extent than other poleis.<sup>56</sup>

If the Spartans reserved special privileges for the war dead, they conversely meted out particularly grievous punishments on those who failed to do their military duty. Xenophon, in his *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, details the dishonor suffered by those the Spartans called *hoi tresantes*, "the tremblers." In contrast to other poleis, where the person who displayed cowardice feared only being called a coward, in Sparta he was stripped of most of his rights as a citizen, a condition known as *atimia*. He was left out of social and political activities, could not freely interact with his fellow Spartans in the common dining messes and other central social organizations, and had to bear such a degree of shame that he was forbidden from even looking cheerful. Xenophon does not wonder that so

<sup>53</sup> For an overview of heroization and hero cult, the foundational work is Habicht 1970. See also McCauley 1993; Hägg 1999; Currie 2005; Jones 2010. For the collection of "hero-reliefs" found at Sparta, an important source for the uniqueness of Spartan hero cult, see Hibler 1993.

<sup>54</sup> Flower 2009.

<sup>55</sup> For Brasidas' heroization, see Chapter 4. See also Simonton 2018; Sears 2019a.

<sup>56</sup> For a thorough treatment of hero cult at Sparta, see Pavlides 2011, especially 104–115, who cautions that some developments in this type of cult might be from the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and we should not confuse the great honors paid to the war dead as truly heroic honors. See also Pavlides 2010, which offers a focused discussion on the development of hero cult at Sparta in the Archaic period. Christesen 2010 provides a good argument about the intersection of heroization with political concerns at Sparta. Arrington 2015: 119 argues that, in comparison to the heroization of the Spartan war dead, and the war dead of some other poleis, such as Megara and Thasos (showing that the Spartans might not have been utterly unique), the treatment of the Athenian dead was decidedly unheroic.

many preferred to kill themselves than live in such a condition (Xen. *Lak. Pol.* 9.4–6). Several other sources talk about the fate of the “tremblers,” which seems to be a uniquely Spartan disgrace.<sup>57</sup> On the flipside of the “in war” tombstones, in a society that holds memory of central importance, being remembered as a “trembler” would have stung especially badly.

The Spartans commissioned several major monuments to commemorate their military achievements – we will consider some of these monuments in more detail later. The most prominent of these was the so-called “Persian Stoa,” located in the heart of the city, in the agora. Pausanias (3.11.3) and the Roman architectural writer Vitruvius (1.1.6) each offer a description of this structure, which was supposedly constructed with spoils taken from the Persians in 479.<sup>58</sup> In addition to being the “most prominent building in the agora,” according to Pausanias, the stoa contained images of the Persians the Spartans had vanquished and, in the words of Vitruvius, served as a spur to future Spartans to attain the kind of manhood that provided for the defense of freedom. The Athenians similarly commemorated the Persian Wars in their own agora, particularly in the decoration of the Painted Stoa, which showed the action of the Battle of Marathon and other important engagements. Polly Low comments on the interaction of this triumphalist monument with the other commemorations of the Persian Wars in Sparta, particularly the tombs and statues of their kings and leaders, and the lists of casualties, that were near Sparta’s acropolis, across from the important shrine of Athena Chalkioikos:

If the Persian Stoa exemplified, in the most literal way possible, what Sparta had gained from the encounter, then the Persian War monuments in front of the Athena Chalkioikos sanctuary represented what Sparta had lost in that conflict – the life of one king, the reputation of another, hundreds of Spartan citizens.<sup>59</sup>

Triumph and loss – even if that loss was glorious – were both on display in Sparta’s landscape.

The Spartans are not well known today for their literary accomplishments. The stereotype of the Spartans, especially as fleshed out by Thucydides, is as a people of few words, literally “Laconic.” Yet, Sparta was a poetic and musical society, especially in the Archaic period.<sup>60</sup> In the following chapter, we will take a close look at Spartan poetry and the

<sup>57</sup> Ducat 2006b provides a comprehensive discussion of the “tremblers,” including an analysis of all the literary sources.

<sup>58</sup> Duffy 2016 is an invaluable resource for the monuments commemorating the Persian Wars.

<sup>59</sup> Low 2011: 13. <sup>60</sup> Calame 2018 evocatively calls pre-Classical Sparta a “song culture.”

occasions at which this poetry was performed – overwhelmingly in a military or commemorative context. The verses of Tyrtaeus, a 7th-century poet, were used by the Spartans to inspire soldiers to courage in battle while having hope for a glorious memory afterwards. The poems of Tyrtaeus and others were performed in various religious festivals that themselves were held to remember previous victories and defeats, and the soldiers that fought in them. The Spartans were exceptionally religious, even for the Greeks, and their religion and its accompanying songs and poems had a military character, integral to Sparta's commemorative ideals.

A spectrum of individuals and groups were involved in commemoration at Sparta. Some monuments and rituals, such as the performance of martial poetry at religious festivals and monuments such as the Persian Stoa next to the agora, were done at the state level. Battlefield burials, according to some scholars, were a way for the Spartan hoplites to demonstrate their power and agency. Prior to a supposed “6th-century revolution” in Sparta, a narrow elite had dominated Sparta, and brought their war dead home to be marked with private monuments in the city.<sup>61</sup> If this scheme is correct, Spartan commemoration is the mirror image of that in Athens, where, instead of battlefield burials, the democratic state co-opted the treatment of the war dead from individual families by bringing the dead back to Athens for communal burial just outside the city.<sup>62</sup>

Private individuals, however, continued to play a role in remembering the war dead at Sparta. The “in war” tombstones were all private monuments, and they continued to be set up throughout the Classical and Hellenistic periods. After the Spartan defeat at the Battle of Leuctra in 371, the ephors commanded the women not to make a public outcry in their grief but to bear their loss in silence (*Xen. Hell.* 6.4.16). Though Spartan women are often portrayed as being among the staunchest supporters of their husbands and sons dying in battle (and even in this passage, Xenophon adds that the families of the slain carried themselves cheerfully the day after hearing the news), there is a clear implication here that they often lamented the dead openly and vigorously. This form of private mourning seems to go against stereotypical Spartan behavior, certainly at a state level, which suggests that the interplay between public and private

<sup>61</sup> For this argument concerning the rise of battlefield burial in Sparta, see Kucewicz 2021a. See Nafissi 1991: 253 for the argument that votive offerings reflect this rise in self-assertion of the hoplite “damos” in Sparta over and against the elites in the 6th century.

<sup>62</sup> For Archaic Athenian developments, see Kucewicz 2021b, who argues that state control of the war dead began in the Archaic period and was expanded, rather than initiated, by the democracy. For the Classical period in Athens, see Arrington 2015.

involved a level of nuance and complexity. Finally, prominent military leaders erected their own monuments, especially at such Panhellenic shrines as Olympia and Delphi, taking a cue from Spartan athletic victors. While we consider the Spartan commemoration of war, we must keep in mind the range of commemorative practices and commemorators alike.

These general principles are not without debate in the modern scholarship, nor are the ancient sources, literary and material, always clear about them. Nor were all of these principles equally operative in every historical period and in every circumstance. The aim of this book is to unpack these principles, to see how things changed over time and to spot where the sources might distort things and get things wrong. I also want us to think again about how Spartan commemoration has been received by subsequent generations, including our own, and what the practical effects of that reception are.

Before going further, let us be clear about the main argument of this book, which is threefold: 1. The Spartan idea of the “beautiful death” and its attendant glory even, or especially, in the context of defeat, was fully formed in the Archaic period, well before Thermopylae. 2. By the time of the Peloponnesian War, Spartan commemoration changed markedly and started to embrace the rhetoric of altruism towards and freedom for the Greeks that characterized Athenian and other non-Spartan commemoration since at least Persian Wars. 3. This change in commemorative practice and rhetoric coincided with and even encouraged an increase in the number, duration, and cost of wars in which the Spartans took part. My conclusion, perhaps counterintuitive, is that Sparta fought more wars when it changed from emphasizing the glory of war for the individual and/or the Spartan state, often to the detriment of sound strategy and tactics, to claiming to fight for freedom and in the service of the Greeks. Though this latter form of commemoration is much more in line with our own commemorative sensibilities, and might strike us as somehow “better,” it had the effect of making war more, rather than less, likely – and might still do so today.

### **A Tour of Ancient Sparta**

I do not find it difficult to be inspired by Sparta and its surroundings, nor, do I think, did the ancients who went there. This might surprise some readers. In the main, Thucydides was right about the reactions to Sparta and Athens of visitors to those cities in the future – that is, us. Thucydides says that Sparta’s lack of imposing monuments and its nature as a collection of villages



rather than a nucleated city mean that it would appear to be half as powerful as it really was, whereas Athens' monuments would trick the visitor into thinking that Athens was twice as powerful as the real historical city (Thuc. 1.10.2). Going to Sparta today is certainly a much different experience than walking the bustling, tourist-filled streets of Athens beneath the gleaming white marble edifices of the Acropolis. Modern Sparta is a modest town many orders of magnitude smaller than the metropolis of Athens with its several million people. The archaeology of Sparta is similarly humble, its most impressive monument being a theater that was used in Roman times. Many travelers to the region skip Sparta altogether in favor of the nearby Byzantine city of Mistras, one of the most spectacular sites of the Peloponnese. But for those who take the time to explore and soak in the majesty of the natural surroundings, the city of Leonidas comes to life to evoke its famous past. We will return to the modern impression of Sparta in this book's final chapter.

The Spartans never built anything on the scale or of the opulence of the Parthenon. That said, Sparta's humble stature in relation to the modern Greek nation-state's capital city was not necessarily inevitable. Athens itself was a small village for centuries and was not even the first capital of the liberated modern Greece. That honor went to the town of Nafplio, nestled beneath a gigantic Venetian fortress in the northeastern Peloponnese and still a favorite destination for tourists. Athens as a capital city was the deliberate creation of Western European powers, and its population exploded over the last century to sprawl over nearly the entire Attic plain. Modern Sparta is also largely the creation of the two centuries following the Greek War of Independence, though admittedly starting from even humbler roots. To put it bluntly, there was no modern Sparta in the 19th century. Some early travelers to the area thought Mistras, nearly ten kilometers away, was the site of ancient Sparta, since nothing else presented itself as a candidate. Modern Sparta was founded, or re-founded, in an effort to revive ancient glories for the newly independent Greek state. As Paraskevas Matalas says regarding the modern town's artificiality and the incautious zeal with which it was built, "Sparta . . . is perhaps the only example of a city that was created out of nothing at a site selected because of its ancient ruins, which were subsequently partly destroyed by the construction of the modern city."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Matalas 2017: 49. Matalas's chapter is an excellent discussion of how Sparta and its landscape affected early travelers to the region. See also Macgregor Morris 2009, who remarks that Athens attracted visitors because of its ruins, whereas Sparta did because it was empty.

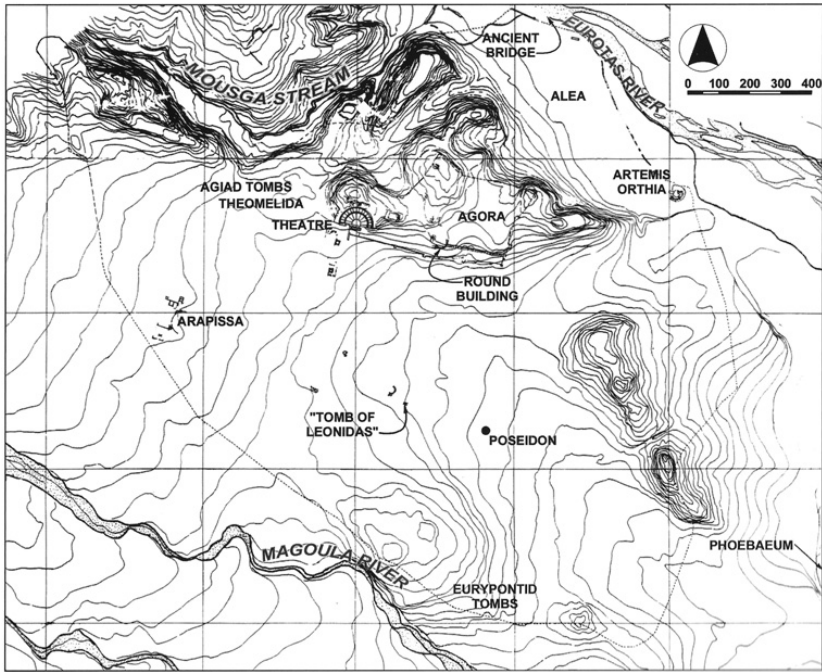


Sparta's ancient prominence is perhaps enough to justify modern projects at the site aimed at generating enthusiasm for the Greek nation-state. There is, however, more than just its reputation keeping Sparta's flame alight. Sparta does contain ample ancient material, despite Matalas's concern with the archaeologically irresponsible development projects of the 19th century. Excavations have laid bare several important monuments and other finds, and a visit to the acropolis, along with other sites in and around Sparta, and its fine museum reward the curious student of history. The acropolis, though but a low hill by Athenian standards, affords a good vantage over the town, from which one cannot help but be impressed with the lush green of the Eurotas valley, especially compared to rocky and arid Attica. The imposing Taygetus mountain range, among the loftiest in Greece, separating Laconia from Messenia dominates the view, providing one explanation for why ancient Sparta did not need to bother with defensive walls – the mountains, along with its warriors, were Sparta's walls. This topographical barrier also forces one to think anew about the brutal accomplishment of Sparta's centuries-long subjugation of the Messenians living on the other side, a subject to which we will return in the next chapter.

Ancient visitors to Sparta were impressed too, none more so than the second-century CE travel writer Pausanias, who provides us with a rich description of Spartan topography and monuments (Paus. 3.II–19). Julia Hell evocatively describes Pausanias' project, undertaken when Rome ruled all that was Greece, as "a lament to the cities of the conquered," and "a kind of commemorative archaeology of Greece."<sup>64</sup> His work is therefore an act of commemoration in and of itself, making it the ideal place to begin our study of Sparta (Map 2).

Since he was writing many centuries after the monuments he describes were supposedly built, we must approach Pausanias' account cautiously and with full consideration given to what scientific archaeological excavation has revealed. It is not enough to do what many travelers and scholars of generations past did, namely walk the town and countryside with Pausanias in hand playing a game of find-the-monument. Not only is it often difficult to square what we see on the ground with Pausanias' text, we need to remember that Pausanias himself could have been wrong with many of his identifications. Some things that he saw are no longer there, and other archaeological treasures, such as the "Smiling Hoplite," were buried by Pausanias' time. Even if we can say with confidence that such-and-such building is the very one Pausanias describes, we must weigh his

<sup>64</sup> Hell 2019: 91–92.



Map 2 Sparta, topography and major landmarks, from Sanders 2009. Reproduced by permission of the British School at Athens.

description against what other evidence we have to gauge whether his account is plausible. With these caveats in mind, let us take a walk through Sparta and try to imagine what a Spartan of the Classical period would have seen and experienced.<sup>65</sup>

In 375, our Spartan arrives in his home territory at the port of Gytheion, forty-five kilometers south of Sparta, at the edge of the Laconian plain. It was here that Helen absconded with Paris, leaving her husband Menelaus, king of Sparta. The road north skirts the eastern slopes of Mount Taygetus, rising to 2,404 meters, or 7,890 feet.<sup>66</sup> Mighty Olympus, far to the north

<sup>65</sup> What follows is inspired by Ober 2005: 17–26, who offers a similar scenario for 4th-century Athens. Sanders 2009 provides a good critical study of Pausanias' routes through the city. Waywell 1999–2000 offers a fulsome yet accessible overview of Sparta's topography, monuments, and excavations. Also see Zavvou and Themis 2009 for a more recent overview of some key archaeological findings at Sparta over the decade of excavations between 1994 and 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Macgregor Morris 2009: 391 remarks on the importance of this landscape to early travelers to Sparta, calling Taygetus itself a monument.

separating Thessaly from Macedonia, is only a few hundred meters higher. On the other side of the plain rises Mount Parnon, no slouch itself at 1,935 meters, or 6,348 feet. The Spartan only grows more confident in his city's power and security, taking in the fertile Laconian plain hemmed in by mountains too high for any enemy to cross easily – not that anyone would dare enter Spartan territory. It was said that no Spartan woman, staying as she would in Sparta all her life, had ever seen the campfires of an enemy (Xen. *Hell.* 6.5.28). The Spartan knows, too, that his compatriots control the Messenian plain on the other side of Taygetus. The precipitous massif is a wall against their enemies, but no barrier to the Spartans. They had thoroughly conquered the Messenians in a series of long and brutal wars many generations ago. Two-fifths of the Peloponnese is effectively Sparta's, while much of the rest generally does Sparta's bidding. The phalanx to which our Spartan belongs makes sure of that.

Before reaching Sparta proper, the Spartan passes the village of Amyklai, part of the Lacedaemonian capital. Here the Spartans observe the ancient cult of the Hyacinthia and have a shrine to Apollo Amyklaios. The sanctuary is filled with dedications, including many spears and other weapons. Those who worship Apollo here expressed themselves as soldiers.<sup>67</sup> Apollo's throne, already nearly two hundred years old when our Spartan makes his way past, was one of the most elaborately decorated pieces in antiquity (Paus. 3.18–19).<sup>68</sup> When they wanted to be, the Archaic Lacedaemonians could be great patrons of the arts. They hired Bathycles of Magnesia to make the throne, a famous artist who fashioned on it scenes from myth, especially great battles and duels between heroes. The Spartan admires not only scenes from the mists of mythical time, but tributes to more recent triumphs too. Nearby are monumental tripods made from spoils taken long ago from the Messenians and, a mere generation before our Spartan's journey, from the Athenians at the Battle of Aegospotami. The hardy stock from which the Spartan sprang continued to produce men capable of bringing down the first Greek state, Athens, with designs on having its own empire.

From this vantage point, our Spartan can look across to the ridge running along the far side of the Eurotas River to catch a glimpse of the Menelaion, a strange ancient building constructed in several steps like a pyramid (Figure 1.1).<sup>69</sup> Here, at a site stretching back to the time of the Trojan War itself, the Spartans worship the hero Menelaus and his wife, Helen, who was

<sup>67</sup> For the military character of this cult, see Pavlides 2011: 58–59; and Chapter 2.

<sup>68</sup> For the architectural remains at the site today, and possible reconstructions, see Bilis and Magnisali 2012.

<sup>69</sup> For this structure, see Tomlinson 1992.



Figure 1.1 The Menelaion outside of Sparta. Author's photo.

brought back to Sparta after the fall of Troy. Our Spartan is among the many who dedicated weapons to the heroes here.<sup>70</sup>

As he enters the city, or what counts as a city for the Spartans, since there are no walls, he passes by numerous hero shrines, including one to the herald Talthybius from Homer's poetry. The reason the Spartans venerate this herald is because they brought about his wrath by throwing Persian heralds into a well when they had come demanding earth and water, that is, submission to the Persian Great King (Hdt. 7.133–134). The Spartans made good their sacrilege of killing the heralds, who are supposed to be inviolable, by appeasing Talthybius with a shrine and worship, and also a hereditary guild called the Talthybiadae. Our Spartan's ancestors, however, never did offer their submission to the Persians, and stood by the sentiment they expressed by murdering the king's messengers. He also sees along the roads scattered tombstones listing individual Spartans who died in war. The beautiful death was so self-evidently good that these glorious dead needed only their name and the inscription "in war" to mark themselves out as good Spartans. They alone (along with either priestesses in office or women who died in childbirth) were given the privilege of having their names written on stone. Our Spartan hopes someday to be similarly honored.

<sup>70</sup> For the military character of the dedications at the Menelaion, see Pavlides 2011: 45.

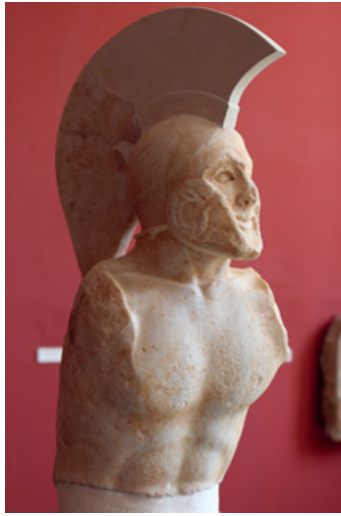


Figure 1.2 The “Smiling Hoplite,” Archaeological Museum of Sparta. Author’s photo. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development.

Passing more tombs of heroes of the distant past and living memory, the Spartan comes to the agora, the center of Sparta. Here he marvels at the Stoa of the Persians, in which the Spartans lavishly display the booty they took from the Persians over a century earlier. The stoa contains images of the Spartans’ enemies, including Mardonius, general of the Persians, and Artemisia, the Greek queen of Halicarnassus and an admiral in Xerxes’ fleet. The Athenians also depicted real figures who fought in the Persian Wars in the Painted Stoa, or Stoa Poikile, in their Agora. The Spartans were at the forefront of Greeks using sculptural and other artistic decorations to depict themselves and their enemies in victory monuments. The pedimental sculptures showing scenes from the Trojan War from the Temple of Aphaia on Aegina are a famous example of this use of sculpture, and might have influenced the Stoa of the Persians in Sparta as well as other sculptures, such as the “Smiling Hoplite” (Figure 1.2).<sup>71</sup> The stoa, its origins, and its images inspire our Spartan to leave a Sparta not lesser

<sup>71</sup> For the date of the Aegina sculptures, which likely came before the “Smiling Hoplite,” and their relationship to the Persian Wars and influence on the Classical style, see Stewart 2008a and 2008b. Dissenting from the majority of earlier opinions, Stewart convincingly argues that the Aegina pediments come after the Persian Wars and were part of that conflict’s commemoration.



than the one his ancestors passed on to their descendants. Walking to the west of the agora, he continues up the slope towards Sparta's acropolis. On the way, he regards the cenotaph of Brasidas, who took the war to the Athenians by liberating cities all along the north Aegean. Brasidas led his men by example, charging against his Athenian enemy boldly (Figure 1.3). He was struck down in the fight but did not perish until he learned of his victory. His remains are in Amphipolis, where he is worshipped as a hero. He also has a treasury building dedicated to him at Delphi, an honor few Spartans before him would have dared to want.

The Spartan next passes the tombs of Leonidas, who gave his life for glory at Thermopylae and whose remains were allegedly repatriated around 440 BCE, and Pausanias, who as regent drove the Persians from Greece once and for all at Plataea (Figure 1.4). Statues of these men, in gleaming marble and shining bronze, inspire emulation. Hard by these tombs is a list of the Three Hundred, those most glorious of all Spartans, to whom every later Spartan must live up. As he makes his way to the sanctuary of Athena Chalkioikos, Athena of the "Bronze House," where the regent Pausanias had been shut in after he became too friendly with the Persians despite his earlier heroism, our Spartan examines monuments to Spartan athletic



Figure 1.3 The "Round Building" on the acropolis of Sparta. Author's photo.



Figure 1.4 The “Leonidaion” or “Tomb of Leonidas” in Sparta. Author’s photo.

victors, advertising the athletes’ renown alongside Sparta’s military champions.<sup>72</sup> Among these monuments is a slender *stele* detailing the prodigious collection of victories amassed by Damonon and his son Enymakratidas throughout their matchless careers on the festival circuit.<sup>73</sup> Seeing Damonon’s enviable distinctions, our Spartan recalls how Brasidas was honored by those he liberated as if he were a victorious athlete. Those who win glory on the racetrack and hippodrome are prone to win glory in war too.

From the acropolis, he can look down on the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, where he dedicated small lead figurine images of hoplites, and where as a boy he partook in competitions to steal cheeses from the goddess’s altar, proving his craftiness, which he would later use against his enemies on the battlefield. He can also see the flat ground where the choruses perform in the Gymnopaidiai festival in remembrance of Spartans’ wars against the Argives, their archrivals in the Peloponnese.

<sup>72</sup> For the connection between military and athletic monuments at Sparta, see Low 2011: 14–15. See also Christesen 2019, who discusses the importance of athletics for Spartan society, especially since the Spartans did not often fight wars and thus turned to athletic honors as a substitute for military ones.

<sup>73</sup> Christesen 2019 is a full account of the Damonon Stele, which is now on display in the Archaeological Museum of Sparta, close to the “Smiling Hoplite.”

He long ago committed to memory the verses of the poets giving instruction on how to fight, and why fighting is the way to win fame.<sup>74</sup>

Everywhere he turns, the Spartan encounters monuments to Sparta's wars, its war leaders, and the cults that inspire military activity and receive military dedications. He has interacted with these commemorative spaces and participated in these commemorative rituals all his life. Sparta's memories of war are ingrained in him, as in every other Spartan living his whole life as if on campaign, on constant war footing. Within a few years, in 371, the Spartan phalanx was defeated decisively by the Thebans at Leuctra. If our Spartan survived that clash of arms, he would have lived to see Laconia itself invaded in the winter of 370–369, the helots liberated, and Messenia torn out of Sparta's grasp. If anything, these traumatic events only caused the Spartans to double-down on their acts of remembrance. To avoid the stigma of being among the "tremblers" after Leuctra, when family members of the survivors hid themselves in shame, our Spartan might have taken his own life. He also might have looked for the next opportunity to throw himself recklessly against an enemy formation to die in a premeditated act of recompense, just as one of his disgraced forebears did when they failed to die with the rest of the Three Hundred at Thermopylae (Hdt. 7.229–232).<sup>75</sup>

In the pages that follow, we will explore how the commemoration of war in which our Spartan was steeped changed over time, differed from the practices of other Greeks, and both reflected and shaped the Spartans' ideas about war. The Spartans, like other ancient Greeks, believed that memory was one of the most important elements of society and culture. How, what, and why they remembered war is therefore fundamental to our understanding of the Spartans, the ancient Greeks, and, I believe, ourselves.

<sup>74</sup> For more on these cults, see Chapter 2.

<sup>75</sup> Luraghi 2008: 209–248 discusses the forming and strengthening of national and ethnic identities after the liberation of Messenia.