This article started life as a talk to the JACT Ancient History INSET day in September 2012. I am grateful to the editor for inviting me to revise it for this journal. My article focuses on topics central to Option 3 Politics and Society of Ancient Sparta, within the OCR Ancient History AS unit, AH1 Greek History from Original Sources. Some of the material on Spartan citizen life may be useful background for Option 2 within the A2 Ancient History unit, AH3 Greek History: Conflict and Culture or for Option 1 within the GCSE Ancient History unit, A031 The Greeks at War.

My article has two aims. My primary aim is to discuss recent approaches to Classical Sparta, concentrating on new insights into her internal society and new understandings of the relevant ancient sources. My other aim (with which I shall start) is to view recent approaches in their broader academic and institutional context: to outline how Spartan historical studies have developed since World War II and why they are currently in an exciting state of ferment. The OCR examiners regularly report that Politics and Society of Ancient Sparta is the most popular option within the AH1 unit. That popularity and enthusiasm are fully matched within the 21st-century academy.

The current state of Spartan studies is nicely summarised in Nigel Kennell’s recent book, Spartans: A New History (2010), which briefly incorporates many of the new approaches into its survey of Spartan history.

In recent years... the traditional view of Sparta has come under increasingly intense scrutiny as historians and archaeologists apply new techniques, perspectives, and even occasionally new pieces of evidence....

As a result, the long-standing consensus over the fundamental nature of Spartan society has begun to crumble. In its place, intense debate has arisen over each and every facet of what we thought we knew about Sparta and the Spartans…. In other words, Sparta is “hot.” But the ferment in Spartan scholarship has a downside. In no other area of ancient Greek history is there a greater gulf between the common conception of Sparta and what specialists believe and dispute (Kennell, 2010, p. 2).

The transformation of Spartan studies since WWII

How has this intense ferment come to develop? The reasons go beyond individual scholarly choices and are rooted in 20th-century political history and in changes to the contemporary academy.

The legacy of Nazi Germany

The first reason is the legacy of Sparta’s role during the Third Reich, when many Nazi leaders and ideologues appropriated Sparta as a charter for their educational, social and military policies, with the support of certain leading German classical scholars (Lossenmann, 2012; Roche, 2012). In the generation after World War II, Sparta’s Nazi associations made her an uncomfortable, even a taboo, subject within Western European scholarship, transforming a previously flourishing field into an academic wasteland. Not until the late 1960s was there a partial revival of interest, primarily in Britain, where short books on Sparta were published by scholars such as A.H.M. Jones (1967) and W.G. Forrest (1968).

Theme park images

Despite this mini-revival, serious research on Sparta remained merely an occasional activity. Until the mid-1980s most books were one-off works by senior academics who briefly turned their attention to Sparta before moving on to pastures new. It is unsurprising that the depictions of Spartan society in such works were often superficial and repeated a standard set of ‘theme park’ images. The quotations
below give a couple of examples:

The famous discipline of the Spartans... is undoubtedly very ancient fundamentally and has close analogies with the customs of many primitive warrior tribes throughout the world (Jones 1967, p. 34).

... both Spartan and Kretan customs were inherited from their common tribal past... all these had been handed down through the generations as have similar institutions among the Masai in Kenya, the Zulus or the Red Indians (Forrest, 1968, p. 53).

Note the warrior imagery, the picture of an unchanging society whose institutions were primitive survivals, and the overall impression of strangeness, reinforced by comparative associations with ‘primitive warrior tribes’.

Seminal influences

There were, however, two exceptional studies in this period which set new historical agendas and exercised a seminal influence on subsequent research. Moses Finley (1968) directly challenged the prevalent ‘theme park’ images, arguing that, far from primitive survivals, Sparta’s classical society was the product of radical change, what he called the ‘sixth-century revolution’, and that it continued to be marked by tensions, conflicts and changes. He also argued that few of Sparta’s institutions were in themselves unique: what was unique was their combination into a common way of life lived by all Spartiates. Geoffrey de St. Croix (1972) undermined the ‘theme park’ images less directly, but equally effectively by providing the first close examination of Spartan policy-making and the formal and informal political relationships, such as patronage, which conditioned it. His account blew apart the overall impression of strangeness, reinforcing by comparative associations with ‘primitive warrior tribes’.

Radical challenges

I have highlighted the legacy of Cartledge’s research because the latest approaches are largely post-Cartledge and frequently critique the orthodoxies he retained. My own work from the mid-1980s onwards fell into that category, highlighting ways in which Sparta was less exceptional than normally believed. My research in the 1980s and 90s argued, for example, that the distinctive developments in Spartan society frequently paralleled similar developments elsewhere in ancient Greece, albeit often taken to their logical extreme (Hodkinson, 1997); and that, despite the public character of the Spartiates’ common way of life, her system of landed property remained a normal Greek system of private ownership and inheritance (Hodkinson, 1986; Hodkinson, 2000, ch. 3). In recent years my research has moved towards more radical perspectives, concluding that Sparta’s public institutions in the classical period were, on the long view, a temporary imposition upon a more enduring privately-oriented, wealth-based society; and that already by the later fifth century Sparta was being transformed back into a plutocratic society, as in the archaic period (2000, ch. 13). In similar vein, I have challenged the standard belief that everyday Spartiate life was primarily geared towards military values, training and war, arguing that Spartan citizens devoted equal attention to their broader civic duties and their private concerns (Hodkinson, 2006).

The other radical challenge to traditional orthodoxies has come from Jean Ducat. Mostly written in his native French, Ducat’s publications have not had the full impact among Anglophone audiences that they deserve, particularly his important monograph Les Hilotes (1990). Rigorously exposing the presuppositions of ancient writers, it disputes many of the supposed certainties of Spartiate-helot relations, arguing that the helots were privately rather than publicly owned, but with a position typically more favourable than the ‘total exploitation’ of chattel slaves elsewhere. Ducat’s Spartan Education (2006a) – fortunately published in English translation – applies the same critical method to Sparta’s public upbringing, emphasising how, far from constituting the boys’ entire education, it ran in parallel with private educational arrangements similar to those in other Greek poleis.

Such revisionist approaches, with their tendency to ‘normalise’ Sparta, have changed the face of Spartan studies; but we should not of course fall into the trap of assuming that ‘new approaches’ automatically mean ‘better approaches’. In his comments quoted above Kennell rightly refers to ‘what specialists believe and dispute’: some specialists still hold fast to older views. The lack of native Spartan sources often precludes certainty: hence the difference between newer and older interpretations is frequently one of competing plausibilities. Positively embracing the creative tension between current divergent views, my recent edited volume, Sparta: Comparative Approaches (Hodkinson, 2009) includes a sustained debate (chs. 11-13) between myself and Mogens Hansen, Director of the Copenhagen Polis Centre, over the merits of recent challenges to the orthodoxy that Sparta was an exceptional polis. These fundamental disagreements between leading scholars make Sparta an especially exciting topic for teaching and provoking student debate.
New research and publishing landscapes

The other factor that has changed the face of Spartan studies is significant changes in the landscape of research and publishing. This new landscape is the product of three main factors. First, as Sparta’s Nazi associations have faded with the passage of time, there has been a global resurgence of international Spartan scholarship, which started in the mid-1980s and has continued to grow exponentially. From a low point of only six books on Spartan history published throughout the entire world in the 1950s, there were around 20 books published in the 1990s and almost 40 in the 2000s.

Much of this resurgence has operated within the traditional model of the lone scholar pursuing his or her individual research. But the second game-changer over the last generation has been the growth of international interchange, especially through meetings of the International Sparta Seminar, co-organised by Anton Powell and myself, which has now produced seven collective volumes, the last six published by The Classical Press of Wales, founded by Powell himself (Powell, 1989; Powell & Hodkinson, 1994; Hodkinson & Powell, 1999; Powell & Hodkinson, 2002; Figueira, 2004; Hodkinson & Powell, 2006; Powell & Hodkinson, 2010). Containing the work of some 47 scholars from thirteen different countries, a notable feature of the volumes is that they make available to Anglophone audiences the translated work of major foreign academics who otherwise publish only in their own languages.

The third and most recent factor has been a more formal collaboration, a project on ‘Sparta in Comparative Perspective, Ancient to Modern’, funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council. The project combines the study of ancient Sparta in comparative historical perspective with study of how Western thought has appropriated Sparta as a comparative model for modern social and political systems (Hodkinson, 2009; Hodkinson & Macgregor Morris, 2012). Run by my team at the University of Nottingham, the project operates as part of the University’s Centre for Spartan and Peloponnesian Studies (www.nottingham.ac.uk/espss), alongside colleagues and doctoral students working on Spartan and Lakonian archaeology.

In sum, within the last generation Spartan studies have been transformed from an occasional activity by a handful of mainly British scholars to a global enterprise marked by coordinated international collaborations, its own specialist publisher, and a dedicated research centre and project. This transformation and the consequent intensive sharing of ideas between scholars from around the world have directly contributed to the current ferment in Spartan historical research.

Politics and Society of Ancient Sparta: new approaches

So what are the most relevant new approaches to the OCR AS Politics and Society of Ancient Sparta option? I shall structure my comments around four of the six bullet points in the specification, in the following order:

- Views of Sparta from other states (Athens)
- The Spartan mirage and the myth of Lycurgus
- The social structure of Sparta: Spartiates, perioikoi and helots
- Education and values in Sparta; the roles of men and women

I shall also partly build my discussion around Dr Maria Pretzler’s admirable and essential JACT Teachers’ Notes (Pretzler, 2008). So as not to duplicate her excellent discussions, I shall focus mainly on points where I have something to add or disagree with, or where work has moved on since 2008: five years is nowadays a long time in Spartan studies!

Views of Sparta from other states (Athens)

I start with external views of Sparta because, in the near-absence of internal Spartan sources, these views, mostly Athenian or Athenian-influenced, form our sole contemporary literary evidence. We also need to understand the so-called ‘Spartan mirage’ in order to know how best to approach this evidence.

Pretzler (2008, pp. 39-42) rightly draws attention to the fact that, though the concept of the Spartan mirage was first coined in 1933 in François Ollier’s Le Mirage Spartiate, not until the 1990s did scholars begin to take proper account of its radical implications for the status of our evidence. Pretzler also neatly outlines the two opposing strands of Athenian thinking: the pro-Spartan view of certain sections of the Athenian elite disgruntled by democracy’s erosion of their political power; and hostile portrayals stemming from Athenian democratic ideology and from her rivalry with the polis that had replaced Persia as enemy no. 1: what Ellen Millender (1999) has called ‘the barbarization of Sparta’.

However, what most scholars have missed is the imbalance between the pro- and the anti-Spartan viewpoints in our surviving sources. It is commonly assumed that we have a roughly even balance of pro- and anti-Spartan accounts; or that any imbalance errs in favour of the pro-Spartan sources. This misimpression was encouraged by the sub-title of Ollier’s book (Étude sur l’idéalisation de Sparte dans l’antiquité grecque) and is reinforced by Paul Cartledge’s summary – cited by Pretzler (2008, pp. 39-40) – of the ‘three crucial components of the myth as we find it in our ancient texts’ all of which are idealised stereotypes.

In reality, I have argued (Hodkinson, 2005, pp. 222-5), among the surviving sources there is no substantial account which indulges in unalloyed idealisation of Sparta. First, the works of the most clear-cut laconisers, such as Kritias, leader of the Thirty Tyrants, survive only in fragments. Secondly, the works of fourth-century writers like Xenophon and Plato, whom scholars often classify as pro-Spartan, are actually equivocal in their approach. For all his positive evaluations of certain Spartan characteristics, Plato is critical of many other aspects: as also is Aristotle. As for Xenophon (whose Constitution of the Spartans is one of the unit’s prescribed sources), his supposed idealisation of Sparta, already questioned in certain earlier scholarship, has come under renewed challenge from scholars who highlight respects in which, whilst broadly sympathetic to Sparta, he also...
presents significant implicit criticisms (Humble, 1999). These challenges are part of a wider rehabilitation of Xenophon as an intelligent and subtle writer whose apparently straightforward statements often have more complex meanings (Tuplin, 2004; Harman 2009). Certainly, in surviving writings from the late fifth century, with the partial exception of Aristophanes, negative portrayals of Sparta outweigh the positive, particularly in Thucydides and the plays of Euripides (Millender, 2002; and the essays by Poole, Harvey and Bradford in Powell & Hodkinson, 1994). Awareness of the unbalanced survival of these external views is crucial in assessing the evidence for certain alleged characteristics of Spartan society, such as its militarism, the license of its women, or its oppression of the helots.

However, one point of a more positive nature can be made. Discussing the challenge of the stereotypes inherent in the Spartan mirage, Pretzler comments that,

> Because of the prevalence of these ideas about Sparta it is probably impossible for us to find out ‘what life was really like’ in classical Sparta. Were the rules really ever as rigid as the sources suggest?

The good news, in my view, is that this judgement is over-pessimistic and that recent more sceptical approaches to the ancient sources are producing genuinely positive insights. Once again, I would single out the work of Jean Ducat, which is noted for its rigorous dissection of the sources and its precision in elucidating exactly what each writer says or doesn’t say, along with his underlying assumptions. This is not stuff to put before beginning students, but what emerges is some genuinely richer understandings. One example is his article (Ducat, 2006b) on the Spartans’ treatment of cowards – relevant to two key passages from the unit’s prescribed sources (Herodotus 7.229-32: on Aristodemus and Pantites, who missed the battle of Thermopylae; and Xenophon, Constitution of the Spartans ch. 9). Ducat’s close examination shows that, contrary to what Xenophon implies, the Spartans did not have a uniform policy of ostracizing or demoting all cowards, but followed a more pragmatic policy of adjusting – and sometimes even waiving – the punishments case by case in the light of the wider consequences for the polis. In this instance it is clear that the rules were certainly not as rigid as some sources suggest.

### The social structure of Sparta: the perioikoi

Of the three main groups in Spartan society, the perioikoi, the free but non-Spartiate populations who inhabited dozens of communities scattered around the large territory of Lakonia and Messenia, are the least well attested in the literary sources. This is a major gap in our knowledge, since the perioikoi were the essential underpinning of the Spartan state, contributing a half, and increasingly more, of the troops in the Lakedaimonian army. They are also hard to distinguish archaeologically, since they largely shared a common material culture with the Spartiates. We probably won’t make any major progress into a better understanding of their everyday life without excavations at a number of perioikic sites or archaeological surveys of several perioikic regions. The first excavation of a perioikic town is currently underway through the University of Amsterdam’s work at Geraki (ancient Geronthrai); but only preliminary reports are currently available.

There has, however, been considerable progress in understanding the positive aspects of their general position within the Spartan state. The international research project of the Copenhagen Polis Centre has shown that, in ancient Greek thinking, autonomy was not a pre-requisite for polis status. Consequently, the dependent but internally self-governing perioikic communities are standardly called poleis by our classical sources: hence the sub-title of Graham Shipley’s article (1997), documenting the known textual and archaeological evidence for ‘the dependent perioikic poleis of Lakonia and Messenia’. More importantly, recent research has drawn out the beneficial implications of the Spartiates and the perioikoi’s shared status as ‘Lakedaimonians’: namely, an authentic closeness of identity stemming from their consciousness of forming a single ethnic group and sharing a common culture; or, to put it another way, an association of mutual benefit into which the perioikoi – or at least their well-to-do classes – were well integrated as the Spartiates’ “circle of first friends” (Ducat, 2010, p. 203).

### The social structure of Sparta: the helots

Of Sparta’s subaltern populations, however, it’s the helots as usual who have formed the subject of most recent research, including the first dedicated conference volume on the subject (Luraghi & Alcock, p. 2003). The important long-standing controversial debates – about the origins of helotage, the conquest of Messenia, the nature of helot communities, the extent of the helot threat – are well outlined by Pretzler (2008, pp. 14-17).

One issue on which recent work has advocated a change of view is the helots’ status. Pretzler states straightforwardly that ‘Helots were officially owned by the state’. However, as Ducat (1990, pp. 19-29) and myself (2000, pp. 113-16) have pointed out, the classical sources typically present the helots as privately owned, though subject to a large degree of communal sharing and intervention. (Xenophon’s Constitution of the Spartans 6.3 is a key text here.) The fact that the Spartiates as a community often treated the helots in collective terms – for example, in the ephors’ annual declaration of war or in mass liberations of helots (a phenomenon also attested in poleis with chattel slaves) – does not mean that individual helots were the collective property of the state.

Scholars have long disagreed about how serious a threat the helots posed to the Spartiates and (not quite the same thing) to what extent the Spartiates perceived them as a threat. As already indicated, one well-established view sees helotage as an exceptional and fragile form of domination whose maintenance forced the Spartiates to transform their own citizen society into a state-controlled and militarised system. But how exceptional was Sparta’s domination over the helots? In recent years several scholars have examined this question through the lens of comparative history, reaching a consensus that helotage was not that exceptional.
Several archaeological projects have been instrumental in understanding the social and economic structure of Classical Sparta. The Laconia Survey, for example, discovered 46 classical sites within the 70 km² of area surveyed, and the Pylotes Regional Archaeological Project, which surveyed the most distant area of western Messenia, some 70 km from Sparta (Alcock et al., 2005, esp. pp. 163-9). The most dramatic finding is the vastly different settlement patterns in these two helot regions. The Laconia Survey discovered 87 late archaic and 46 classical sites within the 70 km² of its survey area compared with a mere five definite archaic and four definite classical sites in the 40 km² surveyed by the Pylotes team. Most of the Laconia Survey sites were correspondingly small, with a detectable sherd scatter of only 0.01 - 0.14 hectares, probably single farmsteads. In contrast, the principal settlement in the Pylotes region had a sherd scatter of around some 20 hectares, apparently a sizeable village with a population into four figures. The significant differences between helot habitation in the two regions probably reflects the contrast between a nearby farming area over which Spartiate masters could exercise close supervision (the sharp reduction in the number of sites from 87 late archaic to 46 classical implies a large degree of Spartiate intervention) and a distant area where direct Spartiate supervision was intermittent and the helots had more scope to organise their own farming and residence in concentrated settlements.

What implications does this archaeological evidence have for long-standing historical debates? It shows that Sparta’s exploitation of the helots was not uniform, thereby further undermining attempts to draw simple deductions from the nature of helotage to the kind of self-organisation that might breed a constant threat of revolt. However, the possibility that such helot self-organisation extended beyond specific local areas to co-ordination at a wider regional level – thereby facilitating helots in different parts of Messenia to unite in revolt – has been somewhat undermined by recent research on the development of Messenian identity. Nino Luraghi’s book The Ancient Messenians has demonstrated that such a common identity becomes evident inside Messenia itself only during the revolt of the late 460s, probably because the rebels included the two perioikic poleis of Thuria and Aithaia (2008, esp. pp. 182-208). The revolt’s significance for the evolution of Messenian identity is also highlighted by Thomas Figueira (2006); but his article shows that, despite Athenian support for the rebels’ noisy proclamation of their Messenian identity following their settlement at Naupaktos, Athenian writers never took the further step of applying that identity to the helots left behind in the western half of Spartan territory. It is symptomatic that the sources for the eventual liberation of those helots by Epaminondas in 370 / 369 portray it as ‘essentially a strike from without, supported by only the slightest local contribution’ (Figueira, 1999, pp. 219) and focus largely on the returning exiles to the exclusion of the in situ helot population. These new perspectives again lend no support to the idea that there was a sufficiently coordinated and sustained helot threat to compel the Spartiates to regiment or militarise their own society.

The social structure of Sparta: the Spartiates

As the preceding discussion implies, another area in which recent approaches have transformed older understandings concerns the Spartiates themselves. Pretzler’s discussion (2008, pp. 10-13) neatly incorporates many of these new interpretations of the character of Spartiate society – so much so that it would be easy not to appreciate what a radically different picture of Sparta they present compared with views common a generation ago. For example, on the subject of landownership, Pretzler swiftly dismisses Plutarch’s claim (in Lycurgus ch. 8 – one of the OCR prescribed texts) that the land was divided into equal kleistoi, rightly stating that landholding was always unequal. This has certainly become the majority specialist view, following my article on ‘Land tenure and inheritance in classical Sparta’ (Hodkinson, 1986; revised as 2000, ch. 3); but, since some general textbooks on Greek history still accept Plutarch’s account of the equal distribution of Spartiate landholdings, it is important to understand why his evidence is nowadays disbelieved. Buckley (2010, pp. 72-7) provides an excellent brief exposition of both older and newer views, along with the key sources.

Most of the evidence for Spartan unequal landownership and wealth more generally comes from literary texts. However, there is one major piece of epigraphic evidence (our longest extant classical Spartan inscription) dating to shortly before or after the Peloponnesian War: a stèle dedicated on the Spartan acropolis as a thank-
offering to the goddess Athena (Figure 1). The stèle is crowned by a shallow relief depicting a four-horse chariot in motion. In the text a certain Damonon lists an impressive series of chariot-race, horse-race and athletic victories won by himself and his son at a range of religious festivals around Spartan territory. (For a full translation and discussion, Hodkinson, 2000, pp. 303-7.) At several points Damonon boasts that his victories in the four-horse chariot race were won ‘with colts bred from his own mares and his own stallion’. Such competitive horse breeding must have required large tracts of private land for grazing and for growing high-protein fodder crops to feed such ‘teams of ravenous horses’ (Isokrates 6.55). Damonon’s expenditures on chariot racing were not exceptional. Wealthy Spartiates won the four-horse chariot race at seven of the eight Olympic Games between 448 and 420 BC. To celebrate their victories they commissioned expensive bronze personal statues made by leading foreign sculptors – in fourth-century Athens a life-size bronze statue cost some 3,000 drachmas, or half a talent – which they dedicated in the sanctuary at Olympia (Hodkinson, 2000, pp. 319-23). These statues were still visible over 500 years later, when they were described by Pausanias the Traveller (6.1.7-2.1).

This evidence of wealthy Spartiates vaunting their private successes through costly and highly visible expenditures is a far cry from the austere Spartan lifestyle painted by Xenophon’s Constitution and Plutarch’s Lycurgus and accepted until recently by modern scholarship. It is true that Spartan citizens were restricted from expending their wealth on many aspects of everyday life: for example, on exotic foodstuffs, foreign wines, or luxurious items of dress. Nevertheless, Pretzler (2008, p. 11) rightly comments that,

the Spartan way of life offered all crucial aspects of a Greek lifestyle: landed property, leisure (no need to work for a living); a life dedicated to leisure pursuits, namely socializing, politics, exercise and hunting; and active contribution to the city’s defence.

The stark contrast between traditional views of the regimented nature of Spartiate life and Pretzler’s portrayal of a Spartiate lifestyle ‘dedicated to leisure pursuits’ is startling. The newer view stems partly from a shift in scholarly focus away from the normative account in Xenophon’s Constitution towards the very different account in his Hellenika, especially regarding two historical episodes – sadly, neither of them among the OCR prescribed sources: the conspiracy of Kinadon c. 398 BC (Hellenika 3.3.4-11) and the episode of Sphodrias in 378 BC (5.4.20-34; discussed in Hodkinson, 2007). In the first episode Xenophon portrays the conspiracy’s leader, Kinadon, taking a potential recruit on a tour of Sparta and its environs. In the agora they found the king, ephors, members of the gerousia and about 40 other Spartiates, outnumbered by over 4,000 non-Spartiates. Walking around the streets, they came across Spartiates in ones and twos, amongst a number of non-citizens. Finally, on each of the Spartiates’ country estates they observed a single master amidst a mass of other persons (presumably, helot labourers). In the episode of Sphodrias Xenophon describes King Agesilaos going shortly after dawn to the River Eurotas (presumably, for his morning bath), where he was engaged in personal conversation by other Spartiates, foreigners and servants. He also depicts Agesilaos’ son Archidamos paying frequent daily visits to his beloved, the youth Kleonymos. In both episodes Xenophon portrays Spartan citizens going about their everyday lives in an independent manner, pursuing their private affairs according to their personal daily schedules – as in any other polis. Far from the state-centred, collective Spartiate lifestyle portrayed by Plutarch (Lycurgus 25), Xenophon’s evidence suggests that the Spartan polis did not attempt to micro-manage its citizens’ daily lives.

One particular aspect of citizen life that Sparta abstained from was its training for war. Traditionally, modern accounts have depicted Spartiate life as primarily devoted to military training. The ground for a different approach was laid by Hans van Wees’ revisionist book, Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities (2004, pp. 89-93), which argued that the military training of all Greek hoplite armies before the fourth century was rudimentary and unspecialised, focused only on general fitness through athletics and the gymnasium.

Van Wees saw Sparta as a partial (but only a partial) exception. My article, ‘Was classical Sparta a military society?’ (Hodkinson, 2006, pp. 133-41), has developed this view further, arguing that in Sparta too training for warfare was conducted primarily through standard Greek leisure pursuits. Xenophon’s only explicit reference to military training for adult Spartiates relates to participation in hunting, ‘so that they, no less than the young men, should be able to stand the strain of campaigning’ (Constitution 4.7). In no source is there any evidence for dedicated weapons practice or combat training. The only implied hint of specialised military training comes in Xenophon’s description (Constitution...
11) of the various drill manoeuvres of which the Lakedaimonian army was capable. Whether these manoeuvres required significant amounts of training, however, is open to doubt. They had to be performed not just by the Spartiates themselves but also by the perioikoi, who were equally integral to the Lakedaimonian phalanx. Since most perioikoi were working farmers scattered around Sparta’s large territory, their opportunities to congregate for peace-time training must have been limited. Indeed, Xenophon himself implies that the drills could be learned with minimal training, describing them as ‘so easy to understand that anyone who can recognise another man cannot go wrong…. There is nothing remotely difficult to learn in this’ (11.6). As intimated above, my argument on this point is part of a broader view that, despite Sparta’s effectiveness in war, martial organisation and values did not dominate over other aspects of private or citizen life.

Education and values in Sparta

The trend of recent research to ‘normalise’ Sparta, to argue that its distinctive characteristics represented variants of wider Greek practices, has also been applied to the upbringing of Spartan boys. (The standard term agonê used in modern discussions is inaccurate: it was never applied to the Spartan upbringing in classical times.) Sparta operated the only compulsory public system of boys’ education in any Greek polis. However, Nigel Kennell (1995, ch. 6) and especially Jean Ducat (2006, chs. 4-5) have argued that this public system, on which Xenophon’s Constitution (chs. 2-4) and other classical writers focus all their attention, formed only part of a Spartan’s education, focused on physical activities.’ Alongside it, in the pre-teenage years, stood what Ducat calls ‘the hidden face of Spartan education’, on which only Plutarch (Lycurgus 19-21) has anything to say: a normal Greek paideia involving training in ‘the 3Rs’ (grammata: recent studies suggest that Spartiates were more literate than previously supposed), oral expression and mousikê, probably taught by teachers privately paid by Spartiate families. Spartan education was hence not simply a public matter, but the product of both public and private structures, which worked in parallel.

I have argued that a similar ‘public-private partnership’ applied to the common messes, the syssitia (Hodkinson, 2009, pp. 447-8). The syssitia were a compulsory public institution, to which all citizens had to contribute a fixed monthly quantity of foodstuffs, on pain of loss of citizenship. Yet each individual syssis was largely a self-regulating entity whose detailed operation lay outside the direct control of state officials. The election of new members lay in the hands of its existing messmates. Its conversations were secret, immune from outside scrutiny: on entering, members were reminded, ‘Not a word goes out through these [doors]’ (Plutarch, Lycurgus 12). Individual messmates could voluntarily donate additional foodstuffs from the hunt or their private estates (Xenophon, Constitution 5). Moreover, each messmate’s continuing participation rested on his private economic capacity to provide the required food contributions.

The self-regulating character of the messes also produced a degree of self-regulation in the organisation of the army, since the messmates in each syssis also fought together in the smallest army unit, the enômaia. Consequently, the recruitment of young Spartiates to particular army units was determined, not in top-down fashion by the polis or its generals, but by the rank-and-file members of the phalanx, as the members of each syssis elected these young men as fellow messmates.

Family life and the roles of men and women

The limits to the state’s control over its public institutions have prompted scholars to question how much control it exercised over its citizens’ private lives. Pretzler (2008, p. 22) is probably right to claim that ‘state interference in what we would call a “private” sphere was more pronounced than in other Greek poleis’; but Ducat (2006, pp. 124-5) and myself (2009, pp. 450-1) have both argued that Spartan ideology and practice accepted the legitimate existence of a private household sphere outside state control. The clearest evidence is provided by Dionysios of Halikarnassos (20, excerpt 13.2). Contrasting Spartan practice with the intrusive scrutiny of private behaviour undertaken by the Roman censors, he states that the Spartans, permitted their oldest men to beat with their canes those citizens who were disorderly in any public place whatever; but as for what took place inside their homes, they neither worried about it nor kept watch over it, holding that each man’s house door marked the boundary within which he was free to live as he pleased.

Dionysios is a late source, from the first century BC; but the existence of a domestic domain exempt from official control is already mentioned by classical writers. The citizens in Plato’s timocratic polis, modelled on Sparta, ‘entrench themselves within the walls of their homes’, where ‘they can spend lavishly on their wives and anything else they choose’ (Republic VIII, 548a).

This does not mean that all family matters were inviolate. For example, state interference was far stronger in the marital arrangements of men than of women. First, men were limited to one legal female partner at a time – the case of Anaxandridas and his two wives (Herodotus 5.39-40) is the exception that proves the rule – whereas a woman could legally have two partners through a wife-sharing/man-doubling arrangement (Xenophon, Constitution 1.8-9) or multiple husbands through a polyandrous marriage (Polybius 12.6h.8). Secondly, as Pretzler (2008, pp. 27-8) correctly notes, the legal obligation to marry and have children applied only to Spartan men: in Xenophon’s Constitution 9.5, the coward must pay a fine for being unable to marry, whereas his unmarried womenfolk suffer only social disadvantage.

In general, I have argued, Spartan families were less constrained by state regulation in making marital arrangements for their womenfolk than were families at Athens or at Gortyn on Crete, the only other poleis for which we possess detailed evidence (Hodkinson,
Take the marriage of heiresses. At Athens and Gortyn, when a man died without sons, his nearest kinsman had the right to marry his surviving daughter, regardless of any arrangements her father had made – unless she was married and already had a son (at Athens) or child of either sex (at Gortyn). In both poleis there were also compulsory rules defining the order of precedence of different eligible kinsmen. In Sparta the deceased father's pre-arrangements had greater force. An heiress already married (whether she had children or not) or even merely betrothed by her father retained her existing or intended spouse (Herodotus 6.57.4; Aristotle, Politics II, 1270a26-29).

Only in the case of an unbetrothed heiress did the father's nearest kinsman have the right to marry her; and if he did not wish to do so, there was no compulsory order of precedence of eligible kinsmen: she could be married to any citizen. In short, Athens and Gortyn intervened to ensure that families married any heiresses within the kin group; Sparta left this up to families themselves.

This flexibility in female marital arrangements was important because women were major owners of property, controlling nearly two-fifths of the land, according to Aristotle (Politics II, 1270a23-5). The precise legal means through which women acquired such a high proportion is debated. Aristotle ascribes it to a combination of inheritances acquired by heiresses (girls without brothers) and large landed dowries (given to girls with brothers). His statement is followed strictly by Pretzler (2008, p. 27), who restricts female inheritance proper to brother-less girls. However, I have argued (1986, pp. 398-404; 2000, pp. 98-103) that the dowries mentioned by Aristotle – who uses Athenian terminology and partly misunderstands the Spartan situation – were not merely voluntary parental gifts to a daughter on marriage, but a pre-mortem anticipation of the daughter's rightful inheritance. According to my thesis, in families with children of both sexes each girl legally inherited half the portion inherited by each boy, as is firmly attested at Gortyn. (For example, in a family with two boys and two girls, each boy inherited one-third of the property, each girl one-sixth.) I have described this system as 'universal female inheritance', since all women gained some inheritance, either as full heiresses or through sharing the property with their brothers. It can be shown mathematically that, across different demographic parameters, such a system invariably produces female landownership at nearly 40%, precisely as Aristotle indicates.

The recent debate arising from Spartiate women's considerable property rights is whether it led to an exceptional degree of female empowerment. Sarah Pomeroy's Spartan Women (2002), offers an extremely optimistic view, portraying female Spartiates as liberated, vocal and articulate, not only exercising freedom of sexual expression and control over their reproductive capacities, but also enforcing societal norms, wielding the power of life and death over their adult sons and even controlling the testing of male babies. Some of this has been accepted by other scholars. Thomas Figueira (2010) has shown that there was some genuinely significant female policing of masculine behaviour. Pomeroy's book, however, has been panned by reviewers for its inadequate source criticism, its anachronistic images of modern liberated, youthful girl-power, and its omission of the roles of older women, especially widows. In contrast to Pomeroy's views stand several mutually complementary alternative approaches. One is the source-contextualised research of Ellen Millender (1999), which shows how fifth-century Athenian writers constructed an image of Sparta as an upside-down world whose licentious women dominated over their effeminate men. Another approach is my own work (Hodkinson, 2004), which argues that, although property and inheritance rights gave some wealthy Spartiate women considerable importance, they also brought constraints for many women, making them valuable commodities whose marriages were deployed for forging dynastic alliances or concentrating family property. A third approach views Spartiate women's unusual comportment and extra-household activities in the context of their expected roles within the ideology of the Spartan polis. This approach is the enduring strength of Paul Cartledge's classic article, 'Spartan wives; liberation or license?' (1981 / 2001 / 2002) and has been further developed in Figueira's sophisticated recent study. As Figueira himself concludes, 'Spartan women were not sexually liberated per se, but culturally conditioned to make certain choices that substantively affected men as well as themselves' (2010, p. 283).

The ambiguous position of prominent Spartiate women is illustrated by one exceptional example: Kyniska, sister (not wife, as Pretzler states) of King Agesilaos II. Kyniska was the first-ever female Olympic chariot-race victor, winning two victories in 396 and 392 BC. (Like other Spartiate Olympic victors, she owned the chariot team, but did not drive the chariot.) She celebrated her successes with a costly and magnificent monument containing seven bronze figures sculpted by Apelles of Megara (Pausanias 6.1.6). Part of its marble base survives in the Olympia Museum and bears a boastful victory epigram which became celebrated in ancient anthologies (Inscriptiones Graecae V.1.1564a; Palatine Anthology 13.16):

Kings of Sparta are my father and brothers. Kyniska, conquering with a chariot of quick-footed horses, set up this statue. And I declare myself the only woman in all Hellas to have gained this crown.

Through use of her wealth Kyniska gained personal panhellenic fame and even received a hero-shrine in Sparta; but she introduces herself through her male relatives. Indeed, Xenophon (Agesilaos 9.6) claims that she bred her teams of chariot horses only at the behest of her brother Agesilaos, who wanted to discredit the successes of male chariot victors as an unmanly achievement dependent solely on wealth. Thus Kyniska's unparalleled female success and prominence both advanced the interests of her male kin and polished the unmasculine behaviour of other Spartiate citizens – a final symbol of the complex character of Spartan society revealed by recent approaches.
Postscript

The length of the reference list below is a sign that, while new academic approaches have developed apace over the last generation, there currently exists no complete synthesis – the nearest is Kennell 2010 – aimed at a broader extra-academic audience. This gap will soon be partly filled by the forthcoming Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Sparta, edited by Anton Powell, projected for publication in late 2013 or early 2014. Besides Spartan antiquity, the Companion will also cover ‘Spartan modernity’: the roles played by Sparta in modern politics and culture. For the latest approaches to this subject, see Sparta in Modern Thought (Hodkinson & Maegregor Morris, 2012), whose contents range from medieval political tracts, via the French Revolution, Nazi Germany and the CIA, to 1990s popular fiction and YouTube. But that is another, very different story!

Stephen Hodkinson is Professor of Ancient History and Director of the Centre for Spartan and Peloponnesian Studies at the University of Nottingham. He has been made an Honorary Citizen of modern Sparta for his contributions to Spartan history.

References


