

*Eleutheria's Double-Edged Sword:*  
Freedom at a Cost

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In a time of empires, Laconia's Sparta forged its name in sovereignty through resilience. Though small in population, the feats carried out by the Spartans boasted the success of both their political and social systems, much to the surprise of contesting empires. Dissimilar to other powers, Sparta held liberty and independence via freedom to function as a core belief and way of life, understood as *eleutheria*. Derived from the Greek *eleutheros* meaning "free," *eleutheria* expresses personal and political independence and freedom. Spartan military training, education, social life, and politics upheld the concept of *eleutheria* in society through reverent respect for its people. Spartan culture boasted of loyalty to family and state, and through this discipline and persistence, Spartans were united and built a reputation well feared by surrounding empires. Though seemingly hypocritical in the employment of helots as slave labor and oligarchy as a form of government, Spartans prided themselves on devoting their whole lives to the state rather than individual interests. The concept of Spartan *eleutheria* bolstered collectivism under the city-state at the cost of the freedoms of its citizens and inhabitants, as seen in all spheres of Spartan society and culture.

When addressing the freedoms of the individual within a city-state, one must first address what rule the individuals of the state operate under. In Sparta, Oligarchy reigned supreme, "the anonymous but extremely powerful Gerousia of 28 elders...the dual kingship and ephors allowed a certain freedom of choice to Spartan politics."<sup>1</sup> The elders and kings held most power in Sparta, and alongside them were the ephors, elected by the people, who held powers in religious, military, and judicial spheres.<sup>2</sup> While the elections of ephors by the Spartans gave them some resemblance to democracy, their political influence stopped there. Worth noting, when the state of Sparta acquired new territory or allies, this policy of oligarchy remained a blanket form of government, as described in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*: "The policy of Lacedaemon was not to exact tribute from her allies, but merely to secure their subservience to her interests by establishing oligarchies among them."<sup>3</sup> Subject to dual kingship rule and policies made by anonymous councils, the Spartans' political freedom banked on hopes that such councils and kings would rule in their favor, and regardless, they were subject to the rule of said councils and kings. The Oligarchy of Sparta held great importance in military matters and one's service to the state. Due to these values, they saw excessive freedoms of the people as a threat to the betterment of the state. As Plato states: "The Spartan is every inch a soldier, a man of few words himself,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles D. Hamilton, "Spartan Politics and Policy, 405-401 B.C.," *The American Journal of Philology* vol. 91, no. 3 (Jul., 1970): 294-314 at 295.

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton, "Spartan Politics and Policy, 405-401 B.C.," 295.

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (ca. 411 B.C.E), translated Richard Crawley, *The Project Gutenberg eBook*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm> (accessed October 13, 2023).

better at deeds than words.”<sup>4</sup> This further provides the basis that the ideal Spartan existed to be an instrument of the state, not questioning authority, and executing orders when requested. Furthermore, starting this military training early in life ranked key in building a collective unit providing much more utility to the state than if purely focusing on the individual; ingraining the ideal of the perfect Spartan in the minds of young boys also encouraged a sort of group tribulation among them, fostering a collective bond and thus orchestrating a hive mind among soldiers from adolescence.<sup>5</sup> This early fostering of a collective mind and appreciation for leadership strengthened the power of the Spartan Oligarchy, though to further distinguish *eleutheria*, a comparison to another empire proves insightful.

Athens differed in many ways from Sparta and in these differences, Sparta's unique system of government and values prove exemplified. Politically Athens remains commonly known as the father of democracy, being the first example of this type of government, within this Athenians already held more political autonomy than the Spartan citizen. Athenian education and societal constructs were also drastically different and more versed from that of Sparta, Athenian boys enjoyed education in grammar, music, gymnastics, poetry, arithmetic, geometry, logic, rhetoric, and other arts.<sup>6</sup> The lack of such subjects in Spartan culture can be explained by the fact every sphere of Sparta was managed by the state: “Only in Sparta, where the organization of the whole of education and society was directed towards military efficiency, was the system entirely in the hands of the State.”<sup>7</sup> This can be viewed in several ways, however, it would be fair to say Sparta suffered a lack of individuality and creativity because of its lack of diversity when it came to fields of study and career offered. Sparta was mainly composed of those in government, those in military, and those who raised the young. Whereas Athens benefited from encouraging individual achievement and intellectual development with a rich education and individual thoughts stemming from an autonomy of thought Sparta sorely lacked. Nonetheless, Sparta found other societal avenues associated with individualism to imbue its collective ideals.

Religion played a pivotal role in preserving *eleutheria* for the state and uniting the people under the state's desires, commonly under the guise of reverence to gods. The few surviving written records provide little insight into Spartans' individual relationships with the gods in their polytheistic sphere, but what little is known tells of group rituals and offerings.<sup>8</sup> When regarding Spartan polytheism, it is important to note that the most prevalent of the gods worshiped were

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<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Laws* (n.d.), *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Laws, by Plato*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1750/1750-h/1750-h.htm> (accessed November 11, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Xenophon, *The Laws and Customs of the Spartans*, in *Classics of Western Thought: The Ancient World*, ed. Donald S. Gochberg (Michigan, 1988), 161-172 at 163.

<sup>6</sup> Donāld Attwater. “Athenian Education.” *The Irish Monthly* 55, no. 645 (1927): 132–37.

<sup>7</sup> Attwater, “Athenian Education,” 133.

<sup>8</sup> Nicolette Pavlides, “The Sanctuaries of Apollo Maleatas and Apollo Tyritas in Laconia: Religion in Spartan–Perioikic Relations,” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 113 (2018): 279-305 at 286.

those relating to battle and warfare, and few were attributed to the sanctity of the individual.<sup>9</sup> Notable in Herodotus's works, Spartans are referred to multiple times as having gone to their gods in hopes of their blessing regarding combat, such as the battle of Plataea.<sup>10</sup> This cult behavior of addressing the gods before battle in expectancy of favor and victory shows the continuous collectivism of the Spartan military and the role it played in preserving the state of *eleutheria*. It is worth noting too that Spartans would justify their attacks and offensive movements by attributing them as calls to action received from the gods, further supported by Pavlides's weaponry findings at Spartan sanctuaries. "The distinctive nature of the finds is also noteworthy, since the weapons consisted mostly of spearheads, javelin heads and arrowheads; that is, offensive weapons."<sup>11</sup> Rather than seeking a personal relationship with the supernatural, the Spartan philosophy prioritized defending and fighting for the freedom of the state, and the gods they worshiped only further encouraged unification under the polity to bring it glory and power. Spartan philosophy materialized further in the thank-offerings of Spartan weapons to the gods and the retirement of old equipment, paying further homage to the supernatural's assistance on the battlefield.<sup>12</sup> This mindset within the Spartan military began early in young Spartans imbuing state values as a way of life.

Through organization and strict discipline, the Spartan military continued the theme of collective freedom holding the utmost value in society. Spartan military familiarization started at a young age and ingrained collective messaging in each child's impressionable mind.<sup>13</sup> As boys grew into men the importance of service to the state continued, and through restrictions on their personal liberties, *eleutheria* of the state persisted in priority. Xenophon noted "Lycurgus prohibited free men from having any connexion [sic] with traffic and enjoined them to consider as their only occupation whatever secures freedom to states."<sup>14</sup> Though some of these restrictions were necessary to preserve the unity of the men and the strength of the unit, they harshly redefined what it meant to be a Spartan, and that one found their purpose in devotion solely to the interests of the state. However, to maintain the men's sense of unity and bravery, propaganda such as that of the poet Tyrtaeus further prioritized obligation to the state's interest. As shown in one of his poems:

For 'tis a fair thing for a good man to fall and die fighting in the van for his native land,  
whereas to leave his city and his rich fields and go a-begging is of all things the most

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<sup>9</sup> Pavlides "The Sanctuaries of Apollo Maleatas and Apollo Tyritas in Laconia," 286.

<sup>10</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, ed. and trans. by Walter Blanco and Jennifer Roberts (New York: Norton & Company, 2013), 395-396.

<sup>11</sup> Pavlides "The Sanctuaries of Apollo Maleatas and Apollo Tyritas in Laconia," 282.

<sup>12</sup> Pavlides "The Sanctuaries of Apollo Maleatas and Apollo Tyritas in Laconia," 286.

<sup>13</sup> Xenophon, "*The Laws and Customs of the Spartans*, in *Classics of Western Thought*," at 164.

<sup>14</sup> Xenophon, "*The Laws and Customs of the Spartans*, in *Classics of Western Thought*," at 168.

miserable, wandering with mother dear and aged father, with little children and wedded wife. For hateful shall such an one be among all those to whom he shall come in bondage to Want and loathsome Penury, and doth shame his lineage and belie his noble beauty, followed by all evil and dishonour. Now if so little thought be taken of a wanderer, and so little honour, respect, or pity, let us fight with a will for this land, and die for our children and never spare our lives. Abide then, O young men, shoulder to shoulder and fight.<sup>15</sup>

In poems such as these Tyrtaeus further pushes the message that to die for your state is to have lived a good life, and how turning away from one's duty to their state brings shame to one's lineage and dishonor to himself. Tyrtaeus also boasted the concept of *areté*, roughly translated as "the act of living one's full potential," or "living your life to its purpose."<sup>16</sup> Tyrtaeus closely attributed *areté* to dying for one's state or answering the state's call (i.e., to go to war).

This kind of propaganda sought to normalize the veneration of Sparta while simultaneously disregarding the value of an individual's life. Further, those in the military remained voiceless when it came to political decisions such as determining the initiation of war against the Persians; this can be seen in Herodotus's *The Histories* in which greater political leaders such as King Leonidas debated the decisions for the people with other political officials.<sup>17</sup> Leonidas voted with a majority of the council to amass his army of 300 before the Persians, which was a strategic play on the geography of the area as they were defending a small passage; however, in the end, "Leonidas, proving himself extremely valiant, fell in that struggle and with him other famous Spartans."<sup>18</sup> Interesting to note is the cause of Leonidas' peril, Epialtes, who betrayed Leonidas: "Epialtes son of Eurydemus, a Malian, thinking he would get a great reward from the king, came to speak with him and told him of the path leading over the mountain to Thermopylae. In so doing he caused the destruction of the Hellenes remaining there."<sup>19</sup> This betrayal ultimately led to the downfall of the Spartans as once they faced opposition from the flank, they could do nothing. The Spartan's conviction to state and its wishes proves further exemplified in the plaque left at Thermopylae which reads, "Foreigner, go tell the Spartans that we lie here obedient to their commands."<sup>20</sup> Herodotus also notes, "It is said that another of the three hundred survived because he was sent as a messenger to Thessaly. His name was Pantites.

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<sup>15</sup> Tyrtaeus, *Elegy and Iambus* (n.d.), *Perseus Digital Library*, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0479%3Avolume%3D1&force=y> (accessed February 29, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> James H. Shey, "Tyrtaeus and the Art of Propaganda," *Arethusa*, 9 (1976): 5–28, at 5 and 6.

<sup>17</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 342-343.

<sup>18</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 346.

<sup>19</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 343.

<sup>20</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 347.

When he returned to Sparta, he was dishonored and hanged himself.”<sup>21</sup> While the average soldier held intrinsic value to the state due to their utility in battle, ultimately, the soldier suffered the most consequences for having been sacrificed for the greater good. Though the Spartan soldier knew well, life lacking autonomy, it was not exclusively reserved for the military, trickling down to the domestic sphere as well.

The elevated position and privileges of women in Spartan society bolster collectivism under state. Spartan women were highly valued for their abilities to give birth to soldiers for military bolstering. Continuing this theme, they found liberty in education and use of Helot’s for household duties, which allowed enjoyment of greater privileges than other patriarchies. In Cartledge’s work on Spartan wives, she states, “Spartan girl’s education was confined to physical exertions and designed to serve exclusively eugenic ends, that is, to produce a strong mother of healthy infants.”<sup>22</sup> This emphasis on educating women to be responsible for childbearing stood pivotal in creating strong armies and greater glory for the state. As opposed to high class Athenian women Spartan women exercised political influence as shown in *The Histories*. During the Persian Wars Gorgo played a crucial in deciphering Xerxes’s invasion plans being written on wood then covered in wax:

Gorgo, Cleomenes' daughter and Leonidas' wife, discovered the trick herself and advised them to scrape the wax away so that they would find writing on the wood. When they did so, they found and read the message, and presently sent it to the rest of the Greeks. This is the story, as it is told.<sup>23</sup>

Herodotus exemplifies Gorgo’s effect as a higher-class Spartan woman through her ability to influence political decisions directly. Moreover, Spartan women’s position in the *oikos* (household) highlights their role in the economy. As ancient gender historian Sarah Pomeroy has observed: “The mother constituted a bridge between private and public.” This manifests in women’s economic freedom within society. Pomeroy continues “Spartan women (like Spartan men) can be viewed not as versatile producers, but essentially as owners, managers, and consumers of wealth based on land.” The financial capacities of women indications a greater degree of freedom, contributing to the prosperity of the Spartan economy. While society largely revolved around men women’s position within society left monotonous tasks of the fields and the home to the Helots.

Concerning the use of slaves, Sparta’s utilization of the helots, while at times inhumane, existed largely to benefit the means of the state and allow the Spartan citizen to concern themselves with tasks seen to hold greater importance than those of everyday living, such as household responsibilities or farming. Relationships between the helots and Spartans were tense and violent;

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<sup>21</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 347.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Cartledge, “Spartan Wives: Liberation or Licence,” *The Classic Quarterly* 31 no. 1 (1981): 84-105 at 92.

<sup>23</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 239.

helots far outnumbered the Spartans, and this was cause for bitter and, at times, lethal treatment of the helots at the hands of the Spartans due to fear of an uprising. Harsh treatment and frequent murder of helots at times for reasons as trivial as one's physical stature being seen as too muscular, caused a general distaste for Spartans in the eyes of the helots.<sup>24</sup> A helot was rarely freed and could only be freed by the state, not their individual "owner." Helots could buy their freedom, but this was rare as their wages were minuscule and buying freedom was rarely emphasized unless the state needed of funds.<sup>25</sup> If a helot were freed, they did not attain Spartan citizenship, as the distinction between helots and Spartans was deeply entrenched; rather, if they had performed acts of great service to the empire or its military and were recognized, they would have gained partial autonomy under the status *neodamōdeis*.<sup>26</sup> *Neodamōdeis* could engage in owning wealth, property, and potentially ability to trade but were barred from the right of voting or holding place in public office being that this was reserved for a proper Spartan citizen.<sup>27</sup> While there were other statuses applied to non-Spartiates, such as *nothoi* (bastard son of helot mother and Spartan father), unfree helots remained state-owned.<sup>28</sup> Further helots were no exception to this ongoing theme of state ownership, as noted by Talbert:

Their status is not conveyed satisfactorily by any modern term: "state-serf" possibly comes nearest. At any rate, it's agreed that they did not belong to the individual Spartiate landlords to whom they were somehow assigned and to whom they paid rent in kind; rather, all helots remained property of the Spartan state. It alone could free them.<sup>29</sup>

The state used helots as another tool to maintain freedom and liberty for the people and allocated slaves where they saw most fit to benefit the state.

Helots were largely allocated to the agriculture sphere to support the army of Sparta, allowing Spartans to focus more on military training, though a smaller number were incorporated into the Spartan armies.<sup>30</sup> Spartan citizens enjoyed the private benefits of owning helots, using them to exercise their own individual needs, but total authority over them remained under the state, as noted by Lewis: "According to Ephorus, the helots were slaves serving under special conditions. The master of a helot could neither manumit him nor sell him 'beyond the boundaries.'" <sup>31</sup> To clarify the meaning of "beyond the boundaries," this is to say slave owners could sell helots within

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<sup>24</sup> David M. Lewis, *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), *Oxford Academic*, at (ch. 6), 131, <https://academic.oup.com/book/25688/chapter/193153076>.

<sup>25</sup> Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 97.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context*, 136.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context*, 136.

<sup>28</sup> Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, 96-97.

<sup>29</sup> Talbert, "The Role of the Helots in the Class struggle at Sparta," 22-23.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context*, 142.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context*, 129.

Spartan society but were restricted from doing so to outsiders. *Eleutheria* can further be seen as bondage to the state in a Helot's eye, as to maintain the Spartan citizen's liberty and autonomy, the Helot's dignity and humanity were sacrificed. Thucydides records an instance of revolt by the helots that can be attributed to treatment previously addressed, "after the earthquake, caused by the secession of the helots to Ithome... ." <sup>32</sup> This in reference to helot's exploitation of an earthquake to revolt and organize at the mountain Ithome, causing Spartans great panic as was their constant fear of Helot revolt, which contributed to continued limiting of helot freedoms and harsh treatment, even killing at mass 2,000 helots at a time to intimidate others in hopes of keeping a docile workforce. <sup>33</sup> As exemplified by the constraints of the helots in Sparta, *eleutheria* reflects a primarily collectivist ideal, however, consideration of alternative evidence stands essential to obtaining a well-rounded understanding of the concept.

From an Athenian perspective the Spartan concept of *eleutheria* leads to political and social decline. In the *Politics* Aristotle criticizes Spartan government: "Again, the license of the Lacedaemonian women defeats the intention of the Spartan constitution, and is adverse to the happiness of the state . . . in those states in which the condition of the women is bad, half the city may be regarded as having no laws." <sup>34</sup> Aristotle condemns the structure of Spartan government, primarily regarding the extensive rights of women. In his view, the freedoms of Spartan women and their inferior nature resulted in the deterioration of society. Aristotle continues to challenge Spartan *eleutheria* by stating, "the legislator wanted to make the whole state hardy and temperate, and he has carried out his intention in the case of the men, but he has neglected the women, who live in every sort of intemperance and luxury." <sup>35</sup> Aristotle depicts Sparta as a lawless state having failed by allowing women social and political opportunity proving collectivism as an ineffective point of government. Though one could agree with Aristotle its important to note that Spartan women's autonomy proved paramount in sustaining Sparta's military strength.

The Spartan oligarchy, religious structure, and austere military system led to a collectivist society demanding sacrifice of personal freedom for independence as a state, and through this, *eleutheria* materialized as a collectivist concept holding an individual's value less than whatever the state saw fit. Even so, the Spartans carried out impressive displays of military power in battles during the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, and their military remained among the strongest at the time, regardless of their lack of numbers. At its heart, Sparta guarded the liberty and independence of the city-state as a belief that should precede all others among its citizens, further employed through education, religion, and customs. Understanding the employment of *eleutheria* in all Spartan spheres of life and tradition stands pivotal in comprehending not only the function

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<sup>32</sup> Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 3, Ch. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context*, 135.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* (ca. 350 B.C.E), *Archive for the History of Economic Thought*, <https://historyofeconomicthought.mcmaster.ca/aristotle/Politics.pdf> (accessed October 13,2023).

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 41.

of their complex society but to appreciate the key belief that formed one of the most powerful military superpowers in history.



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