

BOOK REVIEW

The Greek Superpower. Sparta in the Self-Definitions of Athenians. Edited by PAUL CARTLEDGE AND ANTON POWELL. Swansea, The Classical Press of Wales, 2018. Pp. x, 239. \$78, Hardback. ISBN 9781910589632.

The present volume provides one of many enduring monuments to the energy, entrepreneurship as a creator of the Celtic Classical Conferences and scholarly contributions of Anton Powell, a freelance scholar and publisher (Classical Press of Wales) who died in June 2020. The nine essays re-fract the Spartan image/mirage through the eyes of their sometime yokemates, sometime rival and enemy. The Lacedaemonians,¹ exercising information and disinformation by hook and by crook, have left an opaque and lacunose image/mirage of their super-selves. They suppressed visitors, disvalued writing and self-expression and vanished thousands of expendable human beings: 2,000 helots here (Thuc. 4.80); 3,000 Athenian POWs there (Xen. *Hell.* 2.1.31-32, cf. 2.2.3). One encounters, therefore, a damaged historical mosaic with three-eighths of the *tesserae* never placed.

Paula Debnar's "Sparta in Pericles' Funeral Oration" analyzes the implicit and explicit antitheses between the Peloponnesian juggernaut and its imperial Athenian adversary. A postmodern analysis of Athenian rhetoric suggests that the image of Sparta was good for Pericles' to invoke, to show that even Lacedaemonian prestige and reputation fell short of Attic achievement. Pericles exaggerates the stability and good-will of Athenians (8), while both he and Archidamus identify shame as central to both their polities. Pericles denigrates boasts in words (Thuc. 2.40.1), but his *epitaphios* is the stellar example of such. While the theme is the two communities' polarities, Pericles claims or exhibits that the Athenians have all the Spartans' virtues but to a higher degree—even laconic brachyology.

Ellen Millender compares Athenian and Lacedaemonian deliberative procedures, and mentions barbarian and Spartan failures to allow discussion of

¹ The editors respected their contributors' choice of phonetic (Powell) or Latinate (the rest) transliteration, and so do I.

opposed points of view. Few Spartans could speak publicly in their hierarchical political process. Fewer could introduce resolutions, and fewer yet could veto crooked motions (35). Athenian self-definition employed Spartan antipathy to discourse as a rhetorical Other, but already in Herodotus' image, the Spartans "cut a remarkably poor figure as [Hellenic] champions" (38), first, repulsing the Ionians in their unwillingness to discuss policy and strategy—Samians, Maeandrius and Aristagoras—all reduced to dumb shows. Millender considers Thucydides' image of Sparta in the 432 debate at Sparta—all four speeches address Laconian laconicity. Archidamus' *euboulia* loses out to Sthenilaidas' brachyologic haste, as both the Corinthians and Athenians had warned. Finally, Thucydides suggests the debate was beside the point. Millender insightfully reminds us that the growing power of Athens—not Corinthian complaints—determined their decision (48, citing 1.23.6, 118.2).

Powell himself considers the effects of Lakonism on the Athenian Coup/Revolution of 404/3. Was the junta of the Thirty² consciously aping Spartan institutions, customs and habits? Kimon certainly had wanted to yoke the two major Hellenic powers, but already he had faced an uphill fight (Stesimbrotos at Plut. *Kim.* 16). Further, a yoke of equality differs from one oxkicking the other. Three thousand Athenian soldiers were executed after surrender at Aigospotamoi (Plut. *Lys.* 13). Perikles' *epitaphios*, the most concentrated dose of Athenian othering (66), argues Athenian superiority on just those points where the Lakedaimonians fancied their exceptionalism. Kimon's policies of yore may have given specious cover—a patriotic ancestor (81)—to those oligarchs eager to improve their polis and willing to murder terrorized fellow-citizens and their leader Theramenes to do so. However, his concept of joint hegemony bore no relation to the Thirty's obedience to Lysander and his obedient army. After Kritias' experiment in Spartan-like organized lies and deceit, complete with so-called ephors,³ anti-democratic Lakonism became a dead duck. Xenophon's account of the Thirty probably minimizes actual Spartan directives and lethal interference. Powell points in this direction, casting deserved suspicion on everything that non-Spartans asserted about Spartans thinking and privately saying (79). The Thirty's initial success owed much to Athenians' fear that they might suffer what they had

² Not to be identified as "the Thirty Tyrants," as a few scholars still write. That term, an ancient one, refers to the long-lived if ineffective Emperor Gallienus' competitors (CE 253-268). The "thirty tyrants" probably overrates the power of twenty-nine of them. As Cartledge points out in his Foreword (ix), the ancient sources always refer to the Lakedaimonians, not the Spartans.

³ The fragrant number "Thirty" can be traced back to Lykourgos' *rhētra* (75; see Plut. *Lyk.* 6).

inflicted on Skione and Melos, and the atrocities that the Lakedaimonians had readily inflicted on Plataiai, Argive Hysiai (Th. 5.83.2), Kedreiai and Iasos. Collaborationist, intimidation-based oligarchy was preferable to enslavement or even citizen and polis obliteration. The essay reflects Powell's decades of skeptical submersion in the Spartan mirages.

Michael Scott addresses the presence of eternally austere Lacedaemon in Athenian thought, its art and architecture, albeit lacking necessary illustrations. He explains the Periclean and thus Thucydidean silence about the Parthenon, as a certain embarrassment over its gaudy feminine ornamentation (90). Nevertheless, at Delphi and Olympia, Spartans likewise proudly raised "pointed visual demonstrations" (92) of military and athletic prowess. At Athens, the Cimonian Painted Stoa and the anti-Spartan Nike Temple (of Victory) proclaimed Athenian military achievements at Marathon, Oenoë, against Persians, Amazons, Trojans and Spartans—perhaps another alien (non-Greek) community? Spartan shields taken at Pylos and exhibited in the same stoa provided another prideful blow demolishing the legend of Spartan invincibility (95; Paus. 1.15.4). After the Peloponnesian War, although the Lacedaemonians had the Athenian city-walls destroyed, they did not tear down most of Athens—even monuments suggesting Athenian hegemony remained intact. The Lacedaemonians did put up their victory monuments celebrating Aegospotami at Delphi's entrance, a large stoa there, and Lysander's gold stars. In the *Kerameikos* at Athens, the conquering power had a tomb built for Spartiates who died enforcing Spartan order in Athens. Who paid for it, remains unclear, but the tomb exhibits a retrograde inscription and Laconian letters (*IG II²*, 1178). The tomb was a "vitally useful marker" for Athenians that an external enemy, not native traitors—although long-haired—had overthrown the Athenian democracy (100-1). Scott closes by demonstrating that the spread-out community of Sparta built its own monuments at home (sanctuaries, porticoes and temples)—not as rustic as Thucydides' polarized comparison of their structures (1.10) suggests. Visuality, art and architecture, offers malleable meaning for ancient tourists and Hellenic interstate self-positioning.

Edith Hall revisits Athenian self-definition—ethnic, moral, topographical, etc.—and other-definition of Spartans in seven plays of the popular tragedian Euripides. For example, the mythical *Heraclids* of the early 420s brings to mind Peloponnesian troops on the borders of Attica. Oddly enough, tragic invaders in his plays are never identified as Spartan (122). Only Athenians gave asylum to

the Heraclids, certainly the Lacedaemonians did not. Athenians freed the Peloponnesus from Eurystheus the despot; the beneficiary Heraclids were ancestors of the Spartans. The *Orestes* exhibits several Spartan characters, especially the elder gerontocrat Tyndareus, a figure providing malicious comedy. Hall closes with a puzzle about whether the Greek conquerors portrayed in the *Trojan Women* (416/15) should be identified with the Athenians (post-Melos) or Peloponnesians (post-Plataiai). Contrary to modern productions, she opts forcefully for the latter. First, the Homeric inhabitants of Sparta began the aggression. Second, the competitive dramatist had to win over the Athenian archon and his original audience. She proposes that Sir Gilbert Murray's passionate condemnation of imperial Athenian violence at Melos initiated the plausible modern misperception.

Ralph Rosen turns the torchlight on Old Comedy's portraits of imaginary Spartans, especially in Aristophanes. Again, the dramatist had to heed Athenian audience ideology. Good practice included mocking a common enemy (diet, clothes, appearance), asserting cultural superiority and insulting ethnic differentia (139)—but always finding poor Demos to be victim, not perpetrator. Aristophanes' Laconian characters like Lampito are quite sympathetic, even if not as refined or technically competent as Athenians. Rosen finds less abuse of Spartans than one reasonably expects, but he does not conclude that Aristophanes and his contemporary comic poets (represented by fragments only) were Philo-Laconian or conservative aristocrats. Rich and powerful targets, he argues, are satirized for selfish and excessive behaviors, not for their possessions and power as such (*contra* the influential views of Geoffrey de Saint-Croix). Killer Spartiates were not inherently funny to those who fought them. Better materials were Dicaeopolis' absurd private peace or Lysistrata's sex-strike—daring fantasy but also safer self-censorship (148) suitable for a prize-winner. Frank Zappa but not Spike Lee earns a footnote (n. 20). Rosen's argument is probably relevant to the revolutions of 411 in which Athenian conspirators, "bad guys," can be discerned but are not central in Aristophanes' two comical productions of that year.

Carol Atack moves Athenian self-definition into the 4th century, in particular to Isocrates' usual and exaggerated opposition of the increasingly second-class powers Athens and Sparta. Isocrates' social imaginary is described as illusory, artificial, alleged and performative for his followers. *Patrios Politeia* lay conveniently just beyond living memory and reality. His early target audience consisted of fellow-Athenians who mistakenly valorized Sparta's system, its "laconizing elite politicians and intellectuals" (164), "as if demigods governed there" (*Panath.* 41).

Enter Plato, or observe him lurking in the audience. Eventually replacing citizen collectives with culture heroes like Theseus (“a super-everyman,” 173) and Herakles (inferior because selfish), the long-lived publicist eventually dropped the two former superpowers for Philip of Macedon. But even in the late *Panegyricus*, he continues to fault those Athenians who perceive the now enfeebled Lacedaemonians as an originary paradigm of law and good government. His thrust is not aimed at Spartans at all—real soldiers don’t read Attic orators. When Isocrates praises a Spartan, Attack reads it as ironic (167). The Lacedaemonians are unsuitable partners for the pre-eminent Athenians, more of a foil. When he praises Philip, he suggests that, as a supposed Heraclid, he is descended from the father of all Greeks—even though his Macedonian subjects are *not* Hellenes (171). Mythicization is central to Isocrates’ political message. Isocrates the recycler was far from the first to abandon former positions and twist facts. Lysias ii and Plato’s satirical *Menexenus* exaggerate *epitaphioi* proving different points. Herodotus’ and Thucydides’ agitation refuting prevalent accounts of the tyrannicides struggles to pierce the veil of self-serving ideology.

The last two essays address Plato and Aristotle’s attitudes towards Lacedaemonians. Fritz-Gregor Herrmann exposes for the *Republic* Plato’s non-enthusiasm for Spartans, Spartan-like political measures and foreign Spartanizers. The argument requires serious familiarity with the *Republic*. Plato “does not let [Spartan] reality get in the way of a good constitution” (186). Plato’s uncle was the Laconizing Critias, “perhaps the greatest criminal in Athenian history” (204). This genealogical reality restrains whichever virtues Plato may have found in Sokrates’ “second best,” or least bad, real *politeia*. Certainly, the ideal Platonic constitution has manly features that Spartans never dreamed of. When Socrates states that Laconian education and government is praised by the Many (*Resp.* 544b-c), or calls Sparta the land of the most sophists (*Prot.* 342b), Platonists perceive Socrates’ “perverse sophistry” (203). Idealizing the Spartan constitution was not the historical or Platonized Socrates’ game.⁴ Plato’s bifocal vision demanded for his readers less historical verisimilitude than awareness of 4th-century Laconian imperialism and degenerate injustice at home and abroad.

Pursuing that contemporary Spartan oppression of other states, Malcolm Schofield reconstructs Aristotle’s critique of Spartan imperialism, a welcome

⁴ I regret the loss of uncle Kritias’ *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians*, both for itself and for a representative philo-Lakonian Athenian view of the demi-god Spartans.

antidote to blindly utopian Laconophilia. Aristotle had no doubts or qualms in saying the Spartan state had conquest and exploitation as its rationale (*hupothēsis*) from the first lawgiver. His sometimes contemptuous treatment corresponds to Athenian hostility towards the Spartan regime and its acts in the mid-4th century (216). Their ruthless policies and acts amounted to despotism, not hegemony, leadership. They aggress against their neighbors and their own inhabitants (the helots). Spartan exceptionalism produces coarse citizens, subjects youths to beast-like hardships and develops only a cruel and blinkered, fragile virtue—martial courage.⁵ Sparta's lawgivers failed to provide any education in the proper uses of leisure (*Pol.* 1334a2-10), and such regimes collapse after victory. In victory, because of their regime, Spartans became greedy and the state remained penniless (1271b16-17). Thus, Aristotle's thinking reflects the same Athenian intellectual matrix as Plato's *Laws* and Isocrates' repetitive essays (225). He confronted positive and negative Athenian perspectives on Sparta. He indicts both powers for short-sighted imperial strategies and actions (*Pol.* 1296a32-36).

In sum, Powell and Cartledge's book clarifies evidence for the Spartan mirror in which Athenians could refine their self-image: wits and warriors both, rulers of themselves and others, and the self-praised Hellenists of Hellas. Further, their authors present new elements of the otherwise lacunose Spartan image in the preponderantly Athenocentric literature of 5th- and 4th-century Hellas. The familiar russet dust-jacket lists thirteen published volumes in the Lakedaimonian series and four more "forthcoming." This impressive volume complements its congeners.

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⁵ Isocrates claims that many Lakedaimonians cannot read or write (*Panath.* 209). Nevertheless, that same writer of long op-eds asserts that Spartan sympathizers permeate the entire literate Greek world, including Athens (*Panath.* 41, 61-7, 108-13, 200-265). Aristotle's clearest attack on Sparta's political system occupies *Politics* VII-VIII (228).