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Spartiates, helots and the direction of the agrarian economy: towards an understanding of helotage in comparative perspective

Stephen Hodkinson

This paper is a first step in a project designed to study Sparta in comparative historical perspective, ancient to modern.¹ Modern thought has often followed ancient Greek and Roman sources in portraying Sparta as an exceptional society, somewhat different from other Greek poleis, and indeed from most other civilised human societies. In recent years my work has increasingly been concerned to deconstruct that image as it relates to Greek antiquity, to explore the complex manner in which Spartan institutions and practices were frequently both distinctive and yet reflected, and sometimes even exemplified, trends observable in elsewhere in the Greek world. For the study of helotage, the value of examining Spartan institutions in broader Greek context is amply demonstrated by the paper in this volume by Hans van Wees. My project is designed to develop such a comparative approach one stage further by viewing Spartan customs and institutions in the context of comparable practices in societies beyond the ancient Greek world. In this paper I shall explore some ways in which the operation of helotage may be profitably studied against the backdrop of systems of unfree labour in other historical times and places from antiquity to the modern world.

I should emphasise that the writing of this paper falls at an early stage of my comparative research. I shall not attempt to provide a definitive location of helotage within the wide range of unfree statuses in world history. My paper is, rather, a

¹ I am grateful to Sue Alcock, Richard Catling and Nino Luraghi for allowing me to read their important forthcoming work in advance of publication, to Peter Gattrell for advice on comparative reading on Russian serfdom, and to the participants in the Harvard conference for their supportive reception of the original version of this paper. This article was written during my tenure of an award under the Research Leave scheme of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board.

starting-point for future research, a preliminary investigation of certain potential insights to be derived from comparative study, based upon an outline reading into certain major servile systems in the historical past. Its primary aim is to address the broad question: in what ways might the history and sociology of other systems of unfree labour help to illuminate the character of helotage and of relations between the helots and their masters? Given, in particular, the paucity of the ancient evidence for helot-Spartiate relations—the lack of historical detail highlighted by Sue Alcock in her introduction to this volume—to what extent can comparative study help us to map out some plausible broad contours for the operation of helotage, even if much of the detailed topography must necessarily remain obscure? For the purposes of this initial investigation I shall focus on Spartiate-helot relationships within the key area of the agrarian economy.

Comparative approaches

As has been emphasised in a number of studies, such as Mark Golden's salutary article (1992) on the uses of cross-cultural comparison in ancient social history, the enterprise of comparative history, and especially the methodology of comparison between unfree labour in antiquity and in more recent periods, is by no means straightforward. Although extensive theoretical discussion would be inappropriate in this volume, whose primary subject is the substantive relationship between helots and their masters, some brief remarks are appropriate by way of introduction to the comparative approach taken in my own substantive discussion.

I will start by indicating one kind of comparative approach which is *not* particularly fruitful for my purposes, an approach that I would broadly characterise as "globalising". The prime example is the longstanding debate about how the helots should be defined in terms of modern legal or sociological definitions of servile status. There has been considerable debate, in particular, about whether helotage should be categorised as a form of slavery or a form of serfdom—with the modern definition of serfdom in Article 1 of the UN Supplementary Convention of 1956 being invoked by Geoffrey de Ste. Croix as alleged proof of the helots' classification as "state serfs".² It is not my intention to dismiss entirely the exercise of definition; but the problem with such definitions for the purpose of comparative study is that they have only

² Classification of helotage as a form of slavery: e.g. Oliva 1971, "undeveloped slavery"; Lotze 1959, "Kollektivsklaverei". Definition as "state serfs": e.g. Ste. Croix 1981: 147, 149; Cartledge 1987: 172, 1988: 39. Ste. Croix's invocation (1981: 135-136) of the 1956 *UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Practices similar to Slavery* is followed by Cartledge in both works cited. For criticism of the definition of helots as serfs, Finley 1973: 65 with 189 n.5. Other classifications have been suggested, such as "intercommunal servitude" (Garlan 1988: 93-98).

limited value in illuminating the actual operation and condition of helotage.³ The restricted range of categories (slavery-serfdom-debt bondage or slavery-serfdom-wage labour) employed in most modern classificatory schemes means that some considerable compression of actuality is inherent in the very act of classification.⁴ Even Ste. Croix—in the midst of a long discussion of the classification of different types of unfree labour—concedes that, “Actually, we know of no precise parallels to the condition of the Helots . . . and a certain amount of oversimplification is involved by forcing it into any general category”.⁵ Moreover, even if the classification of helots were unproblematic, status is on its own a poor guide to economic and social reality.⁶ As many students of slavery and serfdom have emphasised, persons of identical servile status can enjoy vastly different lifestyles or socio-economic conditions, even within a single society, let alone between different societies.⁷

Conversely, there is often considerable overlap between the practical conditions of different categories of unfree labour, especially between different societies (Engerman 1996: esp. 19-21). Within the realm of the agrarian economy, various forms of coerced labour have been exploited by ruling elites for both subsistence and market-orientated farming. The character of relationships between landowners and these different unfree labour forces is often affected by common variables; and, although examination of these variables may often reveal key differences between different forms of exploitation, at other times comparable conditions can be seen to apply. For example, as we shall see in more detail below, one important variable in many systems of unfree labour is the extent of labour obligations owed to the landowner. On this subject one can legitimately draw a contrast between most

³ Note Ducat's criticism (1994: 116) of the similar approach of the ancient sources: “leur façon de réfléchir était le plus souvent globalisante, et visait beaucoup plus à définir un esclavage de type hilotique qu'à dresser le catalogue des spécificités de chacun des statuts relevant de ce type”.

⁴ The statement of Greenidge (1958: 24), quoted approvingly by Ste. Croix, that serfdom “is a status intermediate between slavery and complete freedom” reads uncannily like Aristophanes of Byzantium's inadequate classification of the helots, Penestai and a number of other groups as “between free people and slaves” (*ap.* Pollux, *Onomastikon* 3.83).

⁵ Ste. Croix 1981: 149. Despite this admission, he then continues, “but for convenience I shall treat them as the ‘State serfs’ they undoubtedly were”—a dogmatic approach that reads like classification for its own sake.

⁶ Cf. the comments of Biezunska-Malowist and Malowist 1989: 18-19; and of Bush 1996b: 1, 16-17. Cf. also Finley's criticism of the consequences of modern attempts at classification: “So the helots become serfs and the slaves with a *peculium* are discussed in the first instance as slaves, when economically and in terms of the structure and functioning of society, they were mostly self-employed craftsmen, pawnbrokers, moneylenders and shopkeepers” (1973: 65).

⁷ A few, very selective examples: by ancient historians, Bradley 1987: 15-16; Finley 1973: 64-65; by students of modern servile systems, Bush 1996c; Hoch 1996: 320; and the title of Lovejoy 2000: “Transformations in Slavery”. Cf. the remarks of Annequin 1985: 664, on heterogeneity of historical forms of slavery.

systems of serfdom—in which serfs typically exercised some control over their labour, working only part-time for their lords with several days a week to farm their own lands—and some systems of agrarian slavery, in which the slaves worked full-time for their masters, being allocated little more than garden plots and little time to cultivate them. In other slave systems, however, such as in pre-colonial West Africa and in much of the Caribbean, the slaves' access to land and to time for its cultivation was often far closer to that enjoyed by most serfs.⁸ The existence of common variables and, in certain circumstances, of overlapping conditions applying to different categories of unfree labour reinforces my argument that legal or sociological classification is not a fruitful starting-point for the comparative study of Spartiate-helot agrarian relations. As Michael Bush has observed, in summarising the conclusions of a recent comparative volume on serfdom and slavery (1996b: 1): “Both serfdom and slavery were defined by law . . . But what does this reveal about their true nature? . . . The conclusion is: very little . . . the character and condition of both were determined in reality by a wide range of other factors”.

In contrast to the unhelpfulness of globalising approaches, a more promising comparative approach to an understanding of helotage is, I suggest, through the investigation of *specific* aspects or problems which can legitimately be viewed in broader historical perspective. A good example of such a “specific” comparative approach is Paul Cartledge's article “Rebels and *Sambos* in classical Greece: a comparative view” (Cartledge 2001, first published 1985), in which he successfully employed comparative insights from Eugene Genovese's study of slave revolts, *From Rebellion to Revolution* (Genovese 1979), to explain the capacity of the Messenian helots to revolt, in contrast to chattel slaves elsewhere in Greece. Similarly, my comparative essay takes as its subject another major aspect of helotage: the character of Spartiate-helot relationships within the agrarian economies of Lakonia and Messenia during their respective periods of domination by Sparta. Its specific focus is the social relations of production between Spartiates and helots, especially the degree of Spartiate direction of helot farming, and the implications for the helots' experience of servitude.

In line with my criticisms of the limitations of classificatory approaches to the comparative study of helotage, my own comparative study will purposely draw upon insights from diverse systems and types of unfree agrarian labour at different historical times and places. In this initial study, I will concentrate mainly upon three major agrarian servile systems from the modern world (serfdom in rural Russia; slavery in the U.S. South; and slavery in pre-colonial Africa). I shall also refer, at appropriate

⁸ E.g. M. G. Smith 1955; Hill 1985: 37-38; Lovejoy 2000: 187-188; Kolchin 1993: 153.

points, to contemporary servile populations from Greek antiquity, especially the Penestai of Thessaly; and on occasion to certain systems of dependent agrarian labour in which the exploited labour force is legally free.⁹ My study will focus upon certain key variables which have been shown to possess widespread significance for the character of social relations of production across these different types and systems of agrarian labour. The patterns and conclusions indicated, both positively and negatively, by comparative study of these variables will be used as context for assessing the limited and partial ancient literary and archaeological evidence, for drawing out implications, and for suggesting fresh insights into the nature of Spartiate-helot agrarian relations. On occasion, where there is a sufficient degree of similarity to conditions in another servile system, those correspondences will be used to supplement the exiguous ancient evidence by developing, with all due caution, plausible hypotheses regarding the character of helot servitude.¹⁰

The scope of my approach, consequently, differs from the kind of cross-cultural comparison currently most favoured by anthropologists: namely, comparison within a region or culture area. It also differs in scope from the approach adopted in many previous comparative studies by historians of ancient slavery, certainly in those focused upon agrarian labour, which have most frequently restricted their comparisons to ancient chattel-slave systems judged to have operated modes of exploitation directly comparable with the slave systems of the modern New World.¹¹ My focus on diverse examples of servile exploitation also necessarily implies the illumination of helotage by means of difference as well as by similarity. In terms of method, my approach shares something in common with each of the three types of comparative history identified in an influential article by Skocpol and Somers (1980)—macro-causal analysis; the

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⁹ Pertinent comparisons between free and unfree agrarian populations are appropriate on occasions when their conditions of exploitation are affected by similar variables. There have also often been respects regarding the practical conditions of agrarian life in which "he [the serf] closely resembled the free peasant" (Bush 1996c: 206) or in which "the difference between slave and free was only one of degree" (Klein and Lovejoy 1979: 188). For a defence against criticisms (Cartledge 1993: 132, 1998: 13) of my previous study (Hodkinson 1992), in which I illuminated Spartiate-helot sharecropping arrangements through comparative evidence for systems of dependent tenancy, see now Hodkinson 2000: 116-117; cf. also Alcock 2002b: 199 n.9. Attested within systems of servile labour (e.g. M. F. Smith 1954: 38), as well as within those involving legally "free" tenants, sharecropping is a good example of a topic for which comparative study embracing systems of both free and unfree dependent labour is highly appropriate.

¹⁰ For both these sources of comparative insight, see, briefly, Annequin (1985: 640); and also the comments of Golden (1992: 311): "Of course, reports on other cultures cannot in themselves replace missing data from Greece and Rome, but they can be very useful all the same in . . . developing hypotheses, in identifying patterns from scattered scraps, in refuting generalisations."

¹¹ Cf. Martin 1980; Biezunska-Malowist and Malowist 1989: 18, 23. Cf. also the works cited by Golden 1992: 312 n.9.

parallel demonstration of theory; and the contrast of contexts—though it also differs with each in certain important respects. It shares with macro-causal analysis the method of breaking individual cases down into sets of variables and an interest in generalisation, though not its use of quantitative techniques or its de-emphasis upon specificity. Although not aimed at the demonstration of theory, my approach shares an interest in extracting parallel insights, where appropriate, from diverse historical cases. It also shares—as noted above—an awareness of contrast and difference between specific historical cases, although it does not eschew the formulation of explanatory generalisations through comparative analysis.

In his article on the methodology of comparative approaches to the history of slavery, Jacques Annequin has posed the question: "une réflexion comparative doit-elle se fonder sur des ressemblances factuelles ou sur des convergences de problématiques?" (1985: 641-642). Although not impervious to the value, in appropriate context, of factual resemblances between helotage and other systems of unfree agrarian labour, the primary concentration of my own "réflexion comparative" will be upon "des convergences de problématiques", the issues and variables common to diverse systems of exploitation which permit pertinent comparative study across historical time and space.

The agrarian economy: social relations of production and the helot experience

One of the main puzzles concerning helot farming, and indeed of helot life more generally, is how it actually worked on the ground. It is clear that, from the viewpoint of the Spartiate masters, the essential function of the vast majority of the helot population was to cultivate the Spartiates' landholdings and to deliver sufficient produce to enable them to sustain their position as a citizen elite with a near full-time devotion to civic and military affairs. It is equally clear that the Spartiates were rentier landowners who lived not on their estates but in Sparta itself. What is less clear, however, is the extent to which Spartiate masters took steps to intervene actively in directing and controlling the process of agricultural production or, alternatively, left the practical planning and management of farming to the helots themselves. The question of the control of helot labour, of the social relations of production between Spartiates and helots, is important for our understanding of more than just helot agriculture, since comparative evidence suggests that the location of control over the productive process will have had a potentially profound effect on the fundamental conditions of helot life, including the nature of local helot communities.¹² The issues concerned are ones currently under debate in the

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¹² See the comments of Cooper 1979, in the context of African slavery.

study of diverse servile systems in human history, as scholars have become increasingly sensitive to the capacities of unfree peoples to develop, within their experience of servitude, various forms of (semi-)autonomous activity, organisation and culture.¹³ Direct insight from the ancient sources into Spartiate intervention in the agricultural process is confined to one brief passage in Xenophon's account of the conspiracy of Kinadon around 398 BC (*Hell.* 3.3.5). Kinadon is depicted as taking a potential recruit to the conspiracy out from the streets of Sparta to the Spartiates' estates, where he pointed out on each estate a single enemy, the master, surrounded by many potential allies to the conspiracy. The implication is that helots who farmed estates close to Sparta may have experienced a fair degree of intervention and direction from their Spartiate masters. This single episode, located at a particular historical moment, is, however, a slender basis upon which to found an overall judgement regarding agrarian life throughout the entire 1,400 km² of helot-farmed territory within Lakonia and Messenia over a period of several centuries.¹⁴

Indeed, comparative evidence from various types of agricultural labour systems suggests that, even within a common framework of exploitation, we should expect considerable variation in the degree of Spartiate intervention. For example, M. G. Smith's study of the system of slavery maintained by the Fulani aristocracy of Zaria province (northern Nigeria) around 1900 notes different levels of intervention, with some slaves farming their owner's fields through communal work under a slave overseer, whilst in other cases the slaves enjoyed desultory supervision, as long as they performed the required labour or provided rent in kind (M. G. Smith 1955: 103-104). Similar variations in the degrees of autonomy permitted to slave cultivators have been noted within slavery in Thailand (Turton 1980: 278-279). James Scott's classic study of peasant rebellions and subsistence in Southeast Asia also identified a spectrum of landlord-cultivator relationships, ranging from those in which there was a considerable degree of landlord involvement in agricultural decision-making, and in provision of seed and necessary equipment, to relationships in which the landlord provided nothing beyond the land and a demand for rent (1976: 174-176). Such variations in the degree of intervention by master or landowner, observed in diverse systems of dependent labour exploitation, have been found to correlate with a number of key variables. Although none, on its own, is necessarily decisive, collectively they constitute a set of interacting contributory factors that are worth examining in an attempt to illuminate the social relations of production between Spartiates and helots.

¹³ E.g. Hoch 1986: 91-159, 1996: 311-322; Kolchin 1987: 195-357, 1993: 133-168; Moon 1999, esp. 156-281. In studies of U.S. slavery the debate was sparked off by Stanley Elkins' controversial thesis (1976, originally published in 1959) regarding the "Sambo" character of black slaves.

¹⁴ The figure of 1,400 km² derives from the calculations in Hodkinson 2000: 131-145.

The character of economic exploitation

One relevant factor is the character of the economic exploitation of the dependent farming population, the nature of the obligations demanded by the master or landowner. Historically, there have been two main methods of exploitation. One method has been to demand labour services, with the cultivators being compelled to spend much of their time working the owner's landholdings. Often under this arrangement, the cultivators have been allocated some (varying) amount of land for their own use. The other method has been for the owner to require the payment of dues, with the farming population being compelled to render tribute in kind (or, increasingly in the modern world, in cash) from the produce of the owner's estates. Comparative evidence indicates that obligations in the form of dues are typically associated with lower levels of intervention than when labour services are required (cf. Bush 1996c: 213-215). Within modern Russian serfdom, for example, "labour obligations (*barshchina*) required much greater supervision than dues (*obrok*) paid two or three times a year" (Moon 1999: 205; cf. Kolchin 1987: 63-64). Similarly, as Paul Lovejoy has noted, the system of plantation slavery practised in the Savanna region of Africa in the nineteenth century "included a variety of work regimes and management strategies", ranging from cases in which slaves provided labour services, working "in a regimented fashion on the fields of the master under an overseer" to less regimented arrangements in which "slaves lived in their own villages and were subject to fixed payments" (Lovejoy 2000: 212; cf. Mason 1973: 465-466). Although the associations are not hard-and-fast, and there can be other factors involved, the requirement for labour services tends to correlate with a higher, and the demand for dues with a lower, degree of production for the market (Cooper 1979: 115; Kolchin 1987: 65; Moon 1999: 70-71).

Our evidence for helotage suggests that the Spartiates extracted dues in kind rather than labour services.¹⁵ This would fit well with the basic aims of agrarian production in Lakonia and Messenia. Although we should not think of Spartiates as completely divorced from market production, the primary function of their comparatively modest-sized landholdings—with a mean size of a mere 20 ha per citizen household—was to provide the subsistence needs of Spartiate families and the mess contributions required of their adult males.¹⁶ This intimation that the subsistence-orientated aims of production favoured a lesser degree of Spartiate

¹⁵ Ancient evidence: Tyrtaos *fr.* 6, West; Myron, *FGH* 106F2, *ap.* Athen. 657d; *Instituta Laconica* no. 41, *ap.* Plut. *Mor.* 239e; Plut. *Lyk.* 8.4; 24.3 (probably also *Instituta Laconica* no. 22, *ap.* Plut. *Mor.* 238e-f; Herakleides Lembos *fr.* 373.12, Dils = Aristotelian *Lak. Pol.* *fr.* 611.12, Rose). Modern discussion: Hodkinson 1992, 2000: 85-90, 125-127.

¹⁶ On the character of Spartiate agricultural production and the size of estates, Hodkinson 2000: 132-135, 382-385.

intervention is reinforced by comparison with the comparable contemporary servile population of the Penestai in Thessaly. In contrast to the helots, who delivered produce to their Spartiate masters, the large numbers of Penestai who worked the extensive landholdings of the wealthiest Thessalian aristocratic families appear to have lived under conditions of greater control in which they themselves were the recipients of monthly handouts from their owners.¹⁷ As Moon (1999: 73) has pointed out, this latter system represents the logical extreme of a system of labour obligations, as is indicated by its similarity to the monthly distributions of rations to slaves mentioned in Hesiod's *Works and Days* (line 767). However, we should be careful not to exaggerate the lack of intervention implied by the nature of the helots' obligations. As the quotation above from Paul Lovejoy indicates, the dues required in the cases cited in the previous paragraph were in the form of fixed payments. The nature of the payments made by the helots is a matter of controversy. Later sources write of a fixed payment, but these references almost certainly relate to new conditions introduced by the third-century revolution. In archaic and classical times the helots' dues were probably organised on a sharecropping basis, comprising a proportional share of the produce (Hodkinson 1992, 2000: 125-131). This arrangement would have provided a greater incentive for Spartiate masters to intervene in helot farming, since they would gain directly from any consequent increase in agricultural production. This incentive may have been intensified by the fact that Spartiates themselves were compelled, on pain of loss of citizenship, to make monthly contributions of specified foodstuffs (barley flour, wine, cheese and figs) to their common messes. Consequently, they had to ensure that helot farming arrangements were geared towards the production of sufficient quantities of these particular foodstuffs, although the need for special pressure on this point would have been lessened by the fact that the foodstuffs in question were mainly staples required anyway by the helots for their own subsistence.

Relationship to the land

Another relevant factor is the relationship of the farming population to the landholdings they worked, the extent to which they enjoyed practical fixity of tenure, whether *de iure* or simply *de facto*. This factor is clearly directly connected to the capacity of the master or landowner to intervene in the agricultural process by moving his labour force around to suit his interests. Here the practices of certain

¹⁷ Theokritos 16.34-35; Scholion (*Oxonienis Bodleianus Holkhamensis* 88) on Aristoph. *Wasps* 1274; *Etymologicum Gudianum*, s.v. ΕΙΛΩΤΕΣ, as interpreted by Ducat 1994: 46-48, 90-91. The evidence of Theokritos appears to derive from that of Simonides at the end of the sixth century. For the different picture presented by the third-century writer Archemachos, see below.

landowners with regard to peasant sharecropping tenants are particularly instructive. In the region of Tuscany in post-unification Italy, for example, tenants' rights were weak. The landlord's control was ensured by terms of contract which specified that the labour capacity and subsistence needs of the tenant's family should match the size and labour requirements of the holding. To achieve this balance landlords were able to disperse members of their tenants' families elsewhere or order the adoption of living-in help, could give or withhold permission for marriage, and could vet the appointment of new household heads (Gill 1983: 147). Such a high level of intervention in the (dis)placement of the agricultural labour force is also common in systems of slave labour. The potential of the master to separate slave families—man from woman, children from parents—has often been noted as the most poignant example of the potential powerlessness of slaves to ensure some element of continuity in their position (e.g. Bradley 1987: 52-70). Within the plantation slavery of the antebellum U.S. South, for example, children could be taken away into domestic service, and slaves of all ages were frequently sold, hired or loaned to other owners, or moved to other plantations. It has been estimated that, due largely to the strength of the interregional slave trade, "in the upper South about one first marriage in three was broken by forced separation and close to half of all children were separated from at least one parent", (Kolchin 1993: 125-126, drawing upon the work of Tadman 1989). The fact that a common occasion of sale was the death of the owner highlights the fundamental insecurity of the slave's link to the land that s/he cultivated.

Such an extreme degree of insecurity has not, however, been universal, even for slaves. In the lower U.S. South, for example, although owners' rights were no less strong, in practice slaves experienced much less disruption than in the upper South, owing to the region's position as net importer of slaves (Kolchin 1993: 126). Within other servile systems the security of farmers' attachment to the land has been increased by other factors. For example, within the Islamic society of the north African Savanna, although masters retained the legal right of sale, in practice public opinion against the sale of those born into slavery or living *en famille* exercised considerable restraint on their actions (Hill 1985: 37-38; Lovejoy 2000: 213).¹⁸ Similarly, within Russian serfdom, noble landowners had by the early eighteenth century acquired the legal right to move their serfs between estates, convert them to domestic duties, and even buy and sell them separately from the land (Moon 1999: 67); and a few landowners did exercise these rights. On most estates, however,

¹⁸ Cooper (1979: 118-119) argues that the lower frequency of sales of second-generation slaves was also a reflection of a different balance of power *vis-à-vis* their masters in comparison with first-generation slaves.

decisions regarding the relationship of serf households to the land were shared between the landowner's estate manager or steward and serf functionaries elected by their own village communes.¹⁹ The outcome was a generic fixity of tenure at communal level, although there was a tendency towards greater instability of tenure at the level of individual households. The essence of Russian serfdom was that the serfs were peasants legally bound to the land. Commune members were secure, as a collectivity, from arbitrary removal from the local farming territory. However, since many communes were collectively responsible for meeting the demands of the landowner for labour services or dues, they themselves frequently intervened to ensure that the amount of land farmed by their member households matched their size and economic potential. Allocations of land were made to newly formed households and to those increasing in size, if necessary by taking land off households that had become smaller. Many communes also practised a periodic redistribution of land to take account of changes in household size. The instability of tenure potentially generated by these practices was, however, limited by the prevailing "complex household" structure of most serf households (embracing an "extended family" of two or more related married couples or a married couple with their children and one or more other relatives), especially those practising *post-mortem* division of inheritance, which helped to smooth out fluctuations in the size of each of its constituent nuclear families.

When we turn to applying these comparative considerations to the case of helotage, we encounter several points of uncertainty. There is no direct literary evidence for the nature of the helots' relationship to the landholdings they worked. The nearest piece of evidence is a passage from the geographer Strabo (8.5.4), reporting a statement by the fourth-century historian Ephorus that "it was not permitted for the holder [of helots] either to liberate them or to sell them outside the boundaries". This statement raises several issues whose discussion lies beyond the scope of this article.²⁰ The essential question, however, is whether the fact that Ephorus mentions only the prohibition of sale outside Spartan territory can be interpreted as signifying that internal sales were permitted.²¹ There is currently disagreement on this point.²² However, even a scholar like Jean Ducat (1990: 21-22),

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¹⁹ The following discussion is based on Moon 1999: 156-180, 199-236. Although he prefers the term "seigniorial peasants" to the traditional term "serfs", I have retained the latter usage, partly because of its familiarity to non-specialists, partly due to the absence of an obvious substitute for the noun "serfdom".

²⁰ For fuller discussion, Hodkinson 2000: 117-119.

²¹ I interpret the "boundaries" in the passage as a reference to the boundaries of Spartan territory, rather than to the boundaries of individual landholdings as suggested by MacDowell 1986: 35.

²² For two different recent interpretations, Hodkinson 2000: 119 (Ephorus' text is inconclusive); Luraghi 2002a: 228-229 (the text proves the permissibility of internal sales).

who advocates the permissibility of private internal sales, envisages that they normally took place when landholdings underwent a change of Spartiate owner, so that the helots would remain attached to the land they already farmed. A new Spartiate landowner would surely often want to retain the intimate knowledge which resident helot farmers possessed about the local agricultural terrain, with its diverse microclimates and specialised ecological niches.²³ Hence, even if internal sale were permissible, it would not necessarily be incompatible with the possibility that many helots possessed effective fixity of tenure.

Sale, however, was not the only means by which Spartiate masters may potentially have intervened in the disposition of their helot labour force. By analogy with both American slavery and Russian serfdom, young helots may have been taken off the land into personal and domestic service. We have particular evidence for the important roles played by male helot servants as batmen on campaign and by helot female domestics as wet-nurses of Spartiate children and as sexual partners of Spartiate citizens; sons produced through such liaisons were accorded an honourable place in Spartan society and may have added to the prestige of the citizen household (Hodkinson 1997: 46-55, 2000: 336-337). However, we have no evidence about whether or to what extent the supply of personal and domestic servants was drawn from the helot agricultural population.

Another, potentially more significant, form of intervention was through Spartiate masters' redeployment of their helot workforce. A certain basic level of redeployment may have been necessary as a normal response to regular ongoing fluctuations, such as the changing requirements of agricultural exploitation, the varying demands of Spartiate households and the diverse demographic histories of helot families. In addition, however, we need to consider the impact of more fundamental, long-term changes, which we are now for the first time beginning to perceive through the results of recent intensive archaeological survey. The *Laconia Survey* conducted by the British School at Athens, a survey of some 70 km² of mainly arid, marginal hill territory immediately to the east and north-east of Sparta, has revealed a story of major changes in the area's settlement patterns during the archaic and classical periods.²⁴ Following a total absence of settlements in previous periods, the sixth century (and especially the half-century between c.550 and 500 BC) witnessed a relatively rapid phase of rural colonisation in a pattern of wide-spread settlement dispersion, involving the foundation of a minimum of 87 sites,

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²³ Cf. the reported comments of the wealthy Roman senator Publius Volusius, who declared "that estate most fortunate which had as tenants natives of the place, and held them; by reason of long association, even from the cradle, as if born on their father's own property" (Columella, *De Re Rustica* 1.7.3).

²⁴ The following discussion is based upon Catling 2002.

mainly of small and medium size from farmsteads to hamlets. Then, within a short period from c.450 BC onwards, there was further radical change: a sharp reduction in the number of sites (from 87 to 46), involving a marked discontinuity in site occupation and a permanent desertion of many of the smallest farmstead sites, along with a proportionate increase in medium-sized sites, especially in the number of hamlets. This growth and subsequent decline in numbers of settlements have been interpreted as signifying an initial intensification of agricultural exploitation of this previously marginal area through the location of farms close to areas of cultivation, followed by subsequent retraction due to a combination of land failure and concentration of land-ownership.

The socio-economic implications of these significant changes are, unfortunately, obscured by uncertainty over the status of the inhabitants of most of the survey area. Plausible cases can be made for viewing them either as *helots* working Spartiate farms or as *perioikoi* working the land on their own account or with slave labour. It seems certain, however, that most of the western sector of the survey area, closest to Sparta itself, was Spartiate-owned—especially the area embracing the low hills and spurs along the eastern edge of the Eurotas valley from the confluence of the Rivers Eurotas and Kelephina to the state sanctuary of the Menelaion. Within this particular area, there was an initial foundation of 16 sites in the sixth century, comprising 13 small farmsteads (0.01–0.14 ha) and three somewhat larger sites (0.15–0.30 ha). In the later-fifth-century decline, the total number of settlements was reduced to ten. Only six of the 13 original small farmsteads and one of the larger sites continued in occupation; three new small farmsteads were also founded. More detailed analysis of these specific changes lies beyond the scope of this paper, but the general implications are clear. The initial wave of colonisation must have entailed Spartiate masters moving their *helots* into new settlements to facilitate the new or more intensive cultivation of nearby land. Equally significantly, the subsequent decline and readjustments must have involved the removal of some *helot* households from the landholdings they had formerly worked and the resettlement of others in different locations. In some cases, of course, removal or resettlement may have occurred at times when a *helot* household was becoming unviable anyway due to agricultural failure; but it is unlikely that such major changes could have been effected with no element of arbitrary Spartiate intervention or untimely disruption of *helot* life.

The formation of the agrarian economy

The evidence just considered comes, as already indicated, from just one small area of Spartiate territory and raises again the question whether we can extrapolate the evidence from an area close to Sparta to other areas for which we lack similarly

detailed published survey evidence. Here comparative evidence might once again hope to offer some illumination. In general, it seems that the extent of the masters' or landowners' intervention to control the location and disposition of their dependent labour force is often related to the degree to which they themselves were responsible for forming the fundamental elements of the agrarian economy. In Russia the considerable extent of local self-determination had its roots in the fact that "serfdom and the other means by which the 'ruling groups' exploited the peasantry were superimposed on a peasant society and economy which already existed. The ruling and land-owning elites were not primarily responsible for creating the main productive units in Russia's rural economy" (Moon 1999: 66). In contrast, the U.S. plantation system, in which masters exercised strong control over the disposition of their slaves, was the creation of the white masters themselves, and in many states had initially been operated using mainly white indentured servants before the large-scale importation of black slaves (Elkins 1976: 37–40; Kolchin 1993: 8–13). The situation revealed by the *Laconia Survey* is clearly more similar to that of the U.S. plantation system, in the sense that the local agrarian economy was one created by Spartiate landowners themselves. However, the means by which Spartan domination and *helotisation* were established over more distant areas of Lakonia, and the consequent implications for the formation of their local economies, are unclear.²⁵

The case of Messenia might seem, at first sight, more straightforward. A fragment from the late-seventh-century Spartan poet Tyrtaios (*fr.* 5 West) depicts the Spartans as having gained control of Messene two generations previously through act of conquest.²⁶ Thucydides (1.101) presents a similar picture in his statement that the majority of *helots* who revolted in 464 were descendants of the "old Messenians" who had been enslaved in the past. To this evidence we may add another fragment of Tyrtaios (*fr.* 23 West), which seems to mention the Messenians as a unified group engaged in military conflict with the Spartans, and also references in later sources to a Second Messenian War (in effect, an abortive revolt from Spartan control) during Tyrtaios' own lifetime.²⁷ The impression given by this evidence is of a coherent local population which retained its integrity even after its initial conquest—a population whose agricultural practice may not have been massively disrupted by the Spartan conquest. As I myself recently suggested, "after their conquest most Messenian

²⁵ The divergent accounts in classical and later sources are of little historical value: evidence in Cartledge 1979: 348–349; discussion in Luraghi, this volume.

²⁶ The phrase "fathers of our fathers" may of course have a generic rather than specific temporal reference, but this does not affect Tyrtaios' location of the conquest in time past.

²⁷ As Luraghi notes (this volume), the first attested reference to the Second Messenian War probably derives from Ephorus (cf. Diod. 15.66).

working farmers presumably became servile cultivators of the same fields they had farmed before the conquest" (Hodkinson 2000: 119).

Although I am not convinced by every aspect of recent revisionist interpretations of the origins and development of helotage (Luraghi 2002a and this volume), I would now present a less simple, more nuanced, picture of the formation of the Messenian agrarian economy under Spartiate rule. I would retain the concept of a mass enslavement of the pre-existing population following a military conquest of Messene, as described by Tyrtaios. His reference to the enemy fleeing the mountain range of Ithome and abandoning their rich farmlands should not be interpreted as signifying a mass desertion of the conquered region. Tyrtaios is surely referring to a wealthy elite such as dominated warfare and landholding in most contemporary Greek communities, including Sparta itself.²⁸ Their flight would not have involved the mass of the farming population, which was subjected to the servitude described in other surviving fragments of his poetry (*frs.* 6-7 West). Doubt has been expressed about the feasibility of such a mass enslavement, in the light of Orlando Patterson's comparative study, which highlights "a strong tendency on the part of a conquering group not to enslave a conquered population en masse and in situ" and observes that such attempts "were almost always disastrous failures" (1982: 110). In particular, it has been argued that, "a formerly independent group, with a full social structure and its own ruling elites, cannot be reduced to slavery without huge bloodshed" (Luraghi 2002a: 237). However, as the evidence of Tyrtaios suggests, the local population subjugated by Sparta was one already deprived of its full social structure by the flight of its ruling elite, a factor that would have considerably facilitated the initial act of enslavement.²⁹ Moreover, modern doubters of the basic feasibility of a mass enslavement of a pre-existing population in Greek antiquity should not forget that it was deemed feasible by intelligent later commentators like Thucydides and Theopompos, who also ascribed the Thessalians' domination over the Penestai to the same mechanism.³⁰

That said, I would accept that the process of forming the new agrarian regime within the conquered territory of Messene will have been less straightforward and entailed a greater degree of Spartiate manipulation than the simple superimposition of their exploitation on the top of existing structures suggested by the statement in my earlier study. Moreover, I would agree with the revisionist argument on two

²⁸ For what it is worth, Pausanias' account of the episode (4.14.1) states that leading Messenians with foreign *proxeniai* fled abroad, whilst the mass of the populace returned home as before.

²⁹ That, even so, there remained considerable ethnic solidarity and resistance—as Patterson's thesis would suggest—is shown by Tyrtaios' reference (*fr.* 23 West) to further conflict involving the Messenians (even if one dismisses the later sources' picture of a full-scale Second Messenian War).

³⁰ Theopompos, *FGH Hist* 115F122, *ap.* Athen. 265b-c.

important points: first, that the Spartan conquest of "Messene" mentioned by Tyrtaios probably related to the settlement at the foot of Mt. Ithome and its adjacent territory in eastern Messenia, rather than to any wider geographical area; and, secondly, that it is unlikely that the entire region which later became Messenia had been united before the Spartan conquest, especially as it appears that the region had experienced a widespread break in site occupation during the later eighth century.³¹ Exactly when and how the remainder of the region came under Spartiate control is not precisely known. But in these circumstances it seems that, within a framework of potential intra-regional variations, we should expect some degree of scope for the incoming Spartiates actively to mould local agrarian economies. Some support for this probability may be found in preliminary indications from archaeological survey of an increase in settlements in Messenia in the archaic period in comparison with the Geometric period and of a pattern of nucleated settlement under Spartan rule that contrasts with contemporary patterns elsewhere in Greece.³²

Geographical distance, supervision and absenteeism

We should not imagine, however, that the modalities through which helotage was set in place necessarily exercised a determining impact on Spartiate-helot relations throughout the entire period of Spartan domination. For example, the economic framework of plantation slavery in most regions of Africa was—as in the U.S.A.—a creation of the slaveowners themselves, using newly enslaved imported labour which was typically subjected to close supervision. However, in certain circumstances established second-generation slave villages could become subject to less intervention and gradually assume greater self-direction of their agricultural labour (Klein and Lovejoy 1979: 184-187; Lovejoy 2000: 213). In assessing the development of helotage, we need to give consideration to two further interrelated variables which comparative evidence suggests may have had an important influence. In this section I shall examine the question of geographical distance between owner and cultivator; in the following section, the pattern of residence of the unfree population.

The issue of geographical distance has already been implicitly posed by the fact that both the literary evidence of Xenophon and the archaeological evidence of the *Laconia Survey* suggest a considerable degree of Spartiate intervention in those areas closest to Sparta itself. To what extent should we expect similar levels of intervention further afield? Comparative evidence from a variety of servile systems suggests that the presence or absence of the master or owner can exercise a considerable influence upon

³¹ Luraghi 2002b; Davis et al. 1997: 452; Alcock et al. in press; cf. also the abandonment of Nichoria around the mid-eighth century: McDonald, Coulson and Rosser 1983.

³² McDonald and Hope Simpson 1972: 144; Davis et al. 1997: 455-456; Alcock 2002b.

the level of landowner intervention. Within Russian serfdom, for example, there was a marked difference between estates held by petty squires, who normally resided on their estates and ran their domains themselves, giving village communes and their peasant officials little independence, and estates in the hands of the most important noblemen, who were typically absentee landowners on state service in Moscow or in the army. Some absentee landowners did attempt to make use of stewards to impose an authoritarian regime. But on most such estates the management of agricultural production was in practice a shared enterprise between, on the one hand, the land-lord's stewards or estate managers and, on the other, household patriarchs and peasant functionaries elected by the communes, which in most cases were based upon village communities (Kolchin 1987: 200-201). The difficulties that absentee landowners often had (or thought they had) in ensuring that their stewards—who were themselves normally serfs—performed their duties properly further diminished their capacity for effective intervention. One notable sign of these differential degrees of intervention was that resident landowners almost universally demanded labour services, whereas absentee owners “often preferred to leave their serfs on obrok [dues] rather than worry about the supervisory abilities of their stewards”.³³

As Peter Kolchin's comparative study of American slavery and Russian serfdom has noted, the great majority of U.S. slaves—in contrast to their Russian serf counterparts—had resident masters, who managed their plantations directly, usually without even an overseer, and on smaller farms personally directed their labour and even worked alongside them.³⁴ Under these conditions slave independence of action was severely restricted. Nevertheless, there were exceptional areas, most notably the ante-bellum South Carolina low country, in which absenteeism was common among wealthy slave-owners, who often resided in the town of Charleston rather than on their estates. Some, though not all, absentee landowners appointed a white steward as supervisor; but the key figure in directing work on many estates was usually a black “driver”, himself a slave. Hand-in-hand with a lower degree of direct owner intervention went a more moderate version of labour services: the so-called “task” system, according to which slaves were assigned given tasks and could cease work for the day on their completion. Within a more flexible, self-managed work regime, slaves were able to devote more time to working for themselves and to accumulate small amounts of property.³⁵ The huge difference which the presence or absence of the slaveowner can have on the character of farming operations is also emphasised by the Roman agricultural writer, Columella. He strongly advocated the advantages of farming

³³ Kolchin 1987: 58-65 (quotation from pp. 64-65), 87-89; Moon 1999: 202-205.

³⁴ Kolchin 1987: 59-61, 65-68, 1993: 93-132.

³⁵ Morgan 1983; Kolchin 1993: 31-32.

nearby estates through slave labour working under close supervision by the owner. In contrast, he recommended turning over to tenant farmers distant estates “which it is not easy for the owner to visit”, due to the difficulty of controlling the activities of slaves, even when there was a slave overseer (*De Re Rustica* 1.7.5-7).

In the above cases we have been dealing with a relatively sharp dichotomy between the owner's residence on the estate and his absenteeism in a distant town or on state service. As Orlando Patterson (1982: 180-181) points out, however, we should distinguish between such full-scale absenteeism and the simple “living apart” of the master class, as is illustrated by the case of slavery in nineteenth-century, pre-colonial Africa. In various regions of the continent, particular economic and political conditions following the decline of the European slave trade led to the widespread growth of a system of agricultural slavery geared to market production whose most common shared characteristic was the establishment of plantations grouped around the towns.³⁶ Under this system, residential arrangements of both slaves and masters were varied.³⁷ On smaller plantations groups of slaves were often housed in a separate section within the compound of the master's family, and owner and slaves worked the fields side by side. On somewhat larger plantations (over about 20 slaves), the owner's family might live apart from their slaves, though at not any great distance; under these circumstances relatively close supervision was still feasible. The largest plantations of several hundred or more slaves often involved separate slave villages, located at a variety of distances from the town, from the immediate suburbs up to a radius of 30 km or more. Given the range of distances involved, the degree of separateness between master and slaves and the extent of intervention from the master varied considerably. Some owners of large plantations, such as government officials, military personnel and merchants resident in the towns, were absentees who relied upon slave overseers. In other cases, however, the plantations might be managed by junior members of the master's lineage. Within one of the most-studied regions, the nineteenth-century Sokoto Caliphate in Islamic West Africa, larger slave-owners appear in general to have been able to maintain a relatively strict and closely-defined regime of labour services, in which the slaves were organised in gangs farming the masters' fields, although they also possessed their own plots which they were allocated time to

³⁶ The economic and political conditions, the prevalence of plantation slavery and its physical manifestations, are sketched in Lovejoy 1979: 1267-1271, and outlined more broadly in Lovejoy 2000: 165-251.

³⁷ The varied nature of these arrangements is indicated by the semantic range of local terms (such as *rinji* and *gandu*) used to describe larger plantations within the Sokoto Caliphate in Islamic West Africa. These terms could embrace slaves living in the same compound as the master's family through to separate slave villages (Lovejoy 1979: 1279-1280).

cultivate. However, within one region of the Caliphate—that of Nupe in the Bida emirate—the slave villages, which comprised homogeneous populations of captives taken from other areas of Nupe and located together according to ethnic group, enjoyed considerably less intervention, in spite of their relatively recent foundation, organising their own labour regime under village headmen and periodically remitting agricultural tribute.³⁸ In other regions of West Africa too, such as among the Sherbro of Sierra Leone, “the slave villages, being spatially peripheral to the master’s household, slaves were often so little supervised” (MacCormack 1977: 198).

How might these comparative insights illuminate Spartiate-helot relations? The Spartiates all resided in the cluster of villages that constituted Sparta itself. As regards their holdings in the Sparta valley and neighbouring areas, the distinction drawn above between genuine absenteeism and simple “living apart”, along with the example of the closely-regulated “suburban” West African slave villages, reinforces the impression we have already gained from both the literary and the archaeological evidence: namely, that, even if there was a residential separation between the Spartiates masters and their helots, the minimal distance between them would not have posed any great barrier to a high degree of intervention in helot farming. Such intervention would have been facilitated by the fact that one of these Spartiate villages, Amyklai, was located in the very centre of the valley, 5 km south of the main cluster. A further indication of Spartiate intervention is the finding of the *Laconia Survey* that the pottery assemblage of most of the settlements in its western sector close to Sparta lacked evidence of storage vessels, suggesting that their agricultural produce was taken for storage to Sparta itself (Catling 2002: 195–196). In several respects, Spartiate management of their estates in the Sparta valley and its environs appears similar to the level of intervention ascribed to the Athenian landowner Ischomachos in Xenophon’s *Oikonomikos* (7.29–21.12). Ischomachos and his wife reside in a town house, where the agricultural produce is stored (cf. esp. 9.2–10); but whenever he has no pressing business in town he walks out to his slave-worked farm, where he superintends all the details of the work and implements improvements in method (11.14–18; cf. 21.10).

Many Spartiate estates, however, lay some considerable distance from Sparta. Thucydides (4.3) estimated that Pylos on the coast of western Messenia was “about 400 stades from Sparta”, approximately 70 km (cf. Hornblower 1996: 154). Even the eastern Messenian plains were some 40 km distant and parts of the Helos valley in southern Lakonia some 30 km.³⁹ The impression given by literary sources which describe the Spartiate lifestyle, such as Xenophon’s *Polity of the Lakedaimonians* and Plutarch’s *Life of*

³⁸ Lovejoy 1978, 1979: 1280–1286, 2000, esp. pp. 196–199, 205–206, 212–216; Mason 1973: 465–466.

³⁹ I have suggested elsewhere that the Spartiates may have held estates even further south in Lakonia, in the plain of Molaoi some 50 km distant (Hodkinson 2000: 141).

Lykourgos, is that Spartiate life entailed a male citizen’s more-or-less continuous presence in or around Sparta itself, so that he would be available for civic duties and especially for the evening meal at his mess group, attendance at which was compulsory except if delayed by sacrifice or hunting (Plut. *Lyk.* 12.2). In contrast, other evidence suggests that periods of individual absence from Sparta were not uncommon: for example, Spartiates are attested as travelling abroad to visit foreign guest-friends and to worship or compete in games at foreign sanctuaries.⁴⁰ It is possible therefore that citizens could periodically obtain leave to visit their distant estates. However, since the estates of many Spartiates, and especially the wealthy, were probably fragmented into smaller holdings scattered throughout Lakonia and Messenia, it is unlikely that most male citizen landowners would be able to obtain long enough leave to visit each of their holdings with sufficient regularity to sustain an effective degree of personal intervention. Nor is it easy to imagine that most members of the other major set of landowners, Spartiate women, had the time or opportunity to make such wide-ranging personal visits, given their attested household responsibilities in Sparta (Plato, *Laws* 805e; Xen. *Lak. Pol.* 1.9).⁴¹ Hence, as far as their more distant estates were concerned, the probability is that most Spartiate landowners were effectively absentees.⁴²

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⁴⁰ Cf. Hodkinson 1999: 160–176, 2000: 174–175, 294–298, 307–323, 337–352.

⁴¹ Of course, many estates would also be held by minors, both male and female, who were tied to Sparta during their public upbringing; but I take it that responsibility for management lay in the hands of their adult guardians.

⁴² See below for discussion of the large inhabited building discovered at Kopanaki in the Soulima valley. It has been interpreted as the home of a Spartiate landlord with his helots living in attendance (Kaltas 1983; cf. Harrison and Spencer 1998: 162). As indicated below, however, our knowledge of the surrounding settlement pattern is currently insufficient to sustain this conclusion. Moreover, even if the building were the centre of a Spartiate estate, it would not necessarily imply the physical presence of the Spartiate owner. A further piece of evidence is Xenophon’s account of the conspiracy of Kinadon, which includes a reference (*Hell.* 3.3.8) to “Lakedaimonians [probably Spartiates] both older and younger”, who had visited perioikic Aulon—possibly located in the Soulima valley (Roebuck 1941: 25–26; Lazenby and Hope Simpson 1972: 98 n.101, though there is some uncertainty whether the name signifies a town or a region: Cartledge 1979: 274). Aulon is said to be a place where there were helots, whom Kinadon was ordered to arrest, along with certain of its citizens. The circumstances in which both Spartiates and helots were present in Aulon are, however, unclear. It could be a matter of citizens supervising distant estates: it is not impossible that Spartiates owned land near to perioikic settlements, in which helot farmers also resided. However, the order to arrest Aulonitai and helots could equally indicate that we are dealing with helot fugitives and *perioikoi* harbouring them, and that the visiting Spartiates were on official business (Cartledge 1979: 274–275; Lazenby 1997: 445). This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the word Xenophon uses to describe the younger Spartiate visitors, *neôteroi*, is the same used in the previous sentence to refer to young men from the elite military squad of *hippeis* who were sent with Kinadon on his mission. Other interpretations of the episode have been suggested by other scholars, such as that the helots were farming perioikic estates or serving a Spartiate garrison (cf. Lazenby 1997: 445). Overall, the context of the episode is too unclear to serve as the basis for any interpretations about the direction of Aulon’s agrarian economy.

The obvious question is how absentee Spartiate citizens could ensure the effective management of their distant estates. The comparative evidence considered above suggests that the most common method by which absentee landowners have exploited distant servile agrarian populations is through the agency of individuals drawn from the servile population itself in each locality: serf stewards and communal officials within Russian serfdom; black drivers in low country South Carolina; slave overseers or village headmen within the slave villages of pre-colonial Africa. Similarly, it is *a priori* probable that absentee Spartiate landowners drew upon the services of certain individual helots in the management of their holdings—and not only of their holdings in distant Messenia. Even in the case of estates within the Sparta valley, the Spartiate owner could not be continuously present due to his civic duties, and there will also have been shorter periods when large numbers of owners were unavoidably absent on military campaigns.⁴³ So too, even under the comparatively strict supervisory regime described in Xenophon's *Oikonomikos*, Ischomachos put his farms in the management of slave bailiffs at times when he was not personally present (12.2). There is, in fact, a piece of evidence which can enable us to identify, at least by their generic name, the helots who probably acted as managing agents on behalf of Spartiate landowners. A gloss which survives from Hesychios' lexicon of rare words refers to the "*mnōionomoi*: leaders of the helots".⁴⁴ Drawing upon the evidence of the poem of Hybrias (*ap. Athenaios* 695f-696a), Jean Ducat has concluded that the *mnōia* was a group of slaves living and working on an estate (1990: 63, 74). On this interpretation, the *mnōionomoi* can be viewed as leading men drawn from the helots themselves, men who exercised supervision and control over the persons in their *mnōia*, and through whom a Spartiate owner would be likely to work.

The extant version of Hesychios' text is too brief to indicate any distinctions between the roles played by helot *mnōionomoi* in different geographical locations. In view of the comparative evidence considered above, however, we should expect that differences in levels of Spartiate supervision dictated by geographical distance

⁴³ During the period of Sparta's overseas empire in the late fifth and early fourth centuries, a sizeable number of prominent Spartiates spent substantial periods—sometimes several years—away from Spartan territory (Hodkinson 1993: 153-157).

⁴⁴ Hesychios' lexicon, which probably dates to the fifth century AD but drew upon much earlier specialist lexica, focused on rare words in poetry and in Greek dialects. It survives only in a severely abridged form, in which the original lexicon has been reduced to a mere glossary (*OCD*³, 701-702). The extant text, μονομοιτῶν Ειλώτων ἄρχοντες (μ1626, ed. Latte, ii.676) has been plausibly emended by Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1924: 273) to read μνηονόμοι: τῶν Ειλώτων ἄρχοντες. Quite apart from the explanatory gloss, the term *mnōionomoi* itself implies a controlling and supervisory role, just as the *paidonomos* had charge of and responsibility for the youths in the Spartiate upbringing (Xen. *Lak. Pol.* 2-4).

will have led to considerable variations in the degree of responsibility for agricultural management possessed by different *mnōionomoi*. Xenophon's Ischomachos, whom we have compared to owners of estates in the Sparta valley, given his ability to walk to his farms, was able to exert a strict regime of supervision and correction over his slave bailiff (*Oik.* 12.2-14.10; cf. 20.16-20; 21.9). Such close supervision would not have been feasible further afield. It is possible (though by no means certain) that, in order to monitor the activities of *mnōionomoi* on their distant estates, some wealthy Spartiates may have appointed outside agents, most plausibly, perhaps, drawn from among the *perioikoi*: men with functions comparable to those of estate managers within Russian serfdom, appointed by landowners to exercise a general supervision over their dispersed holdings. However, the Russian experience (Moon 1999: 202-203) suggests that, even had such a practice been employed, the outcome of such supervision would normally have been a shared responsibility which left plenty of initiative for the *mnōionomos*.

In the absence of the Spartiate owner, how far then might the responsibilities of helot *mnōionomoi* extend? Was their management limited to strictly agricultural matters, such as ensuring the availability of the appropriate equipment, seed and animals, supervising the input of labour, determining the mix of crops to be grown, deciding the timing of sowing and harvest, and ensuring delivery of the owner's share of the produce? Or did it extend to more "structural" responsibilities, such as ensuring that the level of available labour matched the size of the holding and the owner's requirements for produce: responsibilities which might have involved (re)distributing cultivation rights between households or exerting influence over key life-decisions affecting the growth or diminution of helot families? The possibility of such an extended role raises questions regarding the capacity in which the *mnōionomos* performed his role. Clearly, he was in one sense an overseer accepted, if not appointed, by the Spartiate owner; but did his position also reflect, as Ducat (1990: 63) has suggested, the structure of the local helot community? Ducat terms the *mnōionomoi* "des chefs coutumiers"; I would think particularly of the heads of larger and more important helot households.

Residence and helot communities

The proposition that the persons chosen as *mnōionomoi* may have emerged from the structure of local helot society also raises the question whether their roles were confined to individual Spartiate estates or may have had a wider communal aspect. Despite Ducat's understandable linkage of the *mnōia* to a group of helots working a Spartiate estate, the term itself is unspecific in reference and could equally refer to a broader grouping of helots. In approaching this question, it is relevant to examine

the issue of helot residence patterns. The comparative material considered above suggests that a relatively high degree of local, communal self-direction of agricultural production may be particularly associated with a nucleated settlement pattern, as in the case of the village communities of Russian serfs and certain groups of African slaves.

This association does appear to apply, both positively and negatively, in the case of helotage. We have already seen that the *Laconia Survey* area adjacent to Sparta itself was one of dispersed, small-scale settlements. Although both archaeological and literary evidence is limited, current indications are that the Sparta plain too contained no sizeable settlements beyond the Spartiate villages and that the helot cultivators were dispersed in a mixture of isolated farmsteads and hamlets (Catling 2002: 232-233). In short, those helot farmers under the closest degree of supervision by their Spartiate masters were settled in a pattern of residence less conducive to collective co-ordination of agricultural production by the helots themselves.

We are sadly ill-informed about residential patterns in other helotised areas of Lakonia. As regards distant Messenia, however, the indications are that settlement patterns were considerably more nucleated than in the areas of Lakonia closest to Sparta. These differential patterns can be seen most clearly through comparison of the results of the *Laconia Survey* with those of the *Pylos Regional Archaeological Project* (PRAP), which has recently surveyed an area of western Messenia whose distance from any definitely attested perioikic settlements suggests that "there is no overwhelming reason to envisage the residents . . . as anything but of helot status" (Alcock 2002b: 193). Whereas the *Laconia Survey* discovered 87 late archaic and 46 classical sites within the 70 km² of its survey area, the 40 km² of western Messenia surveyed by PRAP produced a mere six archaic and four classical sites (Alcock 2002b: 193-195). The principal settlement in the area (named by the survey team "I04, Romanou Romanou") was marked by a sherd scatter of some 18 to 22 ha in the archaic period and probably even larger in classical times, compared with a mere 3 ha and 6 ha for the largest sites in the *Laconia Survey* (the perioikic village of Sellasia and the fort of Agios Konstantinos). It was clearly a sizeable conglomeration with a population size well into four figures.⁴⁵ Moreover, in both the archaic and classical periods the second largest site within the survey area (a different site in each period) lay close by, a mere 1.5 km distant. In the classical period these are the only securely-attested places of permanent habitation in the entire survey area.⁴⁶ Although a complete picture of

⁴⁵ Population densities for unwalled settlements of some 100-125 persons respectively per ha, which have been suggested by other intensive surveys (Catling 2002: 205-206; Jameson, Runnels and van Andel 1994: 545), would give it a population of some 1,800-2,750 persons in the archaic period.

⁴⁶ Of the other two sites, one is probably a shrine; the other is attested by only three sherds and may be a seasonal dwelling or a place of "off-site" rural activity (Alcock 2002b: 195).

habitation within the region is obscured by the fact that the various sectors within the PRAP survey area are not contiguous, the survey results indicate an indisputable pattern of residential concentration. Further indications of this pattern have emerged from other, less intensive surveys. The mean size of archaic sites reported by the *University of Minnesota Messenia Expedition*, whose survey area covered the whole of Messenia (and more), has been calculated as approximately 3 ha (Alcock 2002b: 191), equivalent to the sherd scatter from the village of Sellasia, at the top end of the range of habitations in the *Laconia Survey*. Conversely, survey of the "Five Rivers" area by the Gulf of Messenia revealed no evidence of dispersed habitation in farmsteads in the archaic and classical periods, in contrast to the Hellenistic period (Lukermann and Moody 1978: 99; cf. Harrison and Spencer 1998: 160-161). As Richard Catling has recently commented, in comparing the settlement patterns of Lakonian and Messenian helots, "a clear distinction begins to emerge in the ways in which these two groups were distributed in the landscape, and presumably in the ways in which the regions were farmed" (2002: 253).

Not that settlement patterns were necessarily uniform throughout Messenia. One indication of diversity is the eleven-room building (about 30 x 17 m) built around a central courtyard, with thick walls suggestive of a second storey, which was uncovered by rescue excavation in the modern village of Kopanaki in the Soulima valley (Kaltsas 1983). This impressively large structure, whose broad assemblage of domestic pottery including storage facilities marks it clearly as a habitation site, has been interpreted—along with an apparently similar building about 9 km E.S.E. down the valley, near the village of Vasiliko—as evidence of "a plantation-like sort of settlement, with big and isolated buildings forming the centre of large land-holdings" (Luraghi 2002a: 232). Although so precise a conclusion seems premature, given our ignorance—in the absence of intensive field survey—of settlement patterns in the region of each building,⁴⁷ their monumental character does suggest a different kind of settlement from those discussed above. Nevertheless, the picture here too seems to be of a population concentrated rather than spread thinly across the landscape.

⁴⁷ Interpretation of what little evidence does exist is hampered by uncertainty over the period of occupation of the building at Kopanaki. The excavator dated it from the second half of the sixth century to the first quarter of the fifth; but Richard Catling (1996: 34 n.12) has argued that the building's pottery assemblage should be downdated to the second half of the fifth century (perhaps c.450-425). Classical sherds have been noted at two nearby locations: (i) 1 km ENE, on the summit of Stylari hill (McDonald and Rapp 1972: 298; Register A no. 233); (ii) 1.5 km W, at one of the tholos tombs at Ano Kopanaki, Akourthi (ibid. no. 234), which constitutes possible evidence of tomb cult (cf. Alcock 1991: 465 no.23; Antonaccio 1995: 85-87). On the building at Vasiliko, Valmin 1941; Pikoulas 1984. The dating of its sherds and inscriptions to the late sixth and early fifth centuries is somewhat generic and beset with some uncertainties: cf. Valmin 1941: 66, 70 n.1, 73; Jeffery 1990: 203 n.2.

The concentration of the Messenian helot population into nucleated rather than dispersed settlements was probably an important factor in ensuring the capacity of helot *mnōionomoi* to act effectively as local co-ordinators of agricultural production. It also makes more plausible the possibility that the *mnōionomoi* may have operated at a broader communal level, perhaps even at the level of a large village like "I04 Romanou *Romanou*", where they might in effect have been village leaders comprising the more important household heads. Unfortunately, we have no direct evidence for the nature of helot household structures. I have suggested elsewhere that, as part of a strategy to even out some of the above fluctuations and divergences, helot households may have taken the form of co-residential multiple family households (Hodkinson 2000: 125, 386-387). Under such arrangements, the heads of large households would have been notable figures, men of some authority in the wider community. This suggestion, however, must necessarily remain hypothetical.

Whatever the structure of helot households, in considering the kinds of roles that village leaders could potentially have played, we can turn for potential illumination to the best attested case for comparison, namely, the officials of Russian serf communes, who played an important mediating role between absentee landowners and the local serf community. David Moon (1999: 199) has noted that, "communes were the basic institutions of local government in Russian villages . . . guided by state decrees and landowners' instructions, as well as the peasants' unwritten customary law . . . Communal officials were responsible for a wide range of village affairs, including day-to-day administration, sharing out and collecting the obligations communities owed to their landowners and the state, and distributing the village's arable land between households. Communes directed the village economy, especially the three-field system of crop rotation." Of course, in the absence of hard information, we cannot simply transfer the capacities of Russian commune officials onto Messenian helot *mnōionomoi*. We saw earlier that, whereas in Russia serfdom was superimposed on a pre-existing peasant society, there is room for debate about the relative contributions made by the incoming Spartiates and the local farming population to the formation of the Messenian agrarian economy under Spartan rule. Nevertheless, as already noted, the examples of many second-generation African slave villages indicate how even initially disparate groups of slaves transplanted into new territory can, within a context of village residence and landowner absenteeism, come to assume greater self-direction of the agrarian economy. In particular, the aforementioned case of Nupe slave villages, which comprised ethnically homogeneous groups of captives taken from other parts of Nupe territory, shows how the development of semi-autonomous agricultural production can be powerfully facilitated when the servile population shares a

common ethnic identity—as was increasingly the case in fifth-century Messenia, whether founded in a longstanding collective identity or spurred by the development of a secondary ethnic consciousness under the common conditions of servitude imposed by Spartan rule (Luraghi 2002a: 238-240). The example of the Russian serf commune, consequently, constitutes an appropriate comparison to think with.

We can reasonably hypothesise that the experience of shared residence will have led many Messenian helot village communities to undertake a number of communal functions. Like any human community, helot villages will have needed to establish mechanisms for regulating anti-social behaviour, maintaining internal law and order, and administering social sanctions. The village was also no doubt the place where helot households working on different estates would interact socially and intermarry. Although evidence from the *PRAP* survey shows that Messenian settlement patterns under Spartan rule were not unchanging, the pre-eminence of the village "I04 Romanou *Romanou*" throughout the archaic and classical periods also suggests a significant degree of permanence and continuity, especially in comparison with the situation within the area of the *Laconia Survey*. Recent research has shown how, even among the fragile servile communities on U.S. slave plantations, physically separated from one another and constantly vulnerable to disruption by their masters, there still existed "extended kinship networks among slaves, who often exhibited impressive awareness of and attachments to more distant familial relations" (Kolchin 1993: 140). Hence, we should expect some meaningful level of kinship relations and community within helot settlements—even among the dispersed, less permanent and more tightly supervised settlements close to Sparta. We can get some sense of the decision-making capabilities of helot communities throughout both Lakonia and Messenia in the Spartans' infamous appeal to the helots "to pick out those of their number who claimed to have most distinguished themselves in the wars" (Thuc. 4.80).⁴⁸ Even helot communities in Lakonia possessed, at the very least, effective channels of internal communication, as was demonstrated in 371 when, despite Sparta itself being under siege, a Spartan call for volunteers was disseminated so effectively that more than 6,000 Lakonian helots came forward to enlist (Xen. *Hell.* 6.5.28-29). Under the more favourable and enduring conditions of Messenian helot villages, we should expect a particularly solid network of kinship relations and community; and with it a strong sense of a shared past and an attachment to place which could have served as the basis for

⁴⁸ "Infamous" because the Spartans subsequently put all those selected to death. This is not the place to enter into the recent debate about the historical authenticity of the episode. At the very least, Thucydides and his source(s) believed the helots capable of such communal decision-making.

the development of communal institutions. Some indication of the sense of attachment that some Messenian communities had to their territory and their past is evident in the "social memories" recently explored by Susan Alcock (2002a: 132-175), in particular through the evidence for local tomb cults, which indicate the operation of some level of communal organisation for the commemoration of the "heroes" of the past buried in monumental Bronze Age tombs.⁴⁹ The existence of these local cults in archaic and classical Messenia is an especially notable sign of communal identity, in that comparable tomb cults are considerably less present in other regions of archaic and classical Greece, and are almost totally absent from the helotised parts of Lakonia (Antonaccio 1995: esp. 69-70).

In these circumstances, we should give serious consideration to the possibility that some helot village communities may have taken on a role in the management of agricultural labour and in the fulfilment of the obligations towards the Spartiate landowners whose estates were cultivated by their inhabitants. There is a hint in the case of the Penestai of Thessaly that the obligations of some of their servile communities were organised on a communal level. As Jean Ducat (1994: 90-91) has noted, the term *syntaxeis*, by which Archemachos of Euboia (*ap. Athen.* 264a-b) refers to the dues owed by Penestai to their masters, may carry the connotation of dues rendered collectively rather than individually by each servile household.⁵⁰ However, the parallel with the Messenian helots is not exact, in that the very large numbers of Penestai held by the wealthiest Thessalians probably meant that the servile inhabitants of certain Penestic villages, like the serfs of most Russian communes, all owed their obligations to a single master;⁵¹ in these circumstances a collective responsibility for dues would make perfect sense. Although individual wealthy Spartiates reportedly possessed holdings of helots which far exceeded private holdings of slaves in contemporary Athens ([Plato], *Alk.* I 122d), it is doubtful whether any were

⁴⁹ On Messenian tomb cult, see esp. Alcock 1991, 2002a: 132-175; Antonaccio 1995: 70-102. The spread of these cults throughout diverse parts of Messenia suggests that they cannot be ascribed exclusively to Messenian *perioikoi*.

⁵⁰ Ducat squares this evidence with the evidence cited earlier of Penestai being paid monthly rations by suggesting that the difference reflects either the distinction between Penestai directly attached to the master's "palace" and those located in more distant and independent situations, or a distinction between the archaic period when the power of the Thessalian aristocracy was in full flower and later periods when its weakening in the face of the development of poleis had led to a modification in the Penestai's terms of servitude (1994: 91; cf. 118-119).

⁵¹ Ducat 1994: 88-89. As he points out, the fact that Menon of Pharsalos could equip 300 of his Penestai as troops (Dem. 23.199) implies that his total holdings ran well into four figures.

sufficiently large as to encompass an entire village.⁵² Hence communal responsibility for dues would have involved co-ordinating payments of produce to a number of different Spartiate owners; if so, this would have entailed a very significant level of communality indeed.

Leadership and politics

This crucial point that, for all their common residence, different helot households would have been working on different plots of land for different masters, subject to a range of variations in their treatment and therefore to different perceptions of their personal requirements and needs, is a useful reminder that even among the most unified human societies there is a point at which impulses towards communal behaviour hit the buffer of household self-interest. Recent research has demonstrated that even the Russian commune, so often idealised as a model of social co-operation and egalitarianism, was itself a hive of village politics dominated by household patriarchs or by factions of wealthier peasants whose power was based on kinship and patronage. In a spirit of collusion between household heads, communal officials and the landowner's bailiff, local village elites "used the power entrusted to them by landowners to oppress and exploit other peasants in pursuit of their own interests."⁵³ We are not of course able to determine the extent to which helot leaders such as the *mnōionomoi* were able to engage in similar exploitative behaviour over their fellow helots. However, the existence of comparable underlying conditions of economic and social inequality is clearly evident. As in other societies—such as low country South Carolina (Morgan 1983: 120-122)—in which unfree farming populations have enjoyed a certain level of independence, helots were able to accumulate not insignificant amounts of movable property. The ancient sources depict

⁵² In a recent discussion (Hodkinson 2000: 385-388) I suggested that an "ordinary" Spartiate estate of just over 18 ha might have sustained about 5 helot families and that the average landholding of wealthy Spartiates may have been roughly two and a half times as large at about 45 ha. If we assume, *exempli gratia*, that the wealthiest non-royal Spartiate (I purposely exclude the kings) might have held double that amount, some 90 ha, his estates might have sustained some 25 helot families, or a total population of about 125 helots. Even if all his landholdings were concentrated in one place, on the estimates of village population density of some 100-125 persons per ha referred to above (n. 45), this would imply only a very modest settlement of hardly more than a hectare in extent. In reality, however, most Spartiate estates were probably fragmented into a number of different holdings. If one were to adopt the comparatively low figures for the total helot population proposed by Figueira and Scheidel (this volume), the likelihood of the inhabitants of a sizeable helot village belonging to a single Spartiate would be even more remote.

⁵³ Moon 1999: 230-236 (quotation from p. 231); Hoch 1996. Cf. the detailed case studies of Hoch 1986; Melton 1993.

helots engaging in private sales (Hdt 9.80), insuring their boats, and expecting to receive rewards of silver (Thuc. 4.26). In the late third century no fewer than 6,000 Lakonian helots were each able to accumulate the sum of 5 Attic minas (500 drachmas) with which to purchase their freedom (Plut. *Kleom.* 23.1). This property accumulation was doubtless rooted in the system of sharecropping, which created possibilities for households enjoying a high ratio of labourers to household size to gain some benefit from agricultural surpluses that they produced.

A necessary consequence of private property accumulation was economic differentiation. In addition to temporary economic differences between helot households deriving from the normal fluctuations of household life cycles, more enduring differentiation will have resulted from divergent demographic histories and consequent differences in household size. Studies of pre-industrial agrarian societies have often noted positive correlations between household size and levels of wealth (Shanin 1972: 63–68). The potential for considerable economic differentiation among a helot-like servile population is suggested by the claim of Archemachos of Euboia (in the passage cited above) that many Penestai were wealthier than their Thessalian masters.⁵⁴ The presence of differential prosperity amongst a rural population under Spartiate rule has now been documented archaeologically through the wide variations in ceramic assemblages at different sites within the area of the *Laconia Survey* (Catling 2002: 193–195). Within Messenia, archaeological indications of socio-economic differentiation and the exercise of social control may be present in the evidence for the phenomenon of tomb cult mentioned above. Several recent studies of tomb cults have observed that, while they are in one sense a sign of community solidarity, they could also be used to proclaim the superiority of leading families who claimed to trace their pedigrees back to the heroic age, and in particular to the “ancestor” commemorated in the cult.⁵⁵ Excavated finds from the best published example of Messenian tomb cult—that at Tholos F at Nichoria in the Five Rivers region, which dates to the later fifth and early fourth century—suggest that the horizons of some of the cult participants were more than purely Messenian: of 23 recorded items of fine ware, at least 13 (56%), have been identified as either imported items or local imitations of foreign work, with especial links to Olympia and Attica.⁵⁶ Moreover, finds of pithoi and amphorae suggest that the

⁵⁴ As Ducat (1994: 15) notes, the statement is a “paradoxe banal” and is doubtless exaggerated, but makes sense only in the context of economic differentiation among the servile population.

⁵⁵ Morris 1988: 756–758; cf. Antonaccio 1995: 142, 257–268; Alcock 2002a: 146–152.

⁵⁶ These are my own calculations from the finds published in Coulson and Wilkie 1983. Cf. also Antonaccio 1995: 90–93, although it is unclear how her interpretation that the tomb was reused as a rural or pastoral shelter accords with the presence of fine tableware.

cult’s administration included the storage of foodstuffs and liquids for communal dining, a vehicle by which leading helots could perhaps articulate their leadership through the extraction of surplus produce from their own or others’ holdings. Thus the administration of tomb cult brings us back to the organisation of agricultural production and to the authority over other helots which the *mnōionomoi*, “the leaders of the helots”, may have exercised through their supervision and direction of the agrarian economy. As Jacques Annequin (1985: 647) has justly remarked, “Surveiller c’est exercer un pouvoir”.

Other than the tantalising hints provided by tomb cult, our ignorance of so many of the details of helot society generally prevents us from detecting historical episodes in which more prominent helot households used their position for their own self-advancement at the expense of their fellow helots. One set of episodes in which such personal self-advancement can clearly be seen, however, is the positive response given by several thousand helots, from 424 BC onwards, to Spartan calls for military recruits, often in return for freedom from helot status.⁵⁷ Some of these former helot recruits were, indeed, placed on garrison service at Lepreon near the border of northern Messenia (Thuc 5.34), where one of their duties was presumably the capture of runaway helots. Given the evidence of differential status within helot communities and the hint of some communal role in the recruitment process, one wonders whether the composition of these groups of manumitted helots was skewed towards members of the more prominent households. To what extent was the acceptability, indeed desirability, to many helots of military service in Sparta’s armies rooted in the social relations of production between helot *mnōionomoi* and their Spartiate masters, in the process of privileged collaboration practised by the *mnōionomoi* in the management of Spartiate estates?

In raising this particular question, of course, we are led logically on to the broader, political question that lies at the heart of modern debates about helot-Spartiate relationships: how, in the face of occasional widespread revolt, the minority elite group of Spartiates, largely confined to Sparta itself, maintained effective control for several centuries over the much larger servile helot population spread around their large and often distant territory. The particular insight to emerge from this article is, I suggest, that the issue of Spartiate collective political management stands parallel to, and may have been interlocked with, the issue of individual Spartiate management of agricultural estates. If the relations of privileged collaboration established in the agrarian sphere between Spartiate masters and

⁵⁷ E.g. Thuc. 4.80; 5.67; 7.19; 8.5; Xen. *Hell.* 3.1.4; 3.4.2; 6.5.28. Cf. Ducat 1990: 159–166; Hunt 1998, esp. 53–62, 170–175.

the *mnōionomoi* reinforced the authority of wealthy helot households, the influence exercised by those prominent helots within their own communities may in turn have contributed towards the maintenance of order and the stifling, for the most part, of protest against Spartan rule.

Conclusions and prospects

The substantive part of this paper began by asking how helot farming actually worked on the ground, in particular to what extent it was directed by intervention from Spartiate owners, and what the implications were for the fundamental conditions of helot life, including the nature of local helot communities. In addressing these questions, I have attempted to examine certain key variables and general insights suggested by comparative evidence from other systems of unfree agrarian labour, as a means of providing context to and extracting maximum value from the limited ancient literary and archaeological evidence. The first variable to be examined, the nature of helot obligations, was one which took a common form throughout the helotised regions of Spartiate territory: the payment of dues in kind through a sharecropping arrangement. Comparative evidence indicated that the payment of dues was typically correlated with a lesser degree of direct intervention by the owner, although the use of sharecropping may have provided a somewhat greater incentive for such intervention than if the dues had been fixed. The next issue examined was whether helots enjoyed practical fixity of tenure on the land. The ancient evidence regarding the sale of helots proved to be somewhat ambiguous; but the changing agrarian settlement patterns close to Sparta revealed by the *Laconia Survey* suggested that in this region Spartiate owners actively settled their helots onto new agricultural land and subsequently re-settled them when conditions deteriorated. This insight prompted investigation of the underlying issue of responsibility for the formation of the agrarian economy, which comparative study suggested was an important initial influence upon the dominant group's capacity to intervene in agricultural production. It was concluded that, in contrast to the *Laconia Survey* area, Sparta's acquisition of control over eastern Messenia involved the incorporation of a pre-existing farming population within its own territory, although there was probably some scope for the incoming Spartiates to mould local agrarian structures. From here, the observation, derived again from comparative evidence, that subsequent developments in agrarian structures could sometimes override initial patterns of exploitation led to examination of two inter-related variables which have frequently been noted as exercising a significant influence upon social relations of production: geographical distance and patterns of residence among the unfree population. The first of these was, by definition, a

factor differentiating different regions of Spartiate territory. Comparative material indicated that the high degree of Spartiate intervention in areas of Lakonia close to Sparta would not have been feasible in regions further afield where, as absentee landowners, Spartiates would have had to manage their estates through helot overseers, such as the *mnōionomoi*, the "leaders of the helots". This distinction according to geographical distance was seen to correlate with a marked difference between the dispersed settlement pattern of areas close to Sparta and the prevailing pattern of nucleated residence in Messenia. This latter pattern would have created greater potential scope for the development of communal identity and institutions in the context of village residence. Prompted by comparative evidence, however, it was noted that inequalities among the helots may have led to the domination of communal activities by wealthier households who, through their collaboration with Spartiate landowners, could gain private advantage which gave them a vested interest in the maintenance of Spartan rule.

Through use of the comparative method we have been able to reach a deeper understanding, not only of the relationships between Spartiate landowners and their unfree labour force in the operation of the agrarian economy, but also of the implications for certain aspects of helot society, such as their experience of leadership and community. Indeed, the insights of this paper regarding the social relations of production between Spartiates and helots could be profitably extended into a more in-depth examination of relations of patronage and of the potential use of helots as a source of socio-political influence. A number of other aspects of helotage, some of them briefly touched on in this essay—aspects such as the use of helots (or ex-helots) in warfare, their employment in domestic service, helot property ownership, and religious practice—could also be fruitfully explored in the context of other systems of unfree labour, drawing upon a wider range of societies, and in greater depth, than in this initial study. For the present, however, this article has indicated how the practice of comparative history can illuminate the relationship between the helots and their masters to a greater degree than is possible through exclusive reliance on the exiguous data available from the ancient world.

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