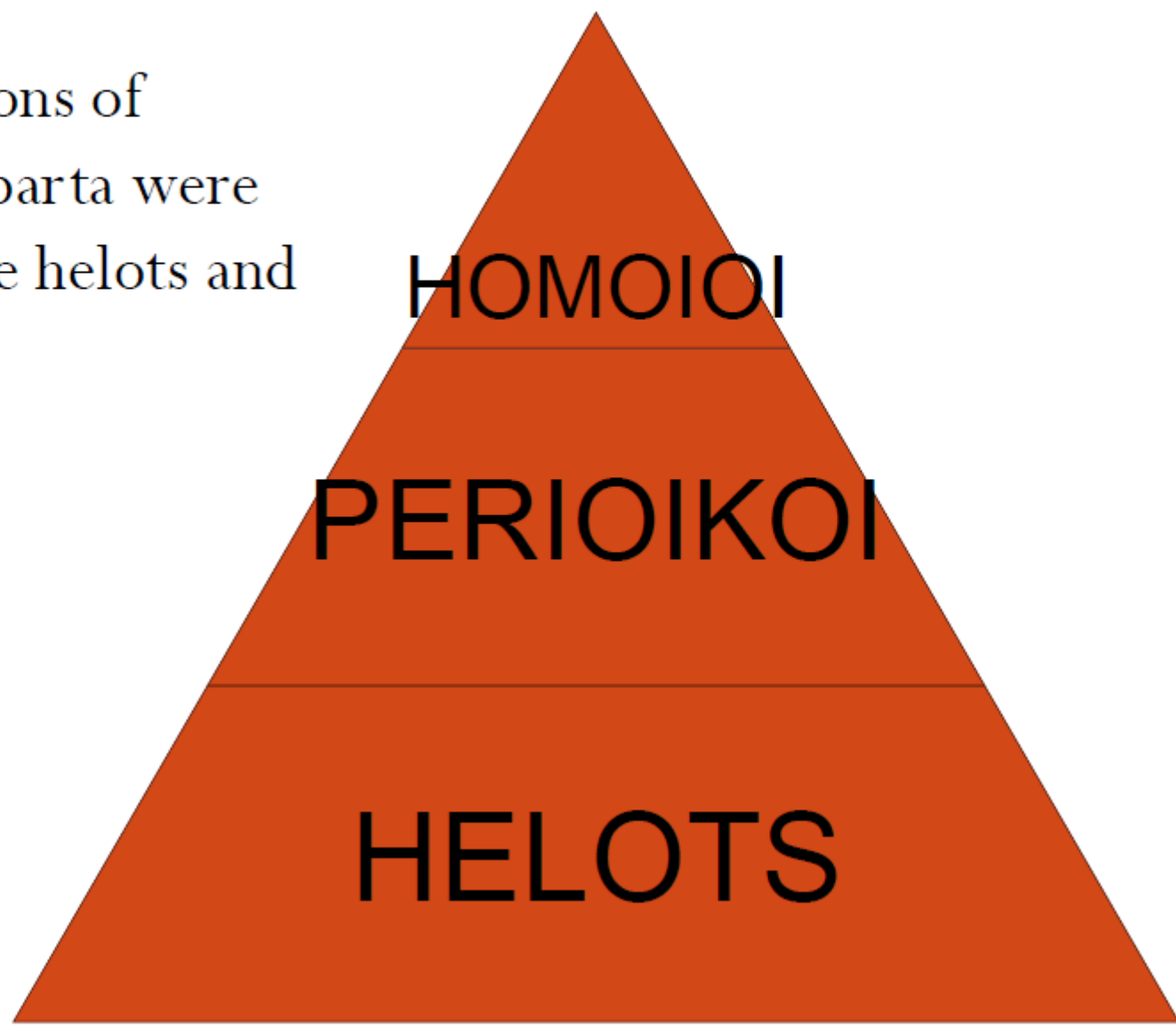


Sparta: An extraordinary city

Lecture 7: Constitution

The main divisions of inhabitants

- The main divisions of inhabitants in Sparta were the homoioi, the helots and the perioikoi.



The Homoioi

- The Homoioi were the full Spartan citizens.
- Homoioi means “Equals”.

The Syssitia

Lycurgus found the Spartans boarding at home like the other Greeks, and came to the conclusion that the custom was responsible for a great deal of misconduct. He therefore established the public messes outside in the open, thinking that this would reduce disregard of orders to a minimum. The amount of food he allowed was just enough to prevent them from getting either too much or too little to eat. But many extras are supplied from the spoils of the chase; and for these rich men sometimes substitute wheaten bread. Consequently the board is never bare until the company breaks up, and never extravagantly furnished.

Xenophon *On the Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 5.2-3

Homoioi and Syssitia

- The Syssitia were useful in creating a sense of community among Spartans
- Also they created the feeling of “equality” among the homoioi.

Communal Ownership

In the following respects, again, his institutions differ from the ordinary type. In most states every man has control of his own children, servants and goods. Lycurgus wanted to secure that the citizens should get some advantage from one another without doing any harm. He therefore gave every father authority over other men's children as well as over his own. When a man knows that fathers have this power, he is bound to rule the children over whom he exercises authority as he would wish his own to be ruled. If a boy tells his own father when he has been whipped by another father, it is a disgrace if the parent does not give his son another whipping. So completely do they trust one another not to give any improper orders to the children.

He also gave the power of using other men's servants in case of necessity; and made sporting dogs common property to this extent, that any who want them invite their master, and if he is engaged himself he is glad to send the hounds. A similar plan of borrowing is applied to horses also; thus a man who falls ill or wants a carriage or wishes to get to some place quickly, if he sees a horse anywhere, takes and uses it carefully and duly restores it.

Homoioi and Communal Ownership

- Communal ownership meant that no homoios could be richer than any other, at least in theory, even if not in practice.
- Communal ownership also provided those with lesser assets to take advantage of the wealth of others.

Allotting Land

After the creation of the thirty senators, his next task, and, indeed, the most hazardous he ever undertook, was the making a new division of their lands. For there was an extreme inequality amongst them, and their state was overloaded with a multitude of indigent and necessitous persons, while its whole wealth had centred upon a very few. To the end, therefore, that he might expel from the state arrogance and envy, luxury and crime, and those yet more inveterate diseases of want and superfluity, he obtained of them to renounce their properties, and to consent to a new division of the land, and that they should live all together on an equal footing; merit to be their only road to eminence, and the disgrace of evil, and credit of worthy acts, their one measure of difference between man and man. Upon their consent to these proposals, proceeding at once to put them into execution, he divided the country of Laconia in general into thirty thousand equal shares, and the part attached to the city of Sparta into nine thousand; these he distributed among the Spartans, as he did the others to the country citizens.

Some authors say that he made but six thousand lots for the citizens of Sparta, and that King Polydorus added three thousand more. Others say that Polydorus doubled the number Lycurgus had made, which, according to them, was but four thousand five hundred. A lot was so much as to yield, one year with another, about seventy bushels of grain for the master of the family, and twelve for his wife, with a suitable proportion of oil and wine. And this he thought sufficient to keep their bodies in good health and strength; superfluities they were better without. It is reported, that, as he returned from a journey shortly after the division of the lands, in harvest time, the ground being newly reaped, seeing the stacks all standing equal and alike, he smiled, and said to those about him, "Methinks all Laconia looks like one family estate just divided among a number of brothers."

Plutarch *Lycurgus* 8.1-8

Homoioi and Land

- The Redistribution of Land was a common desire among the poor in the archaic and classical periods.
- By providing equal lots for the citizens, the Spartans made certain that the notion of “equality” was supported by the state.

Homoioi and Politics

- The main political responsibility of the homoioi was to attend the Assembly.
- The main responsibility of the homoioi in general was of course to be battle-ready.

Perioikoi

- Perioikoi means “dwellers around”.
- The ethnic origin of the perioikoi is unknown but they spoke in the Lakonian dialect.
- Perioikoi were under the same military obligations as the homoioi and served in the same regiments.
- They had no political rights.
- Yet the communities of perioikoi had a certain autonomy.
- They mainly worked in trade and manufacture but could
- own land.
- There were communities of perioikoi in Lakonia, Messenia and Kythera.

Wealthy Perioikoi

Once, when he was already withdrawing in the direction of his camp, the cavalry of the Thebans, up to that moment invisible, suddenly dashed out through the exits which had been made in the stockade, and inasmuch as the peltasts of Agesilaus were going away to dinner or were making their preparations for doing so, while the horsemen were some of them still dismounted and others in the act of mounting, the Thebans charged upon them; and they not only struck down a large number of the peltasts, **but among the horsemen Cleas and Epicydidas, who were Spartiatae, one of the Perioeci, Eudicus, and some Theban exiles**, such as had not yet mounted their horses.

Xenophon Hellenika 5.4.39

Non-Spartan Perioikoi

- It is important to remember that other poleis had perioikoi. Sparta was not unique. Argos, Elis, Thessaly and the poleis of Krete all had perioikoi.



Helots

- Helots were a servile population that were not chattel-slaves, i.e. they could not be bought or sold.
- Yet helots were property. However not of individuals but of the community as a whole.
- Helots had ownership rights, both to part of their produce and in some ways to the land itself.

Other Helot-type populations

Penestai in
Thessaly

Klarotes in
Krete



Spartan Political Organisation

To begin with, there was a god watching over you; and he, foreseeing the future, restricted within due bounds the royal power by making your kingly line no longer single but twofold. In the next place, some man, in whom human nature was blended with power divine, observing your government to be still swollen with fever, blended the self-willed force of the royal strain with the temperate potency of age, by making the power of the eight-and-twenty elders of equal weight with that of the kings in the greatest matters. Then your “third saviour,” seeing your government still fretting and fuming, curbed it, as one may say, by the power of the ephors, which was not far removed from government by lot. Thus, in your case, according to this account, owing to its being blended of the right elements and possessed of due measure, the kingship not only survived itself but ensured the survival of all else.

Plato *Laws* 691d-692b

Spartan Political Organisation

The Kings

The Ephors

The Gerousia

The Assembly

The Kings

- Sparta had two kings
- This is unique in the Greek world
- One was an Eurypontid, the other an Agiad.
- The kings were mainly military leaders.
- They had a place in the Gerousia.
- And they had important religious functions.

For the men who would be kings

The prerogatives which the Spartans have allowed their kings are the following. In the first place, two priesthoods, those (namely) of Lacedaemonian and of Celestial Jupiter; also the right of making war on what country so ever they please, without hindrance from any of the other Spartans, under pain of outlawry; on service the privilege of marching first in the advance and last in the retreat, and of having a hundred picked men for their body guard while with the army; likewise the liberty of sacrificing as many cattle in their expeditions as it seems them good, and the right of having the skins and the chins of the slaughtered animals for their own use. Such are their privileges in war; in peace their rights are as follows. When a citizen makes a public sacrifice the kings are given the first seats at the banquet; they are served before any of the other guests, and have a double portion of everything; they take the lead in the libations; and the hides of the sacrificed beasts belong to them. Every month, on the first day, and again on the seventh of the first decade, each king receives a beast without blemish at the public cost, which he offers up to Apollo; likewise a medimnus of meal, and of wine a Laconian quart. In the contests of the Games they have always the seat of honour; they appoint the citizens who have to entertain foreigners; they also nominate, each of them, two of the Pythians, officers whose business it is to consult the oracle at Delphi, who eat with the kings, and, like them, live at the public charge.

For the men who would be kings

If the kings do not come to the public supper, each of them must have two choenixes of meal and a cotyle of wine sent home to him at his house; if they come, they are given a double quantity of each, and the same when any private man invites them to his table. They have the custody of all the oracles which are pronounced; but the Pythians must likewise have knowledge of them. They have the whole decision of certain causes, which are these, and these only:

When a maiden is left the heiress of her father's estate, and has not been betrothed by him to any one, they decide who is to marry her; in all matters concerning the public highways they judge; and if a person wants to adopt a child, he must do it before the kings. They likewise have the right of sitting in council with the eight-and-twenty senators; and if they are not present, then the senators nearest of kin to them have their privileges, and give two votes as the royal proxies, besides a third vote, which is their own.

Kings: Political Responsibilities

- Foreign Relations with Delphi
- Members of the Gerousia

The Kings and Delphi

they also nominate, each of them, two of the Pythians, officers whose business it is to consult the oracle at Delphi, who eat with the kings, and, like them, live at the public charge.... They have the custody of all the oracles which are pronounced; but the Pythians must likewise have knowledge of them.

- In the classical period Sparta and Delphi have very close relations. It was part of the kings' responsibilities to keep in contact with the oracle.

Two Votes in the Gerousia

They likewise have the right of sitting in council with the eight-and twenty senators; and if they are not present, then the senators nearest of kin to them have their privileges, and give two votes as the royal proxies, besides a third vote, which is their own.

- The kings had **two votes in the Gerousia**.
- This gave them power in this very important council. Not enough power to dominate it but enough to sway it at times of crisis.

Kings: Legal Responsibilities

- Heiresses
- Adoptions
- Public Roads

Heiresses and Adoptions

When a maiden is left the heiress of her father's estate, and has not been betrothed by him to any one, they decide who is to marry her; in all matters concerning the public highways they judge; and if a person wants to adopt a child, he must do it before the kings.

- Having responsibility over Heiresses and Adoptions, the Kings had at least partial control of inheritance practice in Sparta.
- Having control of inheritance practice meant that they had control over part of wealth.

Kings: Military Responsibilities

also the right of making war on what country so ever they please, without hindrance from any of the other Spartans, under pain of outlawry; on service the privilege of marching first in the advance and last in the retreat, and of having a hundred picked men for their body guard while with the army;

- To Declare War
- Generalship on Campaign
- Professionalism of the Army

Leading the Army

- In the classical period, the Spartan kings were first and foremost generals.
- Their main function as leaders of the state was during war.

Leading the Army

As the two hosts were about to engage, first of all the Corinthians, bethinking themselves that they were perpetrating a wrong, changed their minds, and drew off from the main army. Then Demaratus, son of Ariston, who was himself king of Sparta and joint-leader of the expedition, and who till now had had no sort of quarrel with Cleomenes, followed their example. On account of this rupture between the kings, a law was passed at Sparta, forbidding both monarchs to go out together with the army, as had been the custom hitherto. The law also provided, that, as one of the kings was to be left behind, one of the Tyndaridae should also remain at home; whereas hitherto both had accompanied the expeditions, as auxiliaries.

Herodotus 5.75

Kings: Religious Duties

- A large part of the role of the kings in the Spartan state was religious.
- They had various priesthoods and made most important sacrifices, particularly in times of war.

The Gerousia

- The Gerousia was a Council of 28 elders plus the two Kings.
- The 28 members were over 60 years of age and served for life.
- The Gerousia was elected.
- The main functions of the Gerousia were political.

The election of the Gerousia

The senate, as I said before, consisted of those who were Lycurgus's chief aiders and assistants in his plans. The vacancies he ordered to be supplied out of the best and most deserving men past sixty years old, and we need not wonder if there was much striving for it; for what more glorious competition could there be amongst men, than one in which it was not contested who was swiftest among the swift or strongest of the strong, but who of many wise and good was wisest and best, and fittest to be intrusted for ever after, as the reward of his merits, with the supreme authority of the commonwealth, and with power over the lives, franchises, and highest interests of all his countrymen? The manner of their election was as follows: The people being called together, some selected persons were locked up in a room near the place of election, so contrived that they could neither see nor be seen, but could only hear the noise of the assembly without; for they decided this, as most other affairs of moment, by the shouts of the people. This done, the competitors were not brought in and presented all together, but one after another by lot, and passed in order through the assembly without speaking a word. Those who were locked up had writing-tables with them, in which they recorded and marked each shout by its loudness, without knowing in favour of which candidate each of them was made, but merely that they came first, second, third, and so forth. He who was found to have the most and loudest acclamations was declared senator duly elected

Age and Power

- Mortality levels in the ancient world were a lot higher than they are today.
- So finding men over 60 years of age was not easy.
- Also these elders probably did not leave for very long.
- So, the membership of the Gerousia must have changed regularly.

Gerousia and Corruption

Again, the council of elders is not free from defects. It may be said that the elders are good men and well trained in manly virtue; and that, therefore, there is an advantage to the state in having them. But that judges of important causes should hold office for life is a disputable thing, for the mind grows old as well as the body. And when men have been educated in such a manner that even the legislator himself cannot trust them, there is real danger. Many of the elders are well known to have taken bribes and to have been guilty of partiality in public affairs. And therefore they ought not to be irresponsible; yet at Sparta they are so. But (it may be replied), "All magistracies are accountable to the Ephors." Yes, but this prerogative is too great for them, and we maintain that the control should be exercised in some other manner. Further, the mode in which the Spartans elect their elders is childish; and it is improper that the person to be elected should canvass for the office; the worthiest should be appointed, whether he chooses or not. And here the legislator clearly indicates the same intention which appears in other parts of his constitution; he would have his citizens ambitious, and he has reckoned upon this quality in the election of the elders; for no one would ask to be elected if he were not. Yet ambition and avarice, almost more than any other passions, are the motives of crime.

Aristotle *Politics* 1270b35 ff.

The Ephors

- Five ephors were annually elected by the Assembly.
- The first ephor of the year became the Eponymos (i.e. he gave his name to the year, as with the Eponymos Archon in Athens)
- The office of the ephor was unrepeatable (i.e. someone could not become ephor twice).

The Ephors: Powers of the Ephors

- Power to fine anyone
- Power to end a magistrate's term of office
- Power to imprison and try a magistrate.
- Declare war on the helots every year
- Could summon the kings and were mediators in disputes between the kings
- Presided over political trials
- Negotiated with other states

The Powers of the Ephors

It is probable also that these same citizens helped to set up the office of Ephor, having come to the conclusion that obedience is a very great blessing whether in a state or an army or a household. For they thought that the greater the power of these magistrates the more they would impress the minds of the citizens. Accordingly, the Ephors are competent to fine whom they choose, and have authority to enact immediate payment: they have authority also to deprive the magistrates of office, and even to imprison and prefer a capital charge against them. Possessing such wide power they do not, like other states, leave persons elected to office to rule as they like throughout the year, but in common with despots and the presidents of the games, they no sooner see anyone breaking the law than they punish the offender.

Xenophon On the Constitution of the Lacedaimonians 8.3-4

Kings and Ephors

- Further, all rise from their seats when the King appears; only the Ephors do not rise from their official chairs. And they exchange oaths monthly, the Ephors on behalf of the state, the King for himself. And this is the King's oath: “I will reign according to the established laws of the state.” And this the oath of the state: “While you abide by your oath, we will keep the kingship unshaken.”

Xenophon *On the Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 15.6-7

Kings and Ephors: A balance?

- The ephors had power over the kings.
- They were the main constitutional control over the kings.
- The monthly exchange of oaths was a constant reminder to the kings and the magistrates of the power of the ephors.

Ephors: Power and Corruption

The Lacedaemonian constitution is defective in another point; I mean the Ephoralty. This magistracy has authority in the highest matters, but the Ephors are chosen from the whole people, and so the office is apt to fall into the hands of very poor men, who, being badly off, are open to bribes. There have been many examples at Sparta of this evil in former times; and quite recently, in the matter of the Andrians, certain of the Ephors who were bribed did their best to ruin the state. And so great and tyrannical is their power, that even the kings have been compelled to court them, so that, in this way as well together with the royal office, the whole constitution has deteriorated, and from being an aristocracy has turned into a democracy. The Ephoralty certainly does keep the state together; for the people are contented when they have a share in the highest office, and the result, whether due to the legislator or to chance, has been advantageous.

Aristotle *Politics* 1270b6-35

Ephors: Power and Corruption

For if a constitution is to be permanent, all the parts of the state must wish that it should exist and the same arrangements be maintained. This is the case at Sparta, where the kings desire its permanence because they have due honour in their own persons; the nobles because they are represented in the council of elders (for the office of elder is a reward of virtue); and the people, because all are eligible to the Ephoralty.

The election of Ephors out of the whole people is perfectly right, but ought not to be carried on in the present fashion, which is too childish. Again, they have the decision of great causes, although they are quite ordinary men, and therefore they should not determine them merely on their own judgment, but according to written rules, and to the laws. Their way of life, too, is not in accordance with the spirit of the constitution they have a deal too much license; whereas, in the case of the other citizens, the excess of strictness is so intolerable that they run away from the law into the secret indulgence of sensual pleasures.

Aristotle *Politics* 1270b6-35

Corruption and Democracy

- Aristotle's main problem with the Ephorate is that the ephors were outside the law.
- In Aristotelian thinking, the law was a prerequisite of a just government.
- The powers of the ephors made corruption easy but their office was only for a year.

Ephors Outside Sparta

- The Ephorate is found in other Dorian poleis, not only Sparta.
- Ephors are attested in Thera, Kyrene, Euesperides and Herakleia in Lucania (Italy).

The Assembly: Powers

- All homoioi could take part in the Assembly.
- Could decide on new laws.
- Could decide on matters of Peace and War.
- Could conclude treaties.
- Elected ephors, members of the Gerousia and other magistrates.
- Could appoint military commanders.
- Could emancipate helots.

Decision by Acclamation

With these words he, as Ephor, himself put the question to the assembly of the Lacedaemonians. He said that he could not determine which was the loudest acclamation (their mode of decision is by acclamation not by voting); the fact being that he wished to make them declare their opinion openly and thus to increase their ardor for war. Accordingly he said, "All Lacedaemonians who are of opinion that the treaty has been broken, and that Athens is guilty, leave your seats and go there," pointing out a certain place; "all who are of the opposite opinion, there." They accordingly stood up and divided; and those who held that the treaty had been broken were in a decided majority.

Thucydides 1.87

The Assembly: Limitations

- As per the Rhetra, the assembly had the power of final decision on any matter.
- As per the Amendment of the Rhetra, the Gerousia had the right to disregard and rescind any decision of the Assembly judged deleterious to the state.

Spartan Eunomia

But at last a time came when the tyrants of Athens and the far older tyrannies of the rest of Hellas were, with the exception of those in Sicily, once and for all put down by Lacedaemon; for this city, though after the settlement of the Dorians, its present inhabitants, it suffered from factions for an unparalleled length of time, still at a very early period obtained good laws, and **enjoyed a freedom from tyrants which was unbroken; it has possessed the same form of government for more than four hundred years, reckoning to the end of the late war, and** has thus been in a position to arrange the affairs of the other states. Not many years after the deposition of the tyrants, the battle of Marathon was fought between the Medes and the Athenians.

Thucydides 1.18.1

The Ideal of Eunomia

- For the Greeks eunomia was one of the ideal targets of a constitution.
- That the Spartans supposedly did not have either tyrants or stasis during the greater part of the archaic and classical periods was one of the main points of pro-Spartan propaganda.

Eunomia: Democracy or Oligarchy?

This is the case with the constitution of Sparta. For many people [20] endeavor to describe it as being a **democracy, because its system has many democratic features, for instance** first of all its regulation for the rearing of boys, since the sons of the rich are brought up in the same way as those of the poor, and are educated in a manner in which the sons of the poor also could be educated, and they are also treated similarly at the next age, and in the same manner when they are grown up, for there is nothing that distinguishes the rich man from the poor man--thus the arrangements for food are the same for all at the common messes, and the rich wear clothes such as even any poor man could procure, and also because of the two greatest offices the common people elect to one and share in the other (they elect the Elders and share in the Ephorate); but others call it an **oligarchy, because** it has many oligarchical features, for instance that all the offices are elective and none appointed by lot and few persons have the power to sentence to death and exile, and a number of other such matters. But in a well-constructed mixed constitution both of the two factors, and neither of them, should seem to be present, and it should be kept safe by its own means and not by outside aid, and by its own means not because those who desire its security are more numerous outside it (for even a bad constitution might possess this quality), but because no section of the state whatever would even wish for another constitution.

Aristotle Politics 1294b19 ff.

The mixed Constitution

- To the Greeks the Spartan constitution was admirable because it combined elements of democracy, oligarchy and monarchy.
- A constitution of combined elements was called a “mixed” constitution and it was considered the most successful of constitutions.

Follow-up Reading

- Thomas, C.G. “[On the Role of the Spartan Kings](#)” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1974), pp. 257-270.
- Drews, R. “[Phoenicians, Carthage and the Spartan Eunomia](#)” *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 100, No. 1, Tekmhphion. A Special Issue in Honor of James Henry Oliver (Spring, 1979), pp. 45-58.
- David, E. “[The Spartan Syssitia and Plato's Laws](#)” *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (Winter, 1978), pp. 486-495.