

reportedly not permitted so much as to criticize the laws – unless that is just another democratic Athenian slur.

To conclude, the alleged ‘openness’ of the Spartan ‘constitution’ is merely apparent and stems from the peculiarly Spartan feature that the Assembly was the army of adult male hoplite warriors in civilian dress. It naturally therefore had to rubber-stamp, in an open demonstration of solidarity and token sovereignty, decisions which in practice had already been taken elsewhere.

VI

If we return finally to the broader question with which we began, the role of literacy in social organization, we must at least conclude that the Spartan evidence does not support the technological determinism implicit in the simple deduction by Goody and Watt of widespread popular literacy from the mere availability of a version of the Greek alphabet. The simplicity of the alphabet did indeed make it possible for the ordinary Spartan man (and probably woman) to acquire a rudimentary knowledge of reading and writing. Yet at the same time literacy in Sparta remained very thinly spread, and deep literacy was the preserve of an élite operating at the highest levels of state.

To say that Sparta made it ‘son point d’honneur à rester une ville de semi-illettrés’ (Marrou 1971: 45) is perhaps an overstatement. Rather, the nature of the development of Spartan society from the eighth century BC onwards, above all its broadly oligarchic political system and the fraught relationship of the citizen-body to the Helots, did not either necessitate or even encourage the development of those social arts the successful performance of which is dependent on a high level of popular literacy.

5

Spartan Kingship: Doubly Odd?

Introduction

This essay is published here for the first time. The original oral version was delivered on United Nations Day (24 October) 1995 at an Oxford seminar ‘Empire Ancient to Modern: the Rulers’ convened within the Faculty of Modern History. I have tried to retain some of the original talk’s oral quality, and, with a view to keeping it accessible to a non-specialist audience, I have not supplied full references to ancient texts.

Kingship, or rather monarchy, has been very much on the collective English – or British – mind in recent years; so I began my talk by mentioning the then recent advent of Prince Charles’s elder son to Eton, which had cast the spotlight once again on the education of a future English (or British) king, and by extension on the station in life for which he was being educated. That in turn raised the question of the nature of our constitution, and indeed of the United Kingdom, not to mention our position in the wider world, with special immediate reference to our position within the EU. Vernon Bogdanor’s *The Monarchy and the Constitution* appeared in the month following my talk, but was hardly able to quell all discussion or silence all dissent. Tom Nairn, for example, author of a lively account of Britain and its monarchy twenty years ago, *The Enchanted Glass*, has more recently and rather pointedly looked forward to *After Britain* (1999).

In what follows my aim, like that of Carlier 1984, is to approach the Spartan kingship comparatively, trying to assess and evaluate its distinctiveness or possibly uniqueness within a wider, especially but not solely ancient Greek, framework. The most recent discussion of the Spartan kingship known to me is Miller 1998, who focuses fixedly on its dual nature. My account allows also for individual initiative.

*

I. Constituting the subject

Pretty much the same questions, *mutatis mutandis*, could be and have been asked of Sparta’s ‘constitution’, in so far as that word applies (below),

as are currently being asked of the United Kingdom's. Was it either (i) a kingship/kingdom (*basileia*, as Herodotus 7.209.4 and Xenophon *Ages.* 1.1 each once called it) in some more than purely titular sense, or (ii) a disguised collective dictatorship (that was the view of those ancients and moderns who have stressed the role of the Ephorate), or (iii) an 'aristocratic constitution of normal type – except for the anomaly of the two kings' (Gomme 1945: 129; cf. Ste. Croix 1972: 125ff., following possibly Aristotle), or (iv) an oligarchy but a distinctively open, quasi-democratic one (Andrewes 1966; Carlier 1977; 1984: 240-324), or even (v) a democracy, in some ancient Greek sense, if not of course of the same, radical kind as that of Athens; or was it, finally, (vi) a mixed constitution (as sources known to Aristotle characterized it) – if such a thing has ever really existed, or could exist (cf. Nippel 1980)?

Rather than evaluating each of these possible general classifications (all susceptible of further sub-classification and nuancing), I shall be taking a more positive, concrete approach, by focusing on the careers of two kings in particular, separated in time by a century and representing respectively the two royal houses: Kleomenes I (c. 520-490), the Agiads; and Agesilaos II (c. 400-360), the Eurypontids. To set those two admittedly exceptional careers in their immediate political and cultural context, I shall conduct my investigation under three main headings: constitutional position and power (Section II), military command (Section III), and charisma (Section IV).

But I must preface my discussion, as I would any discussion of any aspect of ancient Spartan history, with an account of the nature of our evidence. The history of ancient Sparta as a sovereign and independent Greek city may be said to have begun c. 700 and ended in c. 145 BC. Within that span of five and a half centuries, we have not a single Spartan historian, and precious few certainly authentic Spartan official written documents. The evidence of archaeology, though authentic and contemporary, is also mute and difficult to interpret politically. Thus the vast majority of our written historical evidence is non-Spartan, most of it fifth-century or later, and almost all of it subject to the systematic distortion of the 'Spartan mirage' (Ollier 1933-43; Finley 1962a; Rawson 1969; cf. Chapter 12).

Spartan history, that is, what actually happened or how it actually was in ancient Sparta, does not come to us straight (in so far as any historical information does) but is mediated to us through the reflections, variously distorted, of interested outsiders: mainly of philosophers who approved Sparta's educational regime and social arrangements, and of politicians who approved what they took Sparta's 'constitution' to be, and the policies that Sparta pursued either towards its subject populations at home or towards other Greeks and non-Greeks abroad. This multiple partiality of the evidence – both incomplete and biased – must render any positive

reconstruction of how, let alone why, it actually was in ancient Sparta extremely tentative and delicate.

II. Constitutional position and power

It is a moot point whether any ancient Greek *polis* or 'citizen-state' can be said to have had a constitution, as opposed to laws (varying in precision and consistency) regulating the conduct of officials. True, they had a word, *politeia*, which we do regularly translate 'constitution', but *politeia*, besides also meaning 'citizenship', could be referred to as the 'life' and 'soul' of an ancient Greek city – hardly what we today, at any rate, would understand by 'constitution' (significantly, a word we take from the Romans, not the Greeks). In short, we are probably better advised to talk in terms, not of constitution, nor even 'government' (in the sense of 'the British government'), but 'governance'.¹

How then are we to classify Sparta within any conventional ancient Greek scheme? The Greeks, or some Greeks, invented politics, or the political, in a strong sense, and that invention was a precondition for their further invention of political theory.² Thus some Greek or Greeks at some time before about 430 BC (see Hdt. 3.80-2) made the brilliantly economical discovery that all particular instances or species of governance could be subsumed under one of just three genera: rule by one, rule by some, or rule by all. Logically that tripartite classification is exhaustive; heuristically, it is enormously fruitful, since it does help wonderfully to concentrate the mind. So, in those terms, is Sparta's governance to be classified as rule by one (some form of monarchy), by some (some form of aristocracy or oligarchy), or by all (some form of democracy)? The fact that, as we have seen, different Greeks at different times classified Sparta under all three genera, and were even driven to the desperate expedient of inventing a fourth classificatory term, the 'mixed constitution', in order to find a suitable slot for Sparta, indicates how difficult they found Sparta to classify (cf. Oliva 1998).

That difficulty, as I have suggested elsewhere (see Chapter 3), arose largely because the tripartite classificatory scheme was invented and found applicable for Greek citizen-states as they had developed, evolved or mutated by the fifth century, and were continuing so to develop, evolve or mutate. Sparta's 'constitution', by contrast, had emerged (to put it neutrally) well before the fifth century and then frozen almost solid, so that fifth-century categories could not be simply and straightforwardly applied. To borrow the terminology of a German school of ancient history inspired by Christian Meier (cf. Meier 1990), fifth-century 'kratistische' language (demo-crazy, olig-archy) did not fit the actual, 'nomistische' political arrangements of Sparta – a city in which political rule or sovereign power (*kratos*) was subject to customary, rather than legalistic,

interpretation, to *nomos* in the sense of custom, tradition and authority rather than *nomos* in the sense of positive law.³

So much for the problem of classification in general, that is, of any classification of Spartan governance. In specific detail, the two main sources of difficulty were and are, on the one hand, the Ephors (esp. Richer 1999), and on the other hand, the two kings, and, not least, the relations between these two offices and their holders (Richer 1999: ch. 23). The difficulties may be looked at in two different ways: first, structurally and formally; then, functionally and pragmatically. What were, first, the respective 'powers' of the two 'offices' (*arkhai*)? Second, how were these powers cashed out in terms of practical political exchange? I shall concentrate here on the kings.

The first point to settle, or at least clarify, is whether the two Spartan *basileis* 'really' were 'kings', as opposed to merely called by a word that can mean 'kings'?⁴ Strictly, of course, they were not monarchs, but at most dyarchs, since Sparta had had, allegedly from time immemorial, two kings, not one, who were drawn hereditarily from two distinct and not quite equal (Hdt. 6.51) aristocratic families, each claiming descent ultimately from the 'demi-god son of Zeus' (Thuc. 5.16), that is, Herakles, a born hero who became a god. But if they were not monarchs, were they nevertheless royal? In terms of their ancestry, exhibited and buttressed by official pedigrees which also did service up to a point as king-lists, they certainly were.⁵ If one were, for example, to compare and contrast them with the Greek tyrants, that is, non-legitimate sole rulers, who arose first in the seventh century, it was precisely the Spartan kings' super-aristocratic birth coupled with official recognition of their hereditary right which conferred on them unique (or almost unique) legitimacy to govern – or at any rate 'be king' (*basileuein*).

On the other hand, their power or authority was clearly not kingly or regal in the same way(s) as that of, say, an early-modern European monarch: it was not, in other words, absolute. Of course, even 'absolute' monarchs must in fact depend for the effective exercise of their authority on their court circles and on other instrumentalities beyond their constant and immediate reach. Nevertheless, those quasi-absolute early-modern monarchs could not be called to account through due legal process in the way that Spartan kings could. In this perspective, it was the Greek tyrant and the later Hellenistic monarch (Carlier 1984: 511-14; Shipley 2000: ch. 1) who were the 'absolute' rulers of ancient Greece. As for the Great King of Persia, he was the very model of an ancient absolute monarch (cf. Hall 1989: e.g. 95), as the Greeks tellingly acknowledged by the singular linguistic device of dropping the definite article when referring to him. On the other hand, a Spartan king was certainly more royal and more kingly than the 'kings' (*basileis*) referred to scornfully by the early Greek didactic poet Hesiod as 'bribe-swallowing' or 'gift-devouring': those men were what we would rather call 'lords', that is ruling aristocrats.⁶ So too, *a fortiori*, a

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Spartan king was certainly more royal and kingly than the annual, chiefly religious official selected by lot at Athens who really was merely called 'King'.⁷

Let us next consider, briefly, the relationship between kings and Ephors, or rather the antagonism between the kingship and the ephorate, in which many modern scholars used to see the key to the practical working of the whole Spartan system of governance.⁸ Xenophon, who knew Sparta well at first hand and wrote a laudatory biography of a Spartan king (Agesilaos), wrote also a short pamphlet on some Spartan political, social and cultural institutions (the so-called *Lakedaimoniōn Politeia*). Here (LP 15.7), he records verbatim the oath sworn monthly between, on one hand, the two kings jointly, and, on the other, the board of five Ephors collectively, whereby the Ephors swore to uphold the kingship 'unshaken' – so long as the kings for their part abided by the laws of Sparta. Clearly, the onus was placed explicitly on the kings to obey the laws; if they did not, or if the Ephors could be persuaded or could persuade themselves that one or both had not done so, the Ephors had the power to impeach the king(s) before a Grand Jury (consisting of the Gerousia, afforded by themselves). Some kings were, we know, not only tried but also deposed in this way.⁹ It was one mark of the exceptionalism of our two chosen examples that Kleomenes I, though indicted, survived such a trial, whereas Agesilaos II went out of his way, successfully, to avoid one.

However, before we rush to infer that 'the ephorate' must therefore always have had the whip hand over 'the kingship', the following complicating factors must be kept firmly under consideration. It was always one king on trial, not both, and the other king was always *ex officio*, as a member of the Gerousia, on the jury. The two kings, who came always from two separate aristocratic houses (until Kleomenes III effectively abolished the traditional kingship by installing his brother on the other throne: cf. Carlier 1984: 498 – table; Nabis, though called 'king', was in fact a tyrant: Mossé 1964; Cartledge & Spawforth 1989: ch. 5), were usually competitors, if not personal and/or political enemies. This institutional rivalry was rationalized and even sanctified in terms of a traditional enmity between the two royal houses that was underpinned by myth-history (Hdt. 6.52).

The tradition might of course be broken, or at any rate the rivalry mitigated, in particular instances, as we shall see below. But the ephorate – or rather, astute individual Ephors – might normally expect to be able to exploit this as it were traditional split between the two reigning kings to their own individual or corporate advantage. Not, however, that the Ephors, great though their formal powers undoubtedly were, always had all the best tunes, since they themselves might be split. Decisions taken by them as a board were reached by majority vote; boards were elected annually, tenure was not iterative, and one board of Ephors might take a very different, even contradictory, position from its predecessor, a switch that was likely to involve transferring allegiance from the person or policy

of one king to his rival; and, finally, when it did come to an indictment of a king on a major political charge, the five Ephors were but a small minority of the Grand Jury, always formally outvoted by the twenty-eight elected members of the Gerousia and the other king.

In short, from the apparent imbalance in power between kings and ephors, or the kingship and the ephorate, we should not automatically infer that the Ephors were necessarily the linchpin of the Spartan system of governance. Nor should we infer that it was a power-struggle between kings and Ephors, or the kingship and the ephorate, that made the Spartan political mechanism tick. Of all the possible alternative loci of power I would myself again stress one above all the others put together: the Gerousia (consistently underrated, I believe, by both ancient and modern writers).¹⁰ Sparta, my Sparta, was almost literally a gerontocracy. To become a (non-royal) member of the Gerousia, one certainly had to be aged sixty or over, that is, beyond the required period of compulsory military service, and, probably, an aristocrat by birth. Once elected, you served for life. The Nobel Prize committee for Literature is a near parallel, structurally, as was the Soviet Politburo, and as is the Chinese governmental hierarchy. Without the Gerousia, no major decision of Spartan foreign and, I suspect, domestic policy could be made. It was the Gerousia, as we have seen, that with the admixture of the Ephors constituted Sparta's supreme court. The two reigning kings, regardless of age, were members *ex officio*. The longer a king reigned, therefore, the greater his chance of determining both the composition and the political complexion of the Gerousia. Both kings could clearly expect to have supporters on that body drawn from their respective royal houses (this is the source of an apparent slip in Hdt. 6.57.5, picked up by Thuc. 1.20.3), as well as supporters won and maintained in other ways and for other reasons.

Ex officio membership of the Gerousia, therefore, was by no means the least of a king's privileges and prerogatives. My second main reason for playing down the alleged struggle of Ephors against King and playing up the importance of the kingship is derived from close study of the career of possibly the most ambitious Spartan known to history. Lysander commanded the force that decisively concluded the Peloponnesian War in Sparta's favour. But when not long afterwards he wanted to change the Spartan political system, and did everything in his power to make that happen, the office to which he aspired was that of king.¹¹ This was an office whose powers he was particularly well placed to appreciate, both because he had held the office of Nauarch (Admiral of the Fleet), which Aristotle later described as a sort of second kingship, and because he had suffered personal humiliation and political emasculation at the hands precisely of a Spartan king, a man with whom his relationship had been of the most intimate nature (cf. Chapter 8) – his former beloved, Agesilaos.

Moreover, had the kingship really been so unimportant, it is unlikely that Sparta would have been quite so frequently riven by succession-

disputes, which recall not so much the regular infighting of political rivals for office in a Greek city but rather the harem politics of an oriental dynasty. Such disputes confirm, as Moses Finley remarked (1981a: 32), that the kings were 'a persistently disruptive force of a special kind and magnitude in classical Spartan history'. But they also suggest that the Spartans had a peculiarly high, symbolic regard for kingship – of their odd, dual kind – as such.

III. Military command

At home, a Spartan king's powers of initiative, decision and executive decision were comparatively limited – in comparison, that is, to their far greater powers when abroad on campaign at the head of an army (Herodotus and Xenophon rightly distinguish sharply their powers in war and in peace: cf. Cartledge 1987: 105) In war, they came nearest to exercising the sort of power the legalistic Romans distinguished as *imperium*, to put it bluntly, the powers of life and death, including over Spartan citizens. True, even on campaign a king had to reckon with the watchful presence of two Ephors, exercising the function their name literally signified – 'overseeing'. It was true, too, that the Spartans as a whole exercised both prospective and retrospective control over a commanding king, both because after 506 only one king at a time could command any given force, so that there might be competition for who was – or was not – to hold it, and because after returning home from campaign a king might be arraigned before a Grand Jury. Nevertheless, precisely as in Rome, military campaigning gave a Spartan king a unique chance to build up both material and symbolic capital.

One king, technically only a regent, let that power go to his head, when he commanded a united Greek force to victory over the Persian hordes at Plataea in 479. For that indiscretion Pausanias was severely reprimanded and paid eventually with his life. But as long as a militarily successful king kept his head while all around were – sometimes literally – losing theirs, he might be sure to gain some increase in *auctoritas* to set against the formal restrictions on his *potestas* (once more, the Roman parallel is illuminating). Therefore we should not take too seriously or literally Aristotle's dismissive description of the Spartan kingship as a sort of 'hereditary and perpetual generalship' (Pol. 1285a7, cf. 1271a40-1). First, this was no ordinary generalship, but one that could almost be described as a generalship 'with full powers' (*autokratōr*), as long as the campaigning lasted. Second, Sparta was in some important sense a military state and society, so that to hold the command of the army *ex officio* was potentially to be given access to what was considered culturally the most desirable and impressive form of power of all. Aristotle's characterization may perhaps hold water when say Leonidas, the hero of Thermopylae, is

compared with a full-blooded monarch like Alexander the Great, but that would not exactly be the fairest of comparisons.¹²

IV. Charisma

Mention of Alexander leads me naturally to my third subject-heading, charisma. Alexander is, probably, the most charismatic of all ancient kings, if not the most charismatic Ancient character full stop. He is, to use another Greek-derived term, an icon. But what I want to claim here is that all Spartan kings were charismatic – by definition, regardless of their personal qualities; in other words, that the kingship as such was charismatic in a Weberian sense. Weber's concept may perhaps suffer from 'an uncertainty of referent: does it denote a cultural phenomenon or a psychological one?' (Geertz 1983: 121); and one might prefer Carlier's term 'mystique' (1984: 256, 297-301; though he does also use 'charisme', 292). But for my purposes charisma connotes both cultural and social-psychological esteem, stemming from 'the inherent sacredness of sovereign power' (Geertz 1983: 123). By calling the Spartan kingship charismatic I mean to say that it was distinguished by its perceived possession of some special grace, of ultimately divine derivation. I would emphasize that the symbolic trappings of Spartan royal rule cannot and should not be separated from its substance.

These trappings were several. There is no evidence for the Spartan kings' being blessed with the mediaeval royal touch, but we do know that other Spartans in public were not permitted to touch them. Then, there were the other body-language protocols – always taken very seriously in ancient Greece generally – of sitting, walking and running. In the presence of a king, everyone else except the king must stand; this was to take to the ultimate degree the general Spartan custom whereby juniors were expected to give up their seat to a senior. Conversely, if the Ephors summoned a king to their presence, he did not have to get up and go at the first time of asking, nor yet at the second, but only at the third, whereupon he would normally progress at a dignified walking pace. Agesilaos aroused mirth because, responding punctiliously at the first time of asking, he did not merely walk but ran – or rather, since he was lame in one leg from birth, hobbled. The Spartans, perhaps even more so than other Greeks, despised physical (or indeed any kind of) disability,¹³ and Spartan laughter was typically laughter at another's expense.¹⁴

Second, there was the kings' already mentioned descent, ultimately divine, from great father Zeus, but more immediately heroic, from Herakles, and, more immediately still, Homeric, thanks to their connection with Menelaos, Homeric ruler of Lakedaimon, and his controversial wife Helen. Helen's twin brothers Kastor and Pollux, a.k.a. the Dioskouroi (sons of Zeus), served as the mythical representatives of the two Spartan kings, to the extent that, when the Spartans went to war, they took along with them

images of one or both of the Dioskouroi as talismans. With this divine and heroic descent went what Carlier (1984: 246) calls 'une "puissance royale" transmise par le sang', crucial especially in determining the succession. Solidary with their more than human birth was their more than human ritual of death. So remarkable was this, because so extravagantly lavish by contrast with the burials of ordinary Spartans (and other Greeks by the fifth century), that Herodotus was reminded of the funeral rites of barbarian, non-Greek kings, specifically those of Scythia and Persia. For the period of his death and mourning the king symbolically became identified with the city (*l'état c'est moi*), a very 'un-Greek' state of affairs before the Hellenistic period.¹⁵

Nor was that the only non-Greek, specifically oriental, feature that Herodotus (6.58, 59) the acute comparative ethnographer detected in the powers, attributes, airs and graces with which Spartan kingship was hedged. Indeed, in one absolutely fundamental institutional-symbolic respect the Spartan kings were not citizens, not members of the *'homoioi'* or 'peers', as the Spartans collectively styled themselves, at all, but 'more equal' than ordinary or indeed than all other Spartans.¹⁶ That is, the heir-apparent in each royal house was exempted from the *agôgê*, the state-imposed and state-run educational cycle, which from one point of view was a sort of trial by ordeal to see whether a Spartan boy would eventually be fitted to achieve adult Spartan warrior status (see Chapter 7). This is the extreme instance of a general feature of the Spartan kingship, what has been rather politely called its 'imperfect integration within the commonwealth' (Munson 1993: 48).

Moreover, in addition to their charisma and their unique – and charismatic – exemption from the *agôgê*, the Spartan kings, like aristocrats in most other Greek states, were by virtue of their birth high priests (of Zeus and daughter Athena). This entitled them to certain spiritual and material prerogatives in the conduct of the major Greek civic religious ritual of animal-sacrifice, both at home and abroad, and both on and off the battlefield (Carlier 1984: 256). It also gave them unique access, a sort of hot line, to the principal Greek oracular shrine of Delphi, sacred to Zeus' son Apollo.¹⁷

According to Spartan myth, the laws attributed sometimes to the human or part-human lawgiver Lykourgos had also received the divine sanction of approval by Delphic Apollo. Since those laws among other things guaranteed not just the continued existence of the kingship for ever but also the kingship's special place within Sparta's system of governance, it was very much in the kings' joint interests to keep the Delphic priesthood sweet. In return, moreover, they might reasonably expect to be able to use Delphic favour to further their own policies, especially if they had an enlarged view of Sparta's place in the Greek world as a whole. It is very striking in this connection that, when (as we have seen) Lysander wished to change the rules to make himself eligible for the kingship, he felt he had

first to line up on his side all the other major Greek oracles (and the non-Greek oracle of Ammon in the Libyan desert) in order to try to counteract the peculiarly strong *mana* of Delphi.¹⁸ It is very noticeable, too, that, although the Ephors had the power to use an oracular shrine to test the continuing validity of a particular king's rule, not only did they have that power only once in every eight years but in their use of it they were confined to a local oracular shrine located in a Perioikic town (Ino-Pasiphaë at Thalamai) whose authority was infinitely smaller than that of the mighty panhellenic Apollo, recipient of all the major festival honours at Sparta.¹⁹

V. Kleomenes I and Agesilaos II

Enough has been said, I hope, on the kingship's constitutional status, its prerogatives of and in military command, and its charisma to set the scene for my two concrete illustrations. My aim here is not of course to provide a blow-by-blow account of their reigns, but rather to select what I take to be particularly revelatory episodes, revealing of what Edward Gibbon might have called 'the nice and secret springs' of these two kings' effective power over policy, both its formulation and its execution, for long periods.

i. Kleomenes I²⁰

Our main source on Kleomenes is Herodotus, but either he or his informants or both were on the whole biased against him, and he is presented mainly as a negative paradigm – of irreligion and megalomania.²¹ He and his principal Eurypontid co-king, Damaratos, allegedly exemplified to perfection the traditional antagonism between the two royal houses, so much so that Kleomenes had Damaratos deposed – sacrilegiously, according to Herodotus; whereupon Damaratos 'medized', that is, went over to the Persians, becoming (allegedly – one suspects family pride and Herodotean artistry have combined to exaggerate this) one of Xerxes' most trusted advisers. Because of the deposition and medism of Damaratos, and the alleged sacrilege of Kleomenes followed by his death in suspicious circumstances, the story of Kleomenes' reign comes surrounded by a dense fog of myth-history, difficult for us to penetrate. A further obstacle is that Herodotus, unlike his successors Thucydides and Xenophon, was barely interested in mundane 'constitutional' details; at least, he never let them get in the way of telling a good story. This is a pity, because Kleomenes' long reign (c. 520-490) witnessed not just an acute domestic constitutional crisis but also two major international crises for Sparta, with Persia and with Athens, and hence with its Greek allies.

Roughly speaking, Kleomenes seems to have swung from a foreign policy of opposition to Athens to one of co-operation with Athens against

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the encroaching might of the Persian Empire. In between the two poles came the rise of what we call the Peloponnesian League, through which alliance Sparta claimed and expressed the status of a great Greek power. It was as head of the Peloponnesian League, most conspicuously, that Sparta led the united Greek resistance, such as it was, to Persia in 481-479. Herodotus does not explicitly associate Kleomenes with bringing the Peloponnesian League into existence, though he is usually read as at least implying that. What he does make clear is that Kleomenes, despite certain foreign policy failures, was from 506 to the late 490s in effect the key player in, if not sole ruler of, Sparta.

One factor contributing vitally to that position was the sheer length of his reign (curiously falsified by Herodotus). By 494, when he was impeached on a charge of high treason, he had been on the (Agiad) throne for some twenty-five years, so that all or most of the Gerousia will have been appointed at least under, and perhaps thanks directly to, him. It does not therefore strike me as altogether odd that, since the court trying him in 494 presumably consisted of the Gerousia and the Ephors, he should have been acquitted of that charge of high treason, especially as his defence was a blatant appeal to Sparta's dominant religious ideology (cf. Parker 1989). This was a sort of Spartan equivalent to the race card played by the defence in the notorious trial of O.J. Simpson.

ii. Agesilaos²²

Agesilaos' even longer reign of some forty years (he was vigorously active to the end of his life, in his mid-eighties) is also unusually well documented, far better so, anyhow, than Kleomenes'. Thanks to Xenophon, above all, we can I believe begin to see what really made Sparta tick, so far as major decisions of public policymaking were concerned. To employ the useful Roman terminology, Agesilaos did indeed rule Sparta for most of his forty years because he saw that the formal deficiencies in the *potestas* of the kingship – especially at home, and thanks particularly to its dual character – would have to be and could be adequately compensated for by exploiting its potential for *auctoritas*. The two chief means he employed to maintain and increase the latter were, first, his ideological self-presentation as the quintessential good Spartan citizen, the living embodiment of all the Spartan virtues – as opposed to the sort of king Lysander might well be thought to have wanted to become; and, second, his deployment, on a massive scale, of a technique that again we tend to associate more with Rome than Greece, namely personal patronage.

Not that such a patronage model may be applied to Spartan politics in the same way or on anything like the same scale as it might be to explain the politics of the Roman Republic. For a start, Sparta was tiny by Rome's standards, and its organization of voting in elections, legislation or policymaking was utterly different.²³ But patronage does help to explain better

than any other model of power-accumulation and power-dispensation how the kingship at Sparta could be used to wield decisive influence, thanks especially to its huge wealth, its prerogatives in public sacrifices, games, and feasts, and its near-exclusive pre-eminence in military commands and appointments. In particular, it is patronage that accounts for Agesilaos' capacity in 378 to deliver the vote of acquittal in the major political trial of Sphodrias.²⁴

Sphodrias was a high-ranking Spartiate, who had been entrusted with the properly imperial task of governing Thespiiai, a quite important city of Boiotia, whose chief city Thebes was Sparta's former ally and now principal enemy. Sphodrias was a king's man, but not one of Agesilaos': he owed his appointment to Agesilaos' fellow – or rather rival – king Kleombrotos. Moreover, the action for which he was on trial before the Gerousia (and presumably Ephors) – the invasion of Attica with a view allegedly to seizing the still ungated Peiraeus – was both a flagrant breach of an international diplomatic agreement and a flagrant violation of Agesilaos' own line of foreign policy towards Athens and Thebes. One would therefore have expected Agesilaos to vote for Sphodrias' condemnation (to death), especially as Sphodrias himself was so confident of the guilty verdict that he did not even dare return to Sparta and so in effect convicted himself. As things unexpectedly turned out, however, not only did Agesilaos vote for acquittal but, as Xenophon makes clear, it was Agesilaos' vote that swung the vote of the entire jury.

Agesilaos' motives for switching his vote interest me less than the modalities and implications of his switch (cf. Chapter 8). The Gerousia was at the time divided into three groups: Agesilaos' faction, the faction around the other king (to which Sphodrias belonged), and those members 'in between', who were not committed to either faction. A figure cannot be put on the size of any of these three groups; all we can say is that either Agesilaos' faction together with the other king's faction added up to a simple majority, or that Agesilaos' switch convinced enough of the uncommitted as well to constitute that majority for acquittal. Either way, Agesilaos' switch was a brilliant political move. His foreign policy was already seriously damaged anyhow; but against that damage Agesilaos could now offset the gain, in purely factional terms, resulting from the fact that the other king and especially Sphodrias himself would be so beholden to him that they would be likely to put up less, and less effective, resistance to his foreign policy schemes in the future.

So indeed it proved in the event. Sphodrias and Agesilaos' co-king Kleombrotos both died on the battlefield of Leuktra in 371, unlike Agesilaos himself, and they died fighting a war against Thebes that was the outcome and fulfilment of the wishes of Agesilaos above all. That battle, in retrospect, can be seen to have been the watershed of Sparta's fortunes as a great Greek power. It marked the end not only of her new-style empire but also of her old-style Peloponnesian League, and – what a tragic poet

might have called the 'coping-stone of wretched ills' (*thringkos athliôn kakôn*) – the loss of half her domestic power-base, namely the territory of Messenia together with the Messenian Helots. Sparta thereby ceased, inevitably, to be a great Greek power.

VI. Aftermath

Let me conclude briefly with some mention of the *Nachleben* of the Spartan kingship, the use made of it in post-antique and sometimes very much later political debate and discourse. According to Shelley, 'we are all Greeks', in the sense that 'Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their roots in Greece'. This is at best misleading.²⁵ But we *are* all Greeks insofar as crucial aspects of our cultural heritage, inheritance, or legacy are Greek, in that we have chosen to appropriate these features from the Greeks, to treat the Greeks as in these vital respects our ancestors. One of these areas is politics, and the discourse that goes with it, and it is impossible to overlook the extraordinarily frequent appearance of kings and kingship, and their frequent lionization, in the story of the Spartan legacy.²⁶

Times change, however, and, as Elizabeth Rawson accurately observed (1969: 170), 'No one today would think of taking Agesilaos as a model, either for himself or for his rulers'. Yet 'though both the structure and the expressions of social life change, the inner necessities that animate it do not' (Geertz 1983: 143). The relevant 'necessity' here, I suggest, would be a politics of charisma, whereby subjects (in our case) or fellow-citizens (as in Sparta) are induced to accept and internalize 'the master fictions by which that [social and political] order lives' (Geertz 1983: 146). The history of the Spartan kingship may yet have something to teach us.