

SPARTA: AN EXTRAORDINARY CITY

Lecture 12. The Spartan Mirage



WHAT IS THE MIRAGE?

- The Mirage is the idealistic image of Sparta.
- The mirage is to a large extent the enduring image of Sparta.
- It is the image of the warrior elite, of the last stand at Thermopylae, of the romantic self-sacrifice.



WHERE CAN WE SEE THE MIRAGE?

- In Thermopylae, where the Thespians are always forgotten.
- In the idea of self-sacrifice.
- In the Sparta as liberator from tyranny in the 6th century.
- In the incorruptibility of the “typical” Spartan.
- In the god-given constitution that never changed.



MORE THAN ONE MIRAGE

- The original mirage is of course the image seen by the Greeks in the late archaic and classical periods.
- But there is also the Roman mirage, as seen mainly in Plutarch.
- And there is the modern mirage of Spartan as the ultimate soldier fighting against tyranny and barbarism.



THE EFFECT OF THE SPARTAN MIRAGE

- Everything.
- Not even Tyrtaios is exempt from the mirage, since his poems are propaganda. In many ways they are the first recorded instance of the mirage.
- All our sources are influenced by the mirage and present the mirage to us.



HOW CAN WE SEE THROUGH THE MIRAGE?

- In many ways we cannot, since our knowledge is limited by the sources.
- But we can try to go beyond the mirage by looking at the actions of the Spartans in the political and military spheres and evaluate them without recourse to the sources themselves.
- If we try this, then we may fall into the trap of creating our own mirage.



HOW CAN WE USE THE MIRAGE?

- The mirage may obscure our view of Sparta, but it does illuminate our view of the Greeks, the Romans and later peoples who used Sparta and added to its mirage.
- The mirage is in some ways a lens into Greek ideals.
- The mirage offers us a glimpse into the Greek psyche.



THE MIRAGE AND THE GREEKS

- On the one hand, we see the upper classes through their idealism. For the upper classes, Sparta is an ideal polis with an ideal constitution.
- Equality is paramount but it is an equality of the select few.
- For the Athenian upper-class men, Sparta is the ideal democracy: a democracy of the deserving.



THE MIRAGE AND THE GREEKS

- For the average Greek, as far as we can say anything about the “average” Greek in the classical period, Sparta is ideal not in terms of a constitution but because of the mirage.
- Sparta is seen as the brave liberator.
- Of course, the image of Sparta changes rather abruptly when her behaviour becomes tyrannical.



SPARTA OR THE MIRAGE?

- In many ways Sparta itself is less important than the mirage.
- The mirage can provide us with glimpses into the Greeks, the Romans and later civilizations that are more important than Sparta itself.
- One also has to wonder how much the mirage affected the Spartan's themselves
- The Mirage and Greek Warfare:
 - <https://www.wolfson.cam.ac.uk/about-wolfson/events/wolfson-media-collection/wolfson-ancient-warfare-wednesdays>



