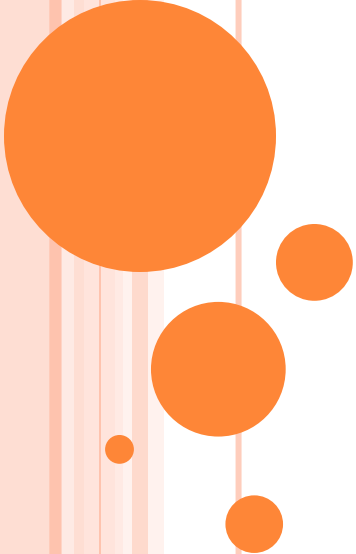




SPARTA: AN EXTRAORDINARY CITY

Lecture 18: Oliganthropia

OLIGANTHROPIA

- Oliganthropia is the decline of citizen manpower.
- It is considered by Aristotle and the majority of modern scholars to have been the main reason behind the abrupt decline of Sparta in the 370s.



SPARTAN POPULATION

- In the sources the total number of the population of Lakonia and Messenia is never mentioned; probably because it was unknown at the time (the Greeks did not make censuses)
- There are however ways to calculate a possible population for Lakonia and Messenia.



A POSSIBLE POPULATION FIGURE

- An easy way to calculate possible population figures is through the carrying ability of the land.
- The Carrying Ability of the Land is *the number of people that could be fed by the grain (usually barley) production of the chora of the polis in a standard year*



THE CARRYING ABILITY OF SPARTA AND MESSENNIA

- Lakonia and Messenia have a total area of 8500 km².
- About 30% of the land is cultivable.
- An adult male eats about 5 medimnoi of wheat per year (200 kg).
- Lakonia and Messenia could theoretically feed about 450,000 people.



OLIGANTHROPIA AND POPULATION

- There is no evidence or reason to assume that oliganthropia had anything to do with population decline in Sparta.
- Short-term population declines can be attributed to severe long-term plagues, war or long famine periods.
- Long-term population decline can only be attributed to a lack of women.



OLIGANTHROPIA AND PROPERTY

As a result of this although the country is capable of supporting fifteen hundred cavalry and thirty thousand heavy-armed troops, they numbered not even a thousand. And the defective nature of their system of land-tenure has been proved by the actual facts of history: the state did not succeed in enduring a single blow, but perished owing to the smallness of its population.

Aristotle *Politics* 1270a29-b6.



POSSIBLE NUMBER OF HOMOIOI IN ARCHAIC PERIOD

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.

Plutarch *Lykourgos* 8



NUMBER OF SPARTAN CITIZEN HOPLITES IN THE PERSIAN WARS

This, then, is how the Greeks fought at Thermopylae. Xerxes then sent for Demaratus and questioned him, saying first, “Demaratus you are a good man. I hold that proven by the plain truth, for things have turned out no differently than you foretold. Now, tell me this: how many Lacedaemonians are left, and how many of them are warriors like these? or is it so with them all?” “My king,” said Demaratus, “the number of the Lacedaemonians is great, and so too the number of their cities. But what you would like to know, I will tell you: there is in Lacedaemon a city called Sparta, **a city of about eight thousand men, all of them equal to those who have fought here**; the rest of the Lacedaemonians are not equal to these, yet they are valiant men.” “And how, Demaratus,” answered Xerxes, “can we overcome those men with the least trouble to ourselves? Come, disclose that to me, for you have been their king and know the plan and order of their counsels.”

Herodotos 7.234



SPARTAN HOMOIOI AT LEUKTRA

The polemarchs, however, seeing that of the whole number of the Lacedaemonians almost a thousand had been killed; seeing, further, that among the Spartiatae themselves, of whom **there were some seven hundred there, about four hundred had fallen;** and perceiving that the allies were one and all without heart for fighting, while some of them were not even displeased at what had taken place, gathered together the most important personages and deliberated about what they should do. And as all thought it best to recover the bodies of the dead by a truce, they finally sent a herald to ask for a truce. After this, then, the Thebans set up a trophy and gave back the bodies under a truce.

Xenophon *Hellenika* 6.4.15



ARISTOTLE *POLITICS* 1270A29-B6

They have a tradition that in the earlier reigns they used to admit foreigners to their citizenship, with the result that dearth of population did not occur in those days, although they were at war for a long period; and it is stated that at one time the Spartiates numbered as **many as ten thousand**. However, whether this is true or not, it is better for a state's male population to be kept up by measures to equalize property. The law in relation to parentage is also somewhat adverse to the correction of this evil. For the lawgiver desiring to make the Spartiates as numerous as possible holds out inducements to the citizens to have as many children as possible: for they have a law releasing the man who has been father of three sons from military service, and exempting the father of four from all taxes. **Yet it is clear that if a number of sons are born and the land is correspondingly divided there will inevitably come to be many poor men.**



THE PROBLEM OF OLIGANTHROPIA IN THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

The Athenians, after guarding them that day and night, the next morning set up a trophy in the island, and got ready to sail, giving their prisoners in batches to be guarded by the captains of the galleys; and the Lacedaemonians sent a herald and took up their dead. The number of the killed and prisoners taken in the island was as follows: four hundred and twenty heavy infantry had passed over; three hundred all but eight were taken alive to Athens; the rest were killed. About a hundred and twenty of the prisoners were Spartans. The Athenian loss was small, the battle not having been fought at close quarters.

Thucydides 4.38



THE PROBLEM OF OLIGANTHROPIA IN THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

Upon the arrival of the men the Athenians determined to keep them in prison until the peace, and if the Peloponnesians invaded their country in the interval, to bring them out and put them to death. Meanwhile the defence of Pylos was not forgotten; the Messenians from Naupactus sent to their old country, to which Pylos formerly belonged, some of the likeliest of their number, and began a series of incursions into Laconia, which their common dialect rendered most destructive. The Lacedaemonians, hitherto without experience of incursions or a warfare of the kind, finding the Helots deserting, and fearing the march of revolution in their country, began to be seriously uneasy, and in spite of their unwillingness to betray this to the Athenians began to send envoys to Athens, and tried to recover Pylos and the prisoners. The Athenians, however, kept grasping at more, and dismissed envoy after envoy without their having effected anything. Such was the history of the affair of Pylos.

Thucydides 4.41



THE PROBLEM OF OLIGANTHROPIA IN THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

- In Thucydides there are some indications that oliganthropia was already a problem at Sparta, since 120 hostages were very important to the Spartans.
- However, it is also clear that for the historian the main problem for Sparta at the time was the fear of a helot revolt.



OLIGANTHROPIA AND CORRUPTION

For I know that formerly the Lacedaemonians preferred to live together at home with moderate fortunes rather than expose themselves to the corrupting influences of flattery as governors of dependent states. And I know too that in former days they were afraid to be found in possession of gold; whereas nowadays there are some who even boast of their possessions. There were alien acts in former days, and to live abroad was illegal; and I have no doubt that the purpose of these regulations was to keep the citizens from being demoralized by contact with foreigners; and now I have no doubt that the fixed ambition of those who are thought to be first among them is to live to their dying day as governors in a foreign land. There was a time when they would fain be worthy of leadership; but now they strive far more earnestly to exercise rule than to be worthy of it. Therefore in times past the Greeks would come to Lacedaemon and beg her to lead them against reputed wrongdoers; but now many are calling on one another to prevent a revival of Lacedaemonian supremacy. Yet we need not wonder if these reproaches are levelled at them, since it is manifest that they obey neither their god nor the laws of Lycurgus.

OLIGANTHROPIA AND CORRUPTION

- With the influx of wealth after 404, the differences between rich and poor in Sparta would have appeared greater than before.
- Also the greater the differences between the wealthy and the poor, the easier for the poor to be resentful.



OLIGANTHROPIA AND THE NON-HOMOIOI

This Cinadon was a young man, sturdy of body and stout of heart, but not one of the peers. And when the ephors asked how he had said that the plan would be carried out, the informer replied that Cinadon had taken him to the edge of the market-place and directed him to count how many Spartiatae there were in the market-place. “And I,” he said, “after counting king and ephors and senators and about forty others, asked ‘Why, Cinadon, did you bid me count these men?’ And he replied: ‘Believe,’ said he, ‘that these men are your enemies, and that all the others who are in the market-place, more than four thousand in number, are your allies.’” In the streets also, the informer said, Cinadon pointed out as enemies here one and there two who met them, and all the rest as allies; and of all who chanced to be on the country estates belonging to Spartiatae, while there would be one whom he would point out as an enemy, namely the master, yet there would be many on each estate named as allies. When the ephors asked how many Cinadon said there really were who were in the secret of this affair, the informer replied that he said in regard to this point that those who were in the secret with himself and the other leaders were by no means many, though trustworthy; the leaders, however, put it this way, that it was they who knew the secret of all the others—Helots, freedmen, lesser Spartiatae, and Perioeci; for whenever among these classes any mention was made of Spartiatae, **no one was able to conceal the fact that he would be glad to eat them raw.**



OLIGANTHROPIA AND THE NON-HOMOIOI

- Under a system of exploitation of the non-homoioi classes as the Spartan, the main problem with declining numbers of the ruling class is the increasing possibility of a successful revolt.
- With homoioi numbers dwindling and non-homoioi numbers rising, the main fear of the Spartans was how to keep their lower classes peaceful.
- With the defeat at Leuktra and the intervention of Thebes in Lakonia and Messenia, the Spartans could no longer keep control of their lower classes and thus had to capitulate.



FOLLOW-UP READING

- Cartledge, Paul. *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History, 1300-362 BCE*, London, 2002, pp. 228-272
- Millender, E.G. “Spartan Literacy Revisited” *Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Apr., 2001), pp. 121-164
- Figueira, T.J. “Xenelasia and Social Control in Classical Sparta” *The Classical Quarterly, New Series*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (May, 2003), pp. 44-74

