

The Spartan *Krypteia*

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Violence permeated the topography of antiquity, from organized warfare to everyday social encounters. It made slaves of some and masters of others and enforced this social order. The threat of violence and fear of reprisal were essential components in maintaining unequal relationships of exploitation and subservience between the slave and free person. What follows examines the relationship between secrecy and violence from the perspective of Spartan society, specifically the role that the *krypteia* played as an institution that promoted, inspired, and enacted violence as a means of power and control, primarily over the helots, but also over other threats to the authority of the Spartiatae within the classical Spartan state. Unsurprisingly, little is known of the *krypteia*. This chapter presents what we do know in the context of Spartan political practice and sociopolitical apparatuses, alongside many of the leading theories regarding the nature of the *krypteia* and its purpose. The discussion aims to paint the *krypteia* in the context of a closed and hierarchical society, in which personal connections and private relationships, secrecy at every level, and spatial considerations like isolation and rural separation added to the threat of violence and, thus, combined to empower the elite and maintain a complex and inequitable system of exploitation and power.

Only Plutarch (who himself cites Aristotle as a source), Plato, and the obscure Heracleides Lembos refer explicitly to the *krypteia*. None of these authors are Spartans, and almost certainly none knew of the institution first-hand. They appear not to understand—or, if they did know, not to reveal—its real meaning or purpose, though perhaps they did. The secretive and allusive *krypteia* thus remained, as its name suggests, just that, a secret thing. As a result, the ancient authors present an allusive and occasionally contra-

dictory image of this institution. Our earliest source, Plato (*Lg.* 633b), has a Spartan named Megillus describe to a Cretan and Athenian the way in which Spartan training made the *Spartiatæ* strong and tough. He noted the *krypteia* among a variety of training methods that included contests and beatings. Members of the *krypteia* went barefoot in the winter, slept in the open, and went through the countryside without attendants. The implication here is both a time of hiding and a secretive institution. Interestingly, there is no mention here of killing or even threatening helots.

Plutarch (*Lyc.* 28.1–6) describes the *krypteia* in more detail. According to him, Aristotle attributed the *krypteia* to the great lawgiver Lycurgus, an attribution Plutarch doubts on account of the institution's brutality and the civil-minded nature of Lycurgus. Plutarch then relates that the ephors, from time to time (*dia chronou*), sent youths to live wild, hiding by day and killing helots that they found outside at night. Sometimes they killed the strongest helots as these worked in the fields. Plutarch (*Lyc.* 28.6) suggests that, rather than the result of Lycurgus' reforms, the *krypteia* emerged in the wake of the great helot revolt of the 460s BC. In support of the brutality of the Spartan regime of the fifth century BC toward braver helots, he cites Thucydides' account (*Th.* 4.80) of the disappearance of two thousand helots who volunteered to fight for the Spartan cause in return for their freedom, though it is here important to note that Thucydides makes no mention of the *krypteia* itself or its involvement in this incident.¹ He also notes Aristotle's report that the Spartans annually declared war on the helots to justify such atrocities (*Plu. Lyc.* 28.4; *Heracleides* 373.10; *FHG* 2). This surely reflects Plutarch's statements on the activities of the *krypteia*, hiding by day, killing helots by night, adding the statement that they do this even in his own day, most likely the second century AD, and that they kill as many as seems appropriate. The last explicit notice to the *krypteia* in a historical context comes also from Plutarch. In his biography of Cleomenes (28), following Phylarchus (*FGrH* 2a 81F59, line 28), the *krypteia* appears in the Spartan army as a unit responsible for reconnaissance in the third century BC and is present on the battlefield at Sellasia in 222 BC. Kennell (2009: 174) has suggested that this unit emerged as a result of the reforms of the later Cleomenes, and he links its emergence to the decline of the Spartan training system known as the *agoge*, of which the earlier *krypteia* had once been a part. Cleomenes thus reconstituted it, but only as a "special operations" unit within the Spartan army.

1. See D. Harvey 2004: 199–218.

Other events are often associated with the activities of the *krypteia*. In his history of the Messenian War, Myron of Priene (see Athenaeus 14.657d) reports that the Spartans degraded the helots in every way, stipulating a shameful dress code (which included the dogskin cap) and a set number of beatings a year regardless of fault, so that they would not forget their servile status (*douleuein*). Significantly, if any helots appeared more vigorous and well fed than a slave ought, they killed them and punished their Spartan overseer. This last statement appears closely allied with stories of the *krypteia* killing brave helots randomly.

Xenophon's (*HG* 3.3.5–11) account of the failed coup of Cinadon mentions young men available to the senior guard commander for state service. Cinadon came from a social group inferior to that of the Spartiatae. Xenophon describes him as one of the Hypomeiones (often simply translated as “Inferiors”), though he was clearly neither helot nor *perioikos*. In 399 or 398 BC, a conspiracy against the elite Spartan system formed around this man. The ephors discovered the plot and acted secretly and quickly. They ordered the Hippagretae (the commanders of the royal bodyguard) and chosen young men to arrest Cinadon. Michell (1952: 164) thought that the commander and those young men involved in Cinadon's arrest came from within the *krypteia*.² The secretive way in which the ephors established Cinadon's guilt and affected his arrest certainly lends itself neatly to the use of a secretive body of youths. The whole affair illustrates well the suspicious, closed, and cloak-and-dagger nature of Spartan political life. Finally, our later sources note the *phouaxir*, or “fox time,” and the famous Roman-era flagellation of Spartan boys at the altar of Artemis Orthia as they attempted to steal cheese (Plu. *Lyc.* 16.13–14; Justin 3.3.6). Some have suggested that the *krypteia* played the role of the guardians of the cheese, with whips, though clearly such a role would not really fit Plutarch's or Plato's *krypteia* at all.³

Analysis of our sources reveals distinct differences that emerge over time regarding the nature of the *krypteia*. Plato's *krypteia* appears to be part of the process, called the *agoge*, used to create physically fit warriors from among

2. Michell (1952: 164) writes, “The only conclusion to which we can arrive is that service in the *krypteia* was a part of the training of Spartan youths, who were used by the ephors at their discretion, and that sometimes the removal of undesirable people was carried out through its agency. We are not expressly told so, but it is reasonable to suppose that the arrest of Cinadon was carried out by members of the *krypteia*.”

3. Ducat 1999: 43–66, esp. 50. For the association of rituals like cheese stealing with the *krypteia*, see Michell 1952: 164. See also T. Meier 1939: 336; Levy 1988; M. Meier 1998: 151–83; Kennell 1995: 71.

the whole Spartan citizen body. This would fit with a *krypteia* established by Lycurgus, as Aristotle (cited in Plutarch) suggests, as part of a state program to create a warrior caste of *Spartiatae*. This view permeated throughout antiquity: Pompeius Trogus says that every Spartan served in it or was liable for service within it until the age of thirty (see Justin 3.3). Plutarch's *krypteia* demonstrates a more deliberate policy aimed at the suppression of the helots. In Plutarch's account only the most quick-witted of the young men went out in secret, and those only went from time to time, which suggests that the *krypteia* formed an elite group from within the already elite group of aspiring *Spartiatae*. Finally, by the third century and the battle of Sellasia, this elite group formed, no doubt in time of war, a special military unit in the Spartan battle line.

The existence of a secret group like the *krypteia* fits well with Sparta's reputation for secrecy.⁴ Thucydides (5.68) comments in a frustrated tone about the difficulty of attaining information about Sparta and its institutions. The Athenians viewed such secrecy with suspicion (Th. 2.39.1).⁵ Democratic Athenians embraced transparency and so abhorred institutional secrecy. The reason is no doubt connected closely to the private and secretive nature of tyranny and oligarchy. Democracy fostered openness, public debate, public voting, and public prosecution of those suspected of treason or conspiracy. Oligarchies governed behind closed doors and, unlike democracy, murdered opponents secretly and without trial. Private dining clubs called *hetaeriae* nurtured oligarchic thinking in Athens. They lay at the heart of the coup of 411 BC and illustrate well the kind of in-house, untransparent societies against which democracy toiled. Thucydides (8.66) connected the oligarchy of 411 with secrecy, random murders, beatings, and the threat of violence. Those who were not members of the oligarchic group and the so-called Five Thousand, whose names remained unpublished, remained silent and passive out of fear that any around them were members of the new in-group (Th. 8.92.5). Secrecy and the threat of violence, therefore, went hand in hand. It is

4. See, e.g., Ephraim 1999: 125, for the conspiracy of silence as typical at Sparta. For surveys of views of this self-reinforcing nature of Spartan secrecy and its effects both inside and outside of Laconia, see Millender 2001: 121–64; Detienne 1988: 56–64, esp. 58; Thomas 1992: 132, 144. For connections between Sparta's lack of written public inscriptions and the supposed secrecy of the oligarchic government, see F. Harvey 1966: 599; Cartledge 1978a: 35–37; Boring 1979: 7–8, 35; Detienne 1988: 58; Ducat 2006: 281–331; Thomas 1992: 144.

5. For further discussion, see Hesk 2000: 23–40, under the telling subtitle “Honest Hoplitest and Tricky Spartans.”

not surprising that the Athenians connected secrecy with random, extralegal violence supporting anti-Democratic politics. Jon Hesk (2000: 32–34) identified the *krypteia* as one of many features that outsiders saw as a deceitful aspect of Spartan society.

Scholars have long studied this singularly Spartan institution. None has fully unraveled its mysteries. George Grote described the *krypteia* as a police force spying in the countryside in harsh conditions and killing any “formidable” helots that they found.⁶ Fittingly, the meaning of such a secret institution remains, as its name suggests, hidden. Even a survey of modern authors’ translations of the term *krypteia* produces uncertainty.⁷ Most translate it as “secret society” (e.g., Murray 1980: 179), though some suggest “secret service” or even “secret police” (Michell 1952: 81), while others describe it temporally, as the “time of hiding” (Tigerstedt 1965). Most splendidly of all, with a modernizing twist, Paul Cartledge offers up three different translations (implicitly descriptions) for the *krypteia*, all in the same book:⁸ at one moment, the *krypteia* represents Sparta’s “Special Ops Brigade” (32); at others, it is the “Secret Operations Executive” (70) or the “Secret Service Brigade” (236).⁹ All these translations demonstrate the power of words, in and of themselves, as commentary. No doubt, each translation embodies something of the nature of the ancient institution. The name *krypteia* itself belies its secretive qualities, and all these translations at least embody secrecy. Some modern authors, perhaps wisely, do not attempt a translation at all, letting the Greek speak for itself.

Comments made by W. Den Boer sum up neatly the extreme views that an earlier generation of scholars held regarding the *krypteia*.

Messenian power was thoroughly destroyed in Tyrtaeus’ time. Evidently the vigilance of the *Crypteia* was adequate. The Spartans too must have taken this control seriously. I fail to understand why some modern scholars connect the duties and methods of the *Crypteia* with education. True, this control was considered as a suitable military exercise and a fitting pastime especially for young Spartans. But anyone who compares these journeys to helot farms with camping expeditions by modern boy-scouts cannot have read the sources well,

6. Grote 1849: 509–11.

7. See Levy 1988: 245–52, aptly titled “La kryptie et ses contradictions.”

8. Cartledge 2003b.

9. Cartledge 2003b, 32, 70, 236, respectively; on 236, he also notes “the helot hunting *crypteia*.”

nor can he have realized that a secret state police is the same everywhere and in all ages. The Krypteia was one of the most revolting manifestations of the military state, preventing the Messenians for two centuries from organizing resistance.¹⁰

The targets of Den Boer's critique are the works of K. M. T. Chrimes and H. Michell.¹¹ Both embraced Plato's benign representation of the *krypteia*, as opposed to that found in Plutarch, with which I began this chapter. In his magisterial study of Agesilaus and fourth-century Sparta, Paul Cartledge (1987: 30) perceptively sees the *krypteia* as "soft" in one version (Plato) and "hard" in the other (Plutarch). Some scholars see it as integral to the management of the Spartan state. Figueira (2003: 222) describes the *krypteia* as "an important administrative mechanism over Messenia," especially "given the primitive character of the governmental apparatus," while Ephraim (1999: 124) likens it to a "pseudo-archaic institution" for "policing and terrorising the helots."

Perhaps we can trace the development of the institution over time. John Fine (1980: 164) sensibly thought that the *krypteia* changed and was perhaps at one time both an elite unit and a rite of passage. It is attractive to think of it in this way, transforming from an initiation rite of manhood, through a more formal means of suppressing the helots, until it ultimately became absorbed into the army of Sparta as a distinct unit of the younger men available for reconnaissance and dangerous or arduous duties. There are plenty of examples of the younger men of ancient armies, especially Peloponnesian armies, taking on hazardous or special missions detached from the main force.¹² Cartledge (1987: 32) is worth quoting with regard to this transformation of the *krypteia* over time.

[The *krypteia*] represents a re-institutionalisation and re-adaptation of an existing initiation rite for it to serve not necessarily a social, but also a police function. If Sparta may under certain circumstances properly be described as a police state, the *krypteia* offered the appropriate kind of paramilitary training for those who were destined to be the superintendents and chief constables of this society.

10. Den Boer 1956: 162–77, 168.

11. Chrimes 1949: 375; Michell 1952: 33, 84, 162–64, 179.

12. E.g., in Spartan armies (X. *HG* 6.5.31) and in Xenophon's *Anabasis* (3.4.15), those under younger hoplites usually less than thirty years old are often called on for tasks that involve stealth, speed, or agility.

Importantly, dominating scholarship on the institution is a detailed analysis of the *krypteia* as a rite of passage with similarities to tribal practices in Africa, Australia, and North America, by Henri Jeanmaire (1913: 121–50).¹³ According to that analysis, the *krypteia* represented the final ritual in the transformative process between boyhood and manhood for the *Spartiatæ*. Elite boys of a certain age removed themselves from society for a short period of time and returned to become men within the group. In this respect, we can identify similarities with a coming-of-age ritual in Dorian Crete, in which boys disappeared into the wilderness, were abducted by adult men before their return, and were then ritually reintegrated into the community (see Str. 10.4). Vidal-Naquet's *Le Chasseur Noir* develops the idea further.¹⁴ The *kryptoi* and the *Spartiatæ* represent two extremes of the same continuum. On the one hand are the boys, naked outsiders who are not yet citizens, roaming in the countryside by night and in winter; on the other are the men, well-armed citizens and absolute insiders of the city, fighting by day in the summer heat. Vidal-Naquet argued that the helots assumed the role of animals hunted at night and that the *krypteia* resembled a night hunt. The young Spartans ("les chasseurs noirs") appear like lone wolves in the wild.¹⁵ Ducat (1974: 1451–64) takes it all one step further. For him, the murder of helots was a "magical rite, a symbolic representation intended to reaffirm the norm that Helots were not and could not become Spartans," and, thus, an extreme enforcement of the social hierarchy.¹⁶ Recently, Kennell (2009: 173) argued that the *krypteia* came from the age-group of *Spartiatæ* called the *hebontes*, essentially those *Spartiatæ* under the age of thirty. This would place the *krypteia* slightly beyond the age-group of boys coming of age and into the group of young adults who had achieved Spartiate status.

Assuming Jeanmaire's analysis has currency, the *krypteia* must have played a critical role in the life of every single Spartan citizen, as a specific moment in the Spartan *agoge*. This may well be an exaggeration, and Aristotle rejected the possibility that every *Spartiatæ* underwent at least this part of the ritual; he limited it to only a few of the Spartiate elites. But if Jeanmaire is right and every Spartiatês needed to kill a helot, the result would indeed be carnage on a great scale. Scholars have naturally challenged the notion that every single

13. See, once again, Ducat 2006, for an excellent related discussion.

14. Vidal-Naquet 1986.

15. Jeanmaire 1939: 550–69; Vidal-Naquet 1986: 112–14; Burkert 1983: 84–93; Epstein 1995: 58–73.

16. Ducat 1974: 1451–64; see also Cartledge 1979.

Spartiatês killed a helot in order to achieve his full status.¹⁷ But the rite of passage may well have evolved away from Helot murder or at least from the killing of Messenians (as many of the Helots in fact were) and, thus, from its origins in the days of the ancient Messenian wars. Among certain ancient tribes, killing an enemy was the means of achieving full tribal status. This would explain the relationship between the two phenomena and would perhaps explain the almost contradictory images that Plato and Plutarch provide of the *krypteia* as a rite of passage (even if only for some *Spartiatæ*) and a formal oppression of the helot group. Thus, such tribal origins became formalized in the fifth century, associated with helot suppression and perhaps the great revolt of ca. 465. Redfield (1977–78: 155) envisages something along these lines. He suggests that the Spartans modeled helotage on the experiences of colonial encounters overseas in which local populations became serfs to dominant Greek colonists. He then states,

In the Spartan version, further, the solidarity characteristic of the founding generation was institutionalised by a myth which froze the moment of initial conquest into permanence and a quasi-ritual which re-enacted it. In these terms we can, I think, understand the perpetual war declared annually by the ephors on the helots (see Aristotle fragment 538 Rose) and the hunting of the helots by the *krypteia* as an element of ephebic training. The Spartans were perpetually conquering their subjects; the helots were perpetually surrendering. In the Greek tradition freedom is the privilege of the victor and slavery the burden of the vanquished; in this sense at Sparta it was true that “the free man is most free and the slave most a slave” (Critias fragment 37 Diels).¹⁸

Many Greek states recognized a transitional phase between boyhood and manhood. The Athenian *ephebeia* formalized the integration of Athenian youths into the army with two years of training and military service.¹⁹ Significantly, the second year saw the *ephebes* as border guards on the periphery of the state. Thucydides (1.105.4, 2.13.6–7) has the youngest Athenians

17. Michell (1952: 162) optimistically doubts that every young Spartan “took a course in murder as part of his regular training.” He cites Plutarch’s statement “from time to time” as referring only to “extraordinary occasions.”

18. Redfield 1977–78: 146–61.

19. See Burckhardt 1996: 26–74; Vidal-Naquet 1968: 49–64; Reinmuth 1952: 34–50; Hesk 2000: 86–89.

on guard duty at the city walls and border forts in the fifth century, while patrols (*peripoloi*) oversaw Piraeus and might launch ambushes (Th. 4.67.2). Significantly, recent research has demonstrated that not every single Athenian became an *ephebos*.²⁰ Thus, joining the *ephebeia* was not a prerequisite of citizenship. Similarly, the Macedonian elite alone entered into royal service.²¹ These “pages” served for two years before entering the elite companion cavalry. In the case of the *krypteia*, this could explain Plutarch’s reference to those boys whose wits were sharpest. In other words, they represented an elite group. Recent work on Sparta reveals its complex hierarchies even within the supposed group of equals, the *homoioi*.²² Vidal-Naquet (1986: 148) is worth quoting at length in regard to the evolution and nature of the *krypteia*.

It is probable that, once they became adults and full warriors, it was the *kryptoi* who composed the elite formation of the three hundred “cavalrymen” concerned above all with police duties. In other words, it is impossible to detach the *krypteia* from the practical part it played in Spartiate society, a role that must have been developed for the most part from the eighth century, the date of the conquest of Messenia; that is to maintain in every way possible a repressive regime faced with the endemic rebellions of the subject population of Messenia and of Laconia itself. The *kryptos*, like the ephebe of Athenian myth, is a guileful hunter—but he hunts helots. The temporary wildness of the *krypteia* is an utterly socialised, even political, wildness: it functions directly to maintain the political and social order.²³

Jacqueline Christien (2006: 176) and Vincent Azoulay (2006: 504–31) have recently argued for a reversed development of the *krypteia*.²⁴ They maintain that rather than emerging from a primitive rite of passage from the Messenian Wars and, thus, away from helot killing, the *krypteia* developed

20. Pritchard (2003: 329), basing his figures on Hansen’s (1985: 12, 47–50, 67–68), argues that about 500 of 990 eighteen-year-olds became ephebes in any given year in later classical Athens.

21. Hammond 1990: 261–90, esp. 266.

22. See, e.g., Hodkinson 1999.

23. Vidal-Naquet 1986: 148.

24. See also Whitby 1994: 87–126; at 104, Whitby observes that the liberation of the helots was a highly topical subject in the fourth century and thus influenced the writings of Plato and Aristotle, who then viewed Spartan institutions with a good deal of hindsight.

into a guerrilla group and away from a more innocent rite of the *agoge*. Noting that the *krypteia* goes unmentioned by authors like Thucydides and Xenophon and that only later fourth-century writers refer to it, they consider the *krypteia* to have developed as a result of the liberation of Messenia in 369 BC. Azoulay points to the Isocratic speech *Archidamus* (see esp. 6.74–76), in which the Spartan king outlines his plan for a guerrilla war of attrition and surprise throughout the countryside of the Peloponnese in order to reconquer Messenia. Christien and Azoulay suggest that this very unhoplite and almost un-Spartan way of war provided the context for the helot-killing *krypteia* and explains why the benign image of the *krypteia* existed first (in Plato), why Plutarch was skeptical of the institution's original violent purpose, and, naturally, why earlier sources appear not to know of its existence. Birgalias (2002: 249–66) lends support to this view, in thinking that the annual declaration of war on the helots dates to this Messenian period of postliberation. At first, this creative and original explanation appears attractive (especially to explain the absence of the *krypteia* in our earlier sources).

We might add to this an episode in the Peloponnesian War that lends weight to Spartan ignorance of guerrilla wars and tactics. In 425/4 BC, the Athenians established some of the Messenians from Naupactos at Pylos. These Messenians raided the Peloponnese, liberating helots and generally making a nuisance of themselves. Thucydides (4.41.3) tells us that the Spartans were ignorant (*amatheis*) until this time (*en to prin chrono*) of such raiding (*lesteias*) and this kind of warfare (*tou toioutou poleμου*). He implies that they could not successfully prohibit or parry the attacks of these incursions. Hoplite armies were not particularly designed for this kind of warfare, but surely this would have been exactly the kind of military action suited to the *krypteia* and that outlined in the *Archidamus*, if *Spartiatæ* had undergone their wilderness initiation.

As we have seen, however, it appears that the *krypteia* may well have existed prior to 369. Michael Vickers (1995: 354) identifies an obscure reference to the *krypteia* (alongside other Spartan customs) in Aristophanes' *Birds* (line 841), produced in 414 BC, in which the speaker refers to concealing fire, accustoming eyes to darkness, and running to give messages, all of which are Spartan practices. Thus, to Vickers at least, the *krypteia* likely existed in some form in the later fifth century. If it did, what form did it take?

To emphasize the relationship between the *krypteia*, education, and *rites de passage* without referring to the helots sanitizes the institution's nature. As we have seen, this occurs partly due to the Platonic view of the *krypteia*. Thus, many modern researchers have rejected the idea that the *krypteia* serendipi-

tously and deliberately killed helots. Many years ago, Girard (1898: 31–38) first suggested that Spartan youths were *melleirens*, about eighteen to twenty years old, and thus in a transition phase between boyhood and manhood. He follows Plato (*Lg.* 6.760) regarding the *agronomoi*, who, when ordered by the ephors of Sparta, busied themselves, as Michell (1952: 163) disparagingly remarks, “like boy scouts” in rural parts of the country. Michell (164) sensibly rejects the notion that such Spartan elite youths would have done any such toil or manual labor. Rightly, I think, he suggests that such work “would have been utterly alien to the warrior caste.” Despite his assertion of an aristocratic ethos for this warrior caste, Michell still embraces a benign view of the *krypteia*. He follows a standard line of argument, suggesting that Plutarch exaggerated the deeds of the *krypteia* (33), that the declaration of war was an archaic ritual that became meaningless (81), and, finally, that the idea that “the youths were sent out to commit murder indiscriminately is so monstrous as to be incredible” (164). Richard Talbert’s (1989: 22–40) important study of what might be termed the economic symbiosis of *Spartiatæ* and helots also depicts a *krypteia* intent more on initiation than on keeping down the helot population. He even concludes that any “widespread provocation of the [helot] class [would] seem senseless,” and he argues, in general, for a relatively peaceful interaction between helot and Spartiate until the Theban victory at Leuctra in 371 and the subsequent invasion of 369 BC (Talbert 1989: 22–40, esp. 34).²⁵ Such optimistic views of the *krypteia* (and, implicitly, of Spartan policy toward the helots) have enjoyed some resurgence recently. Christien (2006: 176) thought it “absurd” that the *Spartiatæ* would kill members of its own workforce on whom they relied so heavily. In a similar vein, Birgalias (2002: 249–66) thought that such murder would have been “catastrophic to the *homoioi*,” while Luraghi (2002: 227–48), despite his recognition of the violence implicit in ancient power relationships, thought, following Alcock’s work on the location of dwellings in the Peloponnese (2002: 185–99, esp. 190–98; see also Ducat 2006), that helot villages, rather than simply isolated helot homesteads, made it unlikely that the helots were separated by the terror of the *krypteia*.

But let us consider the realities inherent in controlling the large serf population of the southern Peloponnese. Helots outnumbered *Spartiatæ* many times over. They lived across a large territorial area that the Spartans could not hope to control without a degree of sophisticated organization and coercion by fear and threat rather than constant pressure and occupation. Plenty

25. For a response to Talbert’s arguments, see Cartledge 1991: 379–81.

of evidence suggests a latent hostility between helots and *Spartiatæ*. The helots had been disenfranchised through war and violence. Thucydides (4.83.3) stated that most Spartan institutions aimed at their own security with regard to the helot presence. When the region had been hit by a large earthquake in the 460s BC, the helots revolted, and Spartan power must have been quite literally rocked. Helots deserted in numbers in the 420s, willingly supported Cinadon in the 390s, and finally overthrew the Spartans wholesale in the 360s. Even Xenophon's rose-tinted image of Sparta reveals that the helots and others lower down the Spartan socioeconomic tree would have eaten the Spartans raw if they could have (X. *HG* 3.3.6). Against this view, we know that helots campaigned with the Spartan army, and there is no evidence of dissent on campaign. But to leave too many helots behind while a large number of *Spartiatæ* ventured abroad invited revolt at home, and we know from more modern contexts that the presence of "colonials" serving in the armies of their imperial masters need not imply mutual affection.²⁶ Even if the Laconian helots displayed some loyalty to their Spartan masters, the regionally distinct Messenians can have harbored few such feelings. Outsiders recognized the plight of the helots, burdened with tariffs and servitude. Theopompus (*FHG* 115 fr. 13) noted that the helot ethnos occupied a totally raw and bitter position. Even the oligarchic Athenian Critias (fr. 37 Diels) noted that "the free man is most free and the slave most a slave" at Sparta. The Messenians, if not their Laconian siblings, revolted when given the opportunity, such as after the great earthquake in the 460s. That the Messenians established their own state in the wake of Spartan defeats against Thebes in the 370s and 360s is surely evidence that Messenian identity survived centuries of oppression. Aristotle (*Pol.* II a 1269a29 ff.) lists the helots among the weaknesses of Sparta's state, as they waited for the opportunity to attack the Spartans and overthrow their rule (1269a37–38).

Many modern scholars have thus recognized the tension between the *Spartiatæ* and helots. Jean Ducat (1974; 1990: 105–27) has shown that violence and dishonor were a central aspect of the relationship between them. Oliva (1971: 48) claimed a "fundamental conflict between the two groups at the opposite poles of Spartan society," while de Ste Croix (2002: 193) more emphatically noted that "the basic relationship between the Spartiates and at any rate the Messenian helots . . . was one of fear and hatred on both sides." Importantly, Devereux (1965: 18–44) highlights the psychological impact of

26. For references and discussion, see Pritchett 1971: 49–51; van Wees 2004: 45; Cartledge 1979: 356; Talbert 1989: 23–26, esp. nn. 9–28.

Spartan power over their helot subjects and the atmosphere of terror that must have pervaded the Spartan state.

The sources note that the *krypteia* moved about secretly in the countryside, almost as if they spied on the helots. Plutarch's last historical notice of the *krypteia* fulfilling the role of a reconnaissance force in the army of Cleomenes III suggests as much (*Cleom.* 28). As they spied, they also identified stronger members of the helot group for elimination and enforced a curfew. Such espionage provided the Spartans with important intelligence about their subjects. Ancient Greek states understood the importance of such local knowledge. The Athenians employed *episkopoi* (literally, "overseers": see *M&L* 276; *ATL* 3.144; *Ar. Av.* 1021) to keep an eye on subject island states in conjunction with local friendly elites (*proxenoi*). Intriguingly, a reference to *kruptê archê* used by the Athenians in their subject states appears in the fifth part of the *Anecdota Graeca*, under the *lekseis rêtorikai*, a tenth-century Byzantine compilation found in Coslinianus (345).²⁷ Unfortunately, such a "secret command" has no parallel in the Athenian Empire anywhere else in the contemporary or even ancient sources. Perhaps it shared some association with the Spartan *krypteia* and its function as a means of spying on subjects who were removed geographically from the overseeing agency.

Spying alone, however, did not make the *krypteia* the most sinister of institutions. The violence inherent in its legacy requires a final word. The Spartans were not averse to crimes of violence even against those not of the helot group, like the apparently brutal suppression of the Cinadon conspiracy. Cartledge (2003b: 22–23, esp. n. 30) points out several instances in which the Spartans killed seemingly innocent or, at best, neutral free Greeks. He cites Sparta's murder of neutral traders, along with Athenian and allied traders of Athens caught sailing around the Peloponnese (*Th.* 2.67.3), the two hundred Plataeans executed when their city fell (*Th.* 3.68.2), and the murder of all free men found in Hysiae after its capture (*Th.* 5.83.2). The callous murder of two thousand helots simply because they appeared brave and almost to spite (if not because of) their willingness to fight for the Spartan state shows even more clearly the Spartiate willingness to purge any potential threat to its authority. Cartledge (1979: 176) notes Spartan cruelty and identified an important passage in Herodotus (4.146) in which the early Spartans performed official killings by night. This report immediately alludes to secrecy and naturally, therefore, to the *krypteia*. We might once again note Vickers' reference to nighttime activity and to the secrecy of the

27. See Tolkiehn 1925: 2460, 2478; Bekker 1814: 273; Losada 1972: 112.

potential Spartans of Aristophanes' *Birds*. Spartans acted in secret, and the threat of violence must have played a significant role to cower the vast numbers of non-*Spartiatae* across the southern Peloponnese into acquiescence. There can be no doubt that the Spartans did commit murders in secret. Isocrates (12.181) stated that, among Greeks, the Spartans alone “deny the wickedness of all homicide.” This was of course a reference to the guilt-absolving declaration of war made against the helots to justify their killings. Spartan policy fostered fear, and fear fostered control.

The violence inherent in the idea of the *krypteia*—its menace, secrecy, and randomness—provided the *Spartiatae* with a perfect mechanism for managing a widely dispersed group of subordinates across the landscape of the southern Peloponnese. It is easy to envisage the power of this threat. Even if not true, rumors of a group of men who were constantly alert to plots or even idle talk of revolution and from whom attack might come at any time, as well as stories of the murders of unarmed and vulnerable helots working in the fields or out wandering at night, would play on the minds of even the bravest helots, if not with regard to their own safety, then concerning that of their families and friends. Parallels with the Gestapo, the NKVD, or the Stasi come to mind. A handful of secret police can terrorize a community of hundreds of thousands due to rumors of brutalities and due to widespread fear of their secrecy.

Despite all the denial of some modern commentators regarding the extreme activities of the *krypteia*, there can be little doubt that ancient elites exploited the weak and maintained their power without pity. The helots were owned communally; the loss of one or two did not affect any single Spartan master economically. The murder of a few helots, especially a few who appeared as potential leaders of their group, would be worth its cost in gold to maintain the social order among the many. In the topography of violence, the *krypteia* played its role well to maintain the balance of power within the Spartan state.

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