Sparta’s Spectacular Austerity

1) Plutarch, *Lyc. 27.2*: καὶ κατεπύκνου παραδειγμάτων πλήθει τὴν πόλιν, σις ἀναγκαῖον ἣν ἐντυχόντος ἄει καὶ συντερεφομένους ἄγεσθαι καὶ κατασχηματίζεσθαι ἰόντας πρός τὸ καλὸν.

“He [Lycurgus] caused the city to be thickly studded with a mass of models; those who came into continuous contact with them and were brought up together with them would necessarily be influenced into conforming with what was good.”


“When he [= Lycurgus] had observed that where those who voluntarily cultivate virtue are not sufficient to increase in power their native lands, in Sparta he compelled all to practice all he virtues in public. Therefore, just as in the case of private individuals those who practice virtue are superior in it to those who neglect it, so Sparta, too, is reasonably superior to all poleis with respect to virtue, because she alone practices kalokagathia in public.”


“And the mode of life of the ephors is not in conformity with the aim of the state, for it is too unrestrained, while in the case of others [= citizens] it is excessive in the direction of austerity, with the result that they are unable to endure it and secretly shun the law and enjoy the pleasures of the body.”


“Those who disclaim trifling or obvious qualities are called affected humbugs and are more contemptible; and sometimes this seems to be boastfulness, like the dress of the Spartans, for both excess and great deficiency are boastful.”

5) Xenophon, *Lac. Pol. 7.3*: ἀλλὰ μὴν οὐδ’ ἵματιν γε ἔνεκα χρηματιστέου· οὐ γὰρ ἐσθήτος πολυτελεία ἀλλὰ σώματος εὐεξίας κοσμοῦνται.
“Well, in truth, one does not need to make money even for cloaks, for they adorn themselves not with the costliness of their clothing but with the vigor of their bodies.”

6) Xenophon, Ages. 11.11: καὶ γὰρ ἐκαλλωπίζετο τῇ μὲν ἀμφὶ τὸ σῶμα φαυλότητι . . . (καὶ) τῷ μὲν αὐτὸς ὡς ἐλαχίστων δείσθαι . . .

“For he prided himself on the simplicity of his own dress [and] on his needing as little as possible.”


“And it was most pleasing for the Greeks who dwelled in Asia to see the viceroys and generals, who had long been insufferably oppressive and had reveled in wealth and luxury, fearing and paying court to a man who went about in a paean coat, and at one brief and laconic speech from him, conforming themselves and changing their form . . .”

8) Plutarch, Ages. 36.5-6: ὡς δὲ ἐώρων λαμπρότητα μὲν καὶ κατασκευὴν οὐδεμίαν, ἄνθρωπον δὲ πρεσβύτην κατσκευὴν ἐν τινὶ πόσῃ παρὰ τὴν θάλασσαν, εὔτελῆ καὶ μικρὸν τὸ σῶμα, τραχὺ καὶ φαύλον ἱμάτιον ἀμπεχόμενον, σκύππειν αὐτοῖς καὶ γελωτοποιεῖν ἐπῆκε . . . ἦτι δὲ μάλλον αὐτοῦ τὴν ἀτοπίαν ἑθαύμασαν, ὅτε ἐξεῖν προσκομισθέντων καὶ προσαμισθέντων ἀλευρα μὲν καὶ μόσχους καὶ χίνας ἔλαβε, τραγήματα δὲ καὶ πέμματα καὶ μύρα διώητο, καὶ βιαζομένων λαβεῖν καὶ λυπαροῦσιν ἐκέλευσε τοῖς εἰλωσι διδόναι κομίζοντας.

“But when they saw no brilliant array but an old man lying in some grass by the sea, his body paltry and small, covered in a cloak that was coarse and mean, they were moved to jeering and laughter. . . But the wondered still more at his eccentricity. When friendly gifts were brought and set before him, he accepted the wheat-meal and the calves, and the geese, but he rejected the sweetmeats and the pastries, and the perfumes, and when he was pressed hard and besought to accept them, he ordered them to be carried away and given to the helots.”

9) Critias fr. 6 Diels-Kranz (ap. Athen. 432d); cf. fr. 33 (ap. Athen. 463e): καί τὸ δὲ ἔθος Σπάρτης μελέτημα τε κατέμνουν ἐστὶ/πίνειν τὴν αὐτὴν οἰνοφόρον κύλικα,/μὲν ἑποδιωρέσθαι προπόσεις οἴνομας καλὸνδοιμα/μὲν ἐπὶ δεξιότεραν χεῖρα κύκλωι θίασον/. . ./ οἱ Λακεδαιμονίων δὲ κόροι πίνουσι τοσοῦτον,/awner φρέν'/ εἰς ἱλαράν ἐλπίδα πάντας ἄγειν/ἐς τε φυλοφρουρὴν γλώσσαν μετρένιο τὸ γέλωτα/στ. . ./ἡ Λακεδαιμονίων δὲ δίαιθ' ὀμαλός διάκειται,/ἐσθεῖν καὶ πίνειν σύμμετρα πρὸς τὸ φρονεῖν/καὶ τὸ πονεῖν εἶναι δυνατοῦς- σὺς ἐστ᾽ ἀποτακτὸς/ήμερα οἰνώςασι σῳμί ἀμέτρουσι πότοις.
Trans. Sprague 1972: “And it is a habit and established practice at Sparta to drink from the same wine cup and not to give toasts mentioning someone by name and not to pass it round, as is customary in Athens, moving to the right in a circle around the company. . . Lacedaemonian youths, however, drink only enough to direct the thinking of all towards cheery hopefulness and the tongue towards friendliness and temperate laughter. . . The way of life of the Lacedaemonians is evenly ordered: to eat and drink the appropriate amount to render them capable of thought and labor. No day is set aside for soaking the body through immoderate draughts.”

10) Xenophon, Lac. Pol. 5.3-4: καὶ σκίτον γε ἔταξεν αὐτοῖς ὡς μήτε ὑπηρπληροῦσθαι μήτε ἐνδεείς γίγνεσθαι. . . καὶ μήν τοῦ πότου ἀποταμόσας τὰς [οὐκ] ἀναγκαίας πόσεις, αἱ σφάλλουσι μὲν σῶματα, σφάλλουσι δὲ γνώμας, ἐφήκεν ὅτι ἐτελεῖς ἡμάς ἐκάστος πίνειν, οὕτω νομιζόν τὸν ἀβλαβέστατον τε καὶ ἡδίστον ποτὸν γίγνεσθαι. οὕτω γε μὴν συσκηνοῦντων πῶς ἄν τὶς ἢ ὑπὸ λιχνείας ἢ ὀινοφλυγίας ἢ αὐτόν ἢ οὐκὸν διαφθείρειν;

“And he prescribed food for them so that they would neither be overfull nor be left wanting.... And, moreover, concerning drinking, having put a stop to compulsory draughts, which trip up bodies and trip up minds, he allowed each to drink whenever he was thirsty, since he believed that in this way drinking is most harmless and most pleasant. Thus, therefore, how then could one of those messing together destroy either himself or his household either through gluttony or drunkenness?”

11) Plutarch, Lyc. 10.1-3; cf. 12; Mor. 226e-f, 236f: Ἔτι δὲ μᾶλλον ἐπιθέσθαι τῇ τρυφῇ καὶ τὸν ζηλὸν ἀφελέσθαι τοῦ πλοῦτου διανοηθείς, τὸ τρίτον πολίτειμα καὶ κάλλιστον ἐπῆγε, τὴν τῶν συσσιτίων κατασκευὴν, ὡστε δειπνεῖν μετ’ ἄλληλων συνιόντας ἐπὶ κοινοῖς καὶ τεταγμένοις ψυχοῖς καὶ σίτοις, οὐκός δὲ μὴ διαιτάσθαι κατακλινέντας εἰς στρωματὰ πολυτελεῖς καὶ τραπέζας, χειρὶ δημιουργῶν καὶ μαγείρων ὑπὸ σκότος, ὡσπερ ἄδηφα γὰρ ζῶα, πιανομένους . . .

“With the aim of attacking luxury still more and removing the passion for wealth, he introduced his third and finest measure, the establishment of the common messes so that they might dine with one another in companies, on common and prescribed cooked dishes and victuals and not lead their lives at home, reclining on expensive couches at expensive tables, delivering themselves into the hands of confectioners and cooks to be fattened in the dark, like gluttonous animals . . .”

12) Xenophon, Lac. Pol. 1.5: ἐπεὶ γε μὴν γυνὴ πρὸς ἄνδρα ἔλθοι, ὀρῶν τοὺς ἄλλους τὸν πρῶτον τοῦ χρόνου ἀμέτρως ταῖς γυναιξὶ συνόντας, καὶ τοῦτο τάνατεία ἔγνω ἔθηκε γὰρ αἰδεύσθαι μὲν εἰσιόντα ὀφθήναι, αἰδεύσθαι δὲ ἐξίοντα. οὕτω δὲ συνόντων
“Since he saw that the others during this first period of time had unlimited intercourse with their wives, he also determined things opposite to this practice. For he established that it was shameful for a man to be seen entering or leaving [sc. his wife’s room]. By engaging in intercourse in this way, they would necessarily be more desirous of one another, and if any offspring should be produced in this way, it would be more vigorous than if they were satiated with one another.”

13) Plutarch, Lyc. 15.5; cf. 15.4; Mor. 228a: ἢ δὲ τοιαῦτη σύνοδος οὐ μόνον ἐγκρατείας καὶ σωφροσύνης ἔσχε, ἀλλὰ τοῖς τε σώμασι γονίμως καὶ τῷ φιλεῖν ἀεὶ καῖνούς καὶ προσφάτους ἤγεν ἐπὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν, οὐ διακορεῖσ εὐδ᾿ ἐξητήλους ταῖς ἀνέδην κοινωνίας...

“And such intercourse not only was an exercise in self-control and temperance but also united husbands and wives when their bodies were fertile and their affections new and fresh, not when they were sated and dulled by unrestricted intercourse.”

14) Plutarch, Lyc. 27.1-2 (cf. Mor. 238d): Καὶ μήν καὶ τά περὶ τάς ταφάς ἁρίστα διεκόσμησεν αὐτοῖς, πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ ἀνελὼν δεισιδαιμονίαν ἔπασαν ἐν τῇ πόλῃ θάπτειν τοὺς νεκροὺς, καὶ πλησίον ἔχειν τὰ μνήματα τῶν ἱερῶν οὐκ ἐκώλυσε, συντρόφους ποιών ταῖς τοιαύταις ὁμιλείναι καὶ συνήθεις τούς νέους, ὥστε μὴ ταραττεσθαι μηδ᾽ ὀρρωδεῖν τὸν θάνατον ὡς μαίνοντα τοὺς ἁμαμένους νεκροὺς σώματος ἢ διὰ τάφων διελθόντας. ἔπειτα συνθάπτειν οὐδὲν εἰςασκεῖν, ἀλλὰ ἐν φοινικίδι καὶ φύλλοις ἐλαίας θέντες τὸ σῶμα περιστελλόν. ἐπιγράψατε δὲ τούνομα θάφαντας οὐκ ἔξαν τοῦ νεκροῦ, πλὴν ἀνθρός ἐν πολέμω καὶ γυναικὸς τῶν ἱερῶν ἀποθανόντων.

Furthermore, Lycurgus made the most excellent regulations in the matter of their burials. First, he did away with all superstitious fear by allowing them to bury their dead within the city and to have memorials of them near the sacred places, thereby making the youth familiar with and accustomed to such sights, so that they were neither agitated by them nor feared death as polluting those who touched a corpse or walked among the graves. Next, he allowed them to bury nothing with the dead; instead, they wrapped the body in a crimson military cloak and olive leaves when they laid it in the grave. To inscribe the name of the deceased was not permitted for those carrying out the burial, except for a man who died in war and a holy woman [text still disputed].

15) Thucydides 1.84.2-3: καὶ δύναται μάλιστα σωφροσύνη ἐμφρων τούτ᾿ ἐιναι: μόνοι γὰρ δι᾿ αὐτὸ εὐπραγιάς τε οὐκ ἐξυμβρίζομεν καὶ ξυμφοράς ἔσχον ἐτέρων εἰκόμενον τῶν τε εξὸν ἔπαινω ἔξοπρονοντός ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ τὰ δεινὰ παρὰ τὸ δοκοῦν ἡμῖν οὐκ ἐπαιρόμεθα ἡδονή, καὶ ἢν τις ἄρα ἐν κατηγορία παροξυνήσῃ, οὐδὲν δὴ μᾶλλον ἄχθεσθέντες ἀνεπείσθημεν... εὔβουλοι δὲ ἄμεθέστερον τῶν νόμων τῆς ὑπεροψίας παιδεύομενοι καὶ ἦν χαλεπότητι
The quality that they condemn is really nothing but sensible moderation: on account of it, we
alone do not become insolent in success and give way less than others in misfortune. We are not
carried away by the pleasure of hearing ourselves praised when people are urging us towards
dangers that run counter to our judgment; nor are we, when annoyed, more likely to be persuaded
by an attempt to goad us through accusation. And we are good at deliberation because we are
educated with too little learning to despise the laws and too severely trained in self-control to
disobey them. And we are trained to avoid being too clever in useless matters—such as being
able to produce in words an excellent criticism of the enemy’s preparations and then failing to
proceed against them with equal success in practice.”

16) Thucydides 1.86: Τοὺς μὲν λόγους τοὺς πολλοὺς τῶν Ἀθηναίων οὐ γιγνώσκω·
ἐπαινέσαντες γὰρ πολλὰ ἐξαυτοῦς οὖδαμοῦ ἀντείπτον ὡς ὁκ ἀδικοῦσι τοὺς ἁμετέρους
ξυμμάχους καὶ τὴν Πελοπόννησον· καίτοι εἰ πρὸς τοὺς Μῆδους ἐγένοντο ἁγαθοὶ τότε, πρὸς
δ’ ἡμᾶς κακοὶ νῦν, διπλασίας ζημίας ἄξιοι εἰσίν, ὅτι ἄντρ ἁγαθῶν κακοὶ γεγένηται. ἡμεῖς δὲ
ομοίοι καὶ τότε καὶ νῦν ἔσμεν, καὶ τοὺς ξυμμάχους, ἢν σωφρονύμεν, οὐ περιοψόμεθα
ἀδικομένους οὐδὲ μελλήσομεν τιμωρεῖν· οί δ’ οὐκετί μέλλουσιν κακῶς πάσχειν. ἄλλοις μὲν
γάρ χρήματά ἐστι πολλά καὶ νήσες καὶ ὄροι, ἡμῖν δὲ ξύμαχοι ἁγαθοὶ, οὐς οὐ παραδοτέα
τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις ἐστίν, οὐδὲ δίκαιοι καὶ λόγοι διακρίτεα μὴ λόγῳ καὶ αὐτοῦς βλαπτομένους,
ἄλλα τιμωρητέα ἐν τάχει καὶ παντὶ σθενεί. καὶ ὡς ἡμᾶς πρέπει βουλεύεσθαι ἀδικομένους
μηδεὶς διδασκέων, ἄλλα τοὺς μέλλοντας ἀδικεῖν μάλλον πρέπει πολὺν χρόνον βουλεύεσθαι.
ψηφίζεσθε οὖν, ὦ

Λακεδαιμόνιοι, ἄξις τῆς Ἀθηναίων τὸν πόλεμον, καὶ μὴν τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἔστε 
μείζους 
γίνεσθαι μὴν τοὺς ξυμμάχους καταπροδίωμεν, ἄλλα ἐξὶ τοῖς θεοῖς ἐπίσκομεν ἐπὶ τοῖς
ἀδικοῦντας.

“I do not understand these long speeches of the Athenians. They praised themselves a good
deal, but they nowhere denied that they are injuring our allies and the Peloponnesus. And yet if
they behaved well against the Mede then but ill against us now, they deserve double punishment,
since they have ceased to be good and have become bad. We, on the other hand, are the same
men then and now, and if we are sensible, we will not allow our allies to be wronged or wait to
help them; they are no longer waiting to suffer. Others have a lot of money and ships and horses,
but we have good allies, whom we ought not to betray to the Athenians. Nor is this a matter
which should be decided by lawsuits and words, since it is not in word that we ourselves are
being injured. Instead, we must assist our allies quickly and with all our might. And let no one
instruc us that it is fitting for us to deliberate when we are being wronged; long deliberation is
rather fitting for those intending to do wrong. Vote, then, Lacedaemonians, for war, as the honor
of Sparta demands, and do not allow the Athenians to grow greater nor let us betray our allies,
but with the gods’ help let us advance against the aggressors!”
17) **Herodotus 3.46:** ἐπείτε δὲ οἱ ἐξελασθέντες Σαμῖων ὑπὸ Πολυκράτεος ἀπίκοντο ἐς τὴν Σπάρτην, καταστάντες ἐπὶ τοὺς ἄρχοντας ἔλεγον πολλὰ οἷα κάρτα δεόμενοι. οἱ δὲ σφὶ τῇ πρώτῃ καταστάσιι ὑπεκρίναντο τὰ μὲν πρῶτα λεχθέντα ἐπιλεληθέναι, τὰ δὲ ὑστερα οὐ συνιέναι. μετὰ δὲ ταύτα δεύτερα καταστάντες ἄλλο μὲν ἔτοιν οὐδὲν, θύλακον δὲ φέροντες ἥφασαν τὸν θύλακον ἀλφίτων δέεσθαι. οἱ δὲ σφὶ ὑπεκρίναντο τῷ θυλάκῳ περιεργάσθαι· ἴνα δ᾿ ἦν ἐδόξη αὐτοῖς.

“When the Samians who had been expelled by Polycrates came to Sparta, they came before the authorities and made a long speech to show the greatness of their need. The Spartans, however, at this first presentation, answered that they had forgotten the beginning of the speech and did not understand its end. After this the Samians came before them a second time, bearing a sack, and said nothing other than that the sack needed barley-meal. To this the Spartans replied that they had overdone it with their ‘sack,’ but they did resolve to help them.”

18) **Plato, Prot. 342d-e:** γνοῖτε δ᾿ ἄν ὅτι ἐγὼ ταύτα ἄληθεν λέγω καὶ Λακεδαίμονιοι πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν καὶ λόγους ἄριστα πεπαίδευσται, ὡδὲ· εἰ γὰρ ἔθελε τις Λακεδαιμονίων τῷ φαυλοτᾶτῳ συγγενέσθαι, τὰ μὲν πολλὰ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις εὐρίησε αὐτὸν φαύλον τινα φαινόμενον, ἔπειτα, ὅπου ἐν τῇ τῶν λεγομένων, ἐνέβαλεν ἡμα τὸν ἄξιον λόγον βραχύ καὶ συνεπραξάμενον ὕστερ ἀπείν τε ἀκοντιστή, ϊ δὲ φαίνεσθαι τὸν προσδιαλεγόμενον παιδὸς μηδὲν ἐπιτίθω.

“‘And you may know that what I say is true and that the Lacedaemonians are the best educated in philosophy and rhetoric by the following: If someone wishes to converse with the meanest of the Lacedaemonians, you will find that for most of the time he makes a poor show in the conversation. But then, at some chance point in the conversation, he throws in a notable remark that is terse and pithy, like a deadly javelin-thrower, that makes the one he is talking with seem no better than a child.’”

19) **Plato, Leg. 641e:** τὴν πόλιν ἄπαντες ἡμῶν Ἁλλήνες ὑπολομμένουσιν ως φιλόλογος τὸ ἔστι καὶ πολύλογος. Λακεδαίμονα δὲ καὶ Κρῆτην, τὴν μὲν βραχύλογον, τὴν δὲ πολύνοιαν μᾶλλον ἡ πολυλογίαν ἁσκοῦσαν.

“All the Greeks are of the opinion that while our own city is both fond and full of speech, Lacedaemon is given to brevity in discourse, while Crete is inclined to wittiness rather than wordiness.”

20) **Plutarch, Agis 4.1:** ὁ δ᾿ Ἀγίς οὖτω πολὺ παρήλλαττεν εὐφυῖα καὶ φρονηματί θυμῆς οὐ μόνον τούτον, ἀλλὰ σχεδὸν ἄπαντας ὅσοι μετ᾿ Ἀγησίλαον τὸν μὲν ἔβαλεν, ἱκετεύει μετὰ καὶ πλοῦτος καὶ τρυφαῖς γυναικῶν, τῆς τε μητέρος Ἀμυθστράτας καὶ τῆς γυναικὸς Ἀρχιδάμιας, σῶσα ἐπιταύραις Λακεδαιμονίων ἐκέκρητην, πρὸς τὰ ὡς ἱδονὰς εὐθὺς ἁπαχρυσάσασθαι, καὶ τὸν ἐπιτρέψω μάλιστα ἡ ὁρίζει τῆς μορφῆς ὑπαίσιον δοκοῦντα περιστάσας τοῦ σώματος, καὶ πάσαν ἑκδῷ καὶ διάφυγων πολυτέλειαν, ἐγκαλλοπιξόθηκας τῷ τριβωνίῳ, καὶ δεῖτα καὶ λοιπά καὶ διαίτας Λακωνικῶς
ζητεῖν, καὶ λέγειν ὡς οὐδὲν δέοιτο τῆς βασιλείας, εἰ μὴ δι’ αὐτὴν ἀναλήψωτο τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὴν πάτριον ἀγωγὴν.

“Agis so far surpassed in natural goodness and in loftiness of soul not only Leonidas but almost all the kings who came after great Agesilaus. Accordingly, before his twentieth year, although he had been reared amid the wealth and luxury of women, namely, his mother Agesistrata and his grandmother Archidamia, who possessed the greatest wealth among the Lacedaemonians, he at once firmly opposed pleasures. He stripped from his body the adornment which was thought especially to suit the grace of his figure, and, having stripped off and escaped every extravagance, he took pride in his short Spartan cloak, sought after Spartan customs in his meals and baths and general ways of living, and declared that he did not want the kingship unless through it he could restore the laws and the ancestral upbringing.”

Select Bibliography


