

CHAPTER XII

THE RISE OF SPARTA AND THE PELOPONNESIAN LEAGUE

About 750-500 B.C.

132. Sparta and Laconia. — Laconia, a country in Peloponnese, has already been briefly described.¹ It is bounded on the north by the Arcadian highland, and on the east and west by lofty parallel ranges. The whole country is the basin of the Eurotas River. It was one of the most fertile parts of Greece, and in the mountain range² on the west were rich iron mines. Naturally the principal occupations were farming and the manufacture of iron wares.

Sparta, the city of Laconia, was situated on the right bank of the Eurotas. In contrast with the usual Greek city, placed on a hill-top and strongly fortified, it was a mere group of villages without walls and on only a slight elevation. The reason for this peculiarity will be made clear below.³

Originally there had been several city-states in Laconia; but Sparta by conquest had reduced the others to submission and had become the sole independent city. In the case of Sparta alone, it is necessary to distinguish between the city and the state. Sparta was simply the city, whereas the name of the state was Lac-e-dae'-mon. The members of the state — Lacedaemonians — comprised both the Spartans and the dependent population.

133. The Social Classes: the Helots. — There were but few slaves in Laconia. Most of the laborers were helots, or state serfs. Some were reduced to this condition by the Spartan conquest; others doubtless were once free peasants, whom oppression forced into serfdom. The helots tilled the fields of the Spartans, paying them fixed amounts of grain, wine, oil, and fruit. They served in war as light-armed troops, and some were given their freedom for

¹ § 78.

² The Taygetus range; § 71.

³ § 138.

bravery and faithfulness. They lived with their families on the farms they worked, or grouped together in villages. Their lords had no right to free them or to sell them beyond the borders of the country; and under favorable conditions they could even acquire property of their own. Still their condition was hard, for the more intelligent they were, the more the Spartans dreaded and oppressed them. The rulers organized a secret police force of youths, which was to watch over the helots, and put out of the way any one who might be regarded as dangerous to the community.

134. The Perioeci. — The per-i-oe'ci were between the helots and Spartans in rank. They inhabited the towns of Laconia and Messenia, and at first enjoyed independence in all local matters; but as time went on Sparta encroached on their liberties by sending out officers to rule over them. They paid war taxes and served as heavy-armed troops in the Lacedaemonian army. As the land left them by the conquerors was the poorest in the country, many of them made their living by skilled industry and trade. While the Spartans themselves could use only iron money, the perioeci were not thus hampered in their business. On the whole, they could not have been badly treated, for they remained loyal to Sparta for centuries. Spartans, perioeci, and helots were alike Dorians, so far as we know; no difference of race has been discovered, and we are not certain why the Spartans treated some of the conquered as serfs and left others free; but perhaps the perioeci were the inhabitants of communities which were strong enough to make good terms with their conquerors.

135. The Spartans; the Training of their Boys. — The Spartans were the inhabitants of the city of Sparta. They were too proud and too exclusive to share their citizenship with the conquered in Laconia and Messenia; and as they were themselves never more than eight or nine thousand of military age, while their subjects were many times as numerous, they could maintain their rule only by making of themselves a standing army and by keeping up a constant military training. Every Spartan must have a sound body to begin with. The father brought his boy soon after birth to the elders of his tribe; and if they found him puny and ill-shaped, they ordered him to be exposed to death in a chasm of the mountains near

by; but if they judged the boy strong and healthy, they allowed him to live. To his seventh year the Spartan boy was in the care of his mother; then the state took charge of his education, and placed him in a company of lads under a trainer. From the age of twelve he had to gather reeds for his own bed from the banks of the Eurotas, and must learn to live without underclothing and to go barefoot winter and summer. Every year the boys had to give a test of their endurance by submitting to a whipping before the altar of the goddess Artemis, and he was the hero who could endure the flogging longest. Boys, youths, and young men were organized in troops and companies, and exercised in marching, sham-fighting, and gymnastics. They were taught to hunt and to be nimble and cunning, but their only mental culture was in music and poetry. The whole object of their education was to make brave, strong, and well-disciplined soldiers. The girls passed through a training like that of the youths, though less severe. They, too, practised running, leaping, and throwing the spear and discus. The state encouraged them to such exercise, as it considered the gymnastic education of women necessary to the physical perfection of the race.

136. Young Men. — At the age of twenty the Spartan youth became a young man, and as he was now liable to military service in the field, he joined a “mess,” or brotherhood of about fifteen comrades each, who ate together in war and in peace. The members of the mess to which he applied voted on his admission with bread crumbs, “throwing them into a basin carried by the waiter around the table; those who liked the young man dropped their ball into the basin without changing its figure, and if any one disliked him, he pressed the crumb flat between his fingers and thus gave his negative vote. And if there was but one of these flattened pieces in the basin, the candidate was rejected, so desirous were they that all the members of the company should be agreeable to each other.”¹ Each member had to furnish his monthly share of barley meal, wine, cheese, figs, and money for meat and dainties; also a part of whatever game he got by hunting. The “black broth” was the national Spartan dish, relished by the elderly men, though the young men preferred meat. Thus their fare was simple

¹ Plutarch, *Lycurgus*.

but efficient; and no one could say that they were spoiled for war by being overfed. Membership of these associations continued through life.

137. Mature Men and Women. — At thirty the Spartan became a mature man, and could now attend the assembly, but he did not cease from military service and training till his sixtieth year. Though compelled by law to marry, he could have no home, and could not even claim his family as his own. All the older Spartans regarded the younger as their children, and the young were taught to obey and respect any of the citizens as much as their own fathers. But while the Spartan ate in the barracks with his fellow-soldiers and passed his time in military exercises, his wife lived in comfort and luxury. Aristotle¹ says that Lycurgus, after subjecting the men to discipline, tried to make the women orderly, but failed, and permitted them therefore to live as they pleased. As they could inherit and acquire property in Laconia, and as men were not permitted to engage in business, it resulted in time that two-fifths of the land in the state came into the hands of the women.

138. The Army. — In the Mycenaean and Homeric ages the nobles alone could afford heavy armor and good weapons. The masses, grouped in tribes and phratries, were miserably equipped and altogether without training. On the battlefield one noble was worth a hundred commoners. This is the chief reason why the

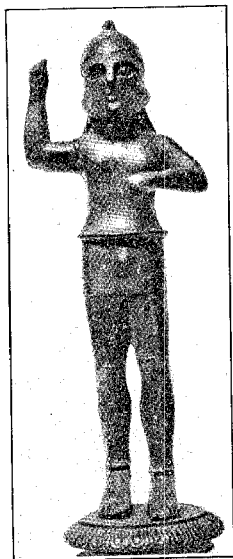


A SPARTAN TOMBSTONE
(From a photograph)

¹ A Greek philosopher who wrote much on the government of Greek cities; § 328.

nobles despised the common men and gave them few political rights.

Even in the Homeric age, however, we find some attempt to keep the masses of fighters in an even line. But the great innovators in this direction were the Spartans. Two causes of the improvement here mentioned may be traced to the country itself: (1) in the broad fertile plain were more land-owners than elsewhere who were wealthy enough to equip themselves with the full armor; (2) the mines of Lacedaemon furnished abundant iron for swords and spear points, the defensive armor being mostly bronze. We must not lose sight of the fact, however, that the principal cause was the intelligence which made use of these resources. The army organized on this new plan was a *phalanx* — a line of warriors equipped with strong defensive armor and long spears,¹ which moved as a unit to the sound of music. The line was several ranks deep. This system made Lacedaemon the strongest military power in the world. It rendered the fortification of Sparta unnecessary, and had besides an important effect on the form of government.



A WARRIOR IN HELMET,
COAT OF MAIL, AND
GREAVES

(Bronze statuette, sixth century B.C.; British Museum)

139. The Government. — It has already been stated that the towns of the perioeci managed their local affairs with more or less interference from Sparta. In this respect they were like our municipalities, though less independent. The government of the city of Sparta, on the other hand, conducted by the Spartans exclusively, supervised these town governments and attended to all the affairs of the state as a whole. Originally

¹ The armor consisted of a large shield, somewhat like the Mycenaean, which covered the entire body, a helmet, and greaves. In time they substituted a smaller round buckler and a coat of mail in place of the heavy man-covering shield. Besides the spear they carried a sword.

the government was like that described by Homer, excepting that there were two kings¹ in place of one.

Continual quarrelling between the two kings weakened the office. Thereupon the government fell into the hands, not of the council, as in most Greek states, but of the assembly of freemen. The reason is to be found in the adoption of the phalanx. Everywhere in Hellas the men who made up the effective military force were the controlling political power. The government of Lacedaemon became accordingly a military aristocracy, as the Spartan freemen were all nobles, ruling over a subject population. The assembly did not exercise the powers of government directly, however, but intrusted them to a board of five ephors, or overseers, elected annually. In time the ephors placed themselves at the head of the state, whereas the kings came to be hardly more than priests and generals. Among the Spartans were some especially noble families, who were represented in the council by twenty-eight elders and the two kings. The council lost influence along with the kings.

Outline of the Aristocratic Constitution

I. Magistrates

1. Five ephors, elected annually, the chief executives.
2. Two kings, hereditary and life-long, from the two royal families; priests and generals; judges in a few minor cases.

II. Council

1. Composed of twenty-eight elders sixty years of age or above, and the two kings, representing the noble families.
2. Functions

{	a. Deliberation on measures to be presented to the assembly.
{	b. Trial of criminal cases.

III. Assembly

1. Composed of Spartans in good standing.
2. Functions

{	a. Election of magistrates and councillors.
{	b. Voting on measures presented by the council.

140. **The Myth of Lycurgus.** — The Spartans of later time tried in the usual Greek way² to account for the origin of their institutions by ascribing them all to one man, Lycurgus. In their belief he was regent in place of a young king, his nephew. Finding the state

full of violence, he went to Crete, and brought home from there a whole body of customs and laws for his country. By compelling the citizens to obey the new laws, he made them the most orderly people in the world. This story was current at Sparta. Other Greeks, wishing to give Apollo the credit, used to say that Lycurgus went to Delphi and got his laws through the oracle. After his death, continues the story, the Lacedaemonians built him a temple, where they worshipped him with the utmost reverence.

It is true that the Spartans had a god named Lycurgus; but, as the early Greeks did not deify their great men, this god could not have been once a human legislator. The similarity between the Spartan and Cretan laws points to a borrowing in one direction or the other. But the great objection to the story is that earlier writers who touch on Lacedaemonian affairs utterly ignore Lycurgus and ascribe the constitution to this or that other person. In fact, the system of the Spartans was due largely to their surroundings, as has been pointed out. There may indeed have lived a man of the same name as the god Lycurgus, and he may have perfected and enforced the system; but of his achievements or even of his existence we have no positive knowledge.

141. The First Messenian War (about 725 B.C.). — After the Spartans had subdued all Laconia, a desire "to plough and plant fertile Messenia" led them to the conquest of that country. In fact they needed more land and helots to support the increasing number of their warrior citizens. After twenty years of hard fighting, they drove the Messenians from the stronghold of Mount Ithome, and annexed the eastern part of the country. Many Messenians fled across the borders. Those who remained became helots, and had to till for the Spartans the fields which had once been their own. "Like asses worn with heavy burdens they brought to their lords, under hard necessity, the half of all the earth produced."¹

142. The Second Messenian War (about 650 B.C.). — Two or three generations later the Messenians rose in rebellion. With the help of allies from Argos, Arcadia, and elsewhere, they utterly routed the Lacedaemonian army. In despair the Spartans talked

¹From Tyrtaeus; see next paragraph. There is much legend regarding the war; but the facts given above are about all we know.

of giving up the struggle, but were inspired to a new effort by Tyrtaeus. He was a martial poet, a general, and a statesman. We have a quotation from one of his "charging songs," which the warriors sang as they went to battle:—

"To the front, O sons of Sparta,
Rich in men, of freeborn fathers;
With your left hand press your shield forth,
Hurl your lance with daring spirit,
Sparing not your life in battle,
For 'tis not the rule at Sparta."¹

Receiving the command, he won a decisive victory. The survivors fled to the Arcadian mountains, whence for many years they raided the farms of Laconia. The Spartans who suffered loss clamored for a redistribution of property; but Tyrtaeus in a poem entitled "Good Order" quieted the discontent. The war ended in the complete subjugation of Messenia. Again many escaped into foreign lands. Some found new homes in Sicily at Messene, a Chalcidic colony. From the new-comers the city and neighboring strait derived their name. The masses of the conquered became helots. For about three centuries Messenia remained a part of Lacedaemon.

143. League with the Arcadians.—Next the Lacedaemonian rulers asked of Apollo at Delphi permission to conquer all Arcadia; but the prophetess answered:—

"The land of Arcadia thou askest: thou askest too much; I refuse it:
Many there are in Arcadian land, stout men eating acorns;
They will prevent thee from this: but I am not grudging toward thee;
Te'ge-a beaten with sounding feet I will give thee to dance in,
And a fair plain will I give thee to measure with line and divide it."

Tegea, however, made the oracle true by defeating the Lacedaemonians and compelling the prisoners to divide her plain among themselves with a measuring line, and till it in fetters.² But somewhat later the Tegeans entered into a league with Sparta, and agreed to follow her lead in war. Their example was imitated by the other Arcadians, who proved a source of great military strength

¹ Fowler, *Greek Literature*, 66.

² This is an example of a double-meaning prophecy (§ 103).

to Sparta, for they were strong, brave men, as mountaineers usually are, and made excellent warriors, second only to the Spartans themselves.

144. Tyranny at Corinth (655-582 B.C.).— Corinth was the most important state of Peloponnesian which entered into permanent alliance with Lacedaemon, and for that reason its previous history is given here. The king had been succeeded by a small body of aristocrats, who in time grew illiberal and insolent. Thereupon Cyp'se-lus, a man of the common people, put them down and made himself tyrant. Though usurpers generally found it necessary to surround themselves with a band of soldiers enlisted from other states, Cypselus was so beloved by a majority of his subjects that he ruled for thirty years without a guard. His son Per-i-an'der, who succeeded him, was compelled to use harsh measures against the nobles who opposed him, and laid heavy taxes on the wealthy. But he used the revenues in beautifying his city and in increasing its power and influence throughout Greece. These tyrants founded many colonies. Cor-cy'ra, an island off the west coast of Greece, had been settled from Corinth long before, but had gained its independence. The tyrants reduced the island temporarily to obedience, and planted in the neighborhood a group of colonies, which remained faithful to the mother city. The same rulers were liberal patrons of religion, especially the religion of the peasants; and their gifts to the gods at Olympia¹ were reckoned among the wonders of the world. On the downfall of the family, Corinth became a well-regulated oligarchy.²

145. The Peloponnesian League.— It was under this form of government that Corinth became an ally of Lacedaemon (about 580 B.C.). Elis had already joined the alliance, and Sicyon (Sish'i-on) followed some years later. All these states were brought into the league by their wealthy men on the assurance that they should have control of their several governments. And in general Sparta desired that her allies should be governed by oligarchies;³ because she knew that oligarchs would be more loyal to her than either tyrants or democrats.

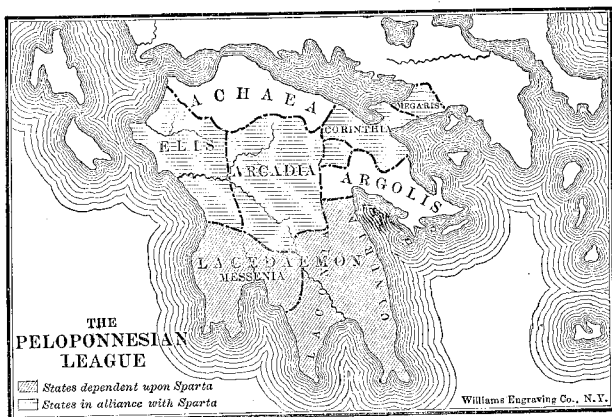
The Peloponnesian League, which Sparta was thus forming, had

¹ § 105.

² § 121.

³ § 121.

no common federal constitution, such as that of the United States, but each community had its own treaty with Lacedaemon. Deputies from the allied states met in congress at Sparta or Corinth to settle questions of war and peace; and the states furnished troops to serve in war under the Lacedaemonian kings. They did not pay tribute to Sparta, but divided among themselves the expenses of the league, which were always light. Thus the states en-



joyed independence, and at the same time the advantages of union.

146. **Sparta and Argos.** — By the middle of the sixth century B.C. the league under the leadership of Sparta had come to include all Peloponnesians excepting Achaea and Argolis. About 550 B.C. the crisis came in a struggle between Sparta and Argos for the possession of Cy-nu'ri-a, a strip of land held by the latter state along the coast east of Mount Parnon. Three hundred champions for each state were to decide the contest; but after a day's fighting, only two Argives and one Spartan remained alive. Then a dispute as to which side had won the victory ended in a bloody battle, in which the Lacedaemonians were masters. This success gave them Cy-nuria and the island of Cy-the'ra, and made them the foremost power among the states of Greece.

Suggestive Questions

1. Write a brief summary of this chapter, like that on p. 28.
2. Describe the armor used in the sixth century B.C. (illustration, p. 116).
3. From the illustration, p. 115, what do you infer as to the character of early Laconian art?
4. What contributions, if any, did Sparta make to civilization?
5. Was the life of a Spartan preferable to that of a perioecus?
6. Would it be right to say "Spartan helots"?
7. Distinguish the three words, Spartan, Lacedaemonian, and Laconian.
8. What advantages or disadvantages do you see in the Spartan method of training boys?
9. Describe the location of Eurotas River, Laconia, Sparta, Messenia, Mount Ithome, Arcadia, Sicyon, and Corinth.

Note-book Topic

Lacedaemonian Society. — Fling, *Source Book of Greek History*, 58-77; Bury, *History of Greece*, ch. iii. § 3; Holm, *History of Greece*, i. ch. xv.

END OF SAMPLE TEXT



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