

When Alcibiades needed a tutor, however, Plato states that Pericles gave charge of him to one Zopyrus, who was no more than an ordinary slave. But Lycurgus did not put Spartan children in the care of any tutors who had been bought or hired. Neither was it permissible for each father to bring up and educate his son in the way he chose. Instead, as soon as boys reached the age of seven, Lycurgus took charge of them all himself and distributed them into Troops;¹ here he accustomed them to live together and be brought up together, playing and learning as a group. The captaincy of the Troop was conferred upon the boy who displayed the soundest judgement and the best fighting spirit. The others kept their eyes on him, responded to his instructions, and endured their punishments from him, so that altogether this training served as a practice in learning ready obedience. Moreover as they exercised boys were constantly watched by their elders, who were always spurring them on to fight and contend with one another: in this their chief object was to get to know each boy's character, in particular how bold he was, and how far he was likely to stand his ground in combat.

The boys learned to read and write no more than was necessary. Otherwise their whole education was aimed at developing smart obedience, perseverance under stress, and victory in battle. So as they grew older they intensified their physical training, and got into the habit of cropping their hair, going barefoot, and exercising naked. From the age of twelve they never wore a tunic, and were given only one cloak a year. Their bodies were rough, and knew nothing of baths or oiling: only on a few days in the year did they experience such delights. They slept together by Squadron and Troop² on mattresses which they made up for themselves from the tips of reeds growing along the River Eurotas, broken off by hand without the help of any iron blade. During winter they added the so-called thistle-down and mixed it into the mattresses, since it was a substance thought to give out warmth.

17. By this age the boys came to be courted by lovers from among the respectable young men. The older men, too, showed even more

1. Literally 'herds'. Plutarch uses the common Greek word *agelē*, but inscriptions show that the official Spartan term was *heira* ('herd of cattle').
2. The precise relationship of the Squadron (*ite*) to the Troop (*agelē*) is unknown.

interest, visiting the gymnasium frequently and being present when the boys fought and joked with one another. This was not just idle interest: instead there was a sense in which everyone regarded himself as father, tutor and commander of each boy. As a result everywhere, on all occasions, there would be somebody to reprimand and punish the boy who slipped up. In addition a Trainer-in-Chief was appointed from among the men with outstanding qualities; they in turn chose as leader for each Troop the one out of the so-called Eirens who had the most discretion and fighting spirit. Those who have proceeded two years beyond the boys' class² are termed Eirens, and the oldest boys Melleirens ('prospective Eirens').

So such an Eiren, twenty years of age, commands those under him in his Troop's fights, while in his quarters he has them serve him his meals like servants. The burlier boys he instructs to bring wood, the slighter ones to collect vegetables. They steal what they fetch, some of them entering gardens, others slipping into the men's messes with a fine mixture of cunning and caution. If a boy is caught, he receives many lashes of the whip for proving to be a clumsy, unskilled thief. The boys also steal whatever provisions they can, thereby learning how to pounce skilfully upon those who are asleep or keeping guard carelessly. A boy is beaten and goes hungry if he is caught. The aim of providing them with only sparse fare is that they should be driven to make up its deficiencies by resort to daring and villainy. While this is the main purpose of their scanty diet, a subsidiary one is claimed to be the development of their physique, helping them in particular to grow tall. When people over-eat, their breathing is laboured, thus producing a broad, squat frame. In contrast if breath suffers from only slight delay and difficulty and has an easy ascent, the body is enabled to develop freely and comfortably. Good looks are produced in the same way. For where lean, sparc features respond to articulation, the sheer weight of obese, over-fed ones makes them resist it. In the same way perhaps, women who take a purge during pregnancy bear babies which are small, but nonetheless have a good, neat shape, since their matter is more

1. Literally 'boy-herdsman' (*paideumônus*).

2. The class of boys (*paides*) in the *agoge* included all those aged between seven and eighteen. For the subsequent classes, see below and Xenophon, *Spartan Society*, Ch. 2, p. 168 note 1.

amenable to moulding because of its lightness. All the same, why this should be so is an open question still to be investigated.

18. The care which the boys take over their stealing is illustrated by the story of the one who had stolen a fox cub and had it concealed inside his cloak: in order to escape detection he was prepared to have his insides clawed and bitten out by the animal, and even to die. This tale is certainly not incredible, judging from Spartan *ephebes*' today. I have witnessed many of them dying under the lashes they received at the altar of Artemis Orthia.²

As he reclined after his meal the Eiren would tell one boy to sing, while to another he would pose a question which called for a considered reply, like 'Who among the men is the best?', or 'What is your opinion of so-and-so's action?' Thereby boys grew accustomed to judging excellence and to making a critical appraisal of the citizens right from the start. When asked which citizen was good, or whose reputation was low, the boy who proved to be at a loss for an answer was regarded as a sluggard whose mind showed no sign of any ambition to excel. Answers had to be reasoned, supported by argument, and at the same time expressed with brevity and conciseness. A bite on the thumb by the Eiren was the punishment for a boy who gave a wrong answer. The Eiren often used to chastise boys in the presence of elders and magistrates, thus offering a demonstration that his punishments were reasonable and necessary. He was permitted to administer punishment without interference, but once the boys had been dismissed he had to give an explanation if his punishments were harsher than necessary or, in contrast, if they were considered inappropriately light.

Whether a boy's standing was good or bad, his lover shared it. There is a story that once when a boy had let slip a despicable cry in

1. The general Greek term for youths in their late teens. For the Spartan equivalent, *paidiskoi* (the class above the *paidai*), see Xenophon, *Spartan Society*, Ch. 2.
2. British archaeologists early this century excavated a shrine of Orthia, later assimilated to Artemis (hence Artemis Orthia), set up close to the west bank of the River Eurotas before 700. Much remains obscure about the character and purpose of the ritual. Authors of the Roman period (like Plutarch) mention a contemporary ceremony where youths were lashed at the altar. But for the classical period we hear from Xenophon (*Spartan Society*, Ch. 2) of boys running a gauntlet of whips to steal cheeses from the altar. There is no knowing whether the former endurance test, or initiation rite, represents a crude partial revival of the latter, or whether the two are completely distinct.

the course of a fight, it was his lover whom the magistrates fined. Sexual relationships of this type were so highly valued that respectable women would in fact have love affairs with unmarried girls. Yet there was no rivalry; instead, if individual males found that their affections had the same object, they made this the foundation for mutual friendship, and eagerly pursued joint efforts to perfect their loved one's character.

19. Boys were further taught to express themselves in a style which was at once sharp, yet at the same time attractive and suited to concise exposition of a variety of points. While in the case of his iron money, as I have explained, Lycurgus arranged for heavy weight to be matched by low value, he did the opposite for the currency of speech. Here he developed the technique of expressing a wide range of ideas in just a few, spare words. In his scheme boys, by staying silent most of the time, were led to give pithy, well-trained answers. By contrast the talk of the person who babbles constantly turns out vapid and mindless, just as excessive sexual activity for the most part leads to barrenness and sterility. Indeed when some Athenian made a joke about how short Laconian swords were, and spoke of the ease with which theatrical conjurors swallow them, King Agis retorted: 'All the same, we certainly reach the enemy with our daggers.' While the Laconian style of speech may seem brief, in my view it certainly does penetrate to the heart of a matter, and makes a forcible impression upon its hearers' minds.

Judging by his recorded remarks, Lycurgus himself in fact seems to have been a man of just a few, well-chosen words. Take, for instance, what he said about government to the person who advocated making the city a democracy: 'Make your own household a democracy first.' And his remark about sacrifices to the person who inquired why the ones he arranged were so small and economical: 'So that we may never cease to honour the gods.' Moreover, when it came to athletics, he would permit citizens to take part only in those games where a hand is not raised.² There are accounts of

1. In *Sayings of Spartans* this remark is attributed to the Eurypontid Agis III, king from 338 to 331.

2. Notionally, therefore, games like boxing were banned. According to *Sayings of Spartans*, Lycurgus 23, the aim was to prevent Spartiates acquiring the habit of crying off (by raising a hand) when in difficulties. In other words, any combat which a Spartiate entered was to be to the death.

similar replies which he made to the citizens by letter. Asked: 'How should we repel an enemy attack?' he replied: 'If you stay poverty-stricken and each man among you has no passion to be greater than another.' And again with reference to walls he said: 'A city cannot be unfortified if it is ringed with brave men and not bricks.' It is difficult to say, however, just how much credence should be attached to these letters and others like them.

20. Spartans' distaste for prolixity can be demonstrated from their pointed remarks. For instance, when somebody engaged Leonidas at an inappropriate moment about business which was by no means trivial, the king said: 'Friend, the question you raise is a good one, but your timing is not good.' When Charilaus, Lycurgus' nephew, was asked why his uncle had made so few laws, his reply was that men of few words need few laws. There was criticism of the sophist Hecataeus in some quarters because he had been invited to the mess, and would then say nothing; Archidamidas' response was that: 'An expert at speaking also knows when to do so.'

Here are some examples of those remarks which I mentioned earlier as being sharp, yet attractive. A wretched character bombarded Demaratus' with inopportune questions, and in particular the persistent query: 'Who is the best of the Spartiates?' Demaratus' answer was: 'The one least like you.' When approval was being expressed of the Eleans' expert and fair management of the Olympic Games, Agis³ inquired: 'What is so remarkable about fair conduct by the Eleans on one day every four years?' When some foreigner was expressing his goodwill towards Sparta and claiming that in his own city he was called a friend of Sparta, Theopompus⁴ said: 'Stranger, it would be more honourable for you to be called a friend of your own city.' The reaction of Pausanias' son, Plectoanax,⁵ to an Athenian politician's disparagement of Spartans as uneducated,

1. Neither figure can be identified with certainty. But the former may be Hecataeus of Abdera or Teos, and the latter the Euryponiid King Archidamius IV of the early third century.

2. Euryponiid king from an unknown date to 491.

3. In *Sayings of Spartans*, Agis 10, this remark is appropriately attributed to the Euryponiid Agis II, king from 427 to 400.

4. Euryponiid king in the late eighth/early seventh centuries.

5. Agiad king, 458-446/5 and 427/6-408. (He was in exile for the intervening period.)

was to say: 'Your point is correct, since we are the only Greeks who have learned nothing wicked from you Athenians.' Archidamidas' answer to a man who inquired how many Spartiates there were was: 'Enough, my friend, to keep out undesirables.'

The Spartans' character may equally be illustrated from their humorous remarks. It was their habit never to waste words and to articulate nothing which did not in some way or other contain an idea meriting serious consideration. One Spartan on being invited to listen to a man imitating the nightingale replied: 'I've heard the nightingale herself.' Another on reading this epitaph:

These men were once cut down by brazen Ares' as they were
Extinguishing tyranny: they died around the gates of Selinus,

remarked: 'Those men deserved to die because they should have let tyranny burn out totally.' When someone promised to give a young man cockerels that would die in combat, the latter retorted: 'Don't give me those, but let me have ones that kill in combat.' Another Spartan, when he saw men sitting on stools in a lavatory, declared: 'May I never sit where it is impossible for me to get up and offer my seat to an older man.' This, then, was the character of their sayings, and it justifies some people's claim that devotion to the intellect is more characteristic of Spartans than love of physical exercise.

21. They were no less enthusiastic about training in lyric poetry and singing than they were about good style and purity in speech. Moreover their songs offered stimulus to rouse the spirit and encouragement for energetic, effective action; in style they were plain and unpretentious, while their subject-matter was serious and calculated to mould character. For the most part they were praised applauding the good fortune of those who had died for Sparta; condemnations of cowards (*tresantes*)² whose lives were filled with grief and misery; and promises to be brave, or boasts about their bravery, depending upon the singers' ages. There is value in citing by way

1. God of war.

2. The Spartan term for men who had shown cowardice in battle or had surrendered to the enemy. They were liable to a wide range of social and legal disabilities: most serious among the latter was the partial loss of their citizen status. For details, see in particular Xenophon, *Spartan Society*, Ch. 9, and Plutarch, *Agessilas*, Ch. 30.

of illustration one example of the last type. At festivals three choirs would be formed corresponding to the three age groups. The choir of old men would sing first:

'We were once valiant young men.'

Next the choir of men in their prime would respond with the words:

'But we are the valiant ones now; put us to the test, if you wish.'

Then the third choir, that of the boys, would sing:

'But we shall be far mightier.'

Altogether anyone who has studied Spartan poetry (some specimens of which have survived even to the present day), and has examined the marching rhythms which they used to an accompaniment of pipes when advancing upon the enemy, would not think both Terpander¹ and Pindar² wrong to connect bravery and music. The former wrote as follows about the Spartans:

Young men's warlike spirit flourishes there, along with
The clear-sounding Muse and Justice in the wide streets.

Pindar says:

The councils of old men
Are pre-eminent there, and the spears of young men,
And choirs and the Muse and Festivity.

Thus the two poets portray the Spartans as being at one and the same time the most musical and the most warlike of people: 'Fine lyre-playing matches iron weaponry,' as the Spartan poet³ has put it. In fact at time of battle the king would first sacrifice to the Muses, thereby apparently reminding his men of their training and their trials, so that they should be ready to face the dangers ahead, and should perform memorable feats in the fighting.

22. It was in wartime that they relaxed the harshest elements of the young men's training:⁴ they did not stop them grooming their

1. From Lesbos. He lived in Sparta in the mid seventh century.

2. Famous fifth-century lyric poet.

3. Alcman -- in fact of uncertain origin, possibly a Laconian, possibly even an Asiatic non-Greek. He lived at Sparta in the second half of the seventh century.

4. *Agoge*: see Ch. 13, p. 22 note 3.

hair and decorating their weapons and clothes, but were pleased at the sight of them like horses prancing and neighing before a contest. So they wore their hair long as soon as they had passed the age of ephebes;¹ they took particular care over it in the face of danger, making it look sleek and combing it. They bore in mind one of Lycurgus' statements about long hair, that it renders handsome men better looking, and ugly ones more frightening. On campaign also their physical exercises were less demanding and they permitted the young men a lifestyle which was generally less subject to punishment and scrutiny, with the result that for them uniquely among mankind war represented a respite from their military training. Once their phalanx² was marshalled together in sight of the enemy, the king sacrificed the customary she-goat, instructed everyone to put on garlands, and ordered the pipers to play Castor's Air.³ At the same time he began the marching paeon, so that it was a sight at once solemn and terrifying to see them marching in step to the pipes, creating no gap in the phalanx nor suffering any disturbance of spirit, but approaching the confrontation calmly and happily in time to the music. In all likelihood men in this frame of mind feel neither fear nor exceptional anger, but with hope and courage they steadily maintain their purpose, believing heaven to be with them.

The king advanced against the enemy with an escort of those who had won a contest for which the prize was a crown. The story is told of one man at the Olympic Games who, when offered an immense sum of money, refused it and with a great struggle beat his opponent in wrestling. When he was asked: 'What have you gained by your victory, Spartan?', he replied with a smile: 'In battle against the enemy my place will be in front of the king.' After they had beaten the enemy and made them flee, they gave chase only far enough to confirm the victory by their opponents' flight, and then at once pulled back, because in their view it was neither noble nor Hellenic to butcher and slaughter men who had given up and yielded their ground. This practice was not only splendid and magnanimous, it also paid dividends: it was known that Spartans would kill those who stood in their way, but would spare those who

1. See Ch. 18, p. 30 note 1.

2. Battle formation of heavily armed soldiers standing several ranks deep.

3. For Spartan devotion to the twin gods Castor and Pollux, see *Sayings of Spartans*, Agesilaus 7 and note.