

Is Plutarch a Trustworthy Source for Archaic Sparta?

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1 Common and Special Heuristic Problems for Archaic Sparta

This open question emerged from a footnote I wrote questioning the Spartan civil and political rights in archaic times. Plutarch's biography of *Lykurgos* soon became my main source because he describes details about archaic Sparta which can barely be found in other authors' works. This makes Plutarch indispensable for me. But it is also a problem in source of criticism because we cannot verify or falsify Plutarch's *Life of Lykurgos* by comparing it to contemporary, archaic sources – there are none. This is a general difficulty in investigating early history and there are several more when it comes to the Spartan history: Our literary sources are mainly authors like Xenophon and Aristotle who did not know their distant past themselves very well, and nearly all contemporary sources of archaic Spartans are fragments of a few poems. We have quite a lot of archaeological objects but still too few to rewrite the heavily idealized history about those superhuman Spartan warriors [17 p. 9]. Those authors like Pausanias and Plutarch, who wrote elaborately about 'archaic' Sparta, lived centuries after this period so it is highly questionable why and what they wrote. But at last the most vital problem in investigating Spartan history is our own contemporary ideology. Over centuries historians living in societies at war read Spartan history as an example of patriotism, devotion and warriorhood: Men fighting until death for their freedom. Therefore we have perceived a much indoctrinated Spartan history even in the 20th century [2, 12] and until today we are struggling to free our science from those ideologies. The controversial film *300* directed by Zack Snyder, for example, shows a picture of Sparta without any heuristic reflection. Therefore it is necessary to ask ourselves what we know and why we know it – or why we cannot be sure.

To illustrate the special problem of Plutarch's *Lykurgos* I am neither going to write about the aims of Plutarch's biographies nor about the ancient discrimination between the genres *ιστορία* and *βίαι* for these are widely investigated and long known topics [9 p. 187, 13 p. 4-8]. Instead, I will head straightaway to the rhetorical skills and patterns to show how and why the *Lykurgos* is special in the works of Plutarch. Plutarch uses ancient rhetoric techniques to develop his narratives. His method of narration follows a variable concept [9 p. 182-185] and seems like free association at times [e.g. Per. 24]. He can do so because he learned the ancient system of semi-creative writing in school, the

so called Progymnasmata. This is a training to teach the pupils to develop a text just by giving them a keyword or an apt phrase. Progymnasmata, which we can find many times in Plutarch's works, are the overlapping Apophthegmata and *χρεῖαι* [1, 3, 14]. For this short open question I will focus on the *χρεῖαι* and explain the resulting difficulties to heuristic evaluation.

2 Plutarch and the Use of *Χρεῖαι*

Χρεῖαι are not only actions and sayings of famous persons [7 p. 74-81, 19 p. 1-8] but also rhetorical patterns in developing a speech or story [5, 6]. In class an Apophthegma was given to the pupils and they had their instructions to develop a short text. Priscian gives a very detailed explanation: 'So, then, the order should be this: (1) First, praise of the one who has spoken or acted should be briefly expressed, then (2) a paraphrase of the *chreia* itself, then (3) the rationale' [III,432,10 Keil, translation from 5 p.195], which he illustrates in the following by a longer example. Having been trained this way for a long time the pupils were able to talk and write spontaneously in an elaborated and structured way. The Apophthegmata were systematically passed as a kind of cultural treasure like proverbs and sayings in our times, although they exceed their importance as we do not have school exercises for elaborating them in speeches or narratives. In ancient times, however, they were a central element of everyone's education [6, 20]. The tradition of *χρεῖαι* was very conservative. A pupil was instructed to develop a narrative or decline a word in the *χρεῖαι*, but he was not allowed to reinvent it or distort its meaning. Therefore this classroom exercise was not creative writing in a modern sense but instead a highly standardized semi-creative writing with strict limits.

We know Plutarch to have collected a high amount of *χρεῖαι* and other Apophthegmata, especially about the Spartans of which he was indeed very fond. He collected many of these from Hellenistic authors such as Xenophon and in fact almost all passages of Plutarch's *Life of Lykurgos* can be attributed to counterparts in Xenophon's *Constitution of the Spartans* [8, 10]. In many passages we are actually able to reconstruct narrative patterns that strongly remind us of the ancient Progymnasmata [1, 3, 14]. But of course Plutarch's *celatio artis* is much too advanced to use them purely on the strict school level.

Having shown one of Plutarch's methods of writing and rewriting his stories the next step is to ask for where the

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Apophthegmata he elaborated came from. They could of course be invented in the Classical or Hellenistic Period to illustrate the mythical beginnings of the Spartan people. We do not have any non-literary evidence that this person called *Lykurgos* really existed and, if we add the hype which existed about the Spartans even back in Hellenistic times to the lack of contemporary sources, one could think he is just a typical, well invented culture hero. But the Ancient Literature had a strict concept of *μίμησις* [11 p. 19-80] which we could now understand as a kind of intertextuality. It was a generally accepted fact that authors took elements from other's work to construct their own narratives which generally was not considered as plagiarism but rather as a form of kindly admitted reference [16, 4 p. 40]. We can be sure that Plutarch's biography goes back at least to Hellenistic authors and regarding the tradition of *μίμησις* those Hellenistic authors passed on stories which they did not create themselves but found in older texts. Maybe there is a primal narrative about Lykurgos and Plutarch's biography goes back into archaic times. But this is only a hypothesis for we don't have proof of this primal narrative.

3 Plutarch, his Sources and the Open Question for Spartan History

To summarize: We already know that Plutarch as a writer was educated to develop his narratives by strict and conservative patterns, which he also used in all of his other works. His sources, especially for his Spartan works, were Hellenistic authors like Xenophon and Aristotle but many other sources are lost and were only passed as Apophthegmata and *χρῆται* which were collected by Plutarch himself. But we cannot be sure what this tells us about the value for archaic Sparta. Is Plutarch's compilation of his Hellenistic sources 'worthless' [18 p. 20] or is it indeed a trustworthy collection of knowledge which would be lost if he had not retrieved it? Does Plutarch's *Lykurgos* go back to an archaic primal narrative? I cannot decide this and have to agree with Starr who wrote that 'we are, I fear, sometimes in danger of becoming Hellenistic rumor-mongering historians' [15 p. 258].

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