

Excavating the Spartans

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Few ancient Greek place names are so embedded in Western consciousness as Sparta, evoking as it does courage, harsh training, stern duty and endurance. By the 2nd century AD it had become a "heritage centre" admired by visiting Romans, and it flourished again in the Byzantine period. The Institute has been involved in new excavations at Sparta since 1989.

Sparta in antiquity

Few names from the remote past convey more meaning than that of an ancient Greek city-state in the central part of the southern Peloponnese. Since the time of Milton the name of Sparta has suggested a coarse indifference to the finer ways of human society, linked with awesome physical courage and an unshakeable devotion to duty borne of a harsh communal upbringing.

Within the ancient Greek world, Spartan military prowess was more feared than admired, but universal and everlasting fame was achieved by an event in 480 BC, when a force of 300 Spartans and Boeotian Thespians under Leonidas, one of the two kings of Sparta, laid down their lives at the narrows of Thermopylae by holding back the great army of Xerxes, King of Persia, in order that the forces of the other Greeks could escape to safety. In the following year another Spartan army under King Pausanias led the Greeks to victory at the battle of Plataea, which saved Greece from Persian conquest.

Two generations later, and with the cooperation of the Persians, the Spartans defeated the power of Athens, once their ally against the Persians, whose naval power had given them supremacy over most of the Greeks following the Persian wars. The supremacy of the Spartans, based on a combination of weak political leadership and military brute strength, soon passed and was ended by a coalition of Greek states under the leadership of Thebes. In the late fourth and early third centuries the military power of Sparta declined. Attempts were made to increase the number of citizens, even to the extent of admitting Helots, local communities reduced centuries earlier to a state of serfdom and whose labours sustained the Spartan warrior community, but to no avail. In the early second century a force of Peloponnesians ended Sparta's proud independence. The system of communal living was scrapped and Sparta became just another Greek city with a famous past, whose fortunes were now determined by the great powers – the kingdoms of Macedonia, Pergamum, Syria and, most potent of all, Rome.

The coming of the Romans had for the Spartans none of the horrors experienced by so many Greek communities; no army came to lay siege and plunder the city, as happened to Athens in the time of Sulla, and nor were its treasures looted for the war chests of Roman generals in the civil wars. Yet by giving timely support to Caesar Octavianus in the war against Antony and Cleopatra, the Spartans gained the favour of the first Roman emperor. Ruled by the local dynast Julius Eurycles, who claimed a royal Spartan descent, the city was shown special favour, most notably in 21 BC when Augustus, accompanied by his empress Livia, came in person and dined with the magistrates and council, an occasion celebrated by local coins bearing portraits of the imperial couple. By this time, a disdain for the Greeks and their ways appears to have been widespread among the Roman upper classes. Their past was magnificent but there was little to admire in their present condition. An exception was made for the Spartans, and Roman regard began to increase for the city that had shown to the world examples of selfless devotion to the state – the *Res Publica* – which for the Romans was true excellence

(*virtus*), the highest of all human achievements.¹

After more than half a century the regime of Eurycles fell from favour and from the time of the Flavians the city began to exhibit a truly Roman appearance. As leading Spartans gained close links with the ruling elite of Rome, including membership of the Senate and even the consulship, the highest office in the Roman state, Sparta began to exhibit everywhere the effects of a tidal wave of benefactions in the form of rebuilt shrines, gymnasia, squares, and other public monuments, many recalling famous names of Sparta's past.

The picture of Sparta presented in the guide book of Pausanias, compiled in the second century AD to assist Roman visitors to the historic sites of Greece, indicates that there was much to see and admire in what had clearly become one of the earliest known examples of a "heritage centre". Innumerable monuments recalled famous names of the past, including Lycurgus, founder of the Spartan constitution, the kings Cleomenes, Leonidas and Pausanias and even General Lysander who had ended the power of Athens. Nor were monuments the sole evocation of Sparta's past. Many ancient rituals were re-enacted, some at the ancient shrine of Artemis Orthia (Artemis the Upright) on the edge of the city near the River Eurotas. Here a permanent bank of seats was erected around the area in front of the altar, from which, in addition to more wholesome choral competitions, the visitors could admire the spectacle of Spartan boys playing the game of the whips, which included stealing offerings from the altar while running the risk of serious wounds inflicted by guardians armed with lashes. The authenticity of such



Figure 1 Sparta: southeast from the Acropolis across the Theatre towards the Taygetus mountains.

re-enactments may be questioned, but there can be no doubt that this was how people then believed it to have been.

More recent ages have been no less admiring of the Spartan upbringing and the heroic actions that it engendered. Alongside many tributes to Athens and her cultural legacy, the Spartan tradition was also widely admired in several European states, notably in England where the development of education for the children of the upper classes appears to have been influenced by the Spartan example.² Many books written for the young contained colourful accounts of Spartan heroism or the endurance of pain by Spartan children. An English preference for the example of Sparta over that of Athens was expressed by the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, when presiding over the Annual Meeting of the British School at Athens, held in London in November 1926, a year in which the political stability of the country had been strained by the General Strike. Baldwin reflected that it was more appropriate that the school should be engaged in uncovering the remains of Sparta because its stalwart qualities appealed more to the youth of the country than the clever versatility of rival Athens.

British archaeologists at Sparta

For more than a century the practice of archaeology in Greece has been dominated by the long-term excavation of historic sites by the foreign schools, most supported directly by state funding from the home country. First came the Germans to Olympia in the 1870s, to be followed by the French at Delphi and Delos, and by the Americans at Corinth and in the Agora of Athens. British interest at the end of the nineteenth century was focused on Bronze Age Crete, where Arthur Evans began to uncover the remains of the Palace of Minos at Knossos, but in 1905 R. C. Bosanquet (Director of the British School at Athens and excavator of the fort at Housesteads on Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland) proposed that Sparta should become the site of a major British excavation. He did so despite the famous remark of Thucydides in the fifth century BC that to future ages the remains of the city would convey nothing whatsoever of her fame or achievements. The site was an attractive one, beneath the towering ranges of Taygetos, and with the Acropolis at the heart of the ancient city covered only by olive groves (Fig. 1), whereas the neoclassical modern town, established in the generation following Greek independence to replace the medieval and Turkish hill town a few miles away at Mistra, occupied only a fraction of the walled area of Hellenistic and Roman Sparta. Alas, things are very different today, modern development having in places reached the foot of the Acropolis hill.

Work on the site began in the spring of 1906. The six-mile perimeter of the Hellenistic walls was traced by A. J. B. Wace, a member of the team from the British School. On the Acropolis the shrine of Athene of the Brazen House (Chalkioikos) was located, and other monuments explored included the Theatre and the so-called Roman Stoa, while the line of a late Roman wall enclosing the Acropolis hill was trenched and many inscribed stones extracted from it. The considerable harvest of coins, inscriptions and pottery was catalogued and published. The surface remains of many ancient monuments in the vicinity of the Acropolis were recorded and a magnificent survey map of the whole site was compiled by the Austrian W. Seyk at a scale of 1:6000.³ Nor were the efforts of the British team confined to the site or vicinity of Sparta, as surveys were made of the many ancient and medieval remains elsewhere in Laconia.

The ambition to make Sparta a major urban site for the British was, ironically, frustrated by the discovery of one of the most remarkable finds of the archaic and classical periods made in mainland Greece up to that time. Already somewhat daunted by the depth and complexity of the medieval remains overlying the ancient levels on the Acropolis, Bosanquet and his colleagues were embarrassed by the discovery of huge votive deposits at the shrine of Artemis Orthia by the bank of the Eurotas. Following a high-level conference with the Greek authorities on the site in May 1906, it was agreed that the British effort would be directed to excavation of the entire site, a costly undertaking that, before weeks of

tedious excavation could begin, required the purchase of land and the diversion of the millstream that flowed across the site. Then the large labour force, which had been engaged for excavation on the Acropolis, was committed to working through the layers of votive deposits, the result of regular sweeping and cleaning of the great altar, using only small kitchen knives for the purpose. Bosanquet handed over direction of the work to R. M. Dawkins, his designated successor as Director of the School, as his plans to develop a major Greco-Roman urban excavation had to be shelved. The excavation of the shrine, completed in 1910, repaid the effort with a remarkable range of material that was soon filling the cases of the Sparta Museum. Within a few years, catalogues of the material were appearing in the School Annual, although the final excavation report did not appear until 1929.⁴

The challenge posed by the problems of the medieval overburden was taken up in a second five-year campaign of excavation in 1924–28, under the Director A. M. Woodward, one of the pre-war team who, like Bosanquet, had experience of excavating Roman military sites in northern England during the years before his return to Greece. The focus was now the Theatre and the area of the Acropolis immediately adjacent to it (Fig. 2). The excavation became increasingly difficult and the return to Sparta appears to have attracted little support or interest among Woodward's archaeological colleagues. After five years – by which time the stage building, a part of the orchestra and the side entrances (paradoi) had been cleared, and the cavea of

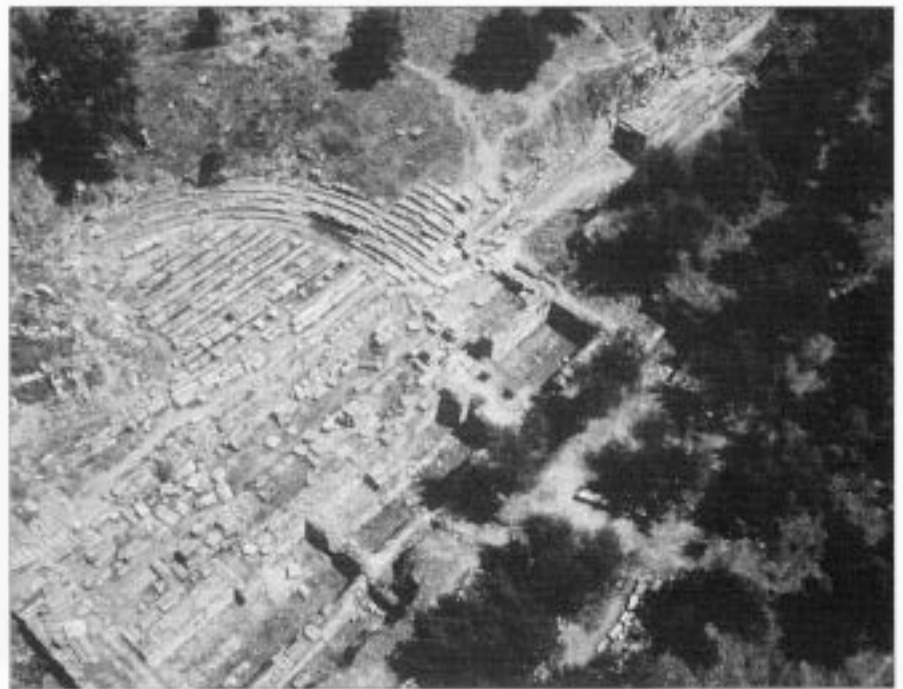


Figure 2 Aerial view of the Sparta Theatre in 1991 (kite photograph by R. Anderson).

seating trenched in order to determine the general plan – Woodward left Athens and the work ceased. On the Acropolis, where construction of the Theatre had caused great disturbance to the earlier classical levels, Woodward's assistant, Margaret Hobling, tackled an area of fearful complexity but was able to complete a publication of the area before the departure of Woodward.⁵

After the Second World War, work by British archaeologists in Laconia resumed with an archaeological survey of the east side of the Eurotas valley in the vicinity of Sparta (the subject of a recent major publication)⁶ and a campaign of excavations on the Bronze Age palatial site adjacent to the Menelaion, a monument of the classical period already in antiquity linked with the legend of King Menelaus and Queen Helen, which overlooks the river a few miles south of the city.

Recent excavations of Roman Sparta

In 1988 a permit was obtained by the author to conduct a surface survey of monuments on the Acropolis and, in the following year, excavations were resumed on behalf of the British School at the site of the Roman Stoa, under the direction of the writer and of Professor G. B. Waywell of King's College London. During three seasons (1989–91) excavations were undertaken at three separate places along the line of a structure nearly 200m long and which still appeared to define the southeastern part of the Acropolis hill.⁷ Most of the remains consisted of massive walls of brick-faced concrete characteristic of the Roman period. They belonged to the vaulted substructures of a two-storey structure facing at the upper level on to the Acropolis and at the lower into the rest of the town. This imposing and prominent structure has been identified tentatively with the rebuilt version of the Persian Stoa. According to Pausanias, this was built originally to commemorate the victory over the Persians in 479 BC with figures of the defeated enemy supporting the roof, in the manner of Caryatids (female figures used as pillars).

During the final season of work on the Stoa, the excavators were invited by the Greek Archaeological Service to resume work on the Theatre, which inevitably proved a larger and more complex undertaking (Fig. 3).⁸ There was now a growing concern in the local community regarding the state of the remains of ancient Sparta and in particular an ambition to clear and rehabilitate the Theatre as an attraction for visitors, if not as an actual place of assembly. The task of the excavators was initially to provide as much information as could be recovered regarding the original design of the Theatre. Several trenches around the cavea defined the arrangement of seating (Fig. 4) and also provided dating evidence, in the form of broken pottery used in the



Figure 3 Seating area (*cavea*) and orchestra of the Sparta Theatre from behind the stage building.

clay build-up of the projecting wings of the cavea, to confirm Woodward's conclusion that the Theatre was constructed in the years following 30 BC. Work in the area of the stage building, now almost completed, has indicated that the original stage arrangement consisted of a building, probably a colonnade in the traditional Spartan Doric order, facing the back of the orchestra, and in front of which was an arrangement by which a stage platform of timber could be rolled into position from the West Parados when required. This enabled the Theatre to accommodate both performances in the Roman manner on an elevated stage and also to serve as a classical Greek theatre, in which the circular orchestra was the focus of attention.⁹

The prominent position of the Sparta Theatre, which may occupy the site of a classical predecessor, suggests that it played more than a merely theatrical role in the life of the city and served also as the location for religious and civic ceremonial. The compromise between traditional Greek practice and current Roman fashion came to an end late in the first century AD when the Doric colonnade and removable stage were replaced by a permanent stage backed by an elaborate two-storey stage building (*scaenae frons*), at least a part of which may have been a benefaction of the Emperor Vespasian in AD 78. Also around this time the marble surfaces of the Theatre, including that flanking the entrance on the east and the surfaces of many of the front seats, began to be inscribed with the names of local citizens involved in the many Spartan artistic and athletic festivals. The inscribed walls are vivid evidence for Sparta's revival in the Roman period, which reached

a peak in the second century AD.

In spite of some major alterations and reconstructions, some caused by earthquakes, the Theatre remained in use as a focus of political and cultural life for four centuries (Fig. 5). Then a period of great insecurity among the cities of Greece, caused partly by the presence of Alaric and the Visigoths, brought about a contraction of the city and the construction of emergency defences to protect the urban nucleus. These defences made use of the solid foundations of both the Roman Stoa and the Theatre, causing both to fall into dis-



Figure 4 Surviving marble seats and perimeter water drain of the Sparta Theatre.



Figure 5 Life-size male head, probably of a local dignitary of the fourth century AD, from the Sparta Theatre.

use. At the latter, many blocks from the stage building and seats from the cavea were removed for the construction of the wall (Fig. 6).

Sparta in the Byzantine period

Excavations in the orchestra and lower cavea during 1992–93 revealed new evidence for what happened during the centuries following the construction of the Acropolis defences. A local historical tradition preserved in the Chronicle of Monemvasia records that Sparta was abandoned by its citizens in the face of the Slavic migrations of the early seventh century and the collapse of Byzantine authority on the mainland of Greece. The site then remained more or less unoccupied until the ninth century, following the Byzantine military recovery under Nicephorus I, when Sparta was, according to the historical tradition, repopulated with refugees from elsewhere in the empire. This version of events now appears to be challenged, if not actually contradicted, by finds of hand-made Slavic pottery and other vessels made in the earlier local traditions in occupation levels above the destruction deposits of the late Roman period. Although such finds hardly indicate an unbroken tradition of urban life, they certainly call into question the image of total desolation one gains from the historical accounts. This was a significant and altogether unexpected harvest from an area where the earlier excavations had indicated a general dearth of evidence from the early Byzantine period (fifth to sixth centuries) and nothing at all from the so-called “Dark Ages” of southern Greece, which began with the arrival of the Slavs and continued until the middle Byzantine revival in the tenth century.



Figure 6 Marble benches of the Sparta Theatre, partly in situ and partly robbed for medieval walls.

The records of Woodward’s excavation (sadly not fully published but deposited in the archives of the British School in Athens) showed that most of the Theatre was covered by up to three or four metres of medieval occupation, associated with two phases of building consisting of closely packed houses on terraces separated by narrow alleyways, which in places followed the curvature of the Theatre. It was their excavation that caused so many difficulties for Woodward, working in such a cramped site, although all the structures were planned before removal and most significant finds were retained, except for the enormous volume of medieval domestic pottery. As had been anticipated, the medieval levels occupied much of the excavators’ time also in 1992–93. Fortunately, since Woodward’s time, interest in medieval pottery from the east Mediterranean has increased greatly, and we were fortunate to secure the specialist services of Dr Guy Sanders, then Assistant Director of the School, to study the large mass of material recovered in 1992–93, much of it from stratified contexts.¹⁰

Not only in the Theatre did the recent excavations yield material evidence for the flourishing state of Lakedaimonia, as medieval Sparta was known. At all three places where excavation took place along the lines of the Roman Stoa, remains of the middle Byzantine city (tenth to thirteenth centuries) were prominent. Environmental sampling revealed a range of crops, including the turnip (*Brassica campestris*), the first record in Greece of this nutritious biennial. This may be an example of the consumption of an unusual food in a time of scarcity. At the same time, given that such root

crops are likely to have been produced only in an economy that had enough land spare to devote to their cultivation, the picture of middle Byzantine Sparta that seems to emerge is one in which the diet was notably richer and more varied than what is generally understood from other sources to have been the case in the Byzantine world. It was the excavation of the remains of two vaulted rooms with semicircular recesses (apses) towards the eastern end of the Roman Stoa that produced the most remarkable evidence from this period (Fig. 7). After the Stoa had been enclosed within the Late Roman perimeter wall (see above), or possibly some time earlier, part of the building had been adapted to serve as a cistern or water reservoir. Within the two apsed chambers were found the remains of a structure, constructed partly of re-used Roman material. The associated finds, including wall paintings, suggested that it was probably a church. Its situation below the overhanging remains of the upper level of the Stoa fitted well with a description of the church and monastery constructed by the Holy Nikon, a revivalist figure who came to Sparta in the late tenth century and gained the name Nikon the Repenter (Metanoieites). Associated with the church, only a small part of which was available for excavation, was a pit, cut through the concrete floor of the Roman Stoa, packed carefully with the bones from several skeletons; other finds included a bronze hanging lamp, and the brick-built tomb of a young adult male (certainly not Nikon, who is recorded as having been buried in his church after a long life) holding the egg of resurrection and with rings bearing images and inscriptions characteristic of Nikon’s time. The

fame of Nikon contributed to the prosperity of Sparta, now firmly re-established as the dominant centre of Laconia, which lasted until the catastrophe of the Fourth Crusade (1204) and the Frankish occupation of the Morea that ensued.

A decade of excavation at Sparta furnishes convincing evidence that excavation of an urban centre with up to two and a half millennia of occupation, within a varying succession of complex societies, although always costly and sometimes inconclusive, does in the medium and longer term repay the time and effort. The past ten years have served to demonstrate the great rewards to be gained from the patient examination of remains from all periods. It may be that the Sparta of Leonidas will never be recovered, but his name was long revered as an inspiration, as it is still, in his native Sparta; and "Sparta" itself still conjures, for good or ill, vivid images of relations between the individual and the community.

Notes

1. On the history of Sparta in the Roman Empire, see P. Cartledge & A. Spawforth (especially p. 93 ff.), *Hellenistic and Roman Sparta: a tale of two cities* (London: Routledge, 1989).
2. E. Rawson, *The Spartan tradition in European thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
3. Many reports on the 1906–1910 excavations are published in the *Annual of the British School at Athens* [BSA] 12 (1905–1906) to 16 (1909–1910).
4. R. M. Dawkins, *Artemis Orthia* (London: *Journal of Hellenic Studies* Supplement 5, 1929).
5. Reports on the 1924–28 excavations are published in the *Annual of the British School at Athens* 26 (1923–25) to 30 (1928–30).
6. W. Cavanagh et al., *The Laconia survey: continuity and change in a Greek rural landscape*, vol. 2: *archaeological data* (London: BSA Supplement 27, 1996).
7. Reports on the recent excavations of the Roman Stoa are published in BSA 88, 219–86, 1993; 89, 377–432, 1994; and 92, 401–434, 1997.
8. An interim report on the Theatre excavations in 1992–94 is published in BSA 90, 435–60, 1995.
9. An interim report on the evidence for a moveable stage is published in the author's contribution to *Sparta in Laconia*, S. Walker & W. Cavanagh (eds) (London: British Museum Colloquium, 1998).
10. His report is published in the interim report on the Theatre excavations of 1992–94 (see n. 8).



Figure 7 Vaulted rooms with apses of the Roman Stoa at Sparta, probably re-used for the monastery of Nikon.