**“Old Age in Sparta” Revisited (In the Company of Anton Powell)**

1. Introduction

For me it is a great honor to participate at this event organized in memory of our distinguished colleague, Anton Powell, the *ktistes* of the ISS (to use the acronym for International Spartan Seminar). The organizers deserve warm congratulations for their initiative. My grateful thanks for their invitation.

I met Anton long before that seminal conference at the Baskerville Hall, Hay-on-Wye 25 years ago, which engendered the volume *Sparta: New Perspectives* mentioned by the organizers in their call for papers as the cornerstone for the foundation of the ISS. Actually, I first met him almost 40 years ago, in 1985. At the time I happened to be in London on Sabbatical leave, engaged in research at the Institute of Classical Studies (those days still in Gordon Square), where I was fortunate to find out that a seminar on Classical Sparta was about to start running under Anton's direction, with meetings due to take place roughly once a month.. I have rich memories of those seminar meetings and the ensuing discussions at the adjacent UCL Pub. As an efficient editor, Anton published most of the papers presented there, including my “Laughter in Spartan Society,” with Routledge as *Classical Sparta: Techniques behind her Success*. Actually, this was his first edited volume on Spartan studies. Many years later Anton confessed to me it was his favorite one (at it often happens in life to be the case with the first experience…). In his preface to Wiley Blackwell*’s Companion to Sparta* he considered that London seminar as the starting point of our ISS. By now those among the active participants at that seminar who have been lucky to survive (some of them happen to be present here) are not only seniors, but *gerontes*. This in itself would perhaps be good cause for me to revisit certain aspects of ‘old age in Sparta,” a subject which aroused my interest a long time ago, in my early middle age.

A word of warning would be in place from the outset: I am going to present quite an odd paper, in the sense that my reflections on the subject are going to be focused this time on Anton’s views and methods as a Sparta scholar (or Sparta student, as he would have modestly corrected me). “We are all Sparta students,” he used to say. But before starting the presentation, I must confess on a personal note that the London seminar under Anton’s magisterial direction had a profound influence on my own research: until then I was interested mainly in Sparta’s social, economic and political history, with a special emphasis on the late-classical and early-Hellenistic period – Sparta between empire and revolution, from the zenith of her power to the nadir of her decline. I focused particularly on the hegemony days, on which I had already published at the time a book and several articles such as the conspiracy of Kinadon, the pamphlet of Pausanias, Aristotle and Sparta. Under the impact of that seminar I started researching Spartan mentality, semiotics of communication and anthropology (topics such as silence, dress, hair behavior, nudity, hunting, suicide – totally different from all I had done before). Furthermore, the emphasis of my research until then was on the roots of Sparta’s *decline*. That seminar, as already noted, generated the book focused on the techniques behind her *success*. The two poles of success and failure and other central aspects of the” Spartan paradox,” are aptly presented by Anton, as an eminent expert in Spartan dialectics, in his preface to the Wiley Blackwell Companion as well as elsewhere. By the way, I am using the term “Spartan paradox” with a measure of hesitation because of its recent appropriations by the digital mass media, for which one needs to be equipped with a special sense of humor...

As far as old age is concerned, as on many other respects, Sparta was considered exceptional in the Greco-Roman civilization, as it also is in modern literature (I won’t go here into the recent discussions of whether it was an exceptional polis, a “normal” polis or a hyper polis). Cicero expressed an opinion widely shared in classical antiquity through statements such as “Only Sparta is a most fitting abode of old age” and “Only in Sparta does it pay to grow old.” In a book on the history of old age from antiquity to the Renaissance, George Minois echoes those statements with the affirmation that “With the exception of Sparta, in Greece neither the gods nor the men liked old people.” (Incidentally, it would be interesting to know how he came to be acquainted with the gods’ sympathies…).

On the whole, the evidence for old age in classical Spartan society, as is the case with most other subjects of Spartan history, is meagre, highly problematic, fragmentary, mostly based on literary non-Spartan and frequently late and biased sources contaminated by Sparta’s deception and especially by the Spartan “mirage.” By the way, this methodological challenge was considered by Anton as a useful opportunity for training to cope with problems of source material in general, and particularly when trying to understand “a secretive foreign state or an unfamiliar culture skilled in the orchestration of propaganda, visual images and lies.” Even allowing for a measure of exaggeration and distortion under the effect of Sparta’s idealization (or denigration) *inter alia* by means of an antithesis with Athens (out of partisan, oligarchic, moralistic, ideological and philosophical inclinations or a mélange of all these and more), one can hardly deny the existence of prominently gerontocratic and gerontocentric traits in Spartan society.

My approach to the subject will be synchronic, with some exceptions. The preference for a synchronic over a diachronic approach stems from the very nature of the subject: changes in mentalities and historical anthropology tend to be much slower than in other domains of history, such as politics and economics.

1. The Elderly Spartiates

On the political, institutional level, gerontocracy was incarnated in the Council of Elders (*Gerousia*) – a subject too much discussed and well known to speak about it here, in an intimate circle of “Spartologues.” I shall do my best to epitomize in a few sentences. Statistically, the prerequisite of age (60) for eligibility to this body is an obvious key for identifying the starting point of old age, while the number of the *gerontes* (28+the two kings, regardless of their age) is a typically oligarchic trait as compared with other *poleis.* A linguistic ambiguity is noteworthy here: the term “*gerontes”* may designate position as well as age; it could refer to members of the *Gerousia* as well as to ordinary old men. In addition to age, eligibility to this council was *de jure* a function of merit, but at least *de facto* it also depended on birth and wealth, thus embodying certain aristocratic, meritocratic and timocratic values and criteria for influence. Life membership, which brings into high relief the gerontocratic trait, was criticized by Aristotle on account of senility risks*.* Their privilege of initiative and obstruction in the decision-taking process in general and legislation in particular, as well as their extensive powers of jurisdiction and supervision, were accompanied by a virtual lack of accountability also deplored by Aristotle. It is typical of Sparta that such powers were held by a few selected members of the most conservative age-group (AS, 222, n. 76). The advisory role of the *Gerousia*, particularly of its most influential members, was crucial in cases of extreme secrecy to be accompanied by deception (as in the emergency case of Kinadon’s conspiracy), a phenomenon in which, alongside secrecy, Andon had a special interest ever since the paper he presented at the old London seminar. Another of Aristotle’s criticism of the *Gerousia* (as well as the ephorate) touched upon the method of election − by means of assessing the intensity of shouting in favor of different candidates – a method despised by the philosopher as “childish.” Though adopted *inter alios* by Geoffrey de Ste Croix, a scholar for whom Anton had a profound respect, this criticism met with his caveat. Anton found appropriate to express his reservation in his stimulating textbook *Athens and Sparta*, not least since such criticism could appeal to the spirit of superiority of modern readers, particularly the young among them – an attitude he was always warning against. I shall quote the paragraph because it is typical of Anton’s didactic methodology:

As often, it may help us to understand ancient history if we try to apply the psychological refinement required in our daily lives. We are currently faced with a group whose members have conflicting wishes about the use of some indivisible resource. Three people may wish to use the family television to watch a mildly appealing old film; the other two may intensely desire to watch the climax of some sporting contest on another channel. In such a situation, if we are concerned to preserve long-term harmony, we give greater weight to the wishes of greater intensity. This, imperfectly, the Spartan system might do; those with most intense wishes would no doubt tend to shout loudest.

Thus, Anton considers “Sparta’s unusual need to preserve the harmony of her citizens” as the rationale behind this election practice and asserts that “unless we can show that it was not, we have no right to dismiss the system as inept” and to assume that the Spartans were not aware of what they were doing. Though nowadays this particular example about sharing one family television as an indivisible resource may look somehow anachronistic – it obviously goes back to the mid 1980’s, the time when Anton was writing that book − its message is still relevant. It is noteworthy here, *mutatis mutandis*, that for all their vital interest in the promotion of social harmony and their choice to define themselves as ”Peers” or ‘Similars” (*homoioi*), the Spartans never adopted the system of selecting by lot their magistrates, although sortition (largely applied alongside elections in democracies), was held in Greek mentality the most equalitarian and the greatest promoter of homogeneity. [note: All Spartan offices were elective, and Aristotle clearly specified this as one of the criteria for considering Sparta as an oligarchy (*Politics*, 1294b 32-34)].

The embodiment of aristocratic, oligarchic, conservative and gerontocratc traits made the *Gerousia* a central component of the Spartan mirage and, as such, it was frequently associated with some of its basic traits, such as the myth of Lykourgos, unanimously credited by the sources with its foundation, Sparta’s allegedly good laws and long lasting stability (encapsulated in the catchword *eunomia*) and the “mixed-constitution” concept in in all of its versions, from Plato to Plutarch.

The universal belief in the capacity of the elderly to give good advice on the basis of their experience, discernible in Greek mentality ever since the Homeric epos and prevalent in many archaic societies, was materialized in Sparta and applied systematically throughout. Even outside the *Gerousia* and its potential circle of candidates among the elite, notwithstanding significant differences of birth, rank, wealth and talent between the elderly citizens, on the whole they were a privileged group. Elders and (therefore) betters…

The roots of Spartan gerontocracy can usefully be explored with the assistance of a comparative approach in anthropology, provided we always bear in mind that Spartan society was not genuinely archaic or folk-traditional; it was a “pseudo-primitive” society, in the sense that it artificially preserved and carefully institutionalized archaic norms, rites and traditions, systematically subordinating them to the service of the State. This folk-traditional disguise of an ancient form of *étatisme* helps us understand the correlation between reverence to old age and some of the other basic features of the Spartan polity, such as its relative stability during much of the archaic and classical periods; the relative homogeneity formally proclaimed by the definition of the citizens as “Similars” in spite of the significant differences at many levels; the mentality of formally prioritizing communal interests over private ones; the traditional socio-economic structure, conformism, intolerance, an authoritarian outlook and deliberate parochialism. Among numerous parallels among genuine folk-traditional societies, one of the most relevant that comes to mind is that of the Abkhasian tribes in the Caucasus. The constant need to defend themselves against Tsarist armies from the north and Turkish slave-raiders from the south gradually shaped them into a community of excellent warriors. The structure of their society is highly reminiscent of the Spartan in its rigidity, uniformity, age-groups, conformism, intolerance to foreign cultures, self-control, predictability of behavior, discipline, austerity, as well as the paucity of verbal communication, the cultivation of physical strength and courage within the educational process. Similarly to Sparta (and other historical analogies of various ages) they consolidated their military strength out of fear and security needs. [note: On the role of fear in Sparta’s emergence as a power] In view of these traits it is significant to find amongthese tribes strongly pronounced gerontocratic inclinations, many of them reminiscent of the Spartan system.

As to the elderly Spartiates, economic independence (i.e. lack of dependence upon their sons), physical security, control over property and vital information, the dominant mentality regarding the older generation as common parents – all these gave them a degree of self-confidence, dignity and prestige that were exceptional by Greek standards and consolidated their authority of supervising over the younger generation, which was to be molded in their own shape. The process of supervision started at the very beginning of a Spariate’s life, when the right to live was ratified by the board called “the oldest of the tribesmen” (*presbytatoi ton phileton*).. The term has a certain Homeric or early-archaic flavor. It also suggests associations with the collective, traditional leadership, based on tribal-patriarchal lines in the Biblical formula “the elders of the tribes” (ziqnei hashevatim) and other documents relating to a similar geographical and historical context, such as the Mari tablets (OA38, n7). Collective decision by that Spartan board of elders on a pan-tribal and pseudo-patriarchal basis was adopted and adapted by the State, which in this case monopolized the individual *potestas* *vitae necisque* of the *paterfamilias* in early Roman law and archaic societies in general. On the methodological level, since Plutarch is our only testimony for this vital piece of information, and here he did not specify his source, it is noteworthy that his evidence on the matter is commonly accepted in modern research despite widespread skepticism (at times in overdose) for his overall reliability, among other causes owing to his moralistic inclinations and his dependence on strata of various sources, many of them late and dubious. In this case, as in many others, his evidence is plausible in its historical context, coherent with whatever we know of Sparta’s profile from much older testimonies and leaves no reasonable ground for hypercritical disbelief.

To return to the subject matter, through the strict discipline of the education (*agōgē*), the hardships, contests, and various initiation rites, the youths were to gain the approval of the older generation, particularly the elderly, so as to be included into the citizens’ ranks. The elderly were regarded as the very defenders of the *regimen morum* and the representatives of values consensus. They were agents of integration propaganda, of systematic indoctrination with State ideology. Their advisory and supervisory role within the education process provided them, particularly the most influential among their cohort, with the prerogative of evaluating the qualifications and aptitude of the youths, which virtually amounted to the power of determining to a considerable extent their eventual integration and prospects of role allocation in the hierarchically oriented system of the so-called “Similars.”

One of the most prominent characteristics of Spartan society consisted of the mixture between elements of co-operation and competition, and the elderly were expected to assist in keeping the proper balance between the two. The Spartan system encouraged fierce competition, rivalry and aggressiveness among the youths but, at the same time, it gave their seniors (particularly the elderly among them) the authority to interfere whenever they thought it necessary in order to prevent an overdose of disruptive effects on social harmony. Thus, for example, those who had failed to be selected to the *corps d’élite* of the *hippeis* were usually at odds with those who had succeeded, and at times the strife could become quite violent. However, any senior passerby had the right to separate the combatants, and the youths were strictly obliged to obey. (OA, 43, n. 33).

Various techniques, such as sham conflicts and the mixing of ages at the common messes were used to bridge the gap between generations and prevent intergenerational tension. Such tension was rare and mainly confined to times of acute social and political crisis. Even when explicitly attested to as a major factor in the history of Sparta (e.g. by the Phylarchean tradition in Plutarch with respect to the first stages of Agis’ reform movement in the mid third century BC), a measure of caution is needed against the moralistic tendency to simplify a complex historical situation by the dichotomy “the young” versus “the elderly.” The Spartans’ attitude of respect toward old age and the crucial importance of seniority as a parameter of social interaction and differential role-allocation were expressed and consolidated by a complex series of symbols, some of them based on nonverbal communication, as is frequently the case among folk-traditional communities. Significant examples are giving up one’s seat in favor of an old person, making room for the elderly in public spaces, keeping silent in their presence, the importance of seniority (the eldest of the group) for leadership in the *gymnasia*, the *syssitia*, etc.

This applied to a certain extent also to the diarchy and the royal *syssition*. When relating the untimely death of Agesipolis, Xenophon comments on the high respect with which he used to treat his much older royal “colleague,” King Agesilaos (who happened to be also Xenophon’s close friend). Agesipolis’ relationship with his own father, former king Pausanias, presents an interesting case of Sparta’s conflict of values with a special bearing on our subject. When in campaign against Mantineia (385 BC), Agesipolis was confronted with his father’s (compromising) request to save the lives of the democratic leaders, whose faction had just been defeated with Spartan military support. Although Pausanias was a fugitive condemned to death (*in absentia*), Agesipolis obeyed him and, despite the strong influence of those (Agesilaos and his supporters) who wanted those leaders annihilated, Agesipolis was faced with no charges for his action. The reasons might have been complex, but to explain this denouement one cannot rule out the Spartans’ deep appreciation of filial obedience as a major value, even when in conflict with political interests. This may be a caveat against unreserved generalizations on Sparta’s *étatisme*..

A statement ascribed by Plato to an Egyptian priest (allegedly addressing himself to Solon in the *Timaios* 22b) described all Greeks as children: “O, Solon, Solon, you Greeks are always children,,,In your souls you are all young.” At first glance this generalization appears less apposite to the Spartans than to other Greeks, for the Spartans did not share the gerophobic view expressed in various genres of Greek literature or in the mentality of some modern societies (and rightly labelled by Geoffrey Kirk as puerile) that only during youth is life worth living.(OA, 158, n.88). In certain senses, however, paradoxically, the Egyptian priest’s statement may be considered as particularly accurate with respect to the Spartans.

As Anton rightly observes childhood is a stage of the life-cycle exposed in any society to hierarchic thought through the rough correspondence between age, strength and sophistication in children’s mentality (A&S 232, 256, note 163). To illustrate this he adduces a personal reminiscence in a note: “A nephew, when aged about nine, told me that God would be such and such. I said that I wasn’t sure there was a god.’ “But Mummy says there’s a God (pause). And she’s older than you!’” Anton laconically concludes the note with the poignant and apophthegmatic remark: “Adult Spartans would have understood” [note: with a special reference to a paragraph in Plato’s *Laws* 634 d-e]. How typical of him and how refreshing to bring such an example in order to illustrate a mentality pattern in an academic textbook!...I can imagine him mimicking that boy’s reaction to his agnosticism.

The above remark is associated with his view that ” the Spartans preserved into adult life the acute dependence of the child on the approval of peers,” and I would add, also of the elders. One of Anton’s examples for this childlike mentality consists of a sanction imposed on those who returned home alive after a military defeat, the “tremblers” (*tresantes*), to give up their seats to younger men – a sanction which, when applied to our modern adult values or mindset, may not appear draconic at all; it may even leave the impression of an anticlimax in Xenophon’s text after the list of other sanctions. However, Anton asserts, we should aptly assess its severity by recalling the psychology of our childhood (*AS* p. 234). This also holds true in his argument with respect to another sanction applied to the *tresantes:* being excluded from the teams picked for ball games. It is worth stressing here the difference between “childish” and “childlike” since, as already observed, Anton had severe reservations for the criticism of some Spartan procedures as childish or infantile.

The childlike need for the approval of peers and of the elders is already reflected in Tyrtaios’ poetry. In his attempt to foster the value of the beautiful Spartan death *(kallos tanathos*), death on the battlefield, he stressed the decorous prospect of being mourned alike by the young and the old; also the prospect of being honored by both groups for those who escaped death by glorious victory (OA, 45 with Tyrt.fr. 12.27; 37 West = fr.9.27; 37 Prato). Owing to its special place in the process of systematic indoctrination with ideas and values during the *agōgē* and within the oral culture of the *syssitia*, Tyrtaios’ poetry contributed to further consolidating that mentality of dependence on the approval of peers and elders. We shall return to him later, at the end of my presentation.

An additional aspect of childlike psychology manifests itself though gregarious and mimetic behavior. An extreme illustration, at first glance quite un-Spartan, under the contagious influence of weeping, is provided by the news of Archidamos’ victory over the Arcadians and Argives (with no casualties on the Spartan side) in the so-called “Tearless Battle” (368 BC), which ironically turned out to be a tearful one since, on receiving the news, Agesilaos (at the time an old man), the *gerontes* and the ephors are reported by Xenophon to have shed tears of joy which infected all the public. At the emotional level, this reaction can be understood in view of Sparta’s extremely difficult situation after the Leuktra catastrophe. Among the elderly a lachrymosely nervous reaction is more predictable than among other age-groups as a physiological symptom of a spontaneous response to a sudden joy or relief. In this case the mass weeping obviously started among the elderly – Agesilaos and the other members of the *Gerousia,* which made it look almost as a probouleutic weeping adopted by the “Assembly.” In other cases the *gerontes* could have contributed to triggering other sorts of gregarious reactions, particularly mass laughter, including laughter of derision at the expense of a certain victim − either as a dangerous alternative of serious deliberation (e.g. in the Assembly preceding the defeat at Leuktra) or as a corrective weapon.

Simone de Beauvoir has aptly stressed that a study of old age should always pay attention to the problems involved in class distinctions and class conflict. In this respect, a digression would be in place here in order to examine a less happy category of the elderly at Sparta. Paradoxically, some of the very factors which contributed to making old age more dignified and worth living for the *homoioi* then elsewhere in Greece, had a major role in making this stage of the life-cycle even more difficult to bear, degrading and depressing in Sparta for the so-called “Inferiors” (*hypomeines*), who had been deprived of their civic rights mainly as a result not being able to pay their due contribution to the *syssition*, the condition *sine qua non* of citizenship, in most cases after having lost their allotment (*klēros*). This holds true also with respect to those who were under the threat of sinking to the Inferiors’ ranks. Their numbers dramatically increased in the late-classical and early-Hellenistic ages *pari passu* with the catastrophic process of *oliganthropia* (the sharp decrease in the citizens’ numbers, which *at the time* was mainly a socio-economic phenomenon, not a demographic one). After having been taught all his life to regard banausic occupations as contemptible and servile, one can easily imagine how an old *hypomeion* would have contemplated the prospects of being employed in such a capacity. Furthermore, even if in Athens an old citizen could not recover from poverty, he still continued to enjoy full civic rights. But an elderly Spartan who, as a result of impoverishment became a *hypomeion*, not only had fewer chances of finding a decent source of livelihood but no longer counted as part of the State and community – he was totally expelled from political and social life, was no longer member of a *syssition.*  Becoming an alien, an outsider, is a particularly misery for an old person, and for a Spartan even more so owing to the communal spirit of that face-to-face society and its mentality of contempt for outsiders. For the elderly among the *hypomeiones* even the prospects of being able at least to continue practicing the respectable (by Spartan standards) military profession through mercenary service abroad were extremely hard to imagine. “Agesilauses” are biological exceptions, not the rule. We are even less informed on the elderly among the two large groups of underprivileged of non-Spartan origin, the helots and the *perioikoi,* which by far outnumbered the Spartiates and provided them with the economic infrastructure of their life-style.

1. Old Age, Spartan Women and the Wife-Sharing Practice

The question arises as to the status of old women (female “citizens”) at Sparta. Despite the vivid interest in Spartan women and the controversial question as to the extent of their uniqueness in Greek history (asreflected inthe work of many distinguished members of this seminar), as far as I am aware, the significance of the old-age factor has not been discussed in the literature as a status determinant. However, bearing in mind the Spartan mentality, it would be reasonable to assume, even on *a priori* grounds, that similarly to the so-called ‘Similars,” seniority must have been an important criterion in the social hierarchy of the female “citizens” alongside birth, wealth and merit. In fact, some of these criteria were logically interconnected. It took a lot of time as well as wealth and a special personality to develop the networks of dependents, friends and debtors of the kind attested in the case of Agis IVth’s mother and grandmother, Agesistrata and Archidamia (by the mid third century BC). By the way, the role of these and other prominent women of what is usually called the “second Spartan revolution” was analyzed in depth by Anton in a paper whose title was formulated as a question: “Spartan Women Assertive in Politics?” By the time of Agis’ reform his mother was in her mid or late fifties, and his grandmother in her early eighties. Obviously, it also took time to give birth to a number of children and be rewarded with due admiration for their character following their success in the *agōgē*, in the army and in Sparta’s public life. In this respect, we should also bear in mind that a Spartan woman usually married at a later age than her Athenian counterpart.

There is cumulative evidence to show that Greek women after menopause enjoyed a higher degree of independence and freedom, including freedom of movement and freedom to appear in public unattended. Spartan women, privileged in this respect from a much earlier age, must have benefited from even more independence with aging. Furthermore, anthropological studies point to the impressive frequency of prominent matriarchal traits developing in later life even in *de jure* patriarchal societies. David Guttmann interprets this trend as a universal expression, at the social level, of personality changes at the psychological and biopsychological levels. He asserts that aging women often assume an increasingly virile and aggressive profile owing to a growing concentration of male hormones in their blood. At the social level, their consequent assertiveness may be associated with their privileged position and their influence.

In Sparta such development would be much stronger than elsewhere because there the female “citizens” underwent (by Greek standards) a process of social “virilization” much earlier owing to their integration in certain educational frameworks parallel to the *agōgē* (as the regular gymnastic training, including the practice of semi-nudity and nudity). Witness a propos the prominently masculine traits of girls and young women in Lakonian art (O A, 61 and n.100). The integration in public life and the use of girls as a moral supporter of the male code of behavior *(inter alia* through sarcastic jokes at the expense of “failures” and warm praise for victors and their excellence) is reminiscent of the propaganda of integration conducted by the elderly. We may even refer to two parallel active choruses in the daily-life theatre at Sparta at the two poles of the life-cycle – the elderly and the girls, despite strong personal animosities existing among the members of the respective groups). However interpreted, whether facilitating a passage to heterosexual relations by means of pseudo-homosexuality or otherwise, the ritual of male transvestism applied to the bride for her first nuptial encounter may be taken as an integral component of the above mentioned process. As a result of the husbands being away from home engaged in perpetual exercise, hunting, the messes, and also frequently in military campaigns, Spartan women usually enjoyed a higher degree of independence and (at least according to a widespread tradition, though, at times, probably exaggerated) of licentiousness as well. Even after allowing for a measure of caution when generalizing in such matters, as shown by Ellen Millender’s emphasis on the role played by non-Spartan, especially fifth-century Athenian sources, in deliberately constructing a Spartan “otherness” in terms of gender and sexuality, it is hard to deny that in many respects Sparta was an exceptional polis also as far as her female “citizens” were concerned. “They *were* different,” as Anton used to say,,,

One of the central aspects of that alterity consists of the wife-sharing practice. When referring to this practice, Xenophon, our earliest source to mention it and the most versed in Spartan matters, puts a crucial emphasis on the age factor which, nevertheless, appears to have received less attention than it deserves in the literature. After explaining that in Sparta marriages used to take place at the period of physical prime, he adds:

It might happen, however, that an old man had a young wife; and he [viz. Lykourgos] observed that old men keep a very jealous watch over their wives. To cope with these cases he founded a totally different system by enabling the elderly husband to bring into his house some man whose physique and spirit he admired, in order to beget children (*Lak,Pol,* 1.7)

Xenophon tries to persuade his audience that in Sparta husbands welcomed the norm on account of social and economic advantages: “the men want to get more brothers for their sons, brothers who are part of the family and share in its power, but claim no share of the property.” (*Lak. Pol.* 1.9 ).. In line with his practice throughout the *Lakedaimonion Politeia*, Xenophon stresses the difference between Sparta and other *poleis* also in this respect, this time with a reference to old age from a psychological perspective. He ascribes to his hero, the omniscient Lykourgos, the apprehension that it is in the nature of old men to keep a very jealous watch over their younger wives, only to stress his success in defeating nature by making the Spartans exceptional. After having depicting Xenophon as a eulogizer of the Spartans’ efficiency, *inter alia* on account of their expertise in the “art” of deceptiveness, Anton pertinently asks: “Should we not suspect that his eulogy of Spartan efficiency was itself in some ways issued to deceive?” In the spirit of this (de)constructive skepticism, one may suspect that despite Xenophon’s idealization, there were cases in which old Spartans were socially and psychologically pressed into this practice of wife sharing against their will. Worthy of note in this respect is that according to Xenophon’s own testimony the initiative of such a relationship did not always come from the elderly husband:

If a man did not wish to cohabit with a wife but wanted children of whom he could be proud, he [Lykourgos] also made it legal for him, when he saw a woman of quality who had borne good children, to have children by her with her husband’s consent. (*Lak. Pol*.1.8).

A man who did not wish to cohabit with a wife could be either a confirmed bachelor − out of a homosexual orientation which, unlike that of most Spartans, was not confined to an (institutionalized) pederastic experience limited in time **−,** or an impoverished citizen, who could not afford raising a child. If a confirmed bachelor, this practice could perhaps have saved him from those humiliating sanctions imposed on his group for not begetting children for Sparta. Significantly to our subject matter, one of those sanctions deprived them of the conventional seniority privileges [note: I am not persuaded by Sarah Pomeroy’s suggestion to translate the verb *synoikein* as “to have intercourse” [with his wife] instead of “to cohabit” or “live with”].

Xenophon also mentions in this respect the interest of Spartan wives in such transactions out of a desire to take charge of two households (*Lak Pol.* 1.9), though he does not explain the practical implications of such desire. [One may associate it perhaps with the importance of motherhood and raising the children in the first years of their life and with social prestige.] Owing to the interest ascribed by Xenophon to Spartan wives in these extramarital relationships, Sarah Pomeroy prefers to call the practice “husband doubling,” “male partner duplication,” or “non-exclusive monogamy” – a term that, unlike “wife sharing” does not imply passivity on the woman’s behalf. However, we are explicitly told only about the males’ role in those transactions: the husband’s initiative or the need to obtain his consent; for all her possible interest in the endeavor, the wife is not presented as initiating, nor is her readiness for the enterprise stated to be strictly necessary. Xenophon intriguingly claims to know of “many similar arrangements” **(***Lak. Pol*. 1.9) but regrettably keeps silent about them… Since in the above cases sexual intercourse was taking place with the husband’s consent, it could hardly be taken as adultery *stricto sensu*.

Incidentally, the denial of the existence of adultery at Sparta is ascribed in a well-known apocryphal anecdote to a certain Geradas (whose name has unmistakable associations to old age – “*geras*”), a man typically presented by Plutarch as a “Spartiate of very ancient times.” The Geradas anecdote is significantly placed by Plutarch at the conclusion of his discussion of the extra-marital liaisons, precisely because they were not adulterous.

Polybius adds an important dimension to the subject by referring to the practice of plural marriages and adelphic polyandry:

For among the Lakedaimonians it was a traditional custom for three or four men to share the wife, sometimes more if they were brothers. The children of those were held to be common…When a man had begotten a sufficient number of children, it was an honorable custom for him to give his wife away to one of his friends. (12.6b.8). [note: for what is worth, Philo, *De leg. spec*. (*On the Special Laws*) 3.4.22 adds an additional piece of information when stating that in Sparta it was legitimate for the offspring of a polyandrous relationship (i.e. urethral siblings) to marry. On the economic level this may have been aimed at keeping the estates of both fathers in the same family after their deaths].

The purpose of plural marriages and fraternal polyandry (in which presumably the eldest brother was a sort of official husband) was diametrically opposed to that of eugenics and producing more children for Sparta: it was most probably meant to reduce the number of children in an impoverished family or to defend a family’s property (including the wife’s dowry) and influence; thereby the practice could only aggravate the destructive effects of *oliganthropia*. This and other factors led some scholars (e.g. Andrew Scott) to believe that chronologically the two contradicting patterns of polyandry originated in two different periods of Spartan history – that grounded on common interests and on principles of equalitarianism and “collectivism” – the concept of sharing almost “everything” − as well as providing Sparta with more (high quality) citizens, is claimed to have originated in the archaic (or late-archaic) period as part of the emerging “order”; the opposite pattern, grounded on individually oriented interests harmful to the State is claimed to have appeared only later, in the late-classical period. However, Polybius presents the latter as “traditional” (i.e. being in force for a very long time). Conversely, on the grounds of demographic fluctuations and the inheritance system many scholars believe that the first pattern of wife sharing (referred to by Xenophon and Plutarch) did not start in the archaic period but only after the great earthquake (465 BC) or even at a much later stage, in the course of the fourth century BC − to cope with the acute paucity of citizens. Incidentally, the same spirit of promoting the production of offspring can be found in the legislation encouraging child procreation (*teknopoiia*) and the sanctions directed against bachelorship. All in all, we have no clue in the sources to a specific date for the introduction of either pattern, nor do we have one even for how widespread the phenomenon of polyandry as a whole was in Sparta. It is not difficult to imagine the two opposing patterns co-existing or running in parallel in a society which, for all its apparently coherent order, in fact was imbued with so many inner contradictions and paradoxes**,** a society many members of which led a “double life” in more than one sense [note]. However, marriages between old men and younger women must have multiplied since the early fourth century onwards owing to the acute decrease in the numbers of younger citizens, i.e. the sinking of many among them into the ranks of the “Inferiors” as a result of the accelerated socio-economic changes that Sparta underwent at the time. Thus, it is possible that Xenophon put such an emphasis on the age factor when referring to polyandry because the frequency of such marriages was a relatively recent development and a phenomenon of special contemporary relevance.

At this point I propose to adopt Anton’s fondness of psychological method and reasonable speculation and advance the hypothesis that sexual transactions of the kind mentioned above (with the obvious exception of fraternal polyandry) are most likely to have taken place at the *syssitia*, where men of widely different ages and wealth used to dine and spend much of their time together (at the expense of private commensality and the time spent at home with their families). The Spartans used various methods in order to consolidate the *esprit de corps* of these groups of around fifteen members and transform them into a sort of family: the special system of co-optation through the unanimous and secret ballot required for the admission of a new member, the obligation of strict confidentiality concerning the talk at each *syssition* (an obligation by which each member was ritually and symbolically reminded by *the eldest* of the group at the entrance); various types of laughter, such as in sociological terms a symmetrical joking relationship within the group and an asymmetric mocking relationship with outsiders, especially aggressive *vis-à-vis* the helots – as, for instance, in the case of those brought to the *syssitia* and intoxicated with wine in order to teach the youths the viciousness of drunkenness and thereby consolidate the Spartan group ideal by means of a stark contrast with an anti-ideal represented by both heavy drunkenness and its impersonators − the helots. As van Wess (238) put it: “…a single mess group did indeed form the citizen core of a ‘sworn band.’” Certain synonyms of the word *syssitia* have a special bearing on their social significance: *philitia* (“groups of friends,” used by Xenophon, *Lak. Pol*. 3.5; 5.6; *Hell.* 5.4.28**)** can be associated with the paramount importance of *esprit de corps –* after all, as members of the same mess, the*syssitoi* were fighting in the same military unit. According to Ephoros and Aristotle the *syssitia* were called in Sparta also *andreia* (“men’s clubs”) [a term which plausibly goes back to their archaic and aristocratic origin– van Vess**].** Wife sharing among comrades at the *andreia*, could be meant *inter alia* to be an imitation of the adelphic polyandry (referred to by Polybius), stressing perhaps the concept of fraternity between members through “partible paternity,” as if the *syssition* were a big *family* [note: for the term “partible paternity” see Ogden, Gk. Bastardy, 234-235; cf. Pomeroy, with the speculation that the Spartans believed male sperm could mingle and produce offspring from two or more male parents]. Such sexual transactions would also add a significant perspective to the requirement of strict confidentiality ritually imposed on the *syssitoi* by the eldest of their group.

Moreover, the *syssitia* functioned in Sparta also as *symposia* (an alternative to the drinking clubs in Athens and elsewhere, though incomparably more moderate, to avoid the danger of hybris), and it is possible to imagine that at times the above sexual transactions could be stimulated by the consumption of wine, even in its more modest quantity allowed for the Spartitates **(**though there are some testimonies suggesting that wine-consumption was not so negligible (Kritias fr, 33=Athen. 463 f with van Wess). Social pressures could also help: an old man reluctant to share his younger wife with a junior mess companion ardently interested in such an endeavor could become the subject of comrades ridicule (particularly if no longer able to procreate), and the Spartans were extremely susceptible and vulnerable to derision**.** Moreover, Xenophon may have hinted to the ultimate device used in such cases: the appeal to Lykourgos’ authority: it was him who recommended the practice! Polybius’ remark that it was *honorable* for a man who had enough children (as was the case with many among the elderly) to share his wife with a friend, may also hint to a mentality facilitating pressure on those inclined to refuse: one may infer the opposite implication, that it was deemed *shameful* not to comply. On the psychological level, this interpretation is supported by Xenophon’s reference to the senile jealousy that the above sexual arrangements were aimed to eradicate (*Lak. Pol.* 1.70 ). May they indirectly convey a Spartan attitude echoed or reproduced by a foreign admirer? Plutarch further elaborated on the matter in a typically enthusiastic eulogy of his hero:.

He [viz. Lykourgos] removed empty and womanish jealousy…and made it honorable for worthy men to share in the begetting of children, mocking those who regard combination and sharing in such matters as intolerable as to resort to murders and wars to avenge them (*Lyk.* 15.11).

Lykourgos’ late biographer adds the epithet “womanish” to depict a husband’s jealousy and provides thereby further support to the derision technique of persuasion hypothesized above (amplified through the phrase introduced by “mocking”). Plutarch backs unreservedly Xenophon’s praise of Lykourgos for having succeeded in banishing jealousy, yet it is *him* who, elsewhere, provides an extreme example of this emotion as being the dominant factor motivating an old Spartan of royal lineage, Kleonymos, to assist Pyrrhus in his invasion of Lakonia in 272 BC after his young wife, Chilonis, had betrayed him with a royal junior, Akrotatos, the grand-nephew of her husband (Areus’ son) (references OA 161, n. 116; prosopography). [note: Attractive as it may be, the suggestion that Kleonymos had initially consented to sharing his wife with Akrotatos, in the spirit of the above extramarital arrangements (see Michell, p.59) and later changed his mind must remain pure speculation] There were, of course, some other notorious cases of adultery in Sparta despite the above claim that it was totally unknown there (which is typically compared by Anton with a statement during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960’s that there was no adultery in China (p.224). Incidentally, China provided Anton with many of his analogies, and he had a special predilection for a comparative approach

1. Unflattering Images: Old Age and the “Visual”

Despite the Spartans’ veneration for the elderly, certain biological vicissitudes of the aging process (sometimes even in an exaggerated, repugnant and grotesque form) were used in a series of artistic representations, either plastic of literary, in the service of Spartan propaganda. The most significant among these unflattering reflections of old age belong to a large group of terracotta masks discovered (about a century ago) by the British excavations at the sanctuary of [Artemis] Orthia, which are interpreted as votive imitations (usually smaller in scale) of the wooden original masks. These were most probably used in ritual dances and other mimetic performances. It is worth stressing that one of the criteria for the classification of the Orthia masks is age: the old masks (the female type as well as other grotesque masks bearing geriatric traits) are of particularly repulsive nature (akin to those classified as “Caricatures,” “Satyrs” and “Gorgons”) and stand in sharp contrast with the beautiful exemplars conventionally classified as “Youths” (the male but beardless type), “Warriors” (bearded male type) and “Portraits” (slightly smiling young faces). By the way, Anton was obsessed with the Spartans’ use of the visual in the manipulation of propaganda messages and chose one of the grotesque type of masks for the cover of his first edited book, that based on the London seminar. The iconographic evidence is all the more significant in view of the probability that the masks dated between the late-seventh and early-fifth centuries BC, which in fact constitute the vast majority of the arsenal, could have been manufactured not only by *perioikoi* but also by Spartiates (i.e before the strict ban imposed on any occupation other than military or political).

One of the most frequent types of those masks is that labelled “Old Women” – old, on account of their wrinkled faces and lack of teeth. These masks have plausibly been associated with Hesychios’ description of the *brydallichai* – ugly feminine masks (aischra prosopeia gynaikeia) worn by male impersonators (probably helots and ephebes made to imitate helots as part of their formation) for the degrading and obscene dances in female disguise that they were made to perform in front of the Spartiates. These “artistic” representations were aimed at consolidating the Spartan group ideal and at stressing its superiority by means of contrast with an anti-ideal, the inferiority of which could be expressed and conveyed through psychological associations between age, social status and gender (paradoxically, despite the special rank enjoyed in many other respects by the elderly and, *mutatis mutandis*, by women in Spartan society as compared to other *poleis*).. On the esthetic level, the hideous aspect of the geriatric masks stands in sharp contrast with the beautiful, ideal traits exhibited by the various categories of the “young” masks. The grotesque features are often mingled with terrifying and morbid traits − a mixture inevitably reminiscent of the bizarre trinity Fear, Death and Laughter, honored in Sparta with special sanctuaries.

The “Old Women” masks may also have been meant to inspire the sensation of fear through association with magical and mysterious forces, such as those of old witches in folklore. The above interpretations are not contradictory because the helots, though despised, were to be feared. In the case of the “Old Women’ masks, the sensation of fear is sometimes accompanied by disgust, a mixture convincingly presented by Jan Bremmer as typical of male attitudes in ancient Greece towards old women. This type of classical misogynism (which, by the way, produced stereotypes of old women’s drunkenness and nymphomania along witchcraft) is illustrated by many mythological figures of terrifying old ladies such as the *Erinyes*, the *Graiai*, the *Moirai* and the Gorgons. (p. 75, note 21) David Guttmann associates the witch stereotype with what he regards, as already noted, an increasingly aggressive and “masculine” profile of older women. His theory can find support not only in Greek mythology but also in Attic comedy, particularly in such cases as Aristophanes’ *Ekklesiazouai* and, even more, the gyneco-gerontocracy of Pherekrates’ *Old Wives* (*Graiai*) (OA 75, n.23) Recalling the testimony of certain sources on the assertiveness and domination of Spartan women and the above theory of old women’s virilization, it would be attractive (if perhaps too bold) to ask whether these “Old-Women,” masks with their masculine traits, might have expressed (on a subconscious level) some hidden fears of a gyneco-gerontocracy. With reference to another context − Aristotle’s expression “under the control of women” (*gynaikokratoumenoi*) – applied disapprovingly to the Spartans, Anton raised the possibility of “an influential form of Spartan fear over what was meant to be a soldierly, homosocial, society of men, in harmony with each other more than with their women” (Wiley, p. 18)

However, it would be wrong to simplify and regard the unflattering artistic representations of old age in Sparta as confined only to the helots (or other underprivileged) and to their ritual imitation or to the category of old women. Some of Tyrtaios’ lines which certainly refer to old male Spartiates do touch on the ugly transformations of the aging body as exposed by nudity as an exhortation of the young to be ready to sacrifice their lives for Sparta. Tyrtaios borrows from Homer’ *Iliad* (22.66-76) and in an elegiac ode uses the motif of the disgrace involved in the violent death of an old man on the battlefield and the mutilation of his corpse, lying with his private parts exposed. Like Homer, Tyrtaios advances the idea of the visualized difference between youth and old age in this respect, but for diametrically opposed aims: in the *Iliad* the idea is adduced by Priam in a desperate attempt to deter Hektor, his son, from sacrificing his life in battle by the device of presenting him with the humiliating prospect of his father’s corpse being eventually exposed to the enemy. Tyrtaios, on the contrary, manipulates the Homeric motif to enhance the readiness of young warriors to sacrifice their life in war. He urges his fellow citizens not to take flight and abandon their older (*palaioteroi)* comrades, whose knees are no longer swift (fr.10/15-19 West). Then, the latter are referred simply as “old men” (*geraioi)*, which at first glance may appear rather strange, since normally the elderly (i.e. those over 60) were no longer in the warrior ranks. But it is this association with old age which enables Tyrtaios to make use of the Homeric device concerning the esthetic difference between young and old corpses – even if later, after having aroused the proper associations, the poet reverts to the more adequate term “older”:

It is shameful for an older man to fall among the front fighters and lie before the young with his head white and his beard hoary…with his privates all bloody in his hands – a sight which is shameful and blameful to contemplate – and his body also all naked. But for a young man all is decorous, as he has the splendid blossom of lovely youth, admirable for men to behold and loved by women while he lives, he is beautiful when fallen among the front fighters... (fr. 10/21-30 West)

“*La belle mort spartiate***…!”.** By the way, typically of his rich associations with modern analogies, Anton compares the Spartan idealization of death to the exhortation of Nationalist troops in the Spanish Civil War: “*Viva la Muerte*!” (“Long live Death!”(AS, 233, n. 175). Surprisingly, although the subject matter in Tyrtaios’ verse is basically ethical – the due respect for seniority and the moral duty of protecting elder comrades – the emphasis is on the esthetic aspect and on the visual: the contrast between the corpse of a young warrior and that of an old man *in the nude*. Tyrtaios’ subtle propaganda was meant to arouse the young warriors’ readiness to die in battle, even if this aim required a manipulative admission of the non-flattering changes undergone by the aging body, the exposure of which is perceived as repulsive and obscene. In spite of Sparta’s gerontolatry, Tyrtaios’ verse (including these lines) served as a canon for education and value-consensus − repeatedly sung in recital contests or by groups of soldiers for the promotion of military morale.

Thus Tyrtaios’ verse and the masks of Orthia (regardless of their interpretation) join, if in a limited sense – the aesthetical – the basic contrast between desirable young age and detestable old age which, in spite of certain remarkable exceptions, is typical of Greek mentality as reflected by various genres of literature and plastic art. To conclude, whatever the “mask” of old age, whether the ideal or the grotesque, it was utilized at Sparta to protect the same face – the so-called Lykourgan order (*kosmos*), its norms and values.

And a propos Lykourgos, at the end of his preface to the *Wiley Companion to Sparta*, Anton expressed his gratitude to Paul Cartledge and generously compared his influence in the field of Spartan studies to the aptitude of one man to leave through his temperament and *oeuvre* his impact on “helping to generate an enduring culture” (i.e. adopting for the matter the model of Lykourgos’ position in Spartan mentality and Sparta reception). I am sure you will all agree with me that Anton fully deserves that honor as well for his unique contribution to the promotion of Spartan studies.

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