Spartan traditions and receptions*

by Paul Cartledge

Sparta, for better or worse, is a 'brand', not just a name. 'Spartan' and its cognate 'laconic' are adjectives of normal and frequent occurrence in British and American English, for example. How this got to be so is a subject of monumental and perennial interest and importance, one that has engaged the minds, pens and word-processors of a multinational succession of major scholars, from the French François Ollier, through the Swedish Eugene Napoleon Tigerstedt and the late British Elizabeth Rawson, to the German Volker Losemann.[1] For a contribution to a volume in honour of the British/adopted Irish George Huxley it seems entirely appropriate to revisit the multiple ways in which Sparta has been, and still is being, handed down (tradition) and received (reception).[2]

Three examples of what is variously called the myth, the legend, or the tradition of Sparta, from different periods and

---

* This is an expanded version – but not too expanded: laconicism forbids! – of the talk I gave in Sparta in March 2005 on being awarded honorary citizenship of (modern) Sparta by the Mayor and Council of the Demos of Sparti. That ceremony inaugurated a hugely successful two-day conference held jointly by the British School at Athens with both the Prehistoric & Classical and the Byzantine Ephorates of Lakonia. I am indebted to my distinguished former pupil Brian McGing and his co-editor Mark Humphries for their very kind invitation to contribute to this honorific volume, which continues my happy connections both with TCD (where I taught from 1973 to 1978) and with *Hermathena*, as well as with the honorand himself (see n. 2, below).

[1] F. Ollier *Le mirage spartiate*, 2 vols (Paris 1933-43, repr. in one vol. Chicago 1973); E.N. Tigerstedt *The Legend of Classical Sparta*, 2 vols + index vol. (Stockholm etc. 1965, 1974, 1978); E.D. Rawson *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Oxford 1969, repr. 1991); V. Losemann *Der Neue Pauly* (2003) s.v. 'Sparta ... Bild und Deutung'. Special mention should also be made of Anton Powell and Stephen Hodkinson, Sparta experts both and co-editors of (among other relevant volumes: see also, e.g., n. 8 below) *The Shadow of Sparta* (Swansea & London, 1994) and *Sparta: Beyond the Mirage* (London, 2002).

[2] I first met George when I was a (very) junior Lecturer in Classical Civilization at the (then) New University of Ulster, Coleraine, during the academic year 1972-3. As my Oxford doctoral thesis, then still in progress (1969-1975), was on the archaeology and history of early Sparta, I had of course read his provocatively brilliant debut book, *Early Sparta* (London, 1962). One of the legendary 'Ballymascanlon' series of meetings of 'Hibernian Hellenists' that George had invented provided the occasion for our first encounter.

historical moments from antiquity to the present, will be represented and reviewed in some detail here. The tradition as a whole begins, formally, with the two (lost) works on Spartan customs composed by the controversial Athenian politician Kritias at the end of the fifth century BC, and it continues in full vigour to our own 21st century AD – the recent (1998) historical novel, *Gates of Fire*, by the American author Steven Pressfield and its reception are sufficient testimony to that. Of course, in the space of a short essay no sort of proper justice can be done let alone be seen to be done to the richness and multiplicity (*poikilia*) of the tradition. But I hope that the three images and meanings I have selected for purposes of illustration will at least be found relevant and illuminating.

I begin in what Losemann has made his own scholarly territory.[3] And I apologise at the outset for beginning with what some may think is an unnecessarily 'dark' and troubled aspect of the Spartan tradition. I refer to the determined effort made by National Socialist Germany to appropriate a particular image – or mirage – of ancient Greece as an essential part of the Party's and governmental regime's public ideology and propaganda. The idea that modern Germany had some special connection with ancient Greece was of course by no means a new one in 1933. Scholars had even spoken of the 'tyranny' of Greece over Germany in the nineteenth century – meaning that ancient Greece served as an essential cultural reference-point, a standard of value, a measure of aspiration.[4] But in the Nazi era it was quite specifically Sparta that was appealed to as the Greek ancestor and model – the Sparta of the 'Nordic' Dorian Spartans, that is, with their ruthless devotion to the common good, their sacrifice of private enjoyment, their fierce physical

[3] V. Losemann *Nazionalsozialismus und Antike: Studien zur Entwicklung des Faches Alte Geschichte 1933-1945* (Hamburg 1977). Further such literature may be found in the rich Bibliography appended to the remarkably helpful volume, *Sparta*, edited by Karl Christ (Darmstadt, 1986), to which Christ himself contributed an introduction of permanent value. Add now B. Näf (ed.) *Antike und Altertumswissenschaft in der Zeit von Faschismus und Nationalsozialismus* (Mandelbachtal & Cambridge, MA 2001); this includes a paper by Losemann.

[4] A. Grafton 'Germany and the West 1830-1900' in K.J. Dover (ed.) *Perceptions of the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford 1992); S. Marchand *Down from Olympus. Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton 1996). The phrase 'tyranny of Greece over Germany' was coined by Edith Butler in 1935.

training, their public educational programme aimed at producing mighty and patriotic warriors, and – not least – their eugenic practices involving the disposal of unfit or disabled infants.[5]

One German academic who was prepared to sign up to this 'Spartan' propaganda and ideology, Otto von Vacano, actually took advantage of the German occupation of Greece during the Second World War to conduct excavations at the Neolithic and later prehistoric site of Kouphovouno not far from Sparta itself. Happily, excavations have recently been renewed there, by the British School at Athens among others, in quite different political and intellectual circumstances.[6] But I wanted to start with the 'dark' or negative side of the Spartan tradition, because it is, I believe, the Nazi appropriation of Sparta that has done most to distort or obscure the true nature of ancient Spartan communal solidarity – and, as a direct consequence, made it impossible any longer to appeal to ancient Sparta straightforwardly as a political-social ideal or model for today and tomorrow.[7]

Yet if one tracks back beyond the twentieth and nineteenth centuries to the eighteenth century, to the age of the Enlightenment, and specifically to the Enlightenment of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one finds a quite different image of Sparta in his writings.[8] First, Rousseau was obsessed with corruption and the necessity for moral regeneration or rebirth, and full of hope for a new or renewed innocence. Though Sparta was, in his view, civilised, it fortunately was not – too – cultivated.

---

[5] 'Nordic' Spartans: M. Bernal *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* I. *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (London 1987) 292-4.

[6] O. von Vacano: R. Hope Simpson and H.E. Waterhouse 'Prehistoric Laconia. Part I' *ABSA* 55 (1960) 74. The current excavations at Kouphovouno (2001-) are a joint British (C. Mee and W.G. Cavanagh) and French (J. Renard) enterprise: see the relevant preliminary accounts in *Archaeological Reports* (Supp. to *Journal of Hellenic Studies*) for 2001-2, 2002-3 and 2003-4.

[7] Victor Ehrenberg, an excellent historian of Sparta who knew the dark side of the Nazi experiment from bitter personal experience, at first labelled Sparta a 'totalitarian' community: *Aspects of the Ancient World* (Oxford, 1946) ch. 7; he later retracted this a little and substituted 'authoritarian': *From Solon to Socrates. Greek History and Civilization during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.* (London, 1968) 388 n. 52.

[8] I summarise the findings of my 'The Socratics' Sparta and Rousseau's' in S. Hodkinson & A. Powell (eds.) *Sparta: New Perspectives* (London 1999) 311-37.

Rousseau praised her extravagantly – if not entirely accurately – for chasing away from her walls (!) 'the Arts and Artists, the Scientists and the "Savans"'. Sparta's austere, simple and uniform lifestyle seemed to him to place her closer than most to the ideally true or pure natural state of human society. Second, Sparta stood for civic morality, patriotism, and devotion to the collectivity, both realising the time-honoured dream of an integration of the individual and the collective, and displaying 'satisfying habits, a sturdy group spirit, an inclination to do right by one's fellows'.

Third, and not least, Rousseau idolised Sparta because of Lykourgos 'the legislator' or 'lawgiver', who fixed 'an iron yoke' and tied the Spartans to it in order to develop their patriotism, a habit of mind and spirit that was constantly impressed upon the Spartans in their laws, games, domestic life, sexual relations, and common meals.

Sparta, in other words, was for Rousseau something of a utopia – to use the word coined in 1516 by the English scholar-politician Sir Thomas More.[9] More, as a good classical scholar, knew that his coinage was ambiguous: did it mean *O*u-topia ('No-Place' 'Nowhere') or *E*u-topia ('Place of Faring Well' 'Good Place')? Actually, for him, it was a No-Place, just an imaginary construct, a place where certain revolutionary political ideas could be explored in theory, as a thought-experiment, without having to suffer any possible unpleasant consequences in real historical practice. But that was not, I think, how Rousseau interpreted 'utopia', nor was it how the great majority of utopian thinkers and utopiographers have conceived it. For them, their utopias are blueprints, plans to be acted on, to be put into practice. Which is of course why 'utopia' has come to acquire such a bad name – thanks to Nazi and other (including Stalinist-Communist) 'utopian' experiments.

Next, however, let us go still further back in time, to a simpler, more innocent age – to Mistra in the middle of the fifteenth century. Were we able to enter a time-machine and transport ourselves to then and there, we would have had the privilege of meeting a most remarkable figure at work: a scholar

[9] Here I draw on ch. 22 of my *Agesilaos and the Crisis of Sparta* (London, 1987, repr. 2000).

by the name of George Gemistos Plethon.[10] Mistra, founded as a Frankish stronghold in the thirteenth century, a sort of high-mediaeval equivalent of ancient Sparta, was from 1348 the capital of the Despotate of the Morea. And it was to here from Constantinople that George Gemistos Plethon chose to relocate. His connections were of the highest. Two early pamphlets of his had been addressed respectively to the Byzantine emperor Manuel Palaeologus and to his son, the young Despot, Theodore. But the major work of his maturity was entitled, boldly, provocatively, the *Laws* – in imitation of his true master, Plato. For Plethon was more of a Platonist, a pre-Christian, than he was a good Orthodox, and what is more he was – as he imagined Plato to have been – a Laconist, a believer in the good old law, and more specifically the good old laws of Lykourgos.

We do not unfortunately have Plethon's *Laws* preserved as such. His Orthodox opponents burnt the work after its author's death. But from the surviving Table of Contents, which are thought to have been composed by Plethon himself, we learn two of its most fundamental maxims – or recommendations. First, that the ideal legislated community (*politeia*) should be 'Spartan' (*Lakonikê*), though 'without the excessive severities that the majority of people [*sc.* today] are unwilling to accept'; and, second, that the community's educational system should be such as to produce Platonic-style philosophers. What the actual ancient Spartans living, supposedly, under the laws of Lykourgos would have made of this, is of course quite a different matter.[11]

There is, at any rate, a recurrent motif throughout the currency of the Spartan myth, from antiquity right up until the modern period, that the Spartans were enemies of culture, or at any rate despisers of mere speculative as opposed to practical wisdom and philosophy.[12] This was one of the things, rather paradoxically, for which the deeply intellectual but pro-Spartan Rousseau had praised the Spartans, as we have seen. He, like many before and after him, had derived that notion of the Spartans as a philistine, anti-intellectual people largely from

[10] C.M. Woodhouse *Gemistus Plethon. The Last of the Hellenes* (Oxford 1986).

[11] Rawson *Spartan Tradition* 121-4.

[12] Spartan 'anti-intellectualism' in the mirage: Rawson *Spartan Tradition* 387, Index of Subjects, s.v.

reading his favourite Greek author, Plutarch, who with Plato had also been a major source of Thomas More's inspiring idea and ideal of ancient Sparta.

Plutarch, as is well known, wrote a series of *Parallel Lives* of great ancient Greeks and equally great but not so ancient Romans – whom he paired and compared: for example, Alexander the Great with Julius Caesar; and, most relevantly for us, Lykourgos with Numa.[13] Unfortunately, however, not all the *Lives* he wrote have been preserved, and among the losses are two that I myself particularly regret: that of Epameinondas of Thebes, perhaps in some ways the greatest of all the (historical) ancient Greeks;[14] and, secondly, that of the Spartan King Leonidas (reigned *c.* 490-480). The ancient Greeks had a sobering maxim 'Look to the end'; or, as it was also expressed by Herodotus's Solon, 'Call no person "happy" until he is dead' (1.32.7, 9) – until, that is, you have seen how (well or badly) he died. Few Greeks, indeed few people (ever), have died better, more happily, than Leonidas.

This is not the place to rehearse in detail how Leonidas achieved that 'summation devoutly to be wished'.[15] But I do want to register just four points about the vital contribution Sparta made to the Persian Wars under the crucial leadership of Leonidas. First, although a number of Greek cities, led by Sparta, had come together to swear oaths of alliance at Corinth in 481, in the summer of 480 when Xerxes and his horde actually descended on the Greek mainland, almost all of it down to and including Boiotia was actively or passively on the Persian side. Leonidas therefore, in fulfilling his city's mission to lead a Greek resistance force to Thermopylai, was actually conducting a much more isolated and dangerous resistance than he could have anticipated.

---

[13] A highly convenient modern edition is F. Hartog (ed.) *Plutarque. Vies parallèles* (Paris, 2001). See Index pp. 2261-2 s.v. 'Sparte, Spartiates'.

[14] The case for Epameinondas is made with gusto by V.D. Hanson *The Soul of Battle. From Ancient Times to the Present Day, How Three Great Liberators Vanquished Tyranny* (N.Y. 1999) 17-120.

[15] Cartledge *The Spartans: An Epic History*, 2nd edn (London & N.Y., 2004). For the full works see my book, *Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed The World* (London & N.Y. 2006).

Second, not only did Leonidas take only 300 Spartan troops, which he said was just an advance guard, but those 300 were not his regular royal bodyguard. They were a very specially selected force, of course. For they had all to be not only fearless and valiant fighters, naturally enough, but also – like Leonidas himself – the fathers of a living son. The implication of that latter criterion was clear: the 300 together with Leonidas were not expected to survive their mission to fight another day or father more Spartan 'guns'.[16] But their male bloodlines would live on, and their sons would grow to maturity inspired with a lasting vision of heroic paternal patriotism.

Third, and specifically, Leonidas with his picked Spartan band was detailed to defend the first and only truly defensible pass into central Greece, the pass at Thermopylai, the Hot Gates.[17] Apart from its defensibility, Thermopylae had the further merit of being located close to the sea – and therefore able to communicate with the Greek fleet headed up by Athens, which was to achieve a great success at Artemision on the northern coast of Euboia and an even greater one at Salamis later the same year. The joint land-sea strategy was absolutely crucial to the Greeks' resistance to Xerxes.[18]

Fourth, and finally, there are the nature and spirit of the 300's last stand. Leonidas and his remaining Greek forces were betrayed on the third day of fighting by a local Greek man from Phokis, whose name has gone down in infamy – it is the modern Greek word for 'nightmare', *ephialtis*. Constantine Cavafy, in his famous poem 'Thermopylae', rather world-wearily advised that in such a situation an Ephialtis should always be expected to emerge.[19]

What was unexpected at the time, however, though not in Sparta, I suggest, was the decision by Leonidas and those of the

---

[16] The 'guns' analogy is drawn from the terminology and more recent history of the fierce inhabitants of the Mani peninsula of southern Lakonia; by them, male children were seen as future combatants in their interminable internecine wars: P. Leigh Fermor *Mani. Travels in Southern Greece* (London 1958).

[17] On the truly liminal position of the Gates, see the typically crisp remarks in G.L. Cawkwell *The Greek Wars. The Failure of Persia* (Oxford 2005) Appendix 5.

[18] See, e.g., P. Green *The Greco-Persian Wars* (California 1996); B. Strauss *The Battle of Salamis* (N.Y. 2004).

[19] Cavafy's 'Thermopyles' was written in 1901 and first published in 1903: R., E. and S. Apostolides (eds), *K.P. Kavaphis, Apanta Ta Poiemata* (Athens, 2002) 59-64.

300 who were fit enough to be present to fight tooth and nail to the death.[20] Defeat at Thermopylae was ultimately inevitable. But what Leonidas and the 300 showed, and had to show, was that the Persians could be resisted, and might one day be defeated. Thermopylae, as for example Michel de Montaigne perceived, was thus for the Spartans and other resisting Greeks a moral, that is a morale, victory.[21]

As such, it has resonated down the ages – and nowhere more powerfully than in Jacques-Louis David's painting that now hangs in the Louvre. Napoleon is said to have told his court painter he could not understand why he had wasted so much time and effort on depicting a bunch of (both literally and colloquially) losers. But then we know, as Napoleon did not, what sort of an 'end' lay in store for the ill-fated former emperor.[22]

To conclude: Sparta, for better or (often) worse, is today, as I stated at the beginning, a 'brand', not just a name. What I have tried to do briefly here, besides duly and fittingly honouring our honorand, is suggest that in a certain sense Sparta is in constant need of re-branding. Above all, the brand now needs to be rescued from any shadow or taint of totalitarianism that may still linger and cling on from the twentieth century. It needs to be re-associated rather with the morally virtuous, relatively selfless ideal community imagined by Rousseau and Plethon and to some extent Plato. Above all, perhaps, it requires to be re-connected with the real-life community of Leonidas. That was one that, for all its (typically Greek) infliction of unfreedom on large numbers of (Greek) others,[23] could not only conceive the

---

[20] Two of the 300 suffered from crippling eye disease – one so badly he felt he could not fight at all; still, for being absent and surviving he earned the terrible nickname 'the trembler', *ho tresas*. A third member of the 300 missed the final battle because he had been sent on a diplomatic mission by Leonidas: he hanged himself for shame – at surviving – when he returned to Sparta. See W.I. Miller *The Mystery of Courage* (Cambridge, MA 2000) ch. 2.

[21] This, in brief, is the argument of Cartledge, 'What have the Spartans done for us? Sparta's contribution to Western civilisation' *Greece & Rome* 2nd ser. 51.2 (2004) 164-79.

[22] Rawson *Spartan Tradition* 291 and Plate 5.

[23] On the Helots, see Cartledge 'Raising hell? The Helot mirage – a personal review' in N. Luraghi & S.E. Alcock (eds) *Helots and their Masters in Laconia and Messenia. Histories, Ideologies, Structures* (Washington, DC, 2003) 12-30; cf. Cartledge

idea, but also put into practice the notion, of fighting and dying for a concept of shared Greekness and a concept of freedom. Had it not been for the Spartans, I not so humbly suggest, what we call the 'Glory that was Greece' would largely either not have happened at all, or would have been forgotten by posterity.

PAUL CARTLEDGE
University of Cambridge

Sparta and Lakonia. A Regional History 1300 to 362 BC, 2nd edn (London & N.Y. 2002) Appendix 4 (sources).