

Our Sources for *History*

As the Greeks and other civilizations emerged from the Dark Ages, the writing from the Bronze Age began to look different from the writing of this new Iron Age. The medium had changed. The writings from Egypt and Mesopotamia had lasted because they had been etched into rock, baked onto a clay tablet, or buried in a tomb. Now, a genre of literature began to emerge, dubbed *historias* by Herodotus (meaning “investigations”): rather than simple court records, an independent writer interviewed witnesses and analyzed written accounts to discover what really happened.

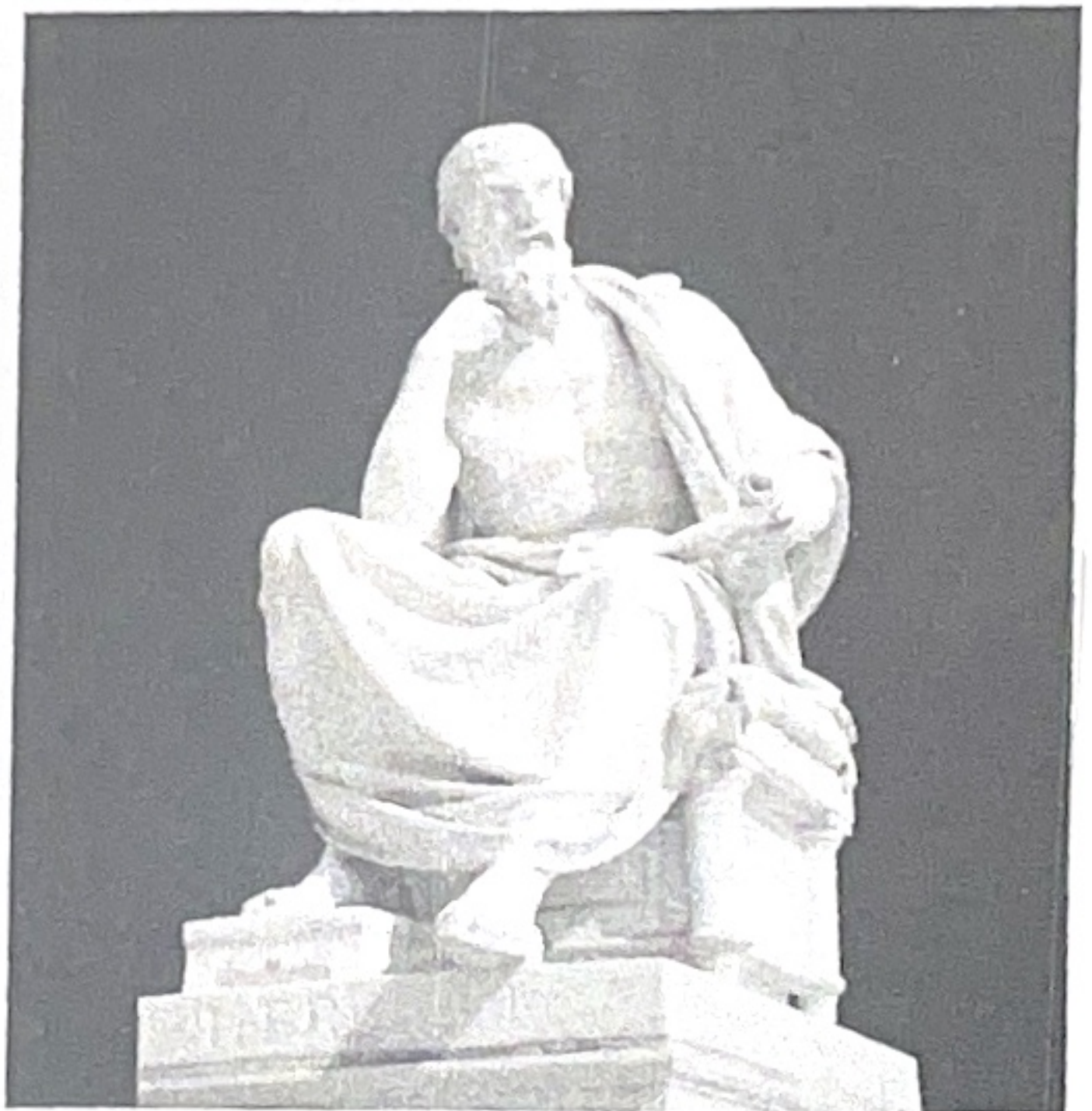
Herodotus was born in 484 BC in Halicarnassus (in Asia Minor). He was the first person yet discovered to begin comparing various historical sources in an effort to determine what actually happened. He would even perform his *Historias* for the Athenians, and he most likely died in Athens.

Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 1²⁷

These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due measure of glory, and further, to put on record what were the grounds for their feuds.

Plutarch was born 600 years after Herodotus, in AD 46 in Chaeronea near Delphi, the home of the famous Greek oracle. After studying in Athens, he was appointed deputy to the Roman governor of Greece. He served in Delphi as a priest of Apollo during the last several decades of his life. In the words of one biographer, “He lived through the reigns of Nero, Domitian, and Trajan, and, leaving the world as he did about AD 120, must have rejoiced at the accession of Hadrian to the imperial throne. His world had grown steadily better while he lived, and was now to enjoy its second golden age.”²⁸

He wrote dozens of biographies and essays about the morals and customs of many societies, including the Spartans. His best-known work is his *Parallel Lives*, in which twenty-three Greek heroes are compared with corresponding

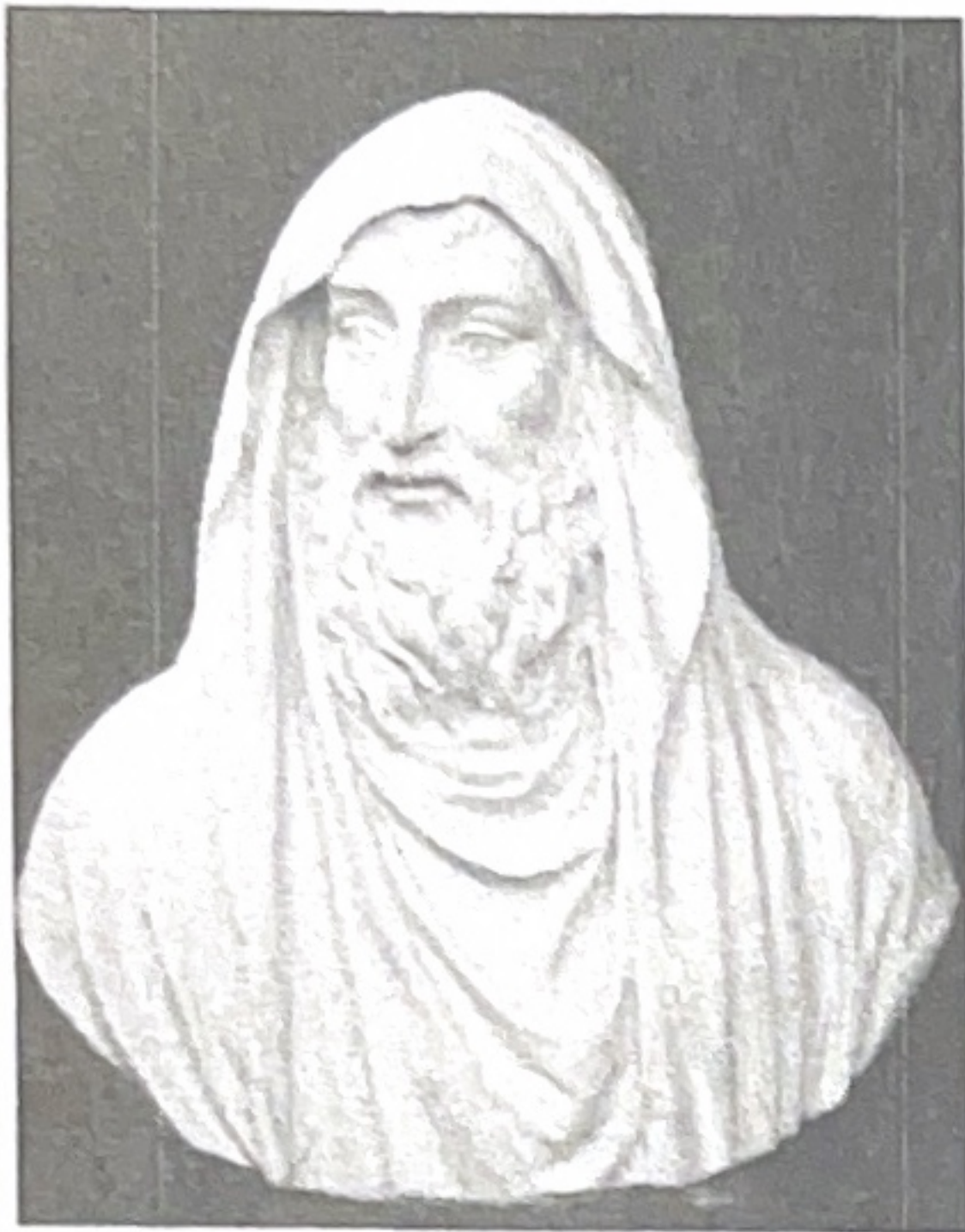


Herodotus

Romans, to draw out each character's strengths and weaknesses. His writings have been translated into many languages, and have had an enormous influence through the centuries and across cultures. For example, his *Lives* are the principal source for several of William Shakespeare's historical plays.

Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* ²⁹

[1.] It is the life of Alexander the King and the life of Caesar who overthrew Pompey that I write in this book. The multitude of their great deeds is so great that I will make no other preface than to ask my readers not to complain if I have chosen to epitomize the most famous parts of their stories, rather than to speak exhaustively of each one.



Plutarch

[2] For it is not *Histories* that I am writing, but *Lives*. The most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; no, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles.

[3] Thus, as painters are more precise in painting the lines and features of the face, where the character is seen, than they are in the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give more particular attention to the marks and indications of the souls of men. Through these I attempt to portray their lives, leaving weightier matters and great battles to others.

Developments in the Poleis

As mentioned earlier, the cities in Greece developed into independent city-states mainly because of the mountainous geography that divided them. This division had broad cultural implications. Though united by the spirit of Panhellenism, each polis developed its own governmental structure, time-keeping method, weights and measures, history, culture, and traditions. We learned what they had in common: a culture named "Hellenic." This should not distract us from their differences, in which many of them took great pride.

There were many significant "poleis" (plural of "polis," meaning city-state) in the Greek world. For example, Corinth was known for an expansive agora (or marketplace). Its unique pottery was traded all over the ancient world. Its name is familiar in part because of "Corinthian columns," an architectural element still used today.

Thebes was a neighbor of Athens known for its strong military. Athenian dramas criticizing aspects of Athenian life often used a Theban setting and Theban characters to communicate ideas more subtly.

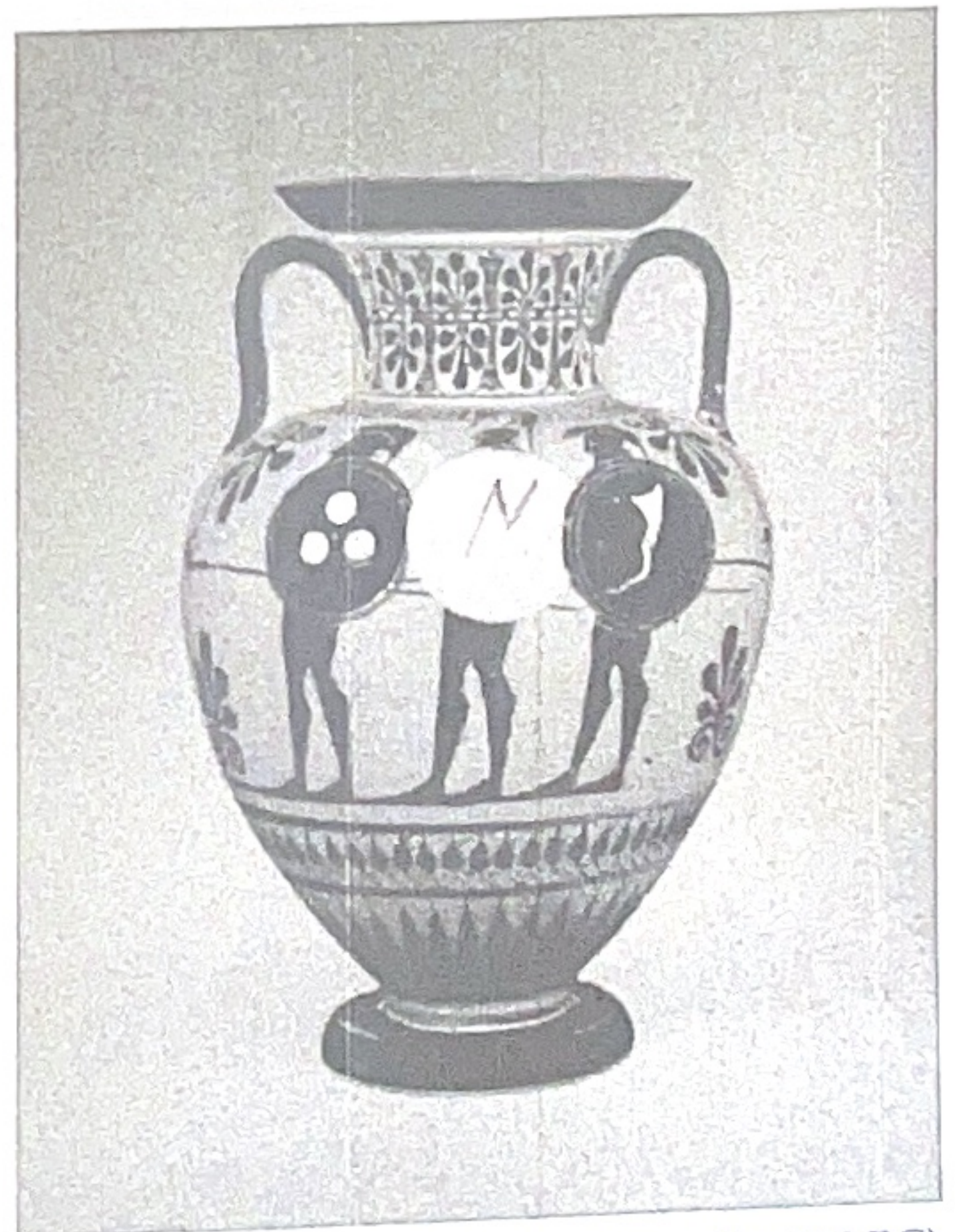
Of all the Greek poleis, Athens and Sparta have had the greatest influence by far on the modern world. This chapter will focus on these two city-states' political, military, and cultural developments leading up to the Classical Period (the 5th century BC).

HOPLITE WARFARE AND ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

During the 7th century BC, Athens and other city-states changed their military tactics significantly. Because horses had become scarce and expensive to maintain, the Greek military focused its tactics on "Hoplite warfare," from the Greek word "hoplon" (ὅπλον), meaning "shield." Foot soldiers equipped with bronze spears, swords, and armor fought in a very tight formation called a "phalanx." Each soldier carried a heavy wooden shield covered in a thick layer of bronze. A bronze-tipped spear pointed menacingly at the enemy. The hoplite soldiers were so close together in a phalanx that each shield covered its bearer and his neighbor.

This change in tactics had political implications. Even before the Dark Ages, Athens and other poleis had been governed by hereditary monarchies advised by a council of nobles (as described in the *Iliad*). By the 8th century BC, these duties became too numerous for one man. Monarchs disappeared completely. Nine "Archons" were now chosen by the "Assembly" of the wealthiest citizens in the polis. In Athens, former Archons would join the "Council of the Areopagus" to advise the new Archons.

Even though the Assembly of some citizens chose the Archons, this arrangement still left a significant amount of power concentrated in the hands of a very few individuals. The transition to hoplite warfare amplified this inequality. Previously, a working-class individual (called a "Thete") who joined the army might be allowed to participate in the Assembly, particularly if he distinguished himself in battle. Now only those who could afford the



Attic Black-Figure Neck Amphora (ca. 510 BC)

hoplite armor could join, and as a result, Thetes (and even some middle-class individuals) were excluded from the political process.

This tension grew much worse when the wealthy ruling class gave themselves the power to confiscate property and land, and even enslave a person in payment for debts. The poor, who could hardly support themselves to begin with, now saw their miniscule economic means disappear, with no recourse.

These trends occurred slightly differently in each polis, and each polis handled them in a different way.

Excerpts from Aristotle's *Politics*³⁰

Book 1

Every polis is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for humankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good...

The polis or political community... aims at a greater good than any other, at the highest good.

The distinction which is made between the king and the statesman is as follows: When the government is one person, the ruler is a king; when the citizens both rule and are ruled, he is called a statesman.

When several villages are united in a single complete community... the polis comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good *life*. And therefore, if the earlier forms of society are natural, so is the polis... Hence it is evident that the polis is a creation of nature, and that man is a political animal by nature.

The proof that the polis is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficient; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need to live in society because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a polis. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature.

Man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all; since armed injustice is the more dangerous. He is equipped at birth with arms, meant to be used by intelligence and virtue, but which he may use for the worst ends. Therefore, if he does not have virtue, he is the most unholy and the most savage of animals, and the most full of lust and gluttony. But justice is the bond of men in poleis, for the administration of justice... is the principle of order in political society.

Book Two

Our purpose is to consider what form of political community is best of all... Three alternatives are conceivable: The members of a polis must either have (1) all things or (2) nothing in common, or (3) some things in common and some not. That they should have nothing in common is clearly impossible...

We ought to consider not only the evils from which the citizens will be saved, but also the advantages they will lose [by joining a particular community].

Book Three

The true forms of government, therefore, are those in which the one, or the few, or the many, exercise their authority for the common good. If these forms of government exercise their authority for their own private good ... they are perversions. For the members of a polis, if they are truly citizens, ought to participate in its advantages.

Of forms of government in which one rules, the one which regards the common good is "kingship" or "royalty"; a government in which more than one but not many rule is called "aristocracy" (either because the rulers are the best men, or because they have at heart the best interests of the polis and of the citizens). When the citizens administer the polis for the common interest, the government is called by the generic name: a "constitution" [or "polity"].

Of the above-mentioned forms, the perversion of royalty is "tyranny"; the perversion of aristocracy is "oligarchy"; the perversion of constitutional government is "democracy." For tyranny is a kind of monarchy which is only concerned with the interest of the monarch; oligarchy is only concerned with the interest of the wealthy; democracy is only concerned with the interest of the needy: none of them pursue the common good of all.

Book Four

The best form of government is often unattainable, and therefore the true legislator and statesman ought to be acquainted, not only with (1) that which is theoretically the best, but also with (2) that which is best *in his circumstances*. [The statesman] should also consider (3) not only how a polis is originally formed but also how it may be longest preserved...

Lycurgus in Sparta

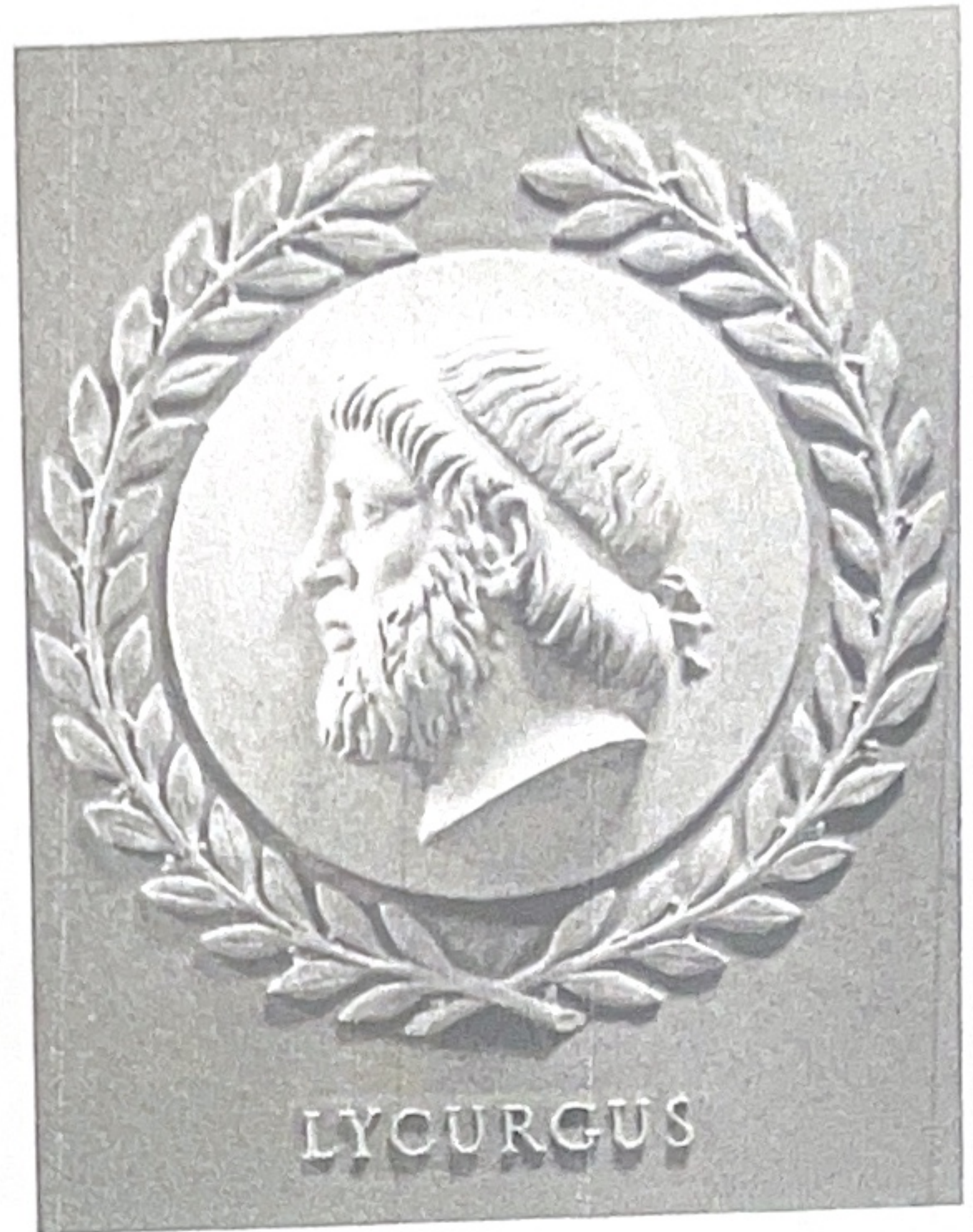
The Spartans had a rigidly-structured society. On top were the Spartan citizens, the highly trained hoplite warriors who organized their society around war-making. Military training was the core of their way of life. However, the citizens were outnumbered by the "Helots," conquered slaves who resided in and around Sparta and constantly threatened to revolt.

As families prospered, the population of Spartan citizens naturally increased. They dealt with their population growth in two ways: 1) by establishing a colony at Tarentum and 2) by conquering their neighbors in Messenia. The original territory of Laconia plus the new territory of Messenia was referred to collectively as "Lacedaemon."

From 640 to 620 BC, the Messenians and Helot commoners revolted, so the Spartans asked Lycurgus to institute a new constitution. The Spartan government before Lycurgus consisted of two kings, a council of aristocrats, and an assembly of armed citizens. The government of Lycurgus included:

- a) Two kings
- b) Five Ephors who defended public morality and could even arrest the king
- c) A council of 28 elders over sixty years of age, and
- d) An assembly of all citizens over thirty years of age.

To help defend against rising neighboring powers, Sparta forced city-states in the Peloponnesus to enter into a one hundred-year treaty. This organization was called the "Peloponnesian League."



THE AGOGE: TRAINING METHODS OF THE ANCIENT SPARTANS

Under Lycurgus, to further the military preparedness of his society, the following practices were undertaken by boys from the age of seven:

1. Boys were forced to sleep naked in the middle of winter, and were permitted only one layer of clothing during the day.
2. Boys were forbidden to wear shoes on long marches, to strengthen the soles of their feet.
3. Meager rations: boys were encouraged to supplement their diet by stealing extra food, though they were severely beaten if caught.
4. The scourge: boys were regularly whipped by their elders and taught to take pride in the degree of pain they could endure.
5. The cheese game: held annually in front of the altar of Orthia Artemis, Spartan boys had to run the gauntlet of older youths armed with sticks and whips, trying (while still conscious) to retrieve wheels of cheese.
6. Periodic killing sprees in the countryside: the victims were Helot slaves working the land. Each year "war" was declared on the Helots to keep them in line. The *krypteia* was also a rite of passage for a boy becoming a man. Each boy was given the task of murdering a Helot without being discovered.
7. Pitched battles: groups of boys were pitted against each other in unarmed combat.
8. "Grinding the tree": a number of boys formed a line, each pressing his hoplite shield against the boy in front of him, with as much force as possible. The boy at the front of the line was ground against a tree until it toppled: a process lasting several days and often with fatal results.
9. The "Oktonyktia" (or "eight nights"): 1,200 warriors would march in full pack and armor for the first four nights, eating only half rations and bivouacking during the day. They drilled almost continuously during the next four days and nights, eating no food for the first two days and no food or water for the last two.

Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* ³¹

[4.1] [*In forming a new government*], Lycurgus determined to avoid suspicion by traveling abroad. He came first to Crete. Here he studied the various forms of government and met their most distinguished men.

[4.3] From Crete, Lycurgus sailed to Asia to compare the Cretan civilization, which was simple and severe, with that of the Ionians, which was extravagant and luxurious. There he made his first acquaintance with the poems of Homer. He saw that the political and disciplinary lessons contained in them were worthy of no less attention than the incentives to pleasure and immoderation which they supplied, he eagerly copied and compiled them in order to take them home with him. These epics already had a certain reputation among the Greeks, and various people had certain portions of them; but Lycurgus was the very first to make them really known.

[4.5] The Egyptians think that Lycurgus visited them also, and that he admired their separation of the military from the other classes of society. They think that by removing manual laborers from participating in government, he made his polis refined and pure.

[5.1] The Lacedaemonians missed Lycurgus sorely. They felt that their kings had titles but were no better than their subjects, while he had a nature fit to lead, and a power to make men follow him. Even the kings hoped that in his presence their subjects would treat them with less arrogance. Upon returning, he at once undertook to revolutionize the civil society. He was convinced that a partial change of the laws would accomplish nothing. He must proceed as a physician would with a patient who was full of all sorts of diseases; he must use strong drugs and purges, and introduce a new and different regimen. Full of this determination, he first made a journey to Delphi. He returned with that famous response in which

the Pythian priestess addressed him as "beloved of the gods, and rather god than man," and said that the god had granted his prayer for good laws, and promised him a constitution which should be the best in the world.

[5.6] Among the many innovations which Lycurgus made, the most important was his institution of a senate, or Council of Elders. As Plato says, by being blended with the overly intense rule of the kings, and by having an equal vote with them in matters of the highest importance, he brought order into the governance of the polis. Before this the civil polity



The Last Spartan by Gaetano Trentanove

was veering and unsteady, inclining at one time to follow the kings towards tyranny, and at another time to follow the multitude towards democracy. But now, by making the power of the senate a sort of ballast for the ship of state and putting her on a steady keel, it achieved the safest and the most orderly arrangement. According to Aristotle, the number of senators was fixed at twenty-eight because, two of the thirty original associates of Lycurgus abandoned the enterprise from lack of courage. In my own opinion, Lycurgus made the senators of just that number in order that the total might be thirty when the two kings were added to the twenty-eight.

[6.1] So eager was Lycurgus for the establishment of this form of government that he obtained an oracle from Delphi which they call a "*rhētra*." And this is the way it runs:

"When thou hast built a temple to Zeus Syllanius and Athena Syllania, divide the people into 'phylai' ["clans"] and into 'obai' ["brotherhoods"], and establish a senate of thirty members, including the 'archagetai' [kings], then from time to time 'appellazein' [gather everyone] between Babyca and Cnacion, and there introduce and strike down laws; but the people must have the deciding voice and the power."^a

[6.3] Lycurgus built neither halls nor any other kind of building for the assemblies. For by such things Lycurgus thought good counsel was discouraged, since the serious purposes of an assembly were rendered foolish, as they gazed upon statues and paintings, extravagantly decorated roofs of council halls. The multitude was not permitted to make a motion, but the motion laid before them by the senators and kings could be accepted or rejected. When the people perverted the sense of the proposals, Kings Polydorus and Theopompus inserted this clause into the *rhētra*: "But if the people should adopt a distorted motion, the senators and kings shall have power of adjournment"; that is, could dismiss outright and dissolve the session since it was acting contrary to the best interests of the polis. And they were able to persuade the city that Apollo authorized this, as Tyrtaeus reminds us in these verses:

[6.4] Phoebus Apollo's mandate was the one they brought from Delphi,
Voicing the will of the god, and his words were then fulfilled:
Sway in the council and honors divine belong to the princes
Under whose care has been set Sparta's city of charm;
Second to them are the elders, and next come the men of the people
Duly confirming by vote *unperverted* decrees.

[7.1] Lycurgus's successors used the five ephors as a curb on the oligarchs who controlled the government. When king Theopompus was insulted for giving away his power, he replied: "No, my power will be greater, since it will last longer."

a "Appellazein" is a reference to Apollo, the Pythian god, who was the source and author of the polity.



Lycurgus Demonstrates the Benefits of Education by Cesar Boetius van Everdingen

In fact, the Spartan kings did not suffer like those of the Messenians and Argives who refused to share any of their power with the people. And this brings into the clearest light the wisdom and foresight of Lycurgus.

[8.1] A second, and a very bold political measure of Lycurgus, is his redistribution of the land. For there was a dreadful inequality in this regard, the city was heavily burdened with penniless and helpless people, and wealth was wholly concentrated in the hands of a few. He persuaded his fellow citizens to divide up the land anew, to share equally the means of production, seeking preeminence through virtue alone. He assured them there was no difference or inequality between men other than blame for vile actions and praise for good ones.

[8.3] To this end, he evenly distributed the Laconian land [outside of Sparta] to thirty thousand "perioikoi," free men who were not Spartan citizens. The city of Sparta was distributed evenly to nine thousand citizens, genuine Spartans.

[8.4] Lycurgus thought that a lot of this size would be sufficient for them, since they needed sustenance enough to promote vigor and health of body, and nothing else. Some time afterwards, as he traveled across the land just after the harvest, and saw the heaps of grain standing parallel and equal to one another, he smiled, and said: "All Laconia looks like a family estate newly divided among many brothers."

[9.1] Next, he withdrew all gold and silver money from currency, and ordained the use of iron money only. Just ten minas' worth of iron required a large store-room in the house, and a yoke of cattle to transport it. In this way, many vices fled from Lacedaemon. For who would steal, or receive a bribe, or rob, or plunder that which could neither be concealed, nor possessed to a satisfactory amount, nor usefully divided into smaller pieces?

[9.3] Next, he banished unnecessary endeavors. The iron money could not be carried to other places in Greece, nor did it have any value there. No merchants brought freight into their harbors; no rhetoric teacher set foot on Laconian soil, no wandering soothsayer, no keeper of harlots, no gold- or silversmith. Luxury died away of itself, and men of large possessions had no advantage over the poor, because their wealth could not be publicly displayed but had to be stored up at home. Necessary utensils such as bedsteads, chairs, and tables were most excellently made. The Laconian "kothon," or drinking-cup, was known to be very useful among soldiers in active service. For its color concealed the disagreeable appearance of the water which they were often compelled to drink, and its curving lips caught the muddy sediment. For all this they had to thank their lawgiver, since their artisans were now freed from useless tasks.

[10.1] With a view to attack luxury still more, he introduced "common messes," so that they might eat common and specified foods with one another in companies. They would no longer eat their meals at home reclining on costly couches at costly tables, delivering themselves into the hands of servants and cooks to be fattened in the dark, like hungry animals. Such luxury ruined not only their characters but also their bodies, by surrendering them to every desire, long naps, hot baths, abundant rest, etc. This was surely a great achievement to make wealth "an object of no desire," as Theophrastus says, and even "unwealth," through these common messes. The rich could not even dine beforehand at home, for the rest kept careful watch of him who did not eat and drink with them, and reviled him as a weakling, one too frail for the common diet.

[11.1] Above all, because of the common messes, the wealthy citizens were furious with Lycurgus... One young man, Alcander, put out one of his eyes. Lycurgus showed the people his face besmeared with blood and his eye destroyed. The people were so filled with shame and sorrow at the sight, that they placed Alcander in his hands. He took Alcander into the house with him, where he did the youth no harm by word or deed, but ordered him to minister to his wants.

The youth, who was of a noble disposition, did as he was commanded. By sharing daily life with Lycurgus, he came to know the gentleness of the man, the calmness of his spirit, the rigid simplicity of his habits, and his tireless drive. He thus became a devoted follower of Lycurgus, and told his friends that the man was the mildest and gentlest of them all. Instead of a wild and impetuous youth, he became a well-mannered and prudent man. Lycurgus, moreover, in memory of his misfortune, built a temple to Athena Optilitis, from "optilus,"

the local Doric word for eye... The Spartan practice of carrying staves into their assemblies was abandoned after this unfortunate accident.

[12.1] As for the public messes, the Cretans call them "andreia," but the Lacedaemonians, "phiditia," either because they are conducive to *friendship* ("phiditia" being equivalent to "philitia"); or because they accustom men to simplicity and *thrift*, for which their word is "pheido."

[12.2] At the common mess, the people dined in companies of about fifteen. Each month the mess-mates contributed a bushel of barley-meal, eight gallons of wine, five pounds of cheese, two and a half pounds of figs, and a very small sum of money for such delicacies as meat and fish.

[12.3] For a long time this custom of eating at common mess-tables was rigidly observed. For instance, when King Agis returned home victorious over the Athenians, he wished to dine at home with his wife. The polemarchs [*military leaders*] refused to send food to him; and when on the following day his anger led him to omit the customary sacrifice, they laid a fine upon him.

[12.4] Boys also used to come to these public messes as schools of sobriety. They would listen to political discussions and see instructive models of virtuous living. They also became accustomed to endure taunting without displeasure. Indeed, it seems to have been especially characteristic of a Spartan to endure taunting, though if anyone could not bear it, he had only to ask and the jester ceased. As each one came in, the eldest of the company pointed to the door and said to him, "Through that door no word goes outside."

[12.5] A candidate for membership in one of these messes underwent the following ordeal. Each of the mess-mates took in his hand a bit of soft bread. When a servant passed by with a bowl on his head, they cast the bread in without a word, like a ballot, leaving it just as it was if they approved the candidate, or squeezing it tight beforehand if they disapproved. Thus, the flattened piece of bread had the force of a negative ballot. If only one flattened piece of bread was in the bowl, the candidate was not admitted to the mess, since they wish all its members to get along.

[12.7] After drinking moderately, they go off home without a torch; for they are not allowed to walk with a light on any other occasion, to accustom themselves to marching boldly and without fear in the darkness of night.

[13.1] Lycurgus did not write down a single law; indeed, one of the so-called "rhetras" forbids it. He thought that if the most important and binding principles which contribute to the prosperity and virtue of a city were implanted in the habits and training of its citizens, they would remain unchanged and secure.

[13.3] One of his rhetras ordained that every house should have its roof fashioned by the axe and its doors by the saw, and no other tools. [By keeping the house simple, the furniture would remain simple as well.] Thus, Leotychides the Elder,



Laconian Black-Figure Kylix

when he dined in Corinth and saw the roof adorned with costly paneling, asked his host if trees grew square in that country.

[13.5] A third *rhētra* of Lycurgus forbids making frequent military expeditions against the same enemy. [This prevents the enemy from becoming experienced in battle, and eventually equaling Sparta.] Thus, when Antalcidas saw King Agesilaus wounded in one of his frequent encounters with the Thebans, Antalcidas said, "This is a fine tuition-fee you are getting from the Thebans for teaching them how to fight."

[13.6] Such rules for daily life were called "*rhētras*" by Lycurgus, implying that they came from the god as oracles.

[14.1] In the matter of education, which he regarded as the greatest and noblest task of the lawgiver, he began at the very source, by carefully regulating marriages and births. He could not overcome the great license and power which the women enjoyed on account of the many military expeditions in which their husbands were engaged. The men were obliged to leave their wives in sole control at home, and for this reason gave them the title of Mistress and paid them great deference.

[16.1] Offspring were not reared at the will of the father, but were carried by him to a place called Lesche, where the elders of the tribes officially examined the infant. If the child was well-built and sturdy, they ordered the father to rear it and assigned it one of the nine thousand lots of land. If it was ill-born and deformed, they sent it to the so-called Apothetae, a chasm-like place at the foot of Mount Taygetus, reasoning that a life which nature had not equipped for health and strength at the beginning was of no advantage to itself or the polis. On the same principle, the women used to bathe their new-born babes not with water, but with wine. It is said that epileptic and sickly infants are thrown into convulsions by the strong wine and lose their senses, while the healthy ones are tempered by it like steel. Their nurses reared infants without swaddling-bands, leaving their limbs free to develop. They taught children to be contented, not dainty about their food, nor fearful of the dark, nor afraid to be left alone, nor given to whimpering. This is the reason why foreigners sometimes brought Spartan nurses for their children. Amycla, for instance, the nurse of the Athenian Alcibiades, is said to have been a Spartan.



Croesus Showing Solon his Treasures by Frans Francken the Younger