

massive, and in the following spring, 431, Sparta and Athens and their respective allies embarked on what was to prove a generation-long conflict of increasingly desperate and desolating character. Perhaps the underlying cause was indeed the growth of Athenian power, but it was the Spartans who started the war.

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WOMEN AND RELIGION

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Females are, and always have been, more or less half the human race, but they have usually received nothing like half the due care and attention in historical sources and historical accounts that their roles and functions in society and history really merit and require. One great exception to that rule – there are always exceptions – was the women of ancient Sparta. So far from being silent or silenced, they had a lot to say for themselves, and there are even sayings attributed to them by name in ancient texts. Let us not forget the truly laconic rejoinder allegedly made by Gorgo, daughter and wife of Spartan kings, to the non-Spartan woman who, marvelling at the Spartan women's apparent control over their men, asked her how come only Spartan women ruled their men: 'Because we are the only women who give birth to (real) men!' What gave that no doubt apocryphal reply its special charge was that even the most sober and acute outside observers of the Spartan scene could seriously believe in the literal factual truth of women's power, or rather domination, in Sparta.

One of the acutest and most sober of such observers was Aristotle. He came originally from an elite family in northern Greece (his father was court physician to King Amyntas III of Macedon, father of Philip

II), but he spent most of his adult life at Athens. Here he was first the star pupil of his day at Plato's Academy, where he arrived at the age of seventeen in 367, some twenty years after its foundation; and then the founder of his own school of higher learning, the Lyceum, which he opened in the mid-330s. Between them, he and his pupils compiled, among much else, accounts of the laws and main constitutional developments of 158 political entities, mostly Greek cities, including of course Sparta. These in turn informed the most brilliant work of political analysis that has come down to us from the ancient world, Aristotle's *Politics* or 'Matters Concerning the *Polis*'. In the second book of that work he did a pretty devastating job of pointing out all the major weaknesses, as he saw them, of Spartan society and Sparta's political system.

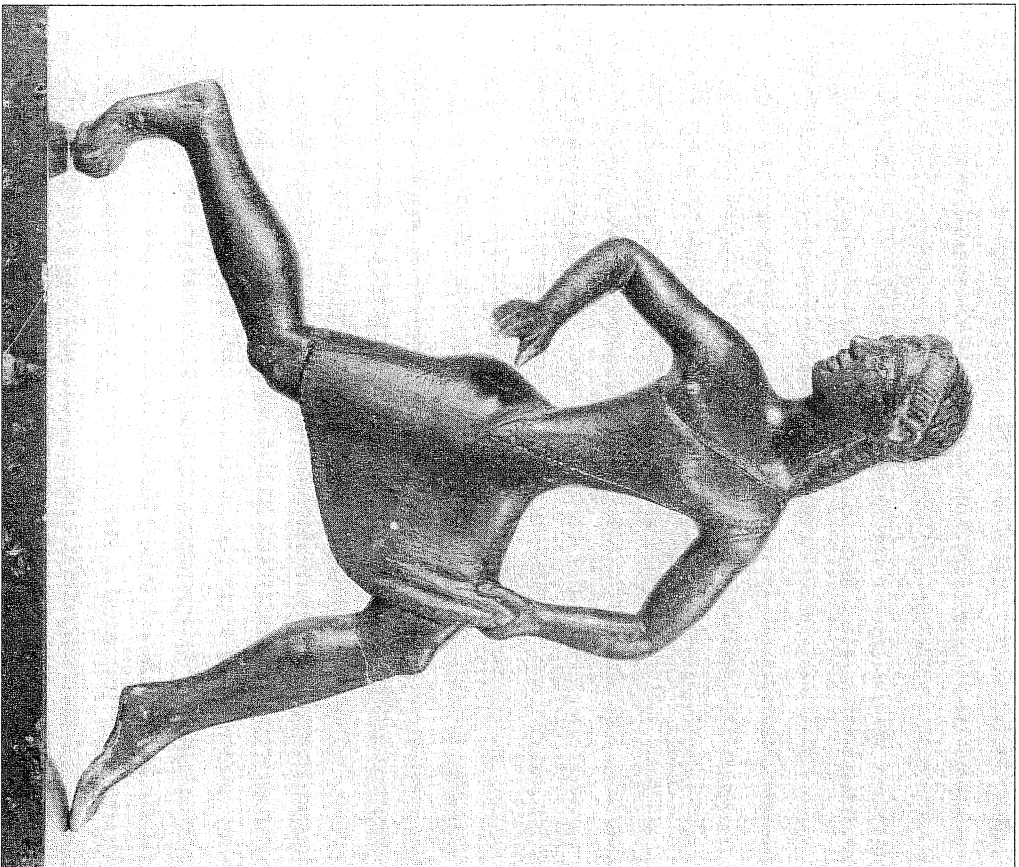
In a sense, this wasn't too difficult to do, since by the time the work was being composed, in the 330s and 320s, Sparta had long since ceased to be a major Greek power, though it remained something of an icon to those who for political or philosophical reasons were unhappy with their own cities' social or political arrangements, and still looked to Sparta to provide some kind of ideal alternative. My present interest in the relevant passage of the *Politics* stems from the fact that Aristotle here explicitly subscribes to the view that in Sparta the women ruled the men, and that this gynocracy (rule of women) was, for him, a key part of the explanation for Sparta's political – and moral – failure. How could that possibly have been right?

The basis for Aristotle's view was twofold, one part intellect, one – almost equal – part sheer prejudice. Consider the prejudice first. Aristotle fully shared the absolutely standard Greek male (chauvinist) view of women's inferiority to men, but to that conventional attitude he added a powerful dose of Aristotelian 'science'. He thought he could prove scientifically that women's bodies and women's minds ('souls', as he called them) were categorically, naturally, that is unalterably, inferior to men's. Women were, in other words, the second sex in the fullest sense: physically, they were deformed males, and intellectually they

lacked the capacity to make their reasoning powers, such as they were, authoritative. This 'theory' applied generically to all women, of course, not only Greek women, and it applied generally to all women, not only to some. In these respects Aristotle went beyond the views of his master, Plato, who was prepared to concede that some very few women might be the intellectual equals and genuine partners of the elite philosopher-rulers of his ideal state.

So, how come Spartan women, despite these inherent feminine defects, were able to, had got themselves in a position to, rule their menfolk? This would surely be, as Aristotle of all people ought to have realized, a contradiction or, at best, a paradox. Yet Aristotle firmly believed it, so firmly that he spent a good deal of time trying to figure it out. In the end, he came up with a sort of historical explanation on the following lines. The besetting sin of Spartan women was, for Aristotle, the characteristic female vice of lack of self-discipline and self-control. The way he accounted for that was by supposing that, whereas the Spartan men had become disciplined by submitting themselves voluntarily to the iron laws of Lycurgus and the consequent Lycurgan regimen, the women had refused to submit to Lycurgus and no one since then had been able to control them, with the result that they wallowed in every sort of luxury and self-indulgence, aided and abetted by their complaisant, uxorious husbands. However, this seems a little hard to accept as a properly historical explanation. For in fact Spartan girls too, even if they did not live in communal barracks from the age of seven like their brothers, did undergo some form of public educational instruction, with tellingly unusual results by general Greek standards of womanly behaviour, as we shall see.

It is easier, on the other hand, to see what it was about the Spartan women's status and entitlements that should have led Aristotle to imagine Sparta to have been a gynocracy. Two socio-legal facts above all – on top of their formal education – differentiated them from women in all other Greek states. First, they were entitled to own and manage property, including landed property, in their own right,



This sprightly figurine of a young female in athletic pose originally decorated the rim of a large bronze vessel (somewhat like that in Ill. p. 97). Found at Pristend in Albania, it illustrates the wide distribution achieved by bronze and other artefacts manufactured in Laconia in the sixth century. The athlete's off-the-shoulder shift was a Spartan peculiarity, appropriate for the athletic exercise that we know was part of a Spartan girl's public education. Every four years at Olympia Greek women, including Spartans, raced in honour of Hera. Alternatively, the figure is being depicted in the act of dancing, a form of ritual activity for which Spartan girls and women were widely celebrated.

probably without the necessary legal intervention of a male guardian. Heiresses in Sparta – that is, daughters without legitimate brothers of the same father – were called *patrouchoi*, which means literally 'holders of the patrimony', whereas in Athens they were called *epikleroi*, which means 'on (i.e., going with) the *klêros* (allotment, lot, portion)'. Athenian *epikleroi*, that is, served merely as a vehicle for transmitting the paternal inheritance to the next male heir and owner, that is to their oldest son, their father's grandson, whereas Spartan *patrouchoi* inherited in their own right. Such heiresses in Sparta were highly prized commodities, much sought after by eligible Spartan men, since they could be married to any Spartan, not only to the nearest male kin on the father's side.

The second point of sociological differentiation was that Spartan wives might have sex with a man other than their husband without falling afoul of any adultery laws – because in Sparta, unlike in the rest of Greece, there apparently were no such laws. Indeed, their husband might actually 'lend' them to another man for the specific purpose of procreating legitimate offspring – for that other man's household and lineage. As for the wives in these cases, they are said to have welcomed such an arrangement, so Xenophon assures us in his fourth-century essay on Spartan society and its mores, since it gave them the chance to manage more than one household. This reminds us that all Spartan wives, like only the wives of rich men elsewhere in Greece, were freed by servile (Helot) labour from domestic drudgery. They did not have to prepare and cook food, make clothes or do the housework: Helot women did all that for them. Possibly they did not even breastfeed their own infants; at any rate Spartan nurses, presumably Helot women, had a high reputation outside Sparta, so high that Alcibiades of Athens, for example, was reared by such a Spartan Helot nurse.

In these circumstances it was easy to twist the fact of Spartan women's ownership of land and other property, and their apparently open and easy sexual congress with men other than their husbands, into a picture of immoral depravity, of a world turned upside down. When

the female rules the male' – so began a Delphic oracle, meaning when everything is at sixes and sevens and nothing is right with the world. 'In Sparta the female rules the male' – so believed many non-Spartan men, including Aristotle, who wrote in that same Book II of the *Politics* that:

*at the time of the Spartans' domination [archê] many things were accomplished by the women.*¹

What he seems to have been claiming is that, at any rate in the early fourth century, Spartan women did not only control their men within the confines of the household, but also somehow exercised a decisive influence over affairs of state. Yet the only actual instance of female intervention in the public sphere during the period that he chooses to give, seems to tell in the exact opposite direction. When in 370/69 the Spartan women saw a mighty Thebes-led army of invasion actually on Spartan home territory and devastating land within sight of Sparta itself, the women allegedly caused more consternation and uproar even than the enemy, through their manically panicky reaction. Again, that looks uncomfortably like sheer male prejudice, since courage in war was deemed to be a peculiarly masculine quality and virtue. Also, the women's panic would in any case have been wholly understandable, since seeing Spartan land, including land that they themselves owned, destroyed in front of their very eyes was hardly something they had been schooled for by the national curriculum.

In short, what Aristotle and other conventionally minded non-Spartan men feared subconsciously and perhaps sometimes consciously was feminine power. One expression of that Greek male fear was the invention of the mythical race of Amazons, but at least the Amazons had the decency to live apart from men, whereas the Spartan viragos apparently exercised their power from within the heart of the community. In the grip of such fear, the male sources often distorted the facts they had access to, usually only at second-hand at best, about Spartan women. Let us instead try to redress the balance and paint a picture of what life, or

rather a lifecycle, might have been like for the average Spartan girl and woman, from the womb to the tomb.

Spartan laws as well as social mores privileged reproduction, 'children-making' (*teknopoia*). Apart from the standard desire of individual Spartans to have a son and heir to continue the family line, there was an overwhelming pressure for the state to maintain the strength of the adult male Spartan citizen community, a community of warriors for defence against the enemy within, the Helots, as much as attack on enemies without. Hence a number of features of Spartan society that would have struck other Greeks as distinctly odd, such as public penalties, including ritual humiliation by women at a religious festival, imposed upon adult men for late marriage, and, conversely, public benefits for fathers of three or more sons; the exemption of women who died in childbirth from the general prohibition against tombstones bearing the names of men or women; and, as we have seen, the absence of laws against adultery.

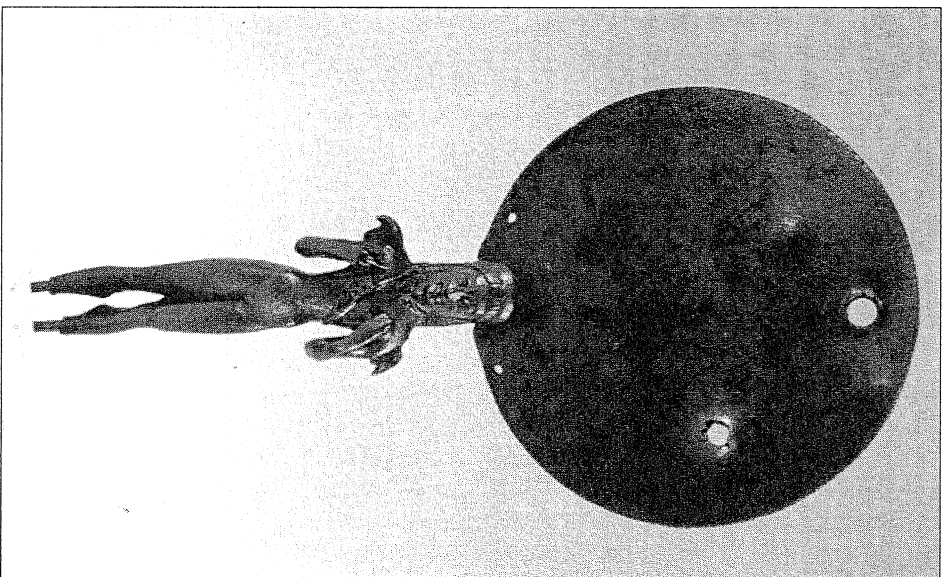
However, although adultery was not punished or even legally recognized, marriage was nevertheless considered a prerequisite for legitimacy of offspring, and only marriage between two Spartans was legally acceptable. Courting happened in the usual Greek way; that is, fathers of noble girls were approached by interested potential husbands or their representatives. Heiresses whose fathers had failed to make provision for their marriage before they died were supposed to have their interests looked after by the kings, a sure sign of their crucial social importance. The actual marriage ceremony, however, was not at all normal by common Greek standards.

In the first place, it began with a rape – normally a purely symbolic and ritualized rape, no doubt, but the symbolism in itself was revealing of the potential for masculine violence and violation. In one famous case, we heard of a future Spartan king, Demaratus, who got his rape in first, as it were, by carrying off a girl already betrothed to another man, his distant cousin and future replacement as king, Leotychidas (see p. 103). Next, after the bride had been seized and somehow conveyed to the

marital home of the husband, she was prepared by her female bridal attendant to receive her husband on the wedding-night. Preparation began with the shaving of the bride's head; thereafter as a married woman she had to keep it close cropped, and perhaps also was obliged to wear a veil in public. She was then clothed in a simple shift fastened by a belt, which the husband would unfasten before deflowering her. If the husband was under thirty when he married, as he perhaps normally would be, he was required still to live in barracks under full military discipline and could visit his wife only by sneaking away at night under cover of darkness. It was said that a Spartan husband might father several children before he saw his wife in daylight!

The ideal outcome of marital sex in Sparta was (to use the language of Mario Puzo's *Godfather*) a masculine child. This ideal was based partly on the traditional peasant patriarchal view of the superiority of the male and the desire of the father to reproduce himself as faithfully as possible, but it was also a tribute to the overriding military imperative in the peculiar conditions of ancient Spartan society. In a later age, the inhabitants of the Mani (the central southern prong of the Peloponnese) would refer to their sons as 'guns' for the same reason, so that male Maniotes were literally sons of a gun. Elsewhere in ancient Greece there are reasons for suspecting a quite high rate of female infanticide, but it is not possible to generalize that expectation to Sparta automatically. We do know, at any rate, of one very ill-favoured girl baby who was reared – though we hear of her because she grew to be extremely beautiful and eventually became the mother of King Demaratus. Her parents will not have been odd, on the other hand, in praying fervently to Helen that their daughter should grow up to be as beautiful as she.

Unlike their brothers, as we have noted, Spartan girls did not go to boarding school from the age of seven. They were educated, rather, at home, by their mothers and domestic Helots, but by no means exclusively so. For uniquely in Greece, they too experienced some sort of public educational programme, which – like that of the boys – focused heavily on the physical dimension. They ran, they jumped, they threw,



Spartan women had a lot to live up to in the awesome standard of physical beauty set by Helen. A series of fine Laconian-made bronze mirrors of the sixth century, found outside Laconia as well as inside (as here), suggests that they paid considerable attention to their looks. Such mirrors were typically dedicated in sanctuaries as offerings to a female divinity. One exceptional feature of the series is that some of the women were depicted completely naked, as Spartan females actually appeared in public in real life, whereas everywhere else in Greece it was the norm for respectable women at this period to be shown in art fully clothed (and seen in public as little as practically feasible).

and they wrestled, allegedly naked and with the boys, but that may well be more non-Spartan male fantasy than Spartan actuality. They also sang and danced, in distinctive and competitive ways. Dance competitions for girls are attested elsewhere in Greece too, but the Spartans cleverly turned girls' dancing to political ends. Selected girls, for example, were sent to dance for Artemis in Caryae, a Perioecic town on Sparta's north-eastern border.

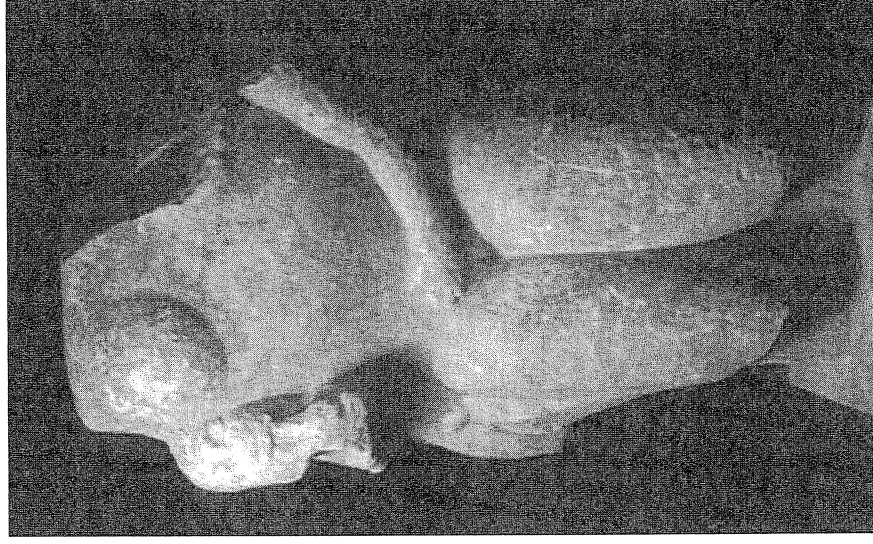
At home in Sparta, competitive girls' choruses led to the invention of a new genre of Greek poetry, the *partheneion* or maiden-song. Its inventor was Alcman (c. 600 BC), a poet with deep lyric sensitivities and an unusually wide range of geographical reference (his mentions of Lydia prompted the ill-informed guess that he had been born in Sardis). The longest *partheneion* fragment we have by Alcman was found in Egypt written on papyrus. In this extract, the singers compete in singing the praises of their leaders, Hagesichora (which means simply 'chorus-leader') and Agido (a name suggesting a female member of the royal family of the Agiads):

*Our purple finery is not
the treasure that defends us,
no coiled snake-bangle of solid gold,
nor Lydian headband splendid upon girls
with big dark eyes,
nor Nanno's hair, no, nor nymphlike Areta,
nor Thulacis, nor Clesithera...
No, it's Hagesichora –
she is my heart's desire.
For her beauty of ankles is not here in the dance:
she bides by Agido, commends
our ceremonial.²*

Presumably such a song as this was sung originally at some religious festival, in honour of a specific goddess; though the precise identity of the goddess in question here remains uncertain, she is most likely to have been some version of Artemis, perhaps the local variant called Orthia, since *parthenoi* were virgins on the threshold of marriage, and Artemis was the goddess who oversaw the crucial transition from girlhood and virginity to marriage and motherhood. After marriage, a *parthenos* became first a *numpbè* ('bride'), then a *gunè*. *Gunè* may be translated 'wife', but, like French *femme*, it also meant 'woman': the

point was that every Spartan girl was expected to become a wife – and mother. Wifehood and motherhood were every Greek female's social as well as anatomical destiny – and nowhere was that emphasized more than in Sparta. The divine recipient of worship in connection with pregnancy and childbirth was Eileithyia, closely associated in Sparta as elsewhere with Artemis (Orthia).

So why the public educational cycle with its emphasis on the physical? There were probably two main reasons for it. One was pragmatic and secular: it was thought that the fittest mothers were, well, the fittest mothers – in other words, that physical fitness conduced directly to eugenic fitness. The other main reason was



In the sanctuary of Orthia, besides dedications to Orthia herself, have been found dedications to the local version of Eileithyia, a Greek divinity of childbirth. It is probably she who is depicted here, in the squatting childbirth position, accompanied on either side by two fertility spirits. Her left hand draws attention to the birth canal. For Spartan women, reproduction was a necessary not an option, and their education was geared to producing maximum eugenic fitness.

sociological and symbolic: Spartan females were not regarded as categorically inferior in the way that male outsiders such as Aristotle would ideally have wished. Young girls were given comparable food rations to those of the boys, adolescent girls went through a process of public education and socialization that imbued them with the society's ideals, to the realization of which their adult behaviour was absolutely crucial, and women could inherit, own and manage property in their own right. It is even possible that they had some say in their father's or guardian's choice of marriage partner, as they certainly did in the running of their home – or homes.

In many societies, women play a key religious role. The women of Sparta were no exception, but Sparta as a society was an exception in terms of Greek religious practice and attitudes, in several ways. The Spartans had the reputation for being unusually pious, even by ancient Greek standards, and they worked hard at maintaining that reputation. They were what we – or an ancient Athenian even – might call monumentally superstitious. Thus they were said, twice, by Herodotus to honour the things of the gods more highly than the things of men: since that was true of all Greeks, what he meant was that the Spartans took their piety and religious devotion to exceptional heights and lengths. He was prompted to this repeated observation by the fact that Sparta failed to turn up at all for the Battle of Marathon in 490, because the phase of the moon was deemed inauspicious, and did not send a full force to Thermopylae in 480, ostensibly because they were celebrating the Carneia festival.

Again, when Xenophon described the Spartans as 'craftsmen of war', he was referring specifically to military manifestations of their religious zeal, such as the animal sacrifices performed on crossing a river-frontier or even on the battlefield as battle was about to be joined. The Spartans were particularly keen on such military divination. If the signs (of a sacrificial animal's entrails) were not 'right', then even an imperatively necessary military action might be delayed, aborted, or avoided altogether. Xenophon records one Spartan com-

mander as taking the omens no fewer than four times before the signs came out 'right'.

In addition to their exceptional piety or religiosity, the profile of the Spartans' religious observance was significantly skewed in comparison to what would have been considered normal practice elsewhere, in two key respects above all. Spartan women, like women elsewhere in Greece, played a leading role in Spartan public and private religion or quasi-religious manifestations. However, there were, apparently, no citizen women-only festivals at Sparta, not even the Thesmophoria in honour of Demeter, the fertility-giving earth mother goddess. Although Demeter did have her own shrine, an Eleusinion, on Spartan territory, it was not located in the town of Sparta itself, nor yet in Amyclae, but a notable distance further south. The nearest local equivalent to the Thesmophoria perhaps was the Tithenidia, a festival celebrating the nursing and nurturing of infants, but this was not a festival confined to Spartan women. A possible explanation for this de-emphasis on Demeter worship in Sparta was that the fertility of crops and animals was in the hands, not of Spartans, but of Helots. A similar explanation could be advanced for the second obtrusive religious abnormality, the curious lack of prominence of Dionysiac worship in Sparta – a staple of religious expression elsewhere in Greece, for both men and women. Again, this absence was presumably somehow connected to the fact that the fruit of the grapevine was produced by Helot labour.

Yet, as we have seen, young Spartan girls on the threshold of marriage sang and danced in competitive choruses, and as adult married women sang songs of scorn around an altar to shame reluctant Spartan bachelors into obeying the laws and taking a bride. The women seem also to have occupied an especially important place in the annual Hyacinthia festival in honour of Apollo and Hyacinthus. Xenophon in his biography of King Agesilaus II says that Agesilaus made a point of sending his daughters to the festival, which was celebrated at Amyclae several kilometres south of Sparta, in the usual public carriage used by

the daughters of ordinary citizens, in order to minimize the social distance between his family and the rest of the citizens. The importance of making such a gesture at this major religious festival is the underlying message.

It was not, however, for their piety that Spartan women were best known outside Sparta. Apart from their shameful – or rather shameless – sexuality, what most transfixed outsiders' attention was the fact that they did not perform the absolutely standard Greek female role of weeping and wailing following a death in the family. In 371, in circumstances we shall describe in a later chapter, Sparta finally suffered a defeat in a pitched battle, a catastrophic defeat, at Leuctra in Boeotia. This is how Xenophon, who may actually have been present, reported the way that the Spartans back home reacted to the news:

It was on the last day of the Gymnopaediae festival that the messenger sent to report the catastrophe arrived in Sparta.

The men's chorus was in the theatre at the time. When the Ephors heard what had happened, they were deeply grieved, as indeed they were bound to be. Yet instead of closing the performance, they allowed the chorus to continue to the end.

When they gave the names of all the dead to the respective relatives, they instructed the women to bear their suffering in silence and to stifle any cries of lamentation. On the following day you could see those women whose relatives had been killed going about looking bright and cheerful, whereas those whose relatives had been reported as still alive were not much in evidence, and those few who were out and about were looking gloomy and sorry for themselves.³

In other words, they did not weep and keen and beat their breasts in lamentation, they did not put on sackcloth and ashes, and they did not enter into a period of mourning, retreating to the innermost recesses of their houses. On the contrary. The show must go on. This is how

Spartan women ought to behave, and presumably had behaved, without needing to be told, for many years, possibly even centuries, before that.

The inconsistency, or contradiction, between Xenophon's picture here of Spartan women's behaviour and Aristotle's negative picture of their non-conformity need not be laboured. It is even tempting to follow the novelist Steven Pressfield in applying the Xenophontic line to the situation at the time of Thermopylae in 480. It is Pressfield's entirely original – and unfortunately entirely unsupported – notion that one of the major considerations guiding the choice of Leonidas' special bodyguard of 300 was the known character of their wives. Those men who were selected were those whose wives could be counted on to not just grin and bear the inevitable death of their husband but laugh and make a happy song and dance about it.

Let us conclude this chapter with the paradigmatic example of an individual, named Spartan mother. Among the so-called *Apophtegms* attributed to Spartan women, in a collection of that title that has come down to us in the works of Plutarch, the first is credited to Argileonis ('lion-bright'), mother of Brasidas. It makes this precisely same point about Spartan women's dutiful subservience to their society's norms, if in a rather different way:

Argileonis, mother of Brasidas, when her son had died, and some of the citizens of Amphipolis came to Sparta to visit her, asked them whether her son had died finely and as befitted a Spartan. When they praised him to the skies and told her that he was the best of all the Spartans in such deeds of valour, she replied: 'My friends, it is true that my child was a fine and good man, but Sparta has many men better than he.'⁴

The full force of that alleged remark derives from the fact that, unlike his self-abnegating mother, the Amphipolitans literally worshipped Brasidas as their founder-hero after his death, as something more than a mere mortal man.

There is not enough evidence, unfortunately, to write any sort of biography of Argileonis (as there is of Gorgo – see Chapter 3, and of Cynisca – see Chapter 7), since apart from this anecdote we know nothing about her except that she was married to one Tellis. Given that he was part of the official Spartan delegation to Athens in 421 that concluded first a general peace and then a separate treaty with Athens, Tellis may well have been a member of the Gerousia and thus a man of distinguished aristocratic family. However, Argileonis, like King Agesiaraus when he insisted on his daughters travelling to a major religious festival in the regular public carriage, was concerned rather to de-emphasize any special difference or distinction that her family undoubtedly bore. She can therefore stand as an emblem of Spartan womanhood.

Other *Aphobthegms* flesh out the ancient picture of Spartan mothers, attributing to them colourful language and equally colourful gestures. We can thus well imagine Argileonis urging Brasidas, as he set off for Amphipolis in 422, to return from battle, 'With your shield – or on it!' Or, supposing Brasidas had *per impossible* proved to be a coward and returned home alive but defeated, we can visualize Argileonis pointing to her womb and asking her son publicly and humiliatingly if he wanted to crawl back inside there. Of such awesomely stern stuff were Spartan mothers made.

6

THE ATHENIAN WAR
432–404 BC

This chapter will deal with what, seen from the Athenian standpoint, is conventionally called the Peloponnesian War, but it will be viewed and described here from the Spartan side. Hence the unfamiliar title, 'the Athenian War', which is the ancient Greek way of saying 'the war against the Athenians'. The conflict was begun by the Spartans with high but misplaced hopes, and was ended finally, twenty-seven years later, only when the Spartans came to an arrangement for financial reasons with the Greeks' old enemy, the Persians. However, the latter had their own quite separate motives for wanting to destroy the power of Athens and they used the Spartans merely as a cat's-paw. This cynical manoeuvring, of which all parties concerned were equally guilty, was to poison Greek interstate relations from then until the conquest of Greece by Macedon under Philip II and his son Alexander the Great, who then went on quite extraordinarily to conquer all the Persian Empire as well.

The Spartans' strategy for winning the Athenian War was in a sense null and void from the start. Imprisoned in their hoplite mentality, which had after all served them exceptionally well for over two centuries, they imagined that straightforward application of more of the same would do the trick. They believed that, simply by invading Athens' home territory

