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BREAKING THE CUFFS: THE HELOTS RISE TO FREEDOM
A LESSON IN THE CAPACITY OF UNWAVERING IDENTITY

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BREAKING THE CUFFS: THE HELOTS RISE TO FREEDOM
A LESSON IN THE CAPACITY OF UNWAVERING IDENTITY

A Master Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty

of

American Public University

by

Christopher Sheline

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Arts

May 2016

American Public University

Charles Town, WV
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DEDICATION:

To my wife Vera, who always supported me no matter how difficult things became, for my son Christopher, who lost many days and nights with his daddy to research and study, and for my unborn son Dominic, for providing us with blissful thoughts during difficult times. You are my soul. Not a day passed that I did not think of what you have endured. I will never forget, and hope that these sacrifices will bring a brighter future for you all.
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I would like to extend thanks to all of the academic supporters of this study. These include Ben Sorenson, former classmate and current history professor, for his advice and encouragement throughout, APUS Program Director Dr. Richard Hines, for going the extra mile to secure this thesis as an independent study, and Dr. Mark Bowles for his help refining my ideas through his lessons on historiography. In addition, a special thank you to Professor Stanley Carpenter, it was through his course on Greek Civilization and the feedback received on the role of slavery and the lack of unity in ancient Greece that provoked this research, and last, but absolutely not least, Dr. Heather Thornton, thesis adviser and professor of several of my undergraduate and graduate courses. Dr. Thornton’s knowledge, support, feedback, and understanding took this thesis from mere concept to an academic work. She helped me narrow topics during courses that had no relation, was always willing to help and communicate, and did so in a friendly yet advisory manner. I could think of no better person to review my most important work to date. This study would not have been possible without each of your efforts.

On a personal note, I would also like to thank my parents, who never resisted the presence of a laptop during rare holiday gatherings, and my sister Heather for proofreading pieces of my work of which she had no interest. To my good friends Matthew Datz and Russell Derwis, whom in their own subtle ways each seemed proud to see me succeed, and, of course, everyone from Dust, thanks for always being there to listen to me rant into the wee hours of the night. All of your support encouraged me to complete this final project. Finally, I would like to thank the driver of the two o’clock train for obnoxiously wailing on the horn. Sometimes, we all need a little distraction.
ABSTRACT

Helots are a well-known part of ancient Greek society, yet there remains much debate regarding the definition of a helot, their identity, and their overall influence on Sparta. Most modern scholars generally refer to a helot as a serf, or tend to classify them alongside chattel slaves. They insist that their history and identity was lost during the persistent wars, causing later historians to fill in the blanks with fabricated or generalized associations. There is even heated debate on their value to the Spartan economic system, questioning the plausibility of the agrarian system. This study posits that a helot was neither a serf nor a chattel slave, but prisoners of the many efforts of Sparta to subdue its capable neighbors through war. As prisoners of war from the same cultural background, helots responded as such by revolting and seceding to formerly owned territories. Their presence connected directly to the development of the Spartan political and economic systems of Lycurgus, which caused conflict and war throughout Greece and amongst Spartan allies. Furthermore, this study clarifies that the helot’s identity never truly faltered, and that their contributions to warfare both on side of Sparta and especially against were examples of their desire for freedom. It concludes that the Messenian helot’s persistent efforts to regain their freedom and lost territory, coupled with Sparta’s constant dependency on helotry, inevitably led to Sparta’s demise.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Slavery was a key characteristic shared throughout Ancient Greek societies. Although there are differences in slavery in each polis (IE: chattel slaves versus helots), slaves were either the property of citizens or of the polis (city-state), and primarily worked as laborers. Athenians not only considered it natural to have a slave, but also that slaves were such by nature. This was a reflection of Aristotle’s belief that human nature is changeable and shaped by politics.\(^1\) Sparta, on the other hand, obtained slaves by subduing their neighbor societies into servitude. It was an act of war, which forced entire communities into servitude. Those servants, helots, had no rights or privileges, least of all in politics. Even citizens that lived in poverty had greater personal freedom than that of a slave.\(^2\) Sparta depended on helots for literally everything, which encouraged them to rise as Greece’s most dominant military force by sheer necessity. A helot’s importance to Spartan society was immeasurable to every extreme, which was technically their first mistake.

A slave, or *doulos*, in ancient Greece came from a variety of sources. As Greece grew economically, there was an increase in the demand for labor. Although it was very common for people to be born into slavery, a majority of slaves were prisoners of war.\(^3\) Taking an enemy, or prisoner, of the state and forcing them into slavery made them useful while paying a penalty for their transgressions. The helots of Sparta were such a case.

Many classifications of slavery existed in Greece, which included serfs, chattel slaves, and helots. Often, peasants fall into the mix for their involvement in debt slavery. This causes


\(^3\) Ibid., 65.
confusion amongst modern scholars when classifying the helots as serfs, peasants, or chattel slaves. What developed out of these concurrent debates are primarily two revolving perspectives surrounding helotry: the idea that helots were serfs because of their relationship to the land with the state being the figurative lord (yet, there was no transferring of ownership), and the idea that helots were slaves with the state as their masters. Both have some merit and their share of relevance, but equally fall short of truly defining and classifying a helot. There is little or no consideration for the fact that the helots were simply captured prisoners of war. This simple change in perspective clarifies much of Spartan history, especially when seeking to identify the specific helot communities that rebelled against Spartan rule.

While the Spartans subdued many neighboring communities under their rule, either as helots or *perioikoi*, very few continued to rebel and fight for their freedom. In fact, one the few details in Greek history that scholars agree on is that the revolting helots were from Messenia. These Messenians fell to Spartan rule after two wars over the course of nearly one hundred years. As history demonstrated, only the captives of the two Messenian Wars became helots. The remaining Messenians fled to colonize elsewhere, or allegedly wandered the Peloponnese, and returned to fight Sparta during every major war. They sought to free their people from helotry and regain their lost territory.

Once reduced to the status of a helot, the Spartans depended on the Messenians, like all helots, for every aspect of life. As such, they became a devout military society with a focus of keeping the helots subdued, quite similar to a society of prison guards. This equally allowed them to become the most formidable land based military in ancient Greece. However, they could not travel far, or develop a formidable navy, because of the need to sustain helot control and prevent rebellions.
Helot treatment was extremely harsh, which provoked a greater desire to rebel and a greater need for Sparta to control. Hence, Sparta built its entire political and economic structure around the helots. The political reforms that developed included the Lycurgus reforms and the development of the Peloponnesian League. These two political developments created various tensions all throughout Greece, and led to two Peloponnesian Wars.

During the Peloponnesian Wars, the Spartans used the helots to fill their ranks partly because the helots outnumbered the Spartans as much as seven to one. In fact, the helots revolted between the two Peloponnesian Wars, essentially bridging the gap and keeping Sparta from fully regrouping. Xenophon actually referred to this revolt as the Third Messenian War.\(^4\) When Thucydides detailed the Peloponnesian Wars, he described the return of the Messenians on side of the Athenians to challenge Sparta for their land once again. He also clarified the specific strategy to encourage helot rebellions and their secession to territory captured by Athens as a means of crippling Spartan supremacy. This not only supports the long lasting identity and heritage of the Messenians, but also proves the weaknesses of Sparta.

While Sparta succeeded in each war, the prolonged disputes, insistent ideology, and attempts to contain the helots only led to their demise. With their numbers dwindling, military discipline dwindled with it. Eventually, they suffered a defeat at the hands of Boeotia (led by Thebes) in 371 BCE, at which time the victors ravaged Spartan territory specifically to liberate all of the Messenian helots. They knew, like the Athenians during the Peloponnesian Wars, that by doing so, Sparta would undoubtedly fall into dismay. Soon after, free Messenians promptly returned to their homeland, joined the liberated helots, and they collectively became true Messenians once more.

These Messenian helots never gave up, always looked for an opportunity to revolt, and undoubtedly influenced the gradual decline of the mighty Sparta. Therefore, the helots highly influenced the decline of Sparta through the constant risk of rebellion, which provoked various political reforms, economic preferences, military tactics, alliances, and even dictated the Spartans ability, or lack thereof, to travel. This was all a direct result of the helot’s persistent struggle for freedom, which demonstrated their unwavering sense of identity.

**Literature Review**

While literature on ancient Greece is quite abundant in the world today, it is subject to the many criticisms, alterations, and ever-changing schools of historical thought perhaps more so than other, more recent, subject focuses. Without a doubt, historical inquiry has changed quite a bit since the original fathers of history, which makes studying their interpretations in comparison to modern schools of thought even more complex. However, mining countless sources revealed that the vast majority of sources, especially surrounding Sparta, originated in the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century AD. There appears to be a significant gap in historical inquiry, especially on the subject of Greek slavery, before the 1800s. Thomas Wiedemann specifically addressed the recent increase in interest in the study of Greek and Roman slavery, claiming the increase began in the nineteenth century with a rising interest in slavery as an economic stage that all societies must endure. However, it is possible that the abolition debate of the nineteenth century also had an influence, as inquiries into both the economic and emancipation processes of the ancients would certainly aid modern understandings and developments. In fact, there are varieties of similarities between ancient and modern practices, which include the idea of emancipation through military service. Another consideration for the

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lack of focus in these areas is likely because of the extensive history through the middle ages, particularly the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods.

It is easy to argue that virtually every historical study to date, regardless of subject area, is a secondary source to the ancient Greeks to some degree. Yet, few sources specifically regard the helots, or more specifically, Messenia and Laconia, in much detail. Most texts provide small bits and pieces, which is precisely what John Marincola stated in his book *Greek Historians*, when he addressed the change in historical analysis from the reliability and methodology of earlier authors to an artistic rendering of structure, themes, and concerns. However, this is not always true. In fact, many of the sources leveraged for this study often appear to be a mixture of both approaches. For example, Thomas Martin’s *Ancient Greece* provided a thorough generalized history of ancient Greece that certainly followed the artistic approach while periodically mentioning various circumstances surrounding primary authors.

Regarding the Messenian Wars, Martin argued that Messenia was large enough to support generous amounts of crops and grazing animals. He assessed that this was the motive for the Spartans to invade, as he believed Laconia was too small to support the needs of Sparta. Nevertheless, the fact that it took two wars over the course of approximately one hundred years to reduce the Messenians to the status of helot is indicative of a greater objective than just obtaining mere slaves and crops, which this thesis reveals. Furthermore, Martin added that the despair the Messenians endured through the loss of their polis and freedom made them seek a chance to revolt. Collectively, this affirms that the Messenians were a capable community that never lost sight of who they were, or what they desired. Reflecting back on Marincola’s theory

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8 Marincola, *Greek Historians*, 1.
7 Martin, *Ancient Greece*, 2
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 75-76.
on historical analysis, Martin noted that Thucydides was an Athenian historian that often
depicted the weaknesses of Sparta. Thucydides’ work is a primary source for researching the
Peloponnesian Wars. These brief deductions clearly depict both historical approaches. However,
Martin’s thoughts on the matter are far from consistent with other authors.

Charles Freeman, author of *Egypt, Greece, and Rome: Civilizations of the Ancient
Mediterranean*, argued that Sparta’s motive to invade Messenia was most likely an effort to
define their identity through successful war. Clearly, this conflicts with Martin’s theory that
Sparta merely sought the resources. Freeman actually argued that Laconia already met Sparta’s
needs, and that the true motive is unclear. Yet, what remains unmentioned is a consideration as
to how conquering Messenia would help Sparta to identify through successful war if the
Messenians were but an insignificant subaltern community. This study would fill this gap,
arguing that the Messenians were in fact a community worthy of conquering for purposes greater
than just their resources.

*The Greeks*, by H.D.F Kitto, is another very general history of ancient Greece similar to
Martin and Freeman’s texts, yet provided another important glimpse into the influence of the
helots on the decline of Sparta. Kitto indirectly alluded to the connection between the helots and
the Lycurgus reforms. He expressed a theory that the enslavement of Messenia created an
atmosphere in which the Spartiates became the minority in their own country, which allowed the
opportunity for the Messenian helots to threaten the stability of Sparta. He believed that this
opportunity is what encouraged the Lycurgus reforms. This study would add that these reforms

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10 Ibid., 106.
12 Ibid.
led to various political and social conflicts all throughout Greece. Donald Kagan supported this theory in his book *The Peloponnesian War*.

Kagan detailed the events leading into, during, and thereafter the Peloponnesian War. He emphasized that, despite having military superiority, the Spartans refrained from going to war as often as possible because of their fear of a helot revolt.\(^\text{14}\) This is somewhat common knowledge. However, Kagan went as far as quoting Thucydides and Aristotle referencing the measures of security taken by the Spartans due to their concern of the helots, but addressed this as a means to explain why the Spartans developed certain alliances such as the Peloponnesian League. He does not make the connection that those alliances were one of the earliest steps in Sparta’s decline and continued conflict, once again due to the sheer existence of the helots.

Again, reflecting on Thomas Weidemann’s work, *Greek and Roman Slavery*, the helots compiled of various bodies including the Messenians and a group called the *Heleatai*, who formerly inhabited the territory called *Helos* in *Lakonia*.\(^\text{15}\) He believed this is where the name “helot” originated. Weidemann further described the treatment of the helots as inhumane and horrible in every respect.\(^\text{16}\) However, he contradicted himself by referring to the helots as a race of slaves, when there was never a single particular race and they were certainly not born into slavery, at least not originally. If any, it would be the Messenians as a common race, but even then, the helots often interbred with Spartiates, albeit often by force or a form of abuse. Nevertheless, this relates to Kelly L. Wrenhaven’s book, *Reconstructing the Slave: The Image of the Slave in Ancient Greece*, regarding the artistic depiction of slaves.

\(^{15}\) Wiedermann, *Greek and Roman Slavery*, 84.
\(^{16}\) Ibid.
Wrenhaven concluded that artistic representations of Greek slaves do not reflect reality in any way. In fact, her entire book revolved around how misinterpreted Greek slaves truly are, and how that affected developing theories and mentalities. She goes as far as to compare their depictions to Greek hero’s, who also did not reflect reality. This is an expression of culture, repression, and Greek mentality, which is quite similar to the manner in which humanism later affected medieval art by taking inaccurate portrayals and making them more realistic. The false representation of slaves is critical to proving the true capability of a helot, as intended by this study. In fact, a book by Sara Forsdyke, titled *Slaves Tell Tales and Other Episodes in the Politics of Popular Culture in Ancient Greece*, actually compliments Wrenhaven’s theories by addressing the issue of a common identity.

Sara Forsdyke argued that there were considerably more slave rebellions in Sparta than in other parts of Greece. She argued that this was directly because the Spartan helots maintained a common identity that was not present in the diverse mixture of slaves in other city-states. While Forsdyke’s argument clearly supports this thesis, her book continued to use slaves as an example for the continued abuse of popular culture in politics, and the many ways that slaves succumbed to these influences. No conclusion ever developed regarding the long-term negative impact these influences had on the Spartan society, or any other Greek society for that matter, which is what this thesis seeks to reveal.

The individual books and authors addressed to this point demonstrate just small pieces of the puzzle. A book titled *Helots and their Masters in Laconia and Messenia: Histories, Ideologies, Structures*, edited by Nino Luraghi and Susan E. Alcock, actually places together and

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analyzes many of these very same pieces providing some of the most current and in depth information surrounding the helot’s origin and life in a single text.

Helots and their Masters in Laconia and Messenia is a collection of writings, each written by credible scholars including the editors themselves, that discussed the significant questions, debates, and methodologies exemplified in modern scholarship regarding ancient helotry. These essays build upon each other, showing a variety of current schools of thought, as well as how each essay challenged one another. This collection aimed to provoke further research by highlighting the relevance of a helot in Greece and the many conflicting theories presented in both primary and secondary sources. Yet, the overall text seems to fall short of making several critical connections.

Susan Alcock opens this book by addressing the lack of evidence and attention put toward the identity and official status of a helot, which she believed encouraged modern scholars to interpret and reinterpret most information inaccurately. Alcock specifically noted the “recycling and reshuffling” of the same limited information that has created the understanding of Spartan society today. This confirms the justification for this thesis study, and ascertains the unreliability of modern scholarship on the subject. All of the essays within the text followed the same approach.

An essay titled “Raising Hell? The Helot Mirage – A Personal Review,” by Paul Cartledge, described how the illusion of a helot created modern constructions of helotry. Cartledge focused on the status, treatment, revolt, and likely uniqueness of the helots, urging further study in these areas. He concluded that the Spartans treated the helots extremely poorly, that they were an enslaved nation rather than mere victims of slave trade, and that this treatment

20 Ibid., 4.
encouraged revolts.\textsuperscript{21} Several authors discussed herein made similar conclusions. However, Cartledge’s study ended with this conclusion, leaving many open-ended questions that this thesis seeks to answer. He does not directly connect the possibility that the Spartans fear of the revolts set Sparta on a downward spiral. Instead, Cartledge addressed some of the conflicting theories on whether the policies and precautions of Sparta had anything to do with the helots at all, quoting Thucydides as a root cause of the confusion.

The next essay, titled “The Imaginary Conquest of the Helots” by book editor Nino Luraghi, theorized that the very time or era under study often created conflicting helot origins. Luraghi further argued that ancient primary sources do not actually describe a helot’s origin, and that the theories originated from the individual and peculiar pieces put together by many secondary authors throughout time.\textsuperscript{22} This required further critical analysis of primary sources, as the very idea that no specific origin existed within a group that consistently revolted and provoked various political and economic reforms within Spartan society weights in against common social and psychological trends. This study found that, in fact, Luraghi’s theory is subjective. It merely reflected the social mentality Greek citizens had of helots and their origins as well as the mentalities of the authors themselves.

The helots were a group of slaves that regularly suffered severe abuse and a lack of rights. Primary documentation of slaves with this perspective is common all throughout history regardless of state or culture. Nevertheless, while several primary sources do in fact place the Messenians at the heart of helot revolts, many subaltern communities undoubtedly intertwined

with said community’s history. Collectively, these facts certainly created a bit of a shroud over specific identities through generalized associations, but not one thick enough to prevent the facts from surfacing.

Luraghi’s theories lead into a paper by Jonathan Hall, who actually added to Luraghi’s theories by researching how the Messenian identity developed. He attempted to isolate whether the Messenians were truly a collective and organized group, or more a group associated as such because of their proximity to Messenia. Hall concluded that the while the Messenians undoubtedly went through a highly dynamic series of changes, depending on their relationship to the Dorian ethno-community and later liberation, these changes were reflective of historical circumstances and demonstrates a link between Messenians identity, their enslavement, and their exile.23 In other words, the Messenians as a group were always Messenians, but evolved under certain circumstances, receiving different titles and classifications likely by the Spartans, only later returning to their original identity after the liberation. The sheer scattering of the group alone only added to their misidentification. As referenced previously, this is why there is so much confusion. While under Spartan rule, formal recognition was not something of much consideration, right, or regard for the helots, which is just another piece that this thesis seeks to prove.

Naturally, the next author, Kurt Raaflaub, addressed the freedom of the Messenians in his work titled “Freedom for the Messenians - A Note on the Impact of Slavery and Helotage in the Greek Concept of Freedom.” Raaflaub sought to clarify how slavery and helotry influenced the very concept of liberty in ancient Greece. According to Raaflaub, slavery was often a better

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alternative commonly defined by personal dependence rather than a lack of freedom.\textsuperscript{24} This is critical to this thesis, as it supports the argument for a desire to break away from helot slavery under Spartan rule for greater independence, and enforces the idea that helot desire for independence caused the decline of Sparta. The idea of personal dependence versus helot independence with the latter being the better speaks to this perspective.

This book concluded with a paper by Orlando Patterson titled “Reflections on Helotic Slavery and Freedom.” Here, Patterson simply concluded that the Spartans did not conceptualize freedom, but rather freedom was a process that developed through the notion that it was a reflection of power over others. In fact, Patterson referred to this as totalitarian democracy, insisting that this model was the prototype that reflected Western freedom until the early twentieth century AD.\textsuperscript{25} It is the idea of power over others in a totalitarian environment as a model for freedom that truly influences new perspectives and considerations for further research.

\textbf{Methodology}

Putting the pieces together to prove the helots greater influence on the decline of Sparta is no easy task. It requires a very delicate search for and handling of sources, particularly primary sources. This is the first stage of the research process. Many primary sources, including Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides, aim for particular audiences, and often exhibit author biases and exaggerations. This is not to mention the plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, among others. For example, Homer was a poet who often used dramatic speeches and heroic figures in his writings to teach, rather than strictly citing facts.\textsuperscript{26} He was essentially speaking to the general


\textsuperscript{26} Marincola, \textit{Greek Historians}, 14-15.
population as a student body. Herodotus’ grandiosity attempted to present history with a more entertaining approach, possibly taking heed from Homer’s influences. Thucydides’ position focused on military history as a primary drive of virtually all social and political developments. He took a more scientific approach to present monumental facts while often coming to generalized conclusions. Sometimes, these primary authors simply wrote to glorify events. The aforementioned playwrights demonstrated cultural perspectives through entertainment rather than by presenting historical facts. Their characters and settings were indicative of historical circumstances. Collectively, this makes primary source gathering a significant challenge, not to mention their scarce availability. Nevertheless, many primary sources still offer a variety of information through a discerning eye. While primary sources catered to this thesis do not exist for literal historical value, they instead offer suggestions as to the apparent conditions, interpretations, and cultural perspectives relevant for academic analysis.

Modern interpretations, or secondary sources, eliminate much of the bias of the ancient authors. However, there is no guarantee of an absence of bias, and its presence is always a concern. Most authors merely replace one bias with another of their own through varying alterations and interpretations. Nevertheless, there is a plethora of information that attempts to zero in on primary source aims, which indirectly offers general supporting advice for this thesis.

Using these sources obtained through scholarly venues, the research followed a historical method of analysis. In light of the focus of this study, empirical evidence remains unobtainable. Therefore, it is primarily a qualitative inquiry in that the study directly seeks to understand and interpret social interactions through the descriptions and data presented in the sources. Yet, there is also an element of a quantitative approach through the objective analysis of cause and effect, as well as by means of testing a hypothesis. The thesis presents social variables that lead to
particular results, such as the helot uprisings creating a need for political reform. It begins by defining a helot and how they differed from other aspects of slavery, connects their motive for rebellion to their identity as a Greek community, and demonstrates how that community influenced developments in the Spartan economic and political systems. Research then turned to reflect how those economic and political developments created conflict throughout Greece, the manner of which the Spartans involved the helots in the resulting warfare, and how those conflicts meant the decline of Sparta. These collective research and analysis efforts confirmed the influence of the helots on the decline of Sparta and the eventual freedom of helot communities.

**Conclusion**

After reviewing the authors, and the writings, discussed herein, it is clear that this is a time of reconsideration. Each author not only challenged each other’s theories but also many other secondary authors by leveraging the primary texts, culture, trends, and even medieval and early modern scenarios of like. In fact, although each author provided a small piece of the stepping-stones toward new theories, no single author ever truly put all of the pieces together. The apparent lapse in research into the helots of Sparta certainly created a significant deficiency in historiography, despite the many sources over the last two hundred years. Most sources, including several of those discussed in the literature review, argue that the helots were mere slaves that encouraged the development and sustainability of Sparta. It is the argument of this thesis that all of these sources fail to recognize that the helots were far more than underappreciated slaves that periodically tried to break free.

Through the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, it is clear that helots were, in fact, a community that never forgot who they were, and, as a result, became a
metaphorical thorn in Sparta’s side. Their presence and actions, though widespread, may have sustained Sparta by force, but undoubtedly led to political policies and systems that caused conflict throughout Greece. Those conflicts eventually led to the decline of Spartan hegemony and the liberation of helots. The direct and indirect actions of the helots dictated the entire course of Ancient Greek history.
Chapter II: What is a Helot?

While it might seem rudimentary to define a helot, the very essence of a helot remains highly debated even amongst modern scholars. Virtually everything from who a helot was precisely, to how and why they differed from other slave societies throughout history remains highly scrutinized. This is largely because of the fact that there was so little appreciation given to the helots, or any slave for that matter, by ancient historians. For example, Aristotle stated, “A slave is a living possession, and the servant himself an instrument which takes precedence of all other instruments.” While this is clearly a reflection of cultural mentality, these sorts of denunciations create far too many assumptions. Aristotle is most likely referring to chattel slaves rather than helots. Helots were not simply instruments or personal possessions, nor were they stereotypical farmers and miners. Deciphering these differences is a critical component to understanding a helot’s true role and influence in Spartan society.

Slave, Serf, or Peasant

Many issues contribute to the consistent misclassification of helots. Simply looking in a dictionary for the term “helot” reveals an unspecified and vague definition of “slave or serf,” but these are two very different things. In some cultures, a slave is simply a bondservant of the lowest class, with a specific individual master. In others, they retain the title of serf, or servant to land transferrable with it to a lord. He who owns the land owns the serf. Similarly, both classifications share likeliness to a peasant, who often performed the same duties while allegedly free to a certain extent. Yet, many peasants were victim to debt bondage, or debt slavery, the use of labor to repay a debt or obligation to a lord. Of course, there was also the class of chattel

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slaves, or persons captured, bought, and legally classed as personal property. Helots, on the other hand, while sharing many of the same qualities of all those formerly addressed, were a classification of their own.

The seventh century BCE saw a variety of forms of slavery. However, when political reforms within the city-states restricted or limited debt bondage, the pronunciation of slave labor immediately followed. Sarah Pomeroy actually referred to the helots as serfs, stating that they worked for Spartan citizens on what was previously their own land.28 Jean Kinney Williams does the same, surmising that they were agricultural workers that worked for a particular master that owned the land.29 Both statements are quite inaccurate, especially in Williams’ case.

Helots did serve Spartan citizens often on what was previously their own land, but that was far from their limitations. The key here is in the fact that the helots served “citizens.” They fulfilled more of a mixed breed of servitude. Where a slave is typically the servant to an individual or land, a helot was a servant of the Spartan state. For this reason, many modern scholars often claim that helots drifted in a sort of free versus slave state. Hence, this is also where the connection between a helot and Spartan peasant surfaces. Yet, helots were certainly none of the above, as they had no specific master and could go anywhere to do anything for anyone if the state deemed it so.

The concept of a serf or slave has always been a generalized classification of servitude much as a peasant has always been the classification for the lowest social class in most societies. Although, one could argue that a peasant rests a bit higher in status than an actual slave. Nevertheless, these labels carry no more weight than these generalizations. Some sources,

including those by Geoffrey de Ste. Croix in Article 1 of the UN Supplementary Convention of 1956, classify helots as “state serfs.” While this might seem more accurate for its consideration of the state-slave relationship, it is still quite limiting to all aspects of helotry. Stephen Hodkinson recognized the fact that the classification of state serfs, amongst many others, is a dramatic oversimplification resulting from the lack of precise parallels to the conditions of helots. Consequently, there are always variations in any form of slavery from society to society and from era to era, but helotry is unique even at its base.

Ancient Greece is the source of many social and political developments in modern Western society, including the essential concepts of serfdom and chattel slavery. Thought processes seem to follow a common trend: Helots must have been serfs because they worked their own land, but cannot be a serf because the state owned them. If they were not serfs, then they must have been slaves. If they were slaves, then since they were from ancient Greece, they must have been chattel slaves. However, this thought process is still inaccurate.

What modern scholars have repeatedly failed to realize is the fact that the Greeks saw these individuals and communities as far below them and not worthy of much regard, which is why there is so often no formal classification of a slave, or appreciation for their original identity. Consider the words of Homer, when he described a man trying to sneak past his enemies, “Scoring himself with wounds dishonorable and with some paltry rags about him cast, in semblance of a slave, like beggar-man, He who might brook no rival in the fleet.” Homer presented a slave as a wounded, dirty, petty individual that would not intimidate anyone. These sorts of descriptions are present in many original writings. Wrenhaven claimed that this sort of

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31 Ibid., 250.
extreme negative view allowed a slave master to treat a slave as a subhuman or animal. Yet, slaves were quite capable, especially on a community aspect as with the helots.

Another issue relative to the misclassification of a helot is the fact that ancient Greece was not a united nation. It was not “Rome.” Instead, each city-state state created different societies complete with different military apparatuses and social ranking systems. For example, the concept of chattel slavery was a bit more specific to the Athenians rather than the Spartans, as was Homer’s description. Any effort to generalize any part of these constructs would result in endless debate. In light of this, it is critically necessary to separate each slave classification to better ascertain where a helot truly resided.

**Chattel Slaves**

“Take away my rebuke, let not men say, Behold, Aegisthus’ chattel, marketed and sold!”

The concept of a chattel slave, like that of serfs, has been the source of many inaccurate classifications and assumptions. Some sources, including those of Pausanias and Plato, actually refer to helots as chattel slaves, but this cannot be accurate. Typically, chattel slavery refers to the most traditional sense of slavery, whereas it reflected the buying and selling of a slave as a household commodity. They were entirely subject to their masters, and were usually captured peoples by either conquest or other. In fact, the title “chattel slavery” in its root means personal property. Today, it is the least common form of slavery. If for no other reason, a helot cannot be a form of chattel slavery because they were not personal property. The Spartan state technically owned them, and the state is a governing body. However, several other aspects of chattel slavery separated it from helotry even further.

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On the occasion that a Greek owned a Greek slave, that slave served in a different polis from which they came, and received the privileges of education so they could tutor Greek children. Most slaves, however, came from regions to the north and east of Greek territory, where pirates or foreign raiders captured and sold them to the Greeks. \(^{35}\) This was such a market, that the Thracians to the north even sold children. \(^{36}\) Considering these facts, most slaves did not speak Greek, and thus appeared as unsophisticated barbarians to city-states such as Athens. This allowed the justification of slaves as lesser beings.

Athenians did not have to worry about slave revolts because there was clearly little unification amongst the diverse slaves. They could not communicate effectively, as most slaves were from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The helots were the exception. Spartan helots maintained a common identity that was not present in the diverse mixture of slaves in other city-states. \(^{37}\) Nevertheless, with all of these sources of slaves, most slave owners only possessed one or two slaves at a time for physical labor. Since the most common kind of slave that resulted from these avenues was a chattel slave, helots tend to be lumped into the same category.

Chattel slaves fulfilled almost any role desired by their masters. Depending on the master’s financial status, slaves worked either alongside them, or with a slave supervisor. This would be unheard of in Sparta. One of the many roles for a slave was that of a farmer, or agricultural servant. However, many Greeks did not keep this role solely for slaves. This is because the cultivation of crops only required short bouts of hard labor. \(^{38}\) When slaves did work on farms, they did so in small numbers. Pomeroy et al. argued that there is still great controversy


\(^{36}\) Ibid.


over the participation of slaves in agriculture. Modern scholars theorize that rich landowners needed many slaves to work the vast lands, which contradicts the belief that small families worked the agricultural economy as independent farmers. Nevertheless, one role that scholars do not dispute is that of a household servant.

Household servants were a primary role for chattel slaves, and were an integral part of the basic social unit of the time, the oikos or household. Aristotle addressed this in the following statement:

The rule of a master, although the slave by nature and the master by nature have in reality the same interests, nevertheless exercised primarily with a view to the interest of the master, but accidentally considers the slave, since, if the slaves perish, the rule of the master perishes with him.\textsuperscript{40}

This is also relative to the relationship between the helot community and the overall Spartan state, but helots had no close relationships to their masters. According to Martin, chattel slaves did everything from cooking and cleaning, to babysitting, to various other domestic chores.\textsuperscript{41} This was one of the better options for a slave, as often a master would integrate a slave into the family, which is quite similar to the stereotypical portrayals of early American slavery. In fact, this position eventually led people to feel that domestic servants ought to receive civil rights and freedom after serving for a given amount of years.\textsuperscript{42} Unfortunately, many other roles for slaves were quite harsh. They also worked in factories, mines, and even manufacturing businesses.

Manufacturing primarily revolved around pottery and metalworking (weapons, armor, shields, etc.).\textsuperscript{43} This was a male driven field of work, as were most hard labor roles. Among the worst duties a slave could have at the time was to work in the gold and silver mines. These very

\textsuperscript{39}Pomeroy et al, \textit{Ancient Greece}, 266.
\textsuperscript{40}Aristotle, \textit{Politics}, 41-42.
\textsuperscript{41}Martin, \textit{Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times}, 66.
\textsuperscript{42}Wiedermann, \textit{Greek and Roman Slavery}, 3.
\textsuperscript{43}Martin, \textit{Ancient Greece}, 66.
narrow, dark, and confining mines were prone to landslides.\textsuperscript{44} The life expectancy for a slave working in a mine was very short. In fact, slave owners typically saw slave mineworkers as expendable instruments for obtaining the city’s source of wealth.\textsuperscript{45} The mines provided material for coins, weapons and armor, and various structures within the Greek cities. Yet, there were some more independent and less hazardous roles for a slave to fulfill.

Some slaves worked as public slaves, or \textit{demosioi}, which meant that the city-state owned them rather than a particular person.\textsuperscript{46} These slaves lived independently, and had various special duties such as coin validation, arresting criminals, and being an executioner. Some even worked as temple slaves (some females were temple prostitutes), whose master was the god of the sanctuary.\textsuperscript{47} Public slaves got as close to politics as one could. Wiedemann made note of a 221-220 BCE public slave by the name of Demetrious, who the Council of the People voted in to be an accountant of public expenditure.\textsuperscript{48} He was responsible for writing a counter-copy of the financial operations for the state record office. However, an Athenian council appointed Demetrious to serve Athens. There is no record of any such slave with these privileges in Sparta, least of all a helot. These variations occurred only in city-states outside of Sparta, primarily Athens.

With all of the sources of slaves available to the Greeks, slaves grew to become a large percentage of the Greek population. Under the roles of agricultural servants, domestic servants, mineworkers, and public servants, slaves provided a service to Greece that made them the essential pillars of Greek stability. This coincides with Aristotle’s implications that slaves are not

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Freeman, \textit{Egypt, Greece, and Rome}, 225.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Martin, \textit{Ancient Greece}, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Wiedermann. \textit{Greek and Roman Slavery}, 149.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotes}
born but made.\footnote{Darrell Dobbs, “Natural Rights and the Problem of Aristotle's Defense of Slavery.” \textit{The Journal of Politics} Vol. 56, No. 1 (Feb., 1994), pp. 69-94 http://www.jstor.org/stable/2132346 [Accessed April 21, 2015].} However, this ironically conflicts with his theories of slaves by nature. Nevertheless, Kitto argued that the Athenians enjoyed several levels of leisure because of the work performed by slaves.\footnote{Ibid. 36.} This leisure allowed the Athenians to focus on politics, philosophy, and economic issues. While a chattel slave was not a free citizen, they did have a place in society and depending on their abilities some status as well. The lowest place on the social ladder was reserved for the \textit{thes}, a person without a place in the \textit{oikos}, and hence without any status in the community. Some slaves even managed to become philosophers, historians, or play writers, and became quite wealthy. This was not the case with the helots.

\textbf{A Helot}

The most common way to refer to a helot is that of a community of state slaves.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{The Politics}, Translated by T.A. Sinclair. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1962), 118.} However, Aristotle himself separated helots from serfs and slaves, stating, “Farm owners are likely to be more troublesome and bumptious than helots, serfs, and slaves.” Like chattel slaves, helot communities were the result of conquest, and performed most of the same duties described herein. However, they did not necessarily have a particular owner, nor act as property for resale. They were property of the civic body. Any Spartan citizen could make use of any helot in any way they desired. The state could utilize the helots at will for anything from large building or agricultural projects to household maintenance. In fact, even when the state ordered a helot to work for a particular Spartiate, that Spartiate had no right to free or sell them. It was a matter of the helot performing an assigned duty like an employer delegating employees. As a result, there was never a personal or familial bond, as seen with some chattel slaves, between a slave and his master(s), and the treatment of a helot tended to be quite harsh and severe in
comparison to a chattel slave, serf, or peasant. There was no opportunity for advancement, wealth, or other professions. However, there was a possibility of a change in status amongst helot ranks.

Only the Spartan state could alter a helot’s status and even reward a helot in a variety of ways. Some of these statuses include the *aphetai*, liberated helots, the *adespotoi*, a helot without an assigned master, and the *erukters*, which appear to be some form of law enforcement or police. Other statuses include the *dispositionautai*, which were part of the navy, and finally the *neodamodeis*, who supported the Spartan hoplites in the frontier. It was also the status given to freed helots, on the rare occasion that there was one. There were also the bastard helots called *mothones* or *mothakes*, who were the product of Spartan men and helot women or a *hypomeiones*, or free Spartan men. Having not completed the *agoge*, or simply because they were helot descendants, they had no *Kleros* or political rights.

Since the helots were state property, they could not pass from one master to another or transfer by any means outside the Spartan state, because once a helot was beyond Sparta’s borders they would be free. That is stunningly similar to a prisoner. Note that these statuses were not particularly promotional as much as they were classifications based on scenario and circumstance. To the Greeks, a change in status did not influence their nature. Once they were a helot to Sparta, they were always a helot of some form to Sparta.

The very fact that helots had such a title is indicative of a former identity or geographic relation. Pausanias stated:

Near the sea is a town called Helus, founded by Heleus son of Perseus, which the Dorians reduced by siege. Its inhabitants were the first slaves of the Lacedaemonion community, and were the first called Helots from the place of their birth. Afterwards Helot was a

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general name the Dorians gave their slaves; just as all the Greeks are Hellenes from Hellas in Thessaly.\textsuperscript{53}

The intent here is not necessarily to identify helot origins, as that will come in the next chapter, but more so to signify that the title in itself is a general term for a slave in Spartan society by association. Clearly, this is not a peasant or serf. Unlike other classifications of slaves, a helot received his or her title because of their relation to territory. They were specific to Sparta, and were hereditary subjects to the Spartan state.\textsuperscript{54} They were a conquered society that had their inheritance and identity specifically tied to land within the Peloponnese. This is a critical fact when substantiating helot identity.

Modern linguists question the reliability of Pausanias’ statement, claiming that the word “helot” derives from the Greek word for “capture” or “\textit{haliskomai}” (ἁλίσκομαι).\textsuperscript{55} Aristotle specifically addressed this translation stating, “Helots, literally meaning captives.”\textsuperscript{56} There is no regard amongst modern scholars for the possibility that the term helot may be such a derivative because of Pausanias’ stated history. In other words, the association that captives of Helus became slaves and were thus called slaves under the same title, which was essentially the mode of Spartan society to subdue thy neighbor. Furthermore, Helus was a part of Laconia, and many sources recognize Laconian helots. Nevertheless, entertaining this theory revealed that, while there are a variety of words that mean capture in the Greek language, the root word \textit{haliskomai} (ἁλίσκομαι) does mean to capture, or simply caught.\textsuperscript{57} Yet, none of the sources that made this connection completed the sentence.

\textsuperscript{53} Pausanias, \textit{Description of Greece}. Translated by Arthur Richard Shilleto. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1886), 212-213.
\textsuperscript{54} Pomeroy et al., \textit{Ancient Greece: A Political, Social and Cultural History}, 155.
\textsuperscript{55} Martin, \textit{Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times}, 75.
\textsuperscript{56} Aristotle, \textit{The Politics}, 139.
In Greek, the term *haliskomai (aliskomai, helotai, εἵλωτες, heilotes)* means caught as in taken, conquered, fall into the enemy’s hand as a prisoner of war. The catching or imprisoning of slaves throughout Greece was typical, but most were not necessarily part of a war. Their incarceration was by way of plunder, crimes committed, or other. According to John Malam, a life of slavery in Greece likely came from a combination of prisoners of war, criminals, and especially the victims of raids intended to capture people and force them into slavery. Therefore, if these words associations are correct, then a helot was literally a prisoner or a community of prisoners, which is precisely how they responded and certainly refutes Aristotle’s belief in slaves by nature. The term helot must be a term for slavery by association, but not in a definitional sense. By literal definition, a helot is a captured prisoner of war.

Today, prisoners in any part of the world provoke a sense of fear, rebellion, or a collective body strictly held captive. These prisoners are confined and controlled by guards (some armed), and required to perform a variety of labor duties from cleaning to yard work. They are prisoners in a “state” penitentiary. Helots were prisoners on their own land, forced to serve a variety of duties from farming, to mining, to military service. The only difference from a modern day prisoner to a helot is coed living and reproduction for economic purposes, because even many of the groups in modern prisons derive from the same or similar ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds.

As a sort of insurance Sparta allowed the helots to marry, have families, and ensured their place on their land. Yet, most slave societies had these privileges all throughout the world at any given time. Even modern day prisoners have a certain part of real estate, only it consists of cement and iron. It does not mean the helots had any sort of special appreciation, as many

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59 Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, 114.
scholars allude in their promotions of helots as moderately free. In fact, the contrary would be true. It was in Sparta’s best interest to keep the helots on their land, farming and mining for Sparta. Breeding meant more servants. This was how Sparta supported their economic and political structures.

**Spartan Society and Functionality**

Spartan society was enigmatic in that it was both glorious and deficient at the same time. Martin described the Spartan way of life as “fundamentally a reaction to their living amidst people of whom they conquered and enslaved to exploit economically.”\(^{60}\) Sparta developed as a direct result of the use and presence of helots. They depended on helots for virtually everything, which is precisely why Sparta became a powerful military society. While this fact is relatively common knowledge, few recognize the internal impact of a soldier society constantly on guard, not to mention the fact that there is no record of a serf, chattel slave, or peasant credited with the development of a mighty state. The seemingly obvious nature of the beast called helot seems disconcertingly allusive in most or all texts. Note that Sparta developing in this manner is also similar to armed guards in a common prison.

Sparta became a society of soldiers constantly on guard specifically to maintain their superiority over their conquered inhabitants, neighbors of Laconia, and force them to provide their subsistence.\(^{61}\) They underwent a significant transformation in their way of life, which meant the development and enforcing of strict laws and customs that controlled virtually all aspects of Sparta. This refers to the Lycurgan reforms and the oligarchy system. Martin argued that this was a necessary endeavor if Sparta was to survive against the many enemies they

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\(^{60}\) Martin, *Ancient Greece*, 75.  
\(^{61}\) Ibid.
created by subjugating their neighbors into helots and *perioikoi.* This is another critical point, as it asserts not only that the laws and customs developed out of a need to secure Spartan survival, but also that the helots were the enemies that threatened that survival. This also adds credibility to the helot community as an able body. The *perioikoi* were not quite as threatening. The *perioikoi* were amongst the conquered inhabitants, yet managed to maintain self-governing communities. Their name literally means “those who live round about” or simply “neighbors,” yet they were required to serve in the Spartan military and pay taxes without ever receiving citizen rights. The *perioikoi* rarely rebelled against Sparta, likely, because they remained free communities as long as they served in the military and paid taxes. However, it is hardly freedom to require service in return for the absence of shackles and helotry. Then again, the ancient Greeks had a different view of what it meant to be free. In any case, this was a creative way for Sparta to build and sustain their military ranks.

The radical transformations that brought Sparta to these lengths clearly connect to the Lycurgan reforms. Although the origins of Lycurgus and his reforms remain debated, the structure that arose is not. The Spartan government was very traditional and complex. It followed the Great Rhetra, which influenced both military and political issues. The Great Rhetra stated the following:

> After you have built a temple to Jupiter Helianius, and to Minerva Hellania, and have phyle’d the people into phyles [tribes], and obe’d them into obes [divisions], you shall establish a council of thirty elders, the leaders included, and shall, from time to time, apellazein the people betwixt Babyca and Cnacion, there propound and put to the vote. The commons have the final voice and decision.

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 158.
This became the heart of the Spartan Constitution. Thus, a council of forty-eight elders developed, with five Ephors that supervised the king. The concept of Spartan government was complex in that it consisted of monarchy, oligarchy, and democratic ideologies. An oligarchy (Oligarchia, rule by a few men) was a form of government in early city-states that replaced chieftains.66 Essentially, it was a step from the tribal sense into a relatively sophisticated government. Families in power would arrange to subdivide the spheres of authority (administrative, military, religious, and judicial) to magistracies that were not hereditary and had a limited term in office.67 This is literally the opposite of the Athenian democracy. It does not take long to recognize the potential for conflict between city-states.

The oligarchy government encouraged the sharing of power. However, many classify the Spartans as totalitarians because they influenced nearly every aspect of life including dress, marriage, sex, and childbirth.68 The inclusion of a monarchy derives from the fact that the Spartans were reluctant to abandon traditional institutions, and thus supported two kings that acted as the head of government.69 This entire system sought to maintain control at all costs, prevent single king tyranny, and above all maintain military hegemony over the Peloponnesus. Although, at times, Sparta sought hegemony over all of Greece, as this study demonstrates later. In any case, other oligarchs looked to Sparta because Sparta gained influence by staying in groups that could not survive without their aid, while they, in themselves, were not a perfect oligarchy because of its clear versatility.70 All of this directly linked to the dependence on helots in Spartan society, and a fear of a helot uprising.

66 Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 103.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 158.
69 Ibid., 170.
To this point, it is necessary to revisit the idea of what precisely a helot is. It is clear that the title “helot” is a derivative of the original inhabitants of Spartan territory. Those inhabitants were captured, made prisoners of the war on that territory, and turned slave. It is also clear that a helot had no specific master outside of the Spartan state. They often worked the land of which they previously possessed, which is why there is confusion with regarding them as serfs, and they drastically differed from a chattel slave. Helots were so important that Sparta grew from and heavily relied on the services they provided. However, considering the denunciations of helot communities by primary authors, their regard for the group itself has little reliability.

Objectively, helots were a collective body similar to a conquered nation, not individual slaves, capable of formerly sustaining their own state(s). Naturally, when holding a collective subaltern community captive on their own land, they tend to rebel, and rebel they did. Hence, as alluded to previously, they were prisoners to the Spartan state forced into labor, and were threatening enough to cause Sparta to create its entire socioeconomic and political structure around them. According to Herodotus, the helots even outnumbered the Spartans as much as seven to one during the battle of Plataea in 479 BCE.\(^{71}\) His exact figures were “thirty-five thousand lightly armored helots to five thousand Spartan soldiers.”\(^ {72}\) This is quite similar to the prisoner to guard ratio today.

Although Herodotus’ partiality and sensationalism causes him quite a bit of criticism, he was still a significant influence to Greek enlightenment that at the very least offered a complex view into accurate information, Hellenizing traditions, and his imagination.\(^ {73}\) In other words, he presented facts through a biased Greeks eye, which in itself demonstrated cultural realities. Perhaps his exact figures were not accurate, but the image of the outnumbering likely has some

\(^{72}\) Ibid.
reliability. This is especially true given the immense land conquered when subduing helots to begin with.

Sparta did not fear the mighty Xerxes and his Persian Army, they did not fear the Athenians, and they did not fear the Thebans, but they certainly feared the helots, and for a variety of reasons. Helots were no simple serf, peasant, or chattel slave. Ironically, even modern historians know much of this, as pieces of it reside in countless texts, but few if any ever give the helots appropriate recognition. It is not a far stretch to state that if helots were prisoners, then the entire state of Sparta was a prison full of armed guards. Except, the helots were a much larger body of a formerly established community, which makes it even more necessary to specify who, precisely, the helots were.
Chapter III: Helot Identity and Origins

The Dorians called slaves helots “even when they were Messenians.” (Illiad, ii. 584)\(^74\)

Since it is apparent that the helots were captives of war, and that the Spartan effort to subdue its neighboring Greeks into slavery was fairly common when building their polis, it is necessary to attempt to clear much of the debate regarding the identity of the helots. Today, there is a lot of focus on who the helots, precisely, were. Some scholars do not believe there was a particular identity because there was more than one community amongst the helots. Others believe that it was a matter of association, in which the Spartans named and classified helots and therefore caused the confusions associated with their identity.

Part of this problem rests in the fact that when rebellions occurred, primary sources often list them as helot revolts and classify all fleeing helots as Messenians regardless of where they were actually from (commonly Laconia or Messenia). This is because revolting against Sparta was a significant part of Messenian identity, and any helot that fled Sparta to join the Messenians at Naupactus became a Messenian during the Peloponnesian War.\(^75\) However, the truest answer rests in the revolts and rebellions themselves. There are clear distinctions between the Laconians and Messenians that depict the helots most referred by both modern and ancient historians.

**Laconians and Messenians**

It is true that several subcultures created the majority of the helot body, but these were still subdued communities not individual slaves. Naturally, amongst collective communities,

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\(^74\) Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 212-213.
there is always a handful, or in this case two, groups that stand out. As regarded by many modern scholars, these two were the original Laconians and later the Messenians.

Laconia, or Lacedaemonia, is in the southern Peloponnese, where the city of Sparta resided. Initially, the city was merely scattered villages until their union created a city-state.\textsuperscript{76} This was the essence of the Great Rherta, which, to reiterate a bit more concretely, was the Spartan Constitution via the oracle of Delphi that encouraged both the subduing of neighboring Greeks and the establishment of its political structure. The merging of villages is what created leadership by two kings, who were the source of the two leading villages. Technically, these kings conquered the other villages rather than literally united them. As sources indicate, the Laconians were amongst the first subdued by the Spartans, which connects the Spartan origin to that of the invading Dorians, as asserted by Pausanias in the aforementioned caption. However, none of the primary sources put much attention on the idea of a Laconian population or settlement, nor addressed them as a capable community to any degree. In fact, almost all primary authors address the location over the populace, which is partly why some authors, such as Nino Luraghi, argued that the a helots origin is not actually presented in the ancient primary sources themselves.

Laconia was just an area of Greece and a generalized term for an ancient peoples turned Spartan helot or most likely \textit{perioikoi}. It is also a term for the Spartans themselves for their relation to the territory, Laconia, of which they presided over. When the Dorians allegedly invaded (there is still no proof of such as invasion), they took the land of Laconia to build Sparta, making its former inhabitants “Laconians.” Whether or not the Dorian invasion actually occurred is essentially irrelevant. The fact that these Laconian neighbors became dependent on Sparta is

\textsuperscript{76} Freeman, \textit{Egypt, Greece, and Rome}, 168.
indicative of these inhabitants being of closer relation to undeveloped tribes of little sophistication or martial capability, especially given the era this may have occurred.

There is some consideration for these original inhabitants to be part of the Arcadian dynasty, but there is little proof of this. In general, throughout history, the subdued “Laconians” appeared a bit more passive in nature, and did not rebel as much or obtain their liberation independently. They actually remained helots even after the decline of Spartan hegemony, possibly because they resided specifically within the Spartan polis. This was not the case with the Messenians.

According to Herodotus, the Messenians were amongst the Arcadians and Argives as the earliest rivals of Sparta. In light of this, it is likely that each of these Spartan neighbors had some role in helotry and the perioikoi. This is consistent with the words of Plutarch, who stated, “The wisdom of Lycurgus became clearly manifest to those who witnessed the revolutions and miseries of the Argives and Messenians, who were neighboring states and of the same race as the Spartans.” The connection to Lycurgus and the referred wisdom that manifested is a resulting series of reforms discussed later in this text. The connection of the Messenians, as the same race as the Spartans, is indicative not only of their Greek similarities (language, culture, etc.), but of their potential Dorian heritage. However, this is not necessarily true.

The quote from the Iliad, referring to the Dorian’s view that all helots were slaves even when they were Messenians, separated the Dorians and Messenians as two distinctive cultures. The similarities that Homer, Pausanias, and even Herodotus refer to are that of Greek origin. The Dorians and Messenians are Greek subcultures. Note that, unlike the Laconians, Messenia was a specified location as well as a definable population rather than a general term. This quote also

77 Herodotus, The Histories, 329.
78 Plutarch. Plutarch’s Lives. 75.
contradicted the generalizations of Thucydides, who referenced all fleeing helots as Messenians. These conflicting viewpoints not only created confusion with helot identity but also demonstrated particular cultural perspectives, whereas the Dorian saw the collective body as slaves, disregarding any other formal identity, and the later Athenian historian Thucydides saw the majority of helots as Messenians. Nevertheless, both perspectives still ascertain that the Messenians were a part of the helot body, if not the majority.

The simplest way to identify the Messenians as the primary revolting helot community fighting to regain their independence is to analyze the Messenian Wars and the revolts themselves. It is necessary to note that the Spartans did not ethnically separate helot groups. They seemed to try to avoid recognizing any such group, regardless of their political, social, and economic relevance. For this reason, there is much confusion over whether the Messenians were in fact a formal group conquered by Sparta and turned slaves, or if the idea of Messenians is like that of the Laconians. However, Jonathan M. Hall uncovered a critical clue regarding Messenian history.

Hall concluded that the Dorianization of Messenians was a result of the “mythopoeic developments” after the liberation of Messenia, when its former history was lost. They merely attempted to fill in the blanks. This indicates that the Messenians were in fact an original and very ancient Achaean society from “the earliest phases of human history.” They would be amongst the four major tribes, alongside the Aeolians, Ionians, and the Dorians. There is even a theory that these Achaeans identify with Mycenaean history. This explains quite a bit regarding their warring, subduing, revolting, and eventual reestablishment.

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79 Luraghi et al., *Helots and Their Masters in Laconia and Messenia*, 158.
80 Ibid., 162.
81 Ibid.
In the words of Thucydides, “Most of the helots were descendants of the early Messenians who had long been enslaved and were hence all called Messenians.” The key here is “early Messenia.” Overall, there is a likelihood of Arcadian, Argives, Messenian, and Laconian helots and perioikoi, which certainly adds credibility to the common confusion on the subject of specific helot identity. However, there is official record that Spartans subdued the city of Tegea in southern Arcadia in 560 BCE but having successfully defeated the Spartans before succumbing, Tegea became a dependent city. This indicates that at least this Arcadian city became perioikoi rather than helots, and would have supported the Spartan military. The Spartan conquest of Messenia consisted of two wars over the course of almost one hundred years.

The Messenian Wars

Many theories surround the causes of the Messenian Wars. Some argue that it was a matter of obtaining agricultural resources, while others insist it was a matter of establishing military dominance. Some contemporary authors even posit that it was a matter of rivalry, in which the Spartans retaliated against the Messenians for their desire of Spartan women. There is also the possibility that it was simply an effort to develop the Spartan polis via “merging” surrounding neighbors, and eliminating threats to their territory by subduing them into servitude. This seems to be the most likely cause given the Great Rherta and the fact that Sparta continually made such an effort throughout its history. It was the very essence of Spartan society to subdue other communities and seek hegemony. However, as this study demonstrates in later chapters, Athens, Corinth, and even Thebes all fought for hegemony as well. It was a common motive for conflict that kept Greece separated by polis, and made unity an unattainable concept.

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83 Freeman, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, 170-171.
The idea of obtaining additional resources, while plausible, may be least likely merely because Laconia already fulfilled the agricultural necessities of Sparta. Messenia was
approximately forty percent of the Peloponnesian peninsula.\textsuperscript{84} This would be overkill if just for
resources to supply the much smaller Sparta. While obtaining this mass of land may seem like a
motive in itself, conquering such a space meant helots would outnumber Spartans and actually
weaken Spartan defenses.\textsuperscript{85} This made it more difficult for them to maintain control over the
widespread helot populations, almost requiring Sparta to make drastic alterations. Nevertheless,
the Messenians did not go down without a fight, not by a long shot.

The Messenian Wars occurred in two periods, although virtually all secondary sources
conflict on these dates. This is likely a result of the varying translations of primary texts, as well
as the primary authors not offering a specific or accurate enough chronology of events. As
addressed previously, each primary author wrote for different reasons, and thus created different
and often conflicting bits of information. Secondary sources would then attempt to interpret this
information in relation to other events and developments, which produced many modern
variations to add to the confusion.

Roughly, the First Messenian War occurred c. 740 - 720 BCE and the Second Messenian
War between c. 680 - 660 BCE. The simple fact that these wars lasted a similar length to most
ancient wars, averaging around twenty years each, is indicative of Messenia being a formidable
foe to the Spartans and the greater need of Sparta to subdue them. For example, the bulk of the
fighting in the Persian Wars lasted for approximately twenty years from 490 - 479 BCE, as did
the first two Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage occurring between 264 - 241 BCE and 218
– 201 BCE. With this kind of duration, Sparta was after more than Messenian resources, they

\textsuperscript{84} Martin, \textit{Ancient Greece}, 75.
\textsuperscript{85} Freeman, \textit{Egypt, Greece, and Rome}, 168.
were after dominance, reputation, and territory. In fact, the very dates of the wars align with various social and political developments in Sparta, but that is to come later.

Perhaps, Plato described the motive for the Messenian Wars, among others, best when he stated:

If you choose then to consider the Lacedaemonians with regard to wealth, you will find that what we have here in Attica falls far short of theirs. For the lands which they possess in their own country, and in Messenia, are such that no person here would dispute their superiority in this respect, whether he considers the quantity or the value of those lands, the number of their other slaves, besides such as the Helots, or the number of their horses and other cattle in the pasture.86

Plato addressed the landmasses of Sparta as a determination of superiority. If their land is better, they must be wealthier. Of course, this can mean resources including gold, silver, and iron mines, but agriculture was allegedly the primary use of a Messenian helot. Plato also directly regarded the helots as part of that superiority in addition to “other slaves” without a specified name. These were likely those of the many groups addressed previously (Laconians, Argives, Acadians, etc.). It is important to point out that Plato does indeed separate general slaves from helots, indicating a certain variation between “other slaves” and a helot. He also clearly separated Sparta from Messenia, and emphasized that the land in Sparta was already superior. This supports the idea that, while the fruitfulness of Messenia was likely an appeal to Sparta, it is again unlikely to be the entire motive.

The story of the First Messenian War is one of theatrics, drama, and devout courage. Yet, with dramatizations aside, the story reveals the cultural and military capabilities of the Messenians. Pausanias himself offered the most detail into the causes of the first war.

Pausanias described a Messenian by the name of Polychares, an Olympic victor of the games in 764 BCE. Polychares entrusted the care of his land and cattle to an unsavory Spartan

named Euaephnus, who later sold said cattle to Laconian merchants while attempting to deceive Polychares as to the happenings of his possessions. Upon this discovery, Euaephnus offered to repay the sum to Polychares, requesting his son accompany him to its location as assurance. Once they were in Laconia, Euaephnus instead slayed Polychares’ son, which provoked Polychares to seek retribution from Lacedaemonian leadership. Upon his denial, Polychares allegedly sought to kill every Lacedaemonian he encountered, and thus the feud began.

The story of Polychares and Euaephnus substantiated Messenian identity as it clearly separated Polychares from Lacedaemonia, and emphasized Messenia not only as community capable only winning the Olympics but also of confronting and challenging Spartan authority. It identified Messenia as having formal land divisions, economic structure, and agricultural value. Yet, perhaps more importantly, this story provided a basis for the everlasting hatred the Messenians had of Spartans. Nevertheless, despite this growing hatred, the Messenians still sought to resolve the issue without going to war.

According to Pausanias, neither side was willing to provide the other with the assailants (Polychares and Euaephnus), and, despite the Messenians attempt to handle the situation in a third party court, the Lacedaemonians secretly prepared for a war on Messenia. 87 He directly stated, “These are the causes which each nation assigns for war.” 88 He implied that the Messenians resistance encouraged the war. However, the Messenians did no such thing.

It was not in the best interest for the Messenians to war with Sparta, nor is it logical that handing over a single person would prevent a war. The effort of the Messenians to resolve the issue diplomatically and judicially is an example of their attempt to avoid war, not resist Spartan demands. At best, Pausanias’ description is an elementary justification for what was already

87 Pausanias, Description of Greece, 235-237.
88 Ibid., 235.
underway. Moses I. Finley referred to Pausanias as “insolent.” Edward Lytton described Pausanias as dependent on helots and money. Although, this story can ascertain that the cattle were a source of conflict, it more importantly demonstrated that there was an underlying tension between the regions.

If this story was true, then Sparta could have resolved the issue without war. Instead, they attacked the Messenian town of Ampheia to start the war. Clearly, it is what Sparta desired. In addition, it took several Laconians for Euaephnus to sell and transport the cattle, which could indicate that the entire ordeal was a ploy to start a war, if it ever actually occurred.

Another note about Pausanias story is that Messenia was not a subculture, or an unsophisticated tribe. Even if every word of Pausanias’ description is an utter fabrication, it still indirectly noted the formal governing and decision-making bodies of Messenia. In fact, Pausanias later described a meeting with the King of Messenia and the collective town assemblies, in which they discussed how to respond to the attack on Ampheia. Pausanias claimed that the assembly encouraged their people to rest easy and “not to fear the preparations of the Lacedaemonians as more formidable than their own, for although they had had longer experience in war, and were favored by the gods for defending their country instead of commencing hostilities.” Considering this statement, the antagonists of Pausanias would have a difficult time arguing for his Spartan bias. This statement also refutes modern perspectives that Messenians and helots were not capable of formal governing structures. Even after the Messenians became a general classification for revolting helots, the origin and roots of Messenia

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91 Pausanias, Description of Greece, 239.
remained. This critical statement relates Messenian heritage to their persistent fight against Sparta all throughout Greek history, and in every major war that developed. It also clarifies that Messenian identity did not falter despite their captivity, separation, and prolonged servitude.

Messenia was a neighbor to Laconia and a target of conquest for which Sparta to obtain hegemony. However, Pausanias does state one piece of undeniable truth:

For this war between the Lacedaemonians and their allies and the Messenians and their mercenaries did not get its name from the attacking force, as the Persian and Peloponnesian wars, but was called the Messenian war from the disasters which befell the Messenians, just as the war at Ilium got called Trojan and not Grecian. This, again, recognizes the relevance of Messenia as a capable and identifiable society, as were the Trojans.

The First Messenian War consisted of relatively common tactics of raiding the countryside. Spartans gathered Messenian crops, while leaving horses, cattle, and causing little natural harm, while the Messenians plundered Laconia. Note that this is partly why there is so much belief that Sparta sought Messenia for their fruitful land. However, the Messenians performed much the same methods in Laconia while merely seeking to defend their own land. It was merely a common war tactic, not necessarily a grand strategy.

After a series of battles, the Messenians actually won the upper hand, and sent the Spartans retreating to their homeland. Upon a second campaign, Spartan King Theopompus encouraged his troops to rally, stating it was a “noble ambition to shew themselves more capable of brilliant exploits than their fathers who subjugated their neighbors, and to acquire richer territory.” This indicates that the motive was about the war itself, the prestige and historical regard, which King Theopompus apparently placed in greater value than richer territory. Sparta

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92 Luraghi et al., *Helots and Their Masters in Laconia and Messenia*, 142-145.
93 Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 238.
94 Ibid., 240.
was a war-based society. During this second engagement, the Spartans actually taunted the Messenians by asserting their doom to Spartan slavery. As a display of their might, Sparta swelled their ranks with all of the formerly subjugated helots.

After falling back to the city of Ithome, the story of Aristodemus sacrificing his daughter with hopes that it would appease the oracles and aid them in their efforts to fend off the invading Spartans came to be. The sacrifice was for naught. While the war continued for twenty years, showing favor to both sides, the Messenian King Aristodemus took his own life on his daughter’s grave in a display of utter dismay and demoralization. The remaining Messenian leadership, after nearly twenty years of fighting without a pause and with enduring spirit, decided to abandon Ithome and scatter.\(^96\) This is why Pausanias, as clarified by Jonathan Hall, referred to the Messenians as “wandering outside of the Peloponnese.”\(^97\)

Sparta subjugated those who remained, forcing upon them an oath to never revolt or organize any kind of revolutionary action, and to provide Sparta with half of its produce.\(^98\) Again, this contributed to the motive for resources theory, but it was more likely that the Spartans needed to secure Messenian servitude to subdue a potential threat. The ultimate goal appeared to be power, prestige, and dominance. Resources were but a subsection achievement of their grand strategy, clarified by the taking of half the produce instead of all of it, and already having produce from Laconia. Nevertheless, this was the beginning of Sparta’s gradual decline, as they were yet to reach their peak of power and already demonstrated their need to subdue their neighbors, prevent a slave revolt, and rely on the servitude of a community clearly capable of economic and martial sustainability. Collectively, these revealed Sparta’s fears and


\(^{97}\) Hall, “The Dorianization of the Messenians,” 142.

\(^{98}\) Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 254-255.
vulnerabilities. Choosing to subdue a community like the Messenians into helotry could only mean trouble, which is precisely what Sparta received. The Messenian helots did not follow the aforementioned oath.

The First Messenian War is clearly indicative of Messenian capability. While the years of servitude certainly took their toll, it is undeniable that this group identified with their heritage and thus desperately fought for their land. Messenian helots had to serve Sparta from their own homes, which made revolt and rebellion a seemingly obvious risk. In fact, the Second Messenian War was the first of a series of revolts lead by the Messenian helots.

“In the thirty-ninth year after the capture of Ithome they rose in insurrection.”

The Second Messenian War took place approximately forty years after the first in c. 680 BCE. This is an important figure because it displays the fact that the Messenians were still essentially the same Messenians that went head on with Sparta and nearly won. It also shows that the Spartan hold on these helots was not as strong as they thought. Their influence was not so great.

Under the leadership of King Aristomenes, the Messenians engaged the Spartans at Derae. The result was yet another neutral battle, which is again another critical note for Messenian durability. In fact, Aristomenes received his kingship because of his performance during the battle of Derae in c. 684 BCE. This is also indicative of a continued assembly capable of such elections. Aristomenes went about fearlessly taunting the Spartans, which provoked the Spartans to seek both their oracle and the Athenians for advice. The result was a year delay, in which both sides collected allies to rally for battle.

The Messenians allied with Elis, Arcadia, Argos, and Sicyon, as well as “all of the Messenians that fled.” The return of fleeing Messenians again demonstrated their will and

99 Ibid., 256.
desire to regain their lost land, and once again affirmed their identity and heritage amongst the revolting helots. Sparta allied with the Corinthians and Lepreum (enemy of Elis). The battle of Boar’s Memorial followed.

Aristomenes led his men valiantly directly into the center where the Spartan King Anazander and his division stood. This brave assault forced the Spartans to rout. Aristomene ordered a Messenian regiment to pursue the routed Spartans, while he and his division persistently engaged every part of the Spartan force until each division routed. 101 This is a display of pure courage and fury. Aristomenes defeated all of the Spartan forces, causing Tyrtaeus to call upon their remaining helots to replenish the ranks. 102 The plundering of Laconia followed this Messenian victory. To date, there is little or no regard for this success in modern interpretations, nor an adequate assessment of the magnitude of such an accomplishment. In fact, some scholars challenge the existence of Aristomenes entirely. 103 Nevertheless, these were no general serf, peasant, or slave communities. Whether Aristomenes existed or was a fabricated heroic figure is of little consequence when appreciating the undisputed Messenian victory.

Pausanias proceeded to describe the Spartan desperation, claiming that they had attempted to sway the war by means of bribing Messenian allies. This holds some truth, as there are examples of such an effort all throughout Spartan history up to and including during the Peloponnesian Wars. Pausanias stated, “The Lacedaemonians violated honor in their war with the Messenians.” 104 As noted, the decline of Sparta commenced.

The repeat plundering and back and forth battling between the Messenians and Spartans eventually led to the turning point at Eira, which Sparta captured after a long ten-year assault.

100 Ibid., 257.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid., 259.
104 Pausanias, Description of Greece, 254-255, 261.
The alleged bribery of the Arcadian leader, Aristocrates, cut the Messenians off from necessary reinforcements. This also allowed the Spartans to wreak havoc on Eira and surrounding properties. During such, Aristomenes concocted a plan to invade Sparta directly while they were distracted. He did not seek to keep Sparta as a Messenian territory as the Spartans would keep their conquered territory, but to trade it for the return of Messene and peace in war. Aristocrates heard of the plan, and promptly informed the Spartans. Once the Messenians discovered this betrayal, they still chose not to stone Aristocrates themselves. This is a great example of Messenian honor. Instead, the Arcadians put him to death and cast him out without a burial.

The Messenians captured at Eira became Spartan helots, and the remaining Messenians built a colony at Cyllene. Others migrated to parts of Italy and Sardinia. The Second Messenian War, the first of many helot rebellions, ended with Laconia as the victor and the Messenians prisoners of war. It is necessary to point out that only those captured at Eira, just as those at Ithome during the First Messenian War, became helots, prisoners of war and slave to Sparta, not the Messenians that fled. This placed revolting Messenian helots back into helotry, which again only asked for more trouble. It also proves that the Messenian culture survived at least amongst those that colonized elsewhere. As history demonstrated, both Messenian sources, helots and colonies, lived to fight another day and fight they did.

The reason for rehashing these ancient wars is not only to depict the formal identity, drive, capability, and resistance of the Messenians, but also to highlight the general aggressions toward one another. All throughout Pausanias’ descriptions, he made note of fierce battling, confidence on both sides, Messenian warriors leaving their rank to fight bravely in the center.

105 Ibid., 271.
106 Ibid., 272.
regarded Messenian commanders for rushing into battle willing to sacrifice themselves for the
good of the cause. Even when hope was lost, the Messenians still fought, only fleeing when
leadership had fallen. The Spartans had to bribe a Messenian ally to secure victory. This is what
concluded the first of several helot revolts. This history alone speaks to the persistent efforts of
the Messenian helots to regain their territory, and break away from Spartan captivity. Clearly,
they were prisoners on their own land that would never let Sparta forget who they were or what
they stood for.

Treatment

In addition to the Messenian Wars, and the undeniable desire of the Messenians to regain
their lost lands, the tendency of rebellion amongst the helot class often developed out of their
inhumane treatment. According to Martin, helots lived under the constant threat of officially
sanctioned violence. This connected to the fact that the ephors of Sparta declared war on the
helot communities annually, which made it legal for any Spartan to kill a helot without the risk
of any sort of penalty. They also publically humiliated them by forcing them to wear dog-skin
caps, to overindulge in various abuses (alcohol or other forms) as a lesson to Spartan youth, and
regularly beat them. This sort of dehumanizing of helots was so extreme that Spartan citizens
created a social and psychological separation between Spartan and helot to enable them to justify
the Greek on Greek abuse. This is a common method of many modern terrorist groups.
Furthermore, a “secret band” of older Sparta boys lived in the wild with the sole purpose of
killing helots most likely to rebel. Virtually every aspect of Spartan society sought to suppress
helots and formulate Sparta into a powerful military, which began with Spartan children as early

108 Ibid., 77.
as seven years old, as detailed later in this text, and shows Sparta’s absolute dedication to its way of life.

Paul Cartledge attempted to zero in on the reason for such harsh treatment by referencing a massacre of some two thousand helots as a means to determine not only that this sort of slaughter was common, but also that it was the direct result of what he called “helot danger” to Sparta.\(^{109}\) The story of this particular massacre surrounded another deceitful Spartan strategy to eliminate the best of the helots. They offered the reward of freedom to each helot that fought best against their enemies, believing that those that made such a claim would be most probable to rise against them. This was the “helot danger,” and the very essence of many Spartan actions. Thucydides himself detailed the massacre Cartledge referred, stating:

> Because of their high spirit, and with the selection of about two thousand, these put on garlands and went around the temples thinking that they received their freedom; but the Lacedaemonians soon after did away with them, and no one knew how each was murdered.\(^{110}\)

The goal was to decrease helot moral and numbers, and thus minimize the chance of a rebellion. This particular example was cruel in a number of ways.

By misleading the selected helots, the Spartans encouraged the strongest to walk into their own deaths while simultaneously leaving a positive impression on remaining helot onlookers. They sought to keep helots as weak as possible, while manipulating them to volunteer for their own deaths. However, Cartledge neglected to make visible the fact that the remaining helots had no confirmable knowledge of these happenings, which, in a sense, added some humanity to the scenario. The possibility of freedom would actually lift spirits and encourage them to fight for the Spartan military instead of against it. Nevertheless, it was actually quite


similar to the use of gas chambers under the guise of showers in Nazi concentration camps. In any case, it remains inhumane toward those that fell to the Spartan sword that day. This is just one event when countless others of similar nature occurred, all aimed at maintaining control and power. It is clear that Sparta did not want another Messenian War.

Disciplining slaves was another act of cruelty toward helots, such as the use of a whip. This type of discipline symbolized the absolute power of the slave owner. Even children were brutally beaten. There were no limitations, regardless of physical, emotional, or psychological ailments. In fact, it got worse in those cases.

If a slave were ill in any way, Spartiates would cast them out instead of care for them or provide them with any sort of aid. Left to suffer, many died. This was even the case amongst Spartan infants, whereas Spartiates would examine all newborns to determine their plausibility as a Spartan soldier. If they found the baby to be weak for any reason, illness or other, they cast them out on the hillside, or, in some cases, forced them into helotry. This drastic measure again sought to ensure Spartan military strength and control. Plato described the idea of discipline as a window to the soul; something required to further one’s self in all aspects of life. Yet, the Spartans clearly used this perspective as a means to develop militarily and in their attempts to control helots. They treated helots like the lowest of the low, as if they had no worth nor value in life, while the contrary was actually true. This treatment was so profound because of the persistent need to prevent a helot rebellion.

Ironically, while these abuses sought to suppress and control the helot communities, particularly the Messenians, it had the reverse effect. Thomas Wiedemann recognized this very fact, asserting that once a slave realized they could neither influence nor control their treatment

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their only practical solution was to flee. In fact, he proposed that rather logical “solution” as apparent in all slave societies, particularly in Greece and Rome. Yet, the Messenians did more than flee. They fought back in mass on several occasions, which separated Messenian helots from all others in captivity. This is another critical point toward the identity and heritage of Messenian helots.

As this study will show, helots even joined the Athenians during the Peloponnesian War. Wiedemann further claimed that most slave rebellions derived from individual slave dissatisfaction with their treatment by particular masters. Yet, this is also clearly not true considering the mass revolting and willful warring of the helots against Sparta. They did not simply seek to flee an unsavory master, or group of masters. They went to battle against the most formidable military in ancient Greece, an entire polis, which in itself validated their determination and credibility. Wiedemann is too general, and likely primarily addressed Roman or Athenian chattel slaves. Yet, these assessments further substantiate the helots as prisoners of war, rather than general slaves of any sort. They were clearly capable of war, willing and able to fight for themselves as a community effectively. This relates to Cartledge’s idea of “helot danger.” These facts directly influenced almost all aspects of Spartan political and economic developments.

\[\text{\underline{113} Wiedermann. Greek and Roman Slavery, 11.}\]
\[\text{\underline{114} Ibid.}\]
Chapter IV:

The Helots Influence on Sparta’s Social, Political and Economic
Developments

“Fearing the youth and multitude of their Helotes, for the Lacedaemonians had ever many ordinances concerning how to look to themselves against the Helotes.”115

The sheer existence of the helots and their tendency to rebel became the very basis of all Spartan political and economic policy. Kitto argued that the task of maintaining their hold on the vast Messenian land pushed Sparta to its limits.116 The enslavement of the Messenians made the Spartans a minority in their own territory. This is not to include the “other slaves” of Laconia and other neighboring regions. Sparta found itself at great risk of rebellion by a clearly threatening community. The Messenian revolt, or Second Messenian War, convinced the Spartans to adopt the institutions of Lycurgus.117 The development of the Peloponnesian League followed soon after. With the Great Rherta and the oligarchy system at its base, these reforms were another step toward Sparta’s gradual demise.

While it might seem contradictory to posit that the reforms that literally made Sparta stand out, and in many ways contributed to their success, were actually a part of their decline, it need be reiterated that it was Sparta’s dependency on helots and the necessity to control them that provoked these developments, and that those developments sparked war. Despite being Spartan victories, the collective wars chipped away at Spartan durability and sustainability, as did the reforms that caused the wars. This was particularly the case with the Peloponnesian

117 Ibid.
Wars. The Messenian helots, as well as the free Messenians, remained a part of that degradation every step of the way.

**Lycurgus (Lykurgus) Reforms**

Well done, philosopher, persist, persuade the young men, that we may have more with the same opinions as you and who say the same as you. From such principles as these have grown our well-constituted states by these was Sparta founded: Lycurgus fixed the opinions in the Spartans by his laws and education. \(^{118}\)

Like most things with the Spartans, and all of ancient Greece for that matter, many conflicting theories surround the life of Lycurgus. Most primary sources reflect on him to some degree, all of which refer to him as a lawgiver or legislator. This includes Aristotle, Plato, Plutarch, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and Polybius. The issues of his existence, divinity, age, or other is not in dispute for this study, as it is clear that this Spartan policy undeniably existed and is most relevant. How his reforms relate to the dependency on helotry is of utmost importance to the path of Spartan history.

The Lycurgan reforms affected most things in Spartan life, which is why many scholars refer to them as a drastic, significant, or dramatic transformation. Everything from political structure, to military organization, to marriage and sex life had some rule or law, which is precisely why Sparta appeared as a totalitarian military society based on complete equality. According to Kitto, Lycurgus organized the city for exactly what it was, “a dominant minority holding down and exploiting a vastly more numerous population of active and dangerous serfs.” \(^ {119}\) Ignoring the reflection on helots as serfs, as the position of this study that it is a flawed and subjective perspective, the pinpointing of Lycurgus’ motives is critical. It is also important to note that these reforms resulted from the fact that the collective helot body outnumbered and

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\(^{119}\) Ibid., 91.
threatened the Spartans, not just the Messenians. For this reason, modern scholars conflict over the start date of the Lycurgan reforms, with some placing them as early as 800 BCE, before the First Messenian War. It is most likely that these reforms began after the Second Messenian War in the mid seventh century BCE.

The persistent wars and risk of helot rebellion first meant that Lycurgus needed to devise a plan to better control their land. Plutarch stated, “In order to expel arrogance, envy, crime, luxury and those with yet older and more serious political afflictions, wealth and poverty, Lycurgus persuaded the citizens to pool all the land and then redistribute it afresh.” A mainstreamed strictly controlled population meant better control overall. Thus, he divided the land evenly amongst the Spartans, so that each Spartan would control a given section and therefore helot or group of helots. All citizens of Sparta worked for the state so the state could grow rather than the individual Spartiate. Each allotment of land meant each citizen could equally contribute to the masses and has what Lycurgus deemed an appropriate amount of barley and produce for the proper health and fitness expectations of a Spartan. The development of children, particularly males, became a critical component of Spartan society as well.

Male children would stay with their mothers until the age of seven, at which point they would move off to the *apoge*. Female children stayed with their mothers. The *apoge* was essentially a military academy. Children would learn from a mentor until they were eighteen years of age, at which time the Spartan warriors would cast them out to encourage independent survival for up to a year. During this time, they had to steal from helots, suffering severe penalties of punishment and disgrace if caught. This relation to the helots equally shows the dismissal of the helots as well as recognizes them as a critical component to Spartan survival. It

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121 Ibid., 17.
taught Spartans to take advantage of helots at a young age. The penalties young Spartans endured if caught caused them to act with such fear that some sources describe extreme acts of desperation to avoid such recognition. Lycurgus encouraged this fear to create a perfect soldier willing to do anything it took to succeed. If the Spartan youth survived the year in exile, they received their shield with the famed embroidery “Come home with this in victory, or on it,” and officially became a Spartan citizen, a Spartiate. This produced devout Spartans that would not think twice about killing a helot.

The role of women in Sparta significantly changed to a much more liberated, per se, status. Women upheld the Spartan household and domestic affairs when the men were off in battle. They travelled about the city, when women in other Greek states remained significantly restricted, as well as vigorously exercised often with Spartan warriors. These women remained scarcely clothed or bare, as to encourage resiliency. Lycurgus believed that a woman needed to be strong and brave to bear a Spartan warrior, including in childbirth and in marriage. Biological physiology aside, these collective beliefs and privileges had some sort of the reverse effect on the Spartan society.

The strict laws of the Lycurgus reforms tended to relate most to Spartan men, leaving women free of its regulations and providing them with freedom, power, and prestige. This is an intriguing perspective given the fact that modern scholars praise Sparta for its emphasis on equality. Nevertheless, Aristotle shared this belief when he stated, “The legislator [Lycurgus] wanted to make the whole state hardy and temperate, and he has carried out his intention in the case of men, but he has neglected the women, who live in every sort of intemperance and

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123 Ibid.
124 Pomeroy et al., Ancient Greece, 162.
125 Freeman, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, 234.
126 Pomeroy et al., Ancient Greece, 162.
luxury.\textsuperscript{127} The implications of Sparta’s literal inequality go farther than women versus men, and especially toward their helot prisoners. It actually influenced the degradation of men in Sparta, and inevitably the military.

The privileges of women eventually meant greed and luxury. By the fourth century BCE, women controlled two-fifths of the land and property in Sparta by right of dowries and inheritances, which led to their purchases of fancy clothing, jewelry, perfumes, and other luxurious items.\textsuperscript{128} While this might seem harmless in today’s world, to Sparta it literally neutralized many of Lycurgus’ efforts to avoid such things, which is ironic in itself.

According to Plutarch, women gained this power because of the frequent expeditions of their husbands.\textsuperscript{129} These same expeditions gave Sparta its military prestige. Aristotle made note of the identical scenario, agreeing with Plutarch that women enjoyed too much freedom. In fact, Plutarch blamed the eventual failure of the reforms on the refusal of women to denounce their privileges.\textsuperscript{130} Realistically, both Aristotle and Plutarch likely exaggerate the situation, but their consistency also coincides with Xenophon’s account. This is indicative of some level of inequality and abuse of privilege, which in itself is perplexing considering Sparta’s efforts in discipline. It leaves the question as to why the Spartans would allow the women to refuse anything. The fact is that the reforms were simply flawed.

Many scholars admire and marvel at Sparta’s resistance to individuality, all Spartans created equal (\textit{homoioi}), because they believe it somehow created a devout loyalty to the Spartan state that never fully developed in other poleis. This was a derivative of the political resistance to

\textsuperscript{127} Aristotle, \textit{Politics}, 29.
\textsuperscript{128} Pomeroy et al., \textit{Ancient Greece}, 60.
autocracy. However, it is clearly apparent that no such equality truly existed. Nevertheless, to give an idea of what this equality looked like in its simplest form, Plutarch, referencing the reform of the common dining table, stated,

The Spartans meet in groups of about fifteen (*syssitia*), sometimes a few more, sometimes a few less. Each man brings to the mess each month ninety prints of barley, fifty-one quarts of wine, about five pounds of cheese and approximately two and one half pounds of figs. In addition, they also bring a small amount of money for garnishes.\(^{131}\)

The reform also required the kings to take part in the mess hall, while the women ate separately as a group. However, this law did not pertain to the helots.

One of the many flaws of these collective reforms is that the Great Rherta forbade any physical writing of laws. This meant that Lycurgus had to rely on habit and strict training to instill these reforms as customary to Sparta. He hoped the Spartans would follow the laws by choice rather than necessity.\(^{132}\) This clearly did not last, as records indicate that the famed Spartan general Lysander also contributed to the greed that degraded Spartan resolve. Perhaps, this is in part because of the strict economic reforms.

**The Spartan Economy**

Territory, particularly Messenia and certain valleys of Laconia, was the primary source of the Spartan economic system. It was abundant in natural resources, which included copper, iron, and tin mines, various rock quarries, and forests. The Messenian farmland provided various foods ranging from olives to grapes for wine, as well as vast pastures for varieties of farm animals, and especially its famed horses. It was also sufficient in its production of grain, which allowed Sparta to remain independent. There was no need for agricultural trade, nor did Spartan law allow it.


Strict law forbade any Spartan citizen from engaging in agriculture, trade, or any other form of professional work, as law required him to be a professional soldier. The helots performed all of these duties for the Spartiate specifically so he could contribute his share to public masses. Not doing so put his citizenship to Sparta at risk. The helots rent, per se, not only contributed to the Spartiate’s masses, but also set a limit on Sparta’s agricultural economy. This placed the helots in a critical position to perform their duties, and clearly meant that Sparta would starve and likely collapse without the helots to keep them functioning. No agricultural farming meant no contributions and no citizens, which would literally mean no Spartan military. It also had the reverse effect, whereas the recirculation of food through the hierarchy meant a greater dependence of the helots on the Spartiates for sustenance. By law, the helots had to contribute at least fifty percent of their produce. The entire economic system depended on slave labor. Yet, while the helots were a literal linchpin to Spartan society, Lycurgus meant to create a self-sufficient society.

There was little or no trade, as few foreigners passed through, no external concepts for Spartan policy ever took shape, and all forms of currency, including the widely accepted Athenian currency, had no value in the Spartan economic system. Instead, Sparta remained traditional in their use of an iron currency. Sources claim that the iron currency was so dense and difficult to manage that few people carried much, which resulted in little wealth amongst the Spartiates. This is because Lycurgus assigned a low value to even a large amount of iron coinage, where ten minas required a substantial storage space. It also eliminated the frequency

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135 Ibid.
137 Plutarch, Plutarch on Sparta, 17.
of theft and contributed to a lack of foreign trade. Collectively, this was likely the point of such a reform, as minimizing the possibility of becoming wealthy would theoretically eliminate greed and encourage a greater devotion to the state and military. This also emphasizes the length of which Sparta went to control the populace. All of these changes connected to the great reform in the sixth century, and likely influenced local arts and crafts.\footnote{A.J. Holladay, “Spartan Austerity” \textit{The Classical Quarterly}, New Series, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1977), pp. 111-126 http://www.jstor.org/stable/638374 [Accessed April 21, 2015].} Literally, these reforms affected all aspects of society.

Although the primary mode of this economy was via agriculture and mining, Lycurgus even cancelled all pending debts to Sparta and Spartiates. There was no other means of internal revenue or financial obligations. These extreme economic restrictions entirely isolated Sparta from growth, and inevitably meant financial ruin if they did not seek plunder or enforce the production of mines via helots. Hence, this contributed to the taxation of the\textit{perioikoi} and helot populations.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{The Politics}, 140.}

Ironically, while the\textit{perioikoi} were conquered neighbors to Sparta, forced to support the military and pay tribute for their freedom, the prohibition of Spartiates to engage in anything but that of a professional soldier meant the\textit{perioikoi} gained full control of all trade and manufacturing.\footnote{Ibid., 149.} Simply put, they were responsible for all of the manufacturing of weapons, armor, ships, etc. This empowered these communities, and allowed them to develop lucrative business practices without the strict laws of Lycurgus to govern them. According to Aristotle, Sparta began to decline once they reached supremacy because they did not know how to be at leisure.\footnote{Ibid., 149.} They continued to go to war without having money in the public treasury. This was another chip off the block of Spartan sustainability.
Where other city-states, such as Athens, developed financially and economically through maritime commerce, Sparta remained ancient and primitive. This tied Sparta to the lands just as their helots, kept Sparta immobile, and made them ever more dependent on helots. In addition, this is why Sparta never developed a formidable navy, where Athens did. As the Second Peloponnesian War, or Great Peloponnesian War, demonstrated, Sparta sought the Persians for naval support against the Athenian navy. Considering the past Persian Wars, seeking Persian support for any reason is always somewhat of a questionable decision when considering a loyalty to Greece.

The idea here is not to detail all of the components of the Lycurgus reforms, as there are volumes that do such a thing, but more so to point out and describe a few of the most critical and widely known reforms that shaped Sparta and placed them on their journey. Most importantly, it is to show how these reforms relate to helot control, contributed to war, and inevitably meant their decline. The fact that so many detailed reforms developed specifically to instill control and stability in the wake of moderately successful helot rebellions truly highlights Sparta’s concern for such. It was a domino effect, whereas one effort to prevent an uprising led to another and another. This is clearly visible in the many ways that each reform connected to one another with each reaching back to the Messenian Wars and an absolute need to maintain helot dependency and control.

The apparent inequalities amongst men and women, political restrictions, and economic conditions led to a decrease in vigor in Sparta most visible after the Peloponnesian Wars. According to Pomeroy, the economic conditions in Sparta in general limited household size and, inevitably, population, as an increase in population would mean further lot division, smaller
parcels, less production capability, and less ability to contribute to the messes. It also meant a dwindling military on a numeric standpoint. Both Aristotle and Plutarch agreed with this decline, linking them directly to the Lycurgus reforms and indirectly to the helots. However, Sparta must have recognized the fragility of their system. In order to sustain their way of life, Sparta sought to create allies with the specific intent of controlling the helots.

**The Peloponnesian League**

As Sparta gained hegemony over Argos, they began to transition from a policy of conquest into a policy of alliance. In the sixth century BCE, Sparta assumed a leadership position and began to unite the Peloponnesian states. First, Sparta set out to rid Corinth of tyranny in order to secure their loyalty. Then, they helped Elis, a former enemy during the Messenian Wars, to secure control of the Olympic Games. The Olympics was a significant honor, as described by Proclus. This provided a substantial basis, as Corinth was the second most powerful polis in the league. Those excluded were Messenia, Argos, Achaea, Thebes and any other polis outside of the Peloponnesus. Some of these, particularly Argos and free Messenians, still threatened Sparta and posed a threat to smaller towns in the Peloponnes. Other members of the league included Phlius, Orneae, Megara, Boeotians, Northern Locrians, Phocians, and Mantinea.

Sparta needed a system of control that would minimize the ability of the Messenians to rebel, while equally ensuring that no other nearby polis could support them in a rebellion. According to Kagan, the development of the Peloponnesian League was a direct result of Sparta’s effort to safeguard their community against the likelihood of a helot rebellion. The

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143 Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 174.
Messenian Wars merely concluded in the late seventh century. With Sparta as the hegemon, weaker towns sought their protection, which both inflated the league and Sparta’s resolve.

The league followed a treaty in which each member would subordinate their foreign policy to Sparta for their protection. This meant that the league was more of a loose organization with Sparta on one side, and all of the allies on the other, each connected by separate treaties.\textsuperscript{145} These treaties only tied the individual states to Sparta but not to each other. This meant Sparta could call upon its allies to serve as soldiers under Spartan command at their will, but none of them could ask one another. It is also, why the original name of the league was actually “Sparta (Lacedaemon) and the allies.”\textsuperscript{146} Sparta only supported its allies when it was to their advantage. This also shows how fragile the alliance truly was.

There were few gatherings amongst alliance members. Typically, they only occurred when Sparta deemed it necessary. The alliance appeared grouped together based on their military, political, and geographic relevance. Smaller, easily controlled, states had less influence and importance to the league. Kagan argued that since Argos never joined the alliance, Sparta always feared an Argive union with other enemy states, especially if those states provided assistance to a helot rebellion.\textsuperscript{147} In fact, Thucydides clarified this fear when addressing the conclusion of the First Peloponnesian War (c. 460 - 445 BCE), stating, “The helots were not rebelling on the scale which Athens hoped and Sparta feared.”\textsuperscript{148} The literal implication of Athenian strategy to depend on the helot rebellion as a critical weakness of Sparta is a detrimental point discussed later in this study. Pomeroy further added that the states in the Peloponnesian League were not concerned about one another’s wellbeing, as the Spartans just

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} Pausanias, Description of Greece, 174.
\textsuperscript{147} Kagan, The Peloponnesian War, 5.
\textsuperscript{148} Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, Trans. Martin Hammond. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2009), 566.
wanted their assistance in the event of a helot uprising.\footnote{Pomeroy et al., \textit{Ancient Greece}, 175.} To this degree, it is already undeniable that the helots, particularly the Messenian helots, carried a considerable influence on all things in Spartan society.

With the Peloponnesian League establish, and the many institutions in place to secure the helots, it was only a matter of time before differences amongst city-states brought war. Nevertheless, Xenophon stated, “so did Lycurgus fashion the state. But those who came after him nonetheless saw it as a pure and powerful oligarchy, swollen and angry.”\footnote{Xenophon, \textit{Constitution of the Lacedaemonians}. Trans. Donald F. Jackson. (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 78.} Swollen with pride perhaps, but the clock on their hegemony was already ticking.
Chapter V: War

In general, Ancient Greek history is full of near constant war. When they were not trying to fend off a foreign invader, like the Persians or Macedonians, they treated each other as such. In fact, the only unity that ever somewhat existed during this era was during the Persian Wars (c. 449 – 499 BCE). Otherwise, each city-state fought against each other for power and prestige, with the strength of their hoplites as a determining factor of a polis. The constant struggle for hegemony, especially between Sparta and Athens, was the primary mode of conflict. Where Athens grew politically and economically, Sparta grew in military prestige. Yet, these differing approaches developed out of a dependency on slaves. The Athenians depended on the diverse chattel slaves, while the Spartans built their entire society around the helot community. As this study revealed, the laws, political ideology (oligarchy and Great Rherta), and alliances that developed in and involving Sparta built on one another specifically to instill control over the Spartiates and helots alike. There needed to be strict discipline to create a powerful military capable of both repressing the significant helot population and obtaining hegemony over at least the Peloponnese.

Sparta used helots in almost every major military engagement, with the helots outnumbering the Spartans on the battlefield almost every time. One of the best examples of this was during the battle of Plataea in 479 BCE, which concluded the Persian Wars. According to Herodotus, “The whole number of the Greeks was of heavy-armed men thirty eight thousand and seven thousand, and of light-armed sixty and nine thousand.”\(^{151}\) Thirty five thousand of these

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soldiers were helots, which is why Herodotus placed the helot to Spartan ratio at approximately seven to one during this battle.

There were a number of types of helots in battle, some liberated and others Spartan half-breeds. Often, Spartiates used helot women for their personnel needs. This produced the nothoi, or nathos (νόθοι), meaning nothing or illegitimate. They were the offspring of a Spartan father and helot women. Only the male offspring remained, as the Spartans saw no military purpose for the females. Hence, the male nothoi became an intermediary part of Spartan society via the rank of mothakes (μοθάκες) and mothones, putting helot blood on side of the Spartan military.\(^{152}\) Homer, himself, depicted a scene of a wealthy man who had many sons born in marriage, yet also had a son with a slave purchased specifically to be his concubine.\(^{153}\) These situations were common. However, the Spartans still withheld citizenship rights from the mothakes, at least in part because they never completed the agoge. After all, most helots were of similar heritage to the Spartans.

Thucydides referenced the use of helots to relieve Spartan hoplites during various sieges, particularly during the Second Peloponnesian War. In fact, there are various records of the helots use in smaller engagements all throughout Spartan history. Sometimes military service led to helot freedom. These helots became neodamôdeis. Of course, this is not to mention the subdued communities of the perioikoi, who were also a critical component of the military. Helots became a crutch for Sparta that both held them up and meant their collapse if removed. This was perhaps a contributing factor to the constant helot rebellions, which occurred every time Sparta seemed vulnerable. This mere tendency is what sparked the outburst of the First Peloponnesian War, despite the common belief of a strict power struggle.

\(^{152}\) Plutarch, *Plutarch on Sparta*, 77.
Causes of the First Peloponnesian War (460 - 445 BCE)

Initially, Athens was part of an alliance with Sparta called the Hellenic League, or as Herodotus simply called it “the Greeks who had united.” Such was the case during the Persian Wars, the famed invasions of Darius and Xerxes. However, while the alliance recognized Sparta and Athens as its head, it fell apart shortly thereafter the Persian Wars. Sparta withdrew from the alliance to reform the Peloponnesian League, which provoked Athens to transition the Hellenic League into the Delian League. Typically, historians blame Pausanias of Sparta for the separation, claiming allies complained that he was being too oppressive. Yet, there was quite a bit more to this division than most sources lead on.

Most modern scholars attribute the causes of the First Peloponnesian War to Sparta’s fear of rising Athenian power. However, a closer look revealed that the power conflict was secondary to the issue of helot-based politics and a helot revolt.

One of the leading fundamental causes of conflict in ancient Greece was of course politics. Democracy and oligarchy were the two primary types of political structures. The beginning of democracy took place in Athens during the Solon reforms. To Athens, democracy meant giving power to the people and equal opportunity. Pericles (c. 495 – 429 BCE), an Athenian leader, stated, “Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy.” All citizens could participate in government activities, to an extent. They also had freedom of speech. Clearly, this is the beginning of modern democracy. While oligarchy also focused on equality, the two variations of equality were quite different. Aristotle stated:

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Democracy arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be equal absolutely. Oligarchy arises out of the notion that those who are unequal in one respect are in all respects unequal; being unequal, that is, in property, they suppose themselves to be unequal absolutely.¹⁵⁶

Although there were many reforms under Solon, democracy was a major source of conflict with the Spartans and the Peloponnesian League. According to Anton Powell, the “demos” of Athens was often mad, and their imperial government constituted a “warning which gives some slight value to even the worst of failures.”¹⁵⁷ Athens believed it should preserve their demokratia and freedom while simultaneously avoiding oligarchies. Thus, by their own political motives they were everlasting enemies of any Greek polis that supported an oligarchy government. Hence, this is one of the primary causes of the First Peloponnesian War, as well as the separation of the original alliance. It was not necessarily about power struggles, as it was clashing ideologies. The oligarchy system was how Sparta attempted to avoid tyranny, and control Spartiates and helots. Yet, even this did not necessarily mean war.

Both Athens and Sparta attempted to resolve their issues without war, as it was in their best interest to do so. Sparta could not risk losing hegemony, nor Athens their political and economic progress. According to Kagan, Sparta sent at least three missions to Athens during which various sincere and sober debates and arguments followed that made it seem possible to avoid war.¹⁵⁸ Themistocles, of Athens, persistently resisted negotiations with Sparta claiming that none of their proposals was in the best interest of Athens, which was to build city walls and a navy. Thucydides addressed these negotiations:

¹⁵⁷ Anton Powell, Athens and Sparta: Constructing Greek Political and Social History from 478 BC. (London: Routledge, 1988), 78.
¹⁵⁸ Kagan, The Peloponnesian War, 47.
Realizing their intentions, the Spartans sent an embassy to Athens, partly because they would themselves have preferred to see neither the Athenians nor anyone else in possession of any walls at all, but more because their allies urged them on, fearing the size of the Athenian navy.\textsuperscript{159}

This is precisely why so many modern scholars focused on the cause of conflict being strictly about power. However, there are several things to point out about this quote. First, Thucydides said it was “partly” the reason, not the entire focus. This makes it tentative rather than a primary motive. Second, he said “preferred” not demanded, and suggested that the allies discouraged the walls and navy, not particularly the Spartans. Thucydides continued, “The Spartans recommended them not to build the walls but rather to join with them in demolishing all the walls surrounding cities outside the Peloponnesian that were still standing.”\textsuperscript{160} Ulterior motives are a certainty, and would likely revolve around the fact that Sparta is a land based military. Walls would make it difficult for Sparta and their allies to invade Athens or any other polis with fortified by walls, if they ever deemed it necessary. Nevertheless, the Spartans clarified that they did not want invading enemies (this dispute occurred after the Persian Wars) to have a fortified base from which to launch attacks, and that the Peloponnesian in its entirety could act as a “refuge and base for all parties.”\textsuperscript{161} This suggestion is subject to all sorts of scrutiny because of Sparta’s desire to maintain hegemony, but the fact is indisputable that Sparta was still willing to be in league with Athens, despite their rising naval authority and defiant diplomacy. Sparta merely “recommended” they heed to their advice.

It is one thing to deny Sparta’s suggestion and offer an alternative solution, and it is another to outright refuse and even delay discussions. Thucydides described Themistocles’ visit to Sparta:

\textsuperscript{159} Thucydides. \textit{The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians}, 54.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.
Themistocles told Sparta he would send an envoy to address the issue, and parted to Sparta himself instead. He told the Athenians to begin building the wall and to send the envoy to join him only after it reached a certain height capable of defense. Once in Sparta, Themistocles avoided Spartan officials, claiming he did not know why his envoy was late to arrive. Sparta believed Themistocles, because they saw him as an ally and friend, but when other visitors arrived with clear contrary evidence – that a wall was going up and had already reached some height – they could find no reasons to disbelieve them.\textsuperscript{162}

Themistocles betrayed the Spartans trust, which clearly was not seeking war with the Athenians at this point. The Spartans saw Themistocles as a friend and ally. To step back for a moment, it is necessary to clarify that Thucydides was an Athenian historian, not a Spartan. His impression of Themistocles and narrative of the situation is far from Athenian bias. In addition, his later exiling was due to his performance as a general. Skipping ahead, Themistocles eventually told Sparta that he decided to build the wall without involving them, and that he felt it was best for his people and allies. Yet, still the Spartans did not seek war, or show much or any anger.\textsuperscript{163} Thucydides actually claimed that the Spartans still respected the Athenians because of their commitment against the Persians. It is necessary to reiterate the fact that Sparta’s proposals occurred after the separation of the Hellenic League, as did their meeting with Themistocles, which is critical. Diplomacy failed because Themistocles had his own agenda, but, despite all of this, it still did not mean war.

Themistocles claimed that he built the walls in the best interest of his people and his allies. However, either Thucydides’ account is incorrect or Themistocles significantly misread his people. The Athenians ostracized Themistocles and exiled him to Argos. In addition, Sparta accused him of creating a treasonous plot against Pausanias, who was under investigation by the Spartans for his alleged crimes. Sparta would not investigate their own famed general if they were not still trying to maintain a collective alliance. Themistocles’ successor, Cimon son of

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
Miltiades, chose to continue in an alliance with Sparta, which again countered Themistocles’ entire position in the ordeal.

Further refuting Themistocles’ appraisal is the fact that the Naxians and Thasians rebelled against Athenian rule, while members of the Delian League, because Athens no longer treated them as equal.\(^{164}\) This fact questioned the fabric of Athenian democratic ideology. Nevertheless, the Athenians crushed both revolts, but not before the Thasians sought Spartan support against what appeared to be Athenian tyranny. It was a hallmark of Spartan policy to stop tyranny.

If Delian League allies appealed to Sparta for support, Themistocles was clearly not accurate, nor was the allegations of Pausanias’ oppressive behavior entirely true. This critical moment depicted when the separation between Athens and Sparta truly began. If the Peloponnesian Wars were all about a power struggle between the two dominating city-states, Sparta would have directly assaulted Athens before the walls and navy were built, just as they did the Messenians and all other subdued communities, instead of seeking to keep them as a friend and ally and *ask* them not to build. Sparta itself did not have walls, which meant they would have the same vulnerabilities as Athens on land. Furthermore, Sparta’s effort to stop tyranny does not necessarily mean they were challenging Athenian power as much as it was a basic principle of their society and political reforms to do so. This is why Thasos sought their support.

Sparta agreed to help the Thasians, but was unable to do so after an earthquake shook Sparta to its core, killing many Spartan soldiers. After three years under siege, the Thasians eventually came to terms with Athens without Spartan support, which meant surrendering

\(^{164}\) Ibid., 59-60.
everything over to Athens and demolishing their walls.\textsuperscript{165} Sparta did not invade Athens, despite their agreement to support the Thasians. This was precisely when Sparta truly began to decline.

According to Thucydides, “During the earthquake Spartan helots and the ‘outsiders’ from Thuria and Aethaia seceded to Ithome. Most of the helots were descendants of the early Messenians.”\textsuperscript{166} This scenario is affirmed by Plutarch when he stated, “Chiefly, after the great earthquake, when, as history informs us, the \textit{Helotes}, joining the Messenians, attacked Sparta, did infinite damage to the country, and brought the city to the greatest extremity.”\textsuperscript{167} There is a bit of a conflict in the identity of those revolting between Thucydides and Plutarch’s descriptions of the helots, as Thucydides referred to them as mostly Messenians while Plutarch separated the helots and Messenians. George A. Papantoniou clarified Plutarch’s statement, claiming that the helots gathered and organized the rebellion, at which time the Messenians later joined them.\textsuperscript{168} Yet, this is a matter of cross association between the Messenian helots and the free Messenians and \textit{perioikoi}, who the fleeing helots rallied in common Messenian fashion. As soon as Sparta was vulnerable and weakened by their losses from the earthquake, the Messenian helots rebelled in mass, sought out their homeland, joined free Messenians, and brought Sparta to their absolute limits. The “outsiders” Thucydides referenced were likely \textit{perioikoi}, but both Thuria and Aethaia were also Messenian towns. These points are critical to confirming both helot identity as well as helot heritage throughout the reign of Sparta.

Reflecting back on the First Messenian War, Ithome was the Messenian city held under siege for several years before eventually succumbing to Sparta. The captives became helots, who

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\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167} Plutarch, \textit{Plutarch’s Lives of Romulus, Lycurgus, Solon, Pericles, Cato, Pompey, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Demosthenes, Cicero, Mark Antony, Brutus, and Others, and his Comparisons}. Translated by John and William Langhorne. (New York: W.M. L. Allison Company, 1889), 64.
\end{flushright}
clearly returned home to Ithome after the earthquake. They never forgot where they were from, nor lost their identity as a community. They knew exactly where they wanted to go, and what they as a group wanted to do. If they did not have a tie to Ithome, through heritage and original identity, there would be no good reason to flee to a city still in Spartan territory, let alone wreak havoc on the countryside. They would simply dissipate and seek freedom. In addition, the fact that the helots fled to Ithome is also indicative of their proximity to Messenia prior to the earthquake, which further substantiates their formal identity in contrast to many modern beliefs. Plutarch stated, “After the earthquake, the helots joined the Messenians, ravaged the country, and almost conquered it.”\(^{169}\) Again, this is likely a matter of association, whereas the captive Messenian helots joined free Messenians. In any case, this was Sparta’s worst nightmare, as a ravaged countryside and rebelling helots meant no resources, no economy, no military support or supplies, and eventually no Sparta. Everything in Sparta depended on the helots performing their duties. This meant Sparta needed to take extreme measures.

As clarified in the development of the Peloponnesian League, in the event that Sparta itself could not put down the revolt their allies should assist them. Thus, instead of invading Athens, Sparta solicited for their support in quelling the helot rebellion. According to Thucydides, Sparta respected the Athenian’s reputation for siege operations while inadvertently revealing their own inadequacy for such.\(^{170}\) This is a very important statement, because it asserts Sparta’s recognition of internal weaknesses and Athenian capability, which again contests the argument of a power struggle between the two states as a primary motive for war. Thucydides described the situation:

Moreover, it was from this campaign (the siege of Ithome against Messenian helots), that an open difference first emerged between the Spartans and the Athenians. When the place


Sparta feared the Athenians would join the Messenians against them, so they dismissed them from their duties. They did not dismiss them from an alliance, friendship, or other. They merely hoped to avoid any additional conflict that might otherwise threaten their stability. Yes, this means they were trying to maintain hegemony, but it does not mean they were at conflict with Athens over power, at least not yet. As addressed earlier, power was a secondary issue to the concerns of helotry and helot based politics, which is clearly a fact as Sparta openly sought Athenian help, revealing their own inadequacies, all to subdue the helot rebellion. Subduing the rebellion was the primary focus of Sparta. It was only after Sparta felt confident that they could handle the siege that they decided to dismiss the Athenians.\textsuperscript{172} Ironically, that decision came after Sparta failed to retake Ithome forcefully, which is what sparked their concern about the Athenians. Unfortunately, for Sparta, their efforts to avoid additional conflict backfired.

Athens suspected Sparta for their dismissal and took offence, as they were the only ally dismissed from the siege. Thucydides stated, “They felt they did not deserve to be treated this way by the Spartans; so just as soon as they had left they abandoned the alliance they had made with the Spartans and joined the Spartan enemies from Argos and Thessaly.\textsuperscript{173} Sparta’s effort to keep Athens from joining the enemy inevitably provoked them to join the enemy.

It light of all of this, it is clear that the helot rebellion and siege on Ithome prevented Sparta from attacking Athens in support of Thasos. This gave Athens the opportunity to complete their walls and simultaneously led to the division of the alliance. This caused significant trouble for Sparta.

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
It is easy to argue that had the helots not rebelled, Sparta still would have warred with Athens in support of the Thasians. However, the completion of the walls after the fact is critical to Sparta’s decline and adds strength to this study. Without the mighty walls, Sparta’s superior hoplites and phalanx might have easily destroyed Athens. Perhaps Athens owed a debt of gratitude to the Messenian helots, but the influence of the helots on Spartan decline is plainly visible. Nevertheless, at this time, Athens did not ally with the Messenian helots, nor go directly to war with Sparta.

The division of the alliance and the revealing of Sparta’s weaknesses in siege warfare was a significant chip off Spartan supremacy, all due to the Messenians rebellion, which is precisely why Xenophon called this revolt the Third Messenian War. This, again, confirms the helot’s identity and heritage to the land.

In Messenian fashion, this helot rebellion lasted for approximately ten years, only concluding when the Messenians felt they could not sustain the war any further. This was somewhat of a repeat of their previous endeavors during the Messenian Wars. Nevertheless, they came to terms with Sparta that they would leave the Peloponnese, and did so with their families. They did not return to their former helot duties, which, again, weakened Sparta but ended the war. This begs the question as to why Sparta made such terms instead of recapturing the Messenians, forcing them back into helotry, or simply killing them. While sources do not directly confirm it, the answer appears to be that Sparta was already in a weakened state and took the easiest avenue out.

Sparta did not want more trouble, especially after the developing tensions with Athens and the losses they endured during the earthquake. Their weakened state is also clearly visible in the fact that Sparta chose to end the war through diplomacy, as it was in their very way of life to

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174 Xenophon, *Xenophon’s Hellenica*, 327.
kill and subdue any helot that posed a threat. This was the purpose of the secret band and alluring emancipation manipulations. Yet, here Sparta let an entire rebelling party take their families and leave.

Despite Sparta’s efforts to avoid war with Athens, as well as the Messenian helots, they only delayed the inevitable. Athens knew of Sparta’s weaknesses and fears, especially with siege warfare and helot rebellions. Thus, they accepted the fleeing helots from Ithome because of their ill feelings toward Sparta, and settled them at Naupactus. 175 Ironically, this put Messenians and helots on side of the Delian League, against Sparta and their allies in the Peloponnesian League, when Sparta just came to terms with them. The Megarians also seceded to the Delian League because of oppression by the Corinthians. They were at war with Corinth over boundaries. Thus, the Athenians built long walls for the Megarians on their boundaries, which fueled the Corinthian hatred of Athens. 176 These collective scenarios set the stage for the First Peloponnesian War (460 – 445 BCE).

Some scholars place the beginning of the war at the dispute between Athens and Sparta at Ithome. However, there is no reliable record of any literal combat or war. It was, at that point, merely a political and social separation. The First Peloponnesian War began around 460 BCE and was really more of a conflict between Athens and Corinth. Although, Athens did conduct a number of campaigns into central Greece and even at one point controlled a large portion of it. 177 Sparta did not participate even in support of Corinth for several years. This is likely because of the losses they endured in the earthquake and prolonged Third Messenian War.

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176 Ibid., 62.
177 Freeman, *Egypt, Greece, and Rome*, 261.
In the First Peloponnesian War, Athens sought to dominate the Isthmus and close off the Peloponnesian in order to persuade Corinth to join the Athenian alliance. They also wanted to take advantage of the resources in Thessaly. In 457 BCE, the Athenians met the Spartans for the first time on the battlefield at Tanagra. While this was a Spartan victory, both sides took heavy losses, which Sparta could ill afford. The Athenians then seized control of Boeotia and Phoci, and subdued the Aeginetans, all of which had to tear down their own walls and surrender their ships to Athens. They also completed their own long walls to the sea, making Athens the only polis with completed walls and a growing navy.

With the resources obtained from these Athenian victories, the Athenians “sailed round the Peloponese, burned Spartan dockyards, seized the Corinthian city of Chalcis, and defeated the Sicyonians.” The Athenians also took control of Egypt, which caused the Persians to seek Spartan aid to no avail. They managed to regain the lost territory themselves, pushing the Athenians out of Egypt. This was not a particularly good showing for Spartan authority, and added to the plausibility of their already weakened and declining state.

The losses sustained by Athens against the Persians in Egypt made it difficult for them to sustain the war much longer. By 440 BCE, the western cities broke away from Athenian control, securing their secession in 447 BCE at the battle of Coronea. This was not the result of Spartan victories. It was a Boeotian victory, a Spartan ally. After the Athenians lost Megara to revolts, they became vulnerable to a Spartan attack. However, while Sparta did invade Attica, devastating the land, they did nothing more. Thucydides stated, “They advanced no further and returned home.” The reasons for this are unclear. However, considering their weakened state

178 Ibid.
and their inadequacies with siege warfare, destroying land was likely their only option. Their departure from Athens meant the Athenians could subdue all of Euboea again. It was at this point, in c. 445 BCE, that Athens sought a peace treaty with Sparta called the Thirty Years Peace.

The Thirty Years Peace concluded the First Peloponnesian War, and sought to prevent further conflict. The peace stated that neither state would interfere with each other’s allies, independent states could join whichever side they preferred, arbitration should be the primary method of settling disagreements, no allies could change sides, and each alliance leader (hegemon) could only use force when necessary to resolve issues within their own alliance.\footnote{Pomeroy et al., \textit{Ancient Greece}, 237.} This was a beneficial diplomatic solution to both hegemons, Sparta and Athens.

The First Peloponnesian War last approximately fifteen years, during which Sparta and Athens took significant losses. However, Sparta had endured near endless war since the helot rebellion and clearly showed an inability to subdue Athens, who reached their peak of power when controlling large portions of Greece. The treaty that ensued meant that Athens would relinquish control over Nisaea, Pegae, Troezen and Achaea back to the Peloponnesians as payment for Sparta’s recognition of the Delian League.\footnote{Thucydides. \textit{The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians}, 68.} Yet, this was their decision because of the losses they endured in Egypt and from the Megara revolt, not because of Sparta’s superiority or invasion of Athenian land. Athens merely sought to keep themselves independent from the Peloponnesians after realizing they could not control the entirety of Greece. In addition, Sparta agreed to let Athens keep Naupactus, where the Messenians and former helots from the recent rebellion resided. This concluded the First Peloponnesian War, with Sparta clearly having significant difficulties but still managing to sustain thanks to the Persians and Megarians. This
entire war and weakened state of Sparta directly linked to the helot rebellion, and the Messenians.

**The Second Peloponnesian War (Great Peloponnesian War 431 – 404BCE)**

The Thirty Years Peace treaty only lasted approximately half of its expectancy. Territorial disputes almost immediately followed. During and after the First Peloponnesian War, Athens became an empire, albeit one often associated with tyranny. The fact that Sparta formally recognized Athenian power is a denunciation of Spartan prestige, again originally resulting from the helot rebellion after the earthquake. This did not sit well with Sparta, despite the agreement to avoid war with Athens.

Conflict began approximately thirteen years after the treaty, although sources vary on this length, as Thucydides does not clarify the duration. The Second Peloponnesian War, or Great Peloponnesian War, divided into three phases: The Archidamian War (431 – 421 BCE), the Sicilian Expedition (415 – 413 BCE), and the Iono-Decelean War (413 – 404 BCE). Yet, Thucydides put all three of these conflicts under the same umbrella. John Marincola claimed that this is because Thucydides saw himself as a universal historian of conflict, and as each war essentially described a reoccurrence, rather than a new conflict, they were all relative. Nevertheless, the treaty began to degrade when Athens supported the dispute over Epidamus and Corcyra around 435 BCE. This dispute directly involved the Corinthians, again, and not Sparta. Nevertheless, Corinth was a primary ally of Sparta. Athens also attacked Potidaea and sanctioned trade against Megara, which were also both associated to the Peloponnesian League.

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186 Ibid., 69.
Despite all of this, Sparta still hesitated to go back to war. It is undeniable that their
decline was in full swing. Thucydides stated:

The Spartans were aware of this [the aforementioned Athenian offenses and
establishment of power], but did little to check them. For most of the time they remained
passive, being ever slow to go to war unless forced to do so, and partly too being
hampered by wars of their own at home.\(^{187}\)

Thucydides did not clarify what wars “at their own home,” but they likely involved inner league
conflicts and more helot resistance. It was only when the Athenian might was too great to ignore,
and far too much of an impediment on the Spartan alliance, that Sparta finally chose to declare
war on Athens. This certainly does not sound like the Sparta that eagerly went about subduing all
of their surrounding regions and communities into helotry. This was a Sparta willing to
recognize Athenian power, and take desperate measures to obtain and sustain an alliance with a
disrespectful manipulative enemy, although Athens saw Sparta in the same light. Furthermore,
Athens openly asserted their anti-oligarchy position and became tyrants, but still Sparta
hesitated.

The Messenians fought Sparta for decades, progressively weakening them until these
sorts of allowances could occur. The Peloponnesian Wars amounted to a lesser amount of time
than the three Messenian Wars before them. According to Kagan, the Athenians only accepted an
alliance with Sparta to avoid attacks from Spartan allies, not Sparta specifically.\(^{188}\) While
Thucydides might disagree with this, citing losses to the Persians, it does hold some legitimacy
considering the First Peloponnesian War had more Athenian versus Corinthian conflicts than any
other. Furthermore, leading into the Second Peloponnesian War, the Thebans, leading the
Boeotians, grew significantly in power and wanted Sparta to war with Athens. This is a very
important truth toward the later Spartan demise.

\(^{187}\) Ibid.
Previously, Athens devised a strategy to distract and dismantle Sparta and its allies. They intended to raid coastal towns from the sea, and encourage helot raids from Pylos. Reflecting on their experiences, witnessing the Spartan concern and difficulty with dealing with helots, Athens sought to use that to their advantage. They also hoped helots would escape to Pylos and possibly provoke a new rebellion in Messenia and Laconia, as the continued turmoil in the Peloponnesian League would benefit Athens while significantly weakening Sparta and the stability of its allies. This was their strategy just prior to the peace and quasi-alliance with Sparta c. 421 BCE.

The intent here is not to analyze the Great Peloponnesian War in its entirety, but more so to demonstrate not only how the helots contributed to the war, on both sides, but also how the Messenians, specifically, maintained their identity and continued to fight for and return to their lost territory for hundreds of years. The reference to the helots as a pivotal part of Athenian strategic mentality is essential to showing their relevance to Spartan decline. However, where the Athenians hoped to encourage helot rebellions, the Spartans attempted to stifle the potential by offering emancipation and using them against the Athenian alliance in battle.

During this war, the Messenians fought as Messenians, even though many were former Spartan helots, on side of Athens. They also fought as helots on side of Sparta. The issue at Amphipolis is a sort of catchall summary situation for the state of Sparta.

In c. 422 BCE, Sparta besieged Amphipolis, an Athenian colony in the Thracian region. In order to obtain this victory, Spartan General Brasidas used over seven hundred freed helots and neodamodeis. The neodamodeis were liberated helots turned mercenary. Even after these helots no longer carried the workload for the Spartan economy, clearly some still carried Sparta

189 Ibid., 199.
190 Ibid., 200.
though military endeavors. According to Kagan, this situation made Sparta nervous, as it was an example of their contention with the shrinking Spartan population.\textsuperscript{192} The shrinking population was the result of the restrictions of the Lycurgus reforms and the near constant warfare. Sparta’s dependence on helots literally became their livelihood. The Spartan victory at Amphipolis led to a one-year armistice during which each side made promises they never truly intended to uphold.

Athens was to return prisoners taken at the Battle of Sphacteria in 425 BCE, where both sides suffered considerable losses, and pledge not to give asylum to helots escaping to Pylos, while Sparta was to allow Athens to fortify their towns, visit the sanctuary at Delphi, and refrain from deploying warships to sea.\textsuperscript{193} The Battle of Sphacteria was a battle that Thucydides referred to as “unexpected and calamitous” because Sparta surrendered in fear of further disaster.\textsuperscript{194} They became even more passive after these events. The terms of the peace would supply Sparta with able bodies, and Athenian allies with walls and maritime security. However, even this arrangement caused trouble.

The Boeotians previously made short truce agreements with Athens, independently from Corinth and Sparta, which caused quite a bit of tension within the league. When the armistice developed, Sparta did not sufficiently compel the league to accept the peace treaty, and withdrew from Amphipolis instead of helping Athens regain the territory. This angered Athens, who then refused to return Pylos under the belief that Sparta betrayed their agreement. However, Sparta already faced dwindling numbers and a dependency on helots in multiple engagements. Persistent battle only made things more difficult. Thus, the Spartans persisted in their request for the restoration of Pylos specifically because it housed helots and Messenians.\textsuperscript{195} They also asked

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{192} Kagan, \textit{The Peloponnesian War}, 204.
\item \textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 178.
\item \textsuperscript{194} Thucydides. \textit{The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians}, 268.
\item \textsuperscript{195} Kagan, \textit{The Peloponnesian War}, 205.
\end{itemize}
that if Athens would not return Pylos, then they should at least remove the Messenians and escaped helots.

Pylos was important to Sparta for a number of reasons, as it became both an Athenian and Messenian stronghold within Spartan territory. The battle of Pylos took place in 425 BCE, and was an Athenian victory. Pylos was part of Messenia, which Athens used as a shelter for escaping Spartan helots, confirming their aforementioned strategic mentality. In addition, and once again, the helots fled to a secure location in their homeland demonstrating an undeniable recognition of their heritage equally by the Athenians, Spartans, and Messenian helots. According to Kagan, Demosthenes, a prominent Athenian diplomat, consulted with the Messenians about the natural benefits of Pylos as a base for the Messenian enemies of Sparta to reside and embark on campaigns to ravage the land of Messenia and Laconia while attempting to stir up another helot rebellion. This might seem odd, pondering why the Messenians would ravage their own land. Yet, in a strategic sense, it would be a perfect opportunity for Messenians to rally Messenian helots still in captivity, as they worked their own land as prisoner slaves.

It is also important to note that the Messenians at Naupactus were the force sent to Pylos to raid the “Spartan” lands. These Messenians were the same Messenians, and former helots, that fought the Spartans during the Third Messenian War (helot rebellion) after the earthquake, and held Ithome for ten years. Here they were again, returning to their homeland in breach of their agreement with Sparta in an effort to free their people and fight Spartan oppression. In addition, Pylos had an abundance of resources to build fortifications, access to the sea via the Bay of Navarino, and was merely fifty miles from Sparta. Collectively, there is no question as to why the Spartans would push so hard to remove these Messenians from Pylos, as many helots

196 Ibid., 138.
197 Ibid., 152.
did in fact desert to Pylos during the Messenian occupation. Thucydides described Sparta’s reaction:

The Spartans, finding the helots deserting, and fearing the march of revolution in their country, began to be seriously uneasy, in spite of their unwillingness to betray this to the Athenians began to send envoys to Athens, and tried to recover Pylos and the prisoners (helots).

Eventually, Sparta got their wish when Athens withdrew the Messenians and helots from Pylos to place them on the island of Cephallenia. Yet, they did not return Pylos, and continued to use it as an invitation for deflection or rebellion by the helots. It was merely a temporary arrangement to remove the Messenians and helots that resided there during these debates.

Ephors believed this temporary peace was an attempt of Sparta to recover their prisoners and weaken Pylos enough to retake. This is yet another example of Sparta’s fear of the Messenians and helots alike, as Sparta did not want to war against them on side of Athens or suffer the loss of their most valuable asset and dependency. Instead, if they could not have them back they tried to remove helots and Messenians from the equation entirely. Thucydides confirmed this mentality when addressing the Spartan strategy to challenge the Athenian pressure in the Peloponnesian prior to the peace:

The Spartans hoped that the best way to divert the Athenians would be to send a force of helots to subvert their allies. They were glad to have an excuse for sending helots, in case they should try to start something in the current situation with Pylos in enemy hands. Issues of security always determined the Spartans relations with the helots, and indeed, they were so fearful of the large numbers of helot youth that they even perpetrated a deed proclaiming that any helots that distinguished themselves in battle would be a candidate for emancipation.

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198 Ibid.
201 Thucydides, The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, 284.
Obviously, this is how they tried to keep the helots from rebelling or joining the enemy side. However, realistically it is what led to their massacre, as describe earlier when Sparta killed two thousand enthusiastic helots. Only a handful ever actually received emancipation, such as those used by Brasidas at the battle of Amphipolis. Yet, in reality, even those helots were a tool for Spartan trickery and deceit, as Sparta hoped their campaign would merely keep them from uniting with fleeing or liberated helots. Nonetheless, the point remains that the helots were a focal point of both sides of the war, almost as if they were the rope in a tug of war.

Pylos in Messenia remained a strategic stronghold for Athens the majority of the war, with the Athenians eventually sending the helots and Messenians back into Pylos to harass the Spartans the following winter. Clearly, the Messenians and helots were a critical part of the Great Peloponnesian War.

In 421 BCE, Sparta and Athens signed the Peace of Nicias, which, this time, was supposed to be a fifty-year peace. Under the agreement, Sparta and Athens were to support one another against attacks, considering any attacker as a common enemy, which meant that the Athenians had to give military assistance in the event of another helot rebellion. Repeatedly, Sparta expressed their concern for helot rebellions, and sought external support. Yet, no such thing ever actually occurred. Sparta and Argos constantly raided each other, and Athens raided Messenia from Pylos via the Messenians from Naupactus. Tensions continued to boil until Athens decided to attack Laconia merely six years (c. 414 – 415 BCE) after the signing of the

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203 Thucydides. The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, 361.
205 Ibid., 289.
peace treaty. It appeared that Sparta’s desperation to stop helot rebellions only provoked Athens to encourage more of them despite any peace arrangements.

Both Sparta and Athens continued to use helots and Messenians as strategic focal points. For example, the Peloponnesians sent helots and neodamodeis under the command of Spartan General Eccritus to assault the Athenian stronghold in Sicily, while Athens, instead of immediately reinforcing Sicily, attacked Laconia in an effort to establish yet another location for helots to escape. They set their eyes on a small cape across from the island of Cythera. Thucydides stated, “Athens ravaged some of the land there and fortified a sort of isthmus area in order to provide a refuge for helots deserting the Spartans, just as at Pylos.” They knew the importance of a helot to Sparta, and sought to exploit it as often as possible.

The war eventually concluded when Lysander of Sparta (d. 395 BCE) made an alliance with Cyrus the Younger of Persia (d. 401 BCE). Pomeroy stated, “Lysander and Cyrus shared a profoundly ambitious temperament, and the two became fast friends.” Lysander hoped to become a ruler in Greece just as Cyrus wanted to be the King of Persia. The alliance meant that Cyrus was to supply money and ships, and the Spartans were to supply Cyrus with ten thousand mercenaries to aid him in overthrowing his brother Antraxerxes II (r. 404 – 459 BCE).

The Athenian fleet suffered several serious setbacks when losing twelve ships at Arginusae (406 BCE), although it was still an Athenian victory. The blame for the loss of these ships fell on the Athenian generals, who included Pericles the Younger, son of Athenian politician Pericles. The order to execute them all immediately followed. This, in addition to losses from the plague, demoralized Athens, which set the stage for the battle of Aegospotami in

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209 Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 345.
405 BCE, where Lysander used the Persian fleet to capture a large portion of the Athenian navy. The Athenian survivors eventually surrendered after Lysander cut off their grain supply, and starved them into submission.

While Sparta remained the hegemon of Greece, and succeeded in both Peloponnesian wars, their progressive decline was clearly underway. They could not eliminate the Athenian threat on land, nor stop them or the Messenians from leveraging the helots strategically. In the end, it was Lysander’s selfish ambition and the aid of the Persians that defeated Athens at sea. It is also relevant to note that the Persian fleet caused the Athenian losses in Egypt that contributed to the end of the First Peloponnesian War, as well as at Aegospotami to conclude the second. It was only a matter of time before Sparta’s power would officially decline. In fact, a new power came from one of the Spartan’s own allies, the Thebans, head of the Boeotians.

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210 Ibid., 347.
Chapter VI:

Sparta’s Defeat and Helot Freedom

Although a lot changed after the Second Peloponnesian War, tensions remained and conflict persisted. Athens, Thebes, and Sparta continued to challenge each other for leadership for another fifty years, only resulting in further weakening each other financially and especially militarily. The Persians played a critical role in the events that unfolded, but Sparta’s dependency on helots always dictated their decisions.

Immediately after the war, Athens lost almost all of its influence in Greece, and Sparta essentially reigned as the undisputed champion of Greece. Kitto stated, “Sparta won the war less by their own brilliance than through the mistakes of the Athenians.” These mistakes refer mostly to the alliances with the Persians, which is ironic because making such an alliance meant giving back to the Persians, namely Artaxerxes, what Athens and Sparta fought together to keep from Xerxes during the Persian Wars, Ionia. With its newfound power, Sparta became a sort of bully to Greece by setting up oligarchy governments everywhere.

Thirty Tyrants

In most cases, Sparta set up boards of ten Spartan officials to ensure the Athenian allies followed oligarchic principles and Spartan interests. However, Athens received thirty appointed men, or the “Thirty Tyrants.” During the reign of these “Tyrants,” led by Critias and Theramenes, the mass killing of the Athenian population occurred alongside the seizing of citizen property and the exiling of many democratic supporters. This is why they earned their title. Some modern scholars argue that this level of cruelty was necessary to subdue the

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democratic ideology completely. However, all it truly did was provoke rebellions that eventually overthrew the Thirty.

The exiling of many pro-democratic Athenians created a large body of Athenian loyalists. Thebes and Megara both accepted the fleeing Athenians, where they organized a campaign to regain Athens and reestablish a democracy. Pausanias stated, “Starting in Thebes with only sixty men he [Thrasybulus] put down the Thirty Tyrants and persuaded the Athenians who were in factions to be reconciled to one another and live on friendly terms.”\(^\text{213}\) While Sparta forbade any of their neighbors and allies from accepting refugees, their former allies, the Thebans and Boeotians, disregarded their demand.

When Thrasybulus gathered seven hundred men at Phyle to siege Athens and dislodge the Thirty, Sparta sent an army under Pausanias to march on Athens. The result was the battles of Munichia (Athenian victory) and Piraeus (Spartan victory) in 403 BCE. However, after the victory at Piraeus, Spartan king Pausanias sought a diplomatic resolution rather than a military victory, and dispersed his army. Xenophon stated, “The terms stated that peace between the rival parties should be established, liberty to return to their own homes being granted to all, with the exception of the Thirty, the Eleven, and the Ten who had been governors in Piraeus.”\(^\text{214}\) This is one of the first examples of amnesty in history.

Once Sparta abandoned Athens due to the pressure applied by Thrasybulus, Athens was once again free and democratic. They obtained their full democracy a mere year after the war.\(^\text{215}\) This did not sit well with many governing parties in Sparta. In fact, the events in Athens resulted in a trial against Pausanias for having nothing to show for his campaign, but only half of the

\(^{213}\) Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 57.


twenty-eight council members condemned him. This gave command back to Lysander, who was initially responsible for the Thirty Tyrants that Pausanias essentially forfeited to the Athenians. Sparta was dealing with two distinctly different views of leadership. Aristotle stated, “For it was Pausanias, the king of the Lacedaemonians, who brought the peace and reconciliation to a fulfilment, in conjunction with the ten commissioners of arbitration who arrived later from Lacedaemon, at his own earnest request.” Lysander wanted the dictation and firm placement of the oligarchy governments, and actually tried to overthrow the monarchy and king Pausanias. This was an example of his opportunist persona and ambition from the start.

The reign of the Thirty lasted only a short time; it was approximately thirteen months ending 403 BCE with Pausanias’s reconciliations. With a democracy reestablished in Athens, Corinth could not become the soul naval power of Greece. This was why Sparta established the Thirty to begin with, instead of destroying Athens after the war, as they feared Corinth would grow too strong without Athens as a counterweight. This is another example of Sparta’s efforts to keep other city-states from growing instead of seeking further political or military developments amongst themselves. All they did was attempt to maintain their influence in pro-Spartan factions by honoring some allies, exiling others, and trying to produce a favorable political atmosphere. Yet, Sparta remained traditional in their political and economic policies, referencing the Lycurgus reforms. Although, Xenophon claimed Sparta’s loyalty to the reforms faltered during his lifetime. This is somewhat apparent only during some of the post-Peloponnesian War circumstances.

216 Pausanias, Description of Greece, 57.
218 Everson, Aristotle, 121.
219 Martin, Ancient Greece, 162.
The decision to keep Athens around, albeit under an oligarchy government, was truly a derivative of Sparta’s inability to sustain their position of power. They knew that, because of their dependency on helots, they could never campaign long enough, or build a strong enough navy, to subdue all of Greece permanently. As Martin stated, referencing the Second Peloponnesian War, “The Spartans returned from its first attack on Athenian territory after about a month because it lacked the structure for resupply over a long period and could not risk being away from Sparta for fear of another helot revolt.”221 This stance clearly dominated their every action. Sparta had to be conscious of intervening too often, especially if it was not in the best interest of their allies, as it could destroy the faction.222 This is precisely what happened.

As Sparta’s reign continued, Athens gradually returned to power by reestablishing their allies, rebuilding their walls and fleet, and developing a coalition of states dedicated to keeping Sparta from interfering in Greek affairs.223 Some of the allies they gained had previously allied with Sparta, including Thebes and Corinth. Thebes, specifically, was one of the most critical changes.

Thebes always seemed to take a sort of outside approach to the Peloponnesian League, as seen with their independent truce agreements during the Second Peloponnesian War with Athens and their independent rise in power. When the Peloponnesian War concluded, Thebes, while formerly hostile to Athens, was literally alienated from Sparta.224 This is what contributed to their inclination to accept Athenian exiles and eventually ally with them. It is also what caused tension with the rest of Sparta’s allies. Nevertheless, with Lysander back in command, the Spartan effort to subdue the Boeotians for their alleged transgressions began.

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221 Ibid., 153.
222 “The Archaic Treaties between the Spartans and Their Allies.”
224 Ibid., 485.
Although Pausanias and Xenophon offer highly detailed and exacerbated reasoning for the war against the coalition, a short version is simply that Sparta sought a war with Thebes in retaliation for their support of Athens. In addition, Lysander and Agesilaus collectively created conflict amongst neighbors to the point that it unnerved their former allies in Persia. Sparta literally made enemies of everyone.

Most scholars argue that the causes of another war were a matter of expansionism into the Asia Minor. According to Pomeroy et al., a combination of Agesilaus fighting in Asia Minor and Sparta constantly interfering with domestic affairs caused the Persian king to offer gold to anyone that would openly war with Sparta. In fact, Pomeroy specifically mentioned a cause being the attacks on the Messenians in Naupactus, which, again, are the same Messenians from the helot rebellion or Third Messenian War. In any case, this eventually led to the Corinthian War.

**The Corinthian War (395 – 387 BCE)**

The Corinthian War put Sparta against the coalition of Athens, Thebes, Corinth, and Argos. While detailing this war is not particularly necessary for this study, there are several things to point out. First, to clarify, it was because of Sparta doing what Sparta does, forcing their will on their neighbors, which caused virtually all of their allies to change sides. This same thing caused the Messenians to join literally every war that developed since their subduing, as well as what caused the helots to rebel at every possible opportunity (treatment aside). The fact that the Persian king offered money was a matter of additional incentive, as it was in his best interest to keep Sparta out of his territory. Yet, despite these circumstances, Sparta still managed a successful military campaign.

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225 Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 365.
Early in war, Sparta sent Pausanias and Lysander to gather troops to attack Boeotia. Lysander decided to attack the fortified town of Haliartus, before Pausanias arrived. The combined Theban and Athenian forces thwarted the assault, killing Lysander and most of his army with him. Seeing this and hoping to avoid another disastrous loss of life with their already dwindling numbers, Pausanias decided not to engage in battle but to ask for a truce instead.\(^{226}\) The Thebans agreed to the truce, so Pausanias collected the dead and returned home. Once in Sparta, the council indicted Pausanias for his inaction against the Theban army, in addition to his late arrival, and sentenced him to death, but he dared not go to the trial.\(^ {227}\) Pausanias spent his remaining days in exile merely for desiring peace and the longevity of his people, contrary to Lysander, who sought to overthrow him.

The circumstances at Haliartus not only cost Sparta two of their primary commanders, but also directly confirmed the concern of numeric disadvantages and a dwindling population. There is no record of the helots contributing to the battle at Haliartus, which is proof in itself of the importance of a helot to Spartan warfare. This is not to say that the helots should be in every battle, but their relevance is undeniable at this point. Sparta simply could not sustain much longer under these circumstances, and needed the helot community more each day. This is a direct derivative of the political, economic, and social structure of Spartan society, which, again, developed around helotry.

Despite the concerns for a dwindling population, clearly present in Pausanias’ actions, Sparta still wanted Pausanias to throw his army into the fire, which is an example of their traditional military society behavior. They seemed to fail to recognize that holding to these traditions, although it made them who they were was literally causing their undoing. This

\(^{226}\) Xenophon, \textit{Hellenica}, 78 – 79.
\(^{227}\) Ibid., 79.
consideration also contradicts Xenophon’s position on the existence of the Lycurgus reforms during this time, as a large portion of the reforms focused on the use of helots in virtually everything. Yet, the situation surrounding Haliartus still indicated a traditional Spartan mentality, not one phasing out of the past. While the helots certainly still supported Sparta economically, their apparent absence from the battlefield cost bodies Sparta simply could not afford. However, the only remaining Sparta commander, Agesilaus, did in fact use an army largely consisting of helots, but these were mostly emancipated mercenaries, or neodamodes, in service of Agesilaus for profit and loot, as seen at the battle of Coronea in 394 BCE. This, again, clarifies their dwindling population and continued dependency on helots.

Skipping ahead, the Corinthian War only lasted eight years, ending in 387 BCE, which is relatively short compared to most of the previous wars. The influence, yet again, of the Persians on side of Sparta, albeit after devastating the Spartan fleet, led to another peace agreement called the Kings Peace or the Peace of Antalcidas. Initially, Persia was on side of the coalition for the reasons previously addressed, but after seeing Athens rise again as a power, they decided to reestablish their relationship with Sparta for their apparent willingness to concede to Persian demands.

The presence of Persia contributed to a stalemate between Sparta and the coalition. With Persia on side of Sparta, the terms of the Kings Peace left Sparta as the hegemon, and gave privileges to Persia in Greek politics. While Antalcidas of Sparta negotiated the peace, the Persians dictated the course of the war, not Sparta. This trend existed for decades at this point. The Persians would change sides based on who posed the greatest threat to Persia, supporting the lesser evil to become the victor. This meant Sparta at the conclusion of both the Peloponnesian War and the Corinthian War. The significance of Persia siding with Sparta each time is also a
significant example of Sparta’s gradual degradation and inability to sustain independently. Nevertheless, in common Greek fashion, the Kings peace or “the treacherous peace” failed.  

Near constant warfare continued.

**The Battle of Leuctra**

“A year before the Theban victory at Leuctra the god foretold to the Messenians of their return to the Peloponnese.”

By 371 BCE, Thebes officially became a democracy and reestablished the Boeotian League. Mark William Padilla argued that this deflection was important because it showed the Theban’s ability to distinguish the difference between a legitimate ruler and an imposter. This meant that even Sparta’s own allies recognized the illegitimacy of Spartan rule. The constant warfare led Athens, Sparta, and Thebes to attempt, yet again, another discussion of truce. However, Theban leader Epaminondas (d. 362 BCE) requested to sign the treaty on behalf of all of Boeotia, after initially signing as the Thebans, which caused all negotiations to seize. Sparta insisted that Epaminondas swear to the treaty only on behalf of Thebes or not sign at all. Thus, the treaty only included a peace between Athens and Sparta. Xenophon stated, “The Athenians came to the conclusion that there was a fair prospect of the Thebans being now literally decimated.” The dispute provoked Sparta to gather an army to move on Thebes, meeting at Leuctra in Boeotia.

Thebes lacked the desire and preparations for the coming assault. Xenophon stated, “The Thebans were supported by no allies except the Boeotians.” There is a theory that Epaminondas solicited for helot support in return for freedom, but there is little to support this in

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229 Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 278.
231 Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 157-158.
232 Ibid., 158.
233 Ibid., 159.
primary texts. If it were true, it would certainly be an invaluable and necessary strategy to weaken Sparta prior to battle. Instead, Sparta was actually quite confident, while the Thebans, fearing impending doom, decided it best to die in battle than continue to suffer under the cruelty of Spartan rule.\textsuperscript{234} Nevertheless, Sparta underestimated the Theban’s because of their lack of support, and arrived somewhat intoxicated. The result was a devastating Spartan loss, and a decisive Theban victory. Polybius described the event, “Theban general Epaminondos brilliantly led the Boeotians to victory over Sparta, and marked the end of two centuries of Spartan military invincibility on the battlefield.”\textsuperscript{235} Thebes crushed Sparta, and became the new hegemon of Greece.

While rejoicing in their new position of power, Epaminondas did not directly seek to finish off Sparta. Instead, he sought to cut them off from their most prized possession. Pausanias stated:

> Now the Thebans after the victory of Leuctra sent messengers to Italy and Sicily and to the Euesperitae, to recall the Messenians from their wanderings to the Peloponnese. Moreover, they gathered quicker than anyone would have thought, from yearning affection to their fatherland, and from their abiding hate to the Lacedaemonians.\textsuperscript{236}

This statement, quite literally, says is all and confirms all aspects of this study. It did not matter how long the Messenians suffered in helotry or in exile, nor as a subalternt community allied with the Athenians. They always knew their heritage, indicative if for no other reason than their constant efforts in their former territories such as Pylos and Ithome, and were quick to come home upon word of Sparta’s inevitable fall. Further proof exists of this heritage in the simple fact that Pausanias described the Messenians hatred of Sparta, their yearning of their fatherland, and even noted the Thebans direct recognition of the Messenians rightful place. In fact, Jonathan M.

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{235} Polybius, \textit{The Histories}, Translated by Robin Waterfield. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 448.  
\textsuperscript{236} Pausanias, Description of Greece, 279.
Hall, quoting and analyzing Pausanias, stated, “While the Messenians wandered the Peloponnese for three hundred years, they abandoned none of the customs of their homeland.” There can be no doubt that these were the same Messenians of the Messenian Wars, finally receiving the opportunity to regain what they lost so long ago. Naturally, Epaminondas then turned his attention toward removing the final crutch of Spartan power, which meant liberating the remaining Messenian helots. This specifically signified the helot’s crucial importance to Sparta.

Epaminondas proceeded into Laconia, ravaged the countryside, and liberated the rest of Messenia. Helots, finally, became citizens of their homeland once more. The freeing of these slaves, or apparent prisoners of war, meant the crippling of Sparta both militarily and economically, as their entire system rested on the shoulders of helot labor. Clearly, the Thebans knew this would break Sparta, as Messenia consisted of at least one third of Spartan territory and more than half of their helots. For this reason, modern scholars refer to Epaminondas strategy as an indirect approach to destroying the economic roots of Sparta’s military supremacy. Xenophon clarifies this in his lessons from Cyrus, urging the necessity of a general to learn about his enemy’s economy as well as how to supply soldiers. This is a critical point to the thesis of this study.

Merely thirty years after their official establishment as the hegemon of Greece, with the conclusion of the Great Peloponnesian War, Sparta’s chances at establishing hegemony were officially shattered. Epaminondas erected a new capital of Messene on Mount Ithome, and supported an Arcadian federation. This led to the dissolution of the Peloponnesian League, as some its members desired peace with Boeotia, while Sparta continued to refuse to acknowledge

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238 Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 372.
the independence of Messenia. They refused the acknowledgement of Messenia, no other, as
defeating the Messenians began their original rise to hegemony in Greece. Sparta could not
formally recognize those they called helot during their reign. This again proves that it was all
about the Messenian helots from start to finish.

Eventually, the Laconian helots also received their liberation. According to J.M.
Edmonds, “During the Theban invasion of Laconia the helot prisoners refused to sing at the
bidding of their captors the songs of Terpander or Aleman or Spendon the Laconian on the plea
that their masters never allowed it.” This emphasized that these Laconian helots, rather than
Messenian helots, were such for so long and under such duress that they would not utter a single
verse even when under the head of the new hegemon. This brief example also separated the
Messenian helots from the Laconian helots, and confirmed their collective positions as prisoners
instead of generalized slaves. It is also worth noting that the helots of Laconia were essentially
Spartans, which contributed to their delayed liberation.

Thebes, being a new and seemingly unprepared head of Greece, had no new political
ideas to contribute. Thus, Thebes repeatedly marched into the Peloponnesus in an attempt to
create a new centralized polis. These attempts cost the Thebans the life of Epaminondas, a
Theban general and diplomat, thus collapsing the Theban influence. This essentially left Athens
as the only remaining power. Greece was in shambles. Within a quarter-century, Athens once
again reflected the coming of an empire, having regained many of their former allies.

242 J. M. Edmonds, Lyra Graeca; Being the Remains of All the Greek Lyric Poets from Eumelus to
Chapter VII: Conclusion

From the analysis of the many primary and secondary sources, it is clear that there are varieties of interpretations surrounding not only every aspect of a helot but also of the decline of Sparta. Modern scholars, including J.B. Bury, question the accuracy of many ancient historians, especially Herodotus and Thucydides, claiming that their accounts lack various details, including an analysis of the commercial and economic basis for which Athens grew and how that endangered the interests of other states, as well as of the likelihood of faulty numeric values in battle. Some even go as far as questioning their specific terminology down to the letter for their truest relevance, as seen in the debate over the existence of an agathoergoi. However, the details provided herein consolidated the views of each of these authors, including Pausanias, Polybius, and Xenophon, and put henceforth the information consistent amongst all writings to make this argument as indisputable as possible. Hence, this study began with an attempt to define a helot first, as understanding their differences from other forms of slavery is critical to appreciating their overall influence on all of Greek history.

Part of the problem with identifying what a helot precisely was in ancient Greece relates to the confusion between modern interpretations of slavery and the known types of slavery during ancient Greece. Kostas Vlassopoulos placed blame on Aristotle’s perspectives, positing that slavery was a depiction of domination linked directly to its relationship with property. Being that most modern societies relate much closer to Athenian views rather than those of

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Sparta, and Aristotle resided in Athens, helot definitions became narrow and subjective. This perspective typically limited the classification of a helot to either a serf or slave.

After many careful considerations, including the nature of their name, the services they provided, and their actions when rebelling, a helot classified not simply as a serf or chattel slave, specifically, but as a community of prisoners held captive on their own land and forced to perform the duties of a slave. Greek history repeatedly demonstrated that this is precisely how helots responded to their environment. While many or most slaves were prisoners to some degree, with helots it was a matter of putting the period at the end of the sentence to heighten the prisoner-based perspective. Most helot prisoners shared a common mentality, language, and cultural heritage, which is apparent not only in the direct and indirect descriptions of primary authors but equally through the helot’s actions when revolting. This is why helots stood out amongst all other slaves and managed to coordinate several rebellions effectively, where other slaves, such as Athenian chattel slaves who typically did not even speak the same language, rarely revolted. Each time, helots returned to their formerly held territory and fought back against Sparta instead of dispersing and fleeing. This communal behavior caused much concern for Sparta early in their history. Thus, identifying the specific group(s) that rallied these rebellions and caused such concern for Sparta was a necessary endeavor.

Identifying the helots was no easy task, as there are several conflicting schools of thought on the subject. For example, Luraghi questioned the idea of a “continuist” versus a “discontinuist” identity with the Messenians. The former (continuist) claimed the Messenians maintained a connection to their identity from the Old Messenians of the Messenian Wars, while the latter (discontinuist) posit that there is no proof of such a relation, and that it is more likely
that the Messenians lost their history because of the Spartan invasions.\textsuperscript{247} Luraghi goes into quite a bit of detail analyzing the reliability of Pausanias’ testimony. Adding to this confusion was Thucydides’ tendency to clump together all fleeing helots as Messenians, when it was more realistic to state that the majority were Messenians rather than all. However, there remains a single fact that is lacking from the discussions, which is that the events in history can create or change identity but in no way remove genealogy or heritage. For example, many identify Aristotle as an Athenian despite the fact that he was born a Macedonian.

Whatever disagreements exist with Pausanias’ history, the Messenians that returned after the decline without a doubt were of the same heritage as those of the Messenian Wars, as were the Messenians that consistently rallied helots to follow in their suit. While it is a certainty that not everyone classified as a Messenian was of the same genealogical background, as time and history creates mixtures everywhere in the world, their collective and majority actions speak for themselves. The rebellious helots responsible for Sparta’s decline were of original Messenian descent.

While it is likely that much of the information provided by the ancient historians, particularly Herodotus and Pausanias, are exaggerated, the basis of the events still occurred. The Messenian Wars did happen, as did the frequent rebellions. Thus, the helots were born and bred in Laconia and Messenia. They represented a homogenous group of people with shared religious practices and customs. They spoke the same language and suffered the same humiliating form of slavery and abuse from their shared Spartan overlords. In addition to this, the land they lived and worked on was originally theirs until Sparta conquered them. Helots, of any breed, remained on their native homelands, instead of uprooted and transplanted to foreign soils like most other

\textsuperscript{247} Nino Luraghi, \textit{The Ancient Messenians: Constructions of Ethnicity and Memory} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4-5.
Greek slaves. It was due to these common bonds to each other and their ties to the land that made the helots such a threat and constant concern of the Spartan State. Sparta’s fear of a rebellion resulted in more than just the inhumane and demoralizing treatment of helots, which some modern scholars argue was worse for Athenian chattel slaves. Sparta’s fear also provoked the development of various political and economic practices.

After the Second Messenian War, the Lycurgus reforms arose with the specific intent of enforcing strict control over the helots and the Spartiates alike. Sparta followed the Great Rhetra as its constitution and developed an oligarchic government, or rule of two. While still having some element of a traditional monarchy, this governmental structure sought to eliminate tyranny and greed through the sharing of power. The reforms that developed influenced all aspects of Spartan life.

In an effort to keep the helots subdued as much as possible, Lycurgus equally divided the land amongst the Spartiates, created equal contribution expectations from each citizen to the masses, and developed a strict training regimen that began with boys at the age of seven called the agoge. During this training, the “secret band” of Spartan youths sought out capable helots to kill in order to avoid a potential uprising. Sparta also declared war on the helots annually for the same purpose. Overall, this created a devout military society bent on keeping the helots subdued much like armed guards in a modern prison. Yet, the fact that these reforms only affected Spartan men caused women to grow in power, which created friction and questioned the equality of Sparta. Greed became a notable issue. This was reflective of the economic position of Sparta.

Messenia was a primary source of the Spartan economy. Yet, the reforms forbade any Spartan citizen from engaging in agriculture, trade, or professional work, which added to the importance of Messenian helots on a labor and a dependability standpoint. Sparta simply had to
keep them subdued. The helots supplied fifty percent of their produce to support Sparta. There was never any trade with other city-states, and the currency was a hefty iron with minimal value. These restrictions empowered the business practices of neighboring perioikoi, who had no obligations to the Lycurgus reforms, and left the Spartans with a depleted war treasury. Meanwhile, Athens pursued maritime commerce and developed a formidable navy.

All of the reforms sought to instill control and stability after the helot rebellions, but instead created a domino effect of negative occurrences. Over time, the inequalities, political restrictions, and economic conditions reduced Spartan drive, decreased the Spartan population, and increased the desperation of Sparta to minimize helot rebellions. This, in turn, led to the establishment of the Peloponnesian League.

The Peloponnesian League obligated allies to aid Sparta in the event of a helot uprising, while equally preventing them from harboring any fleeing helots. Each ally connected to Sparta by a separate treaty, which did not connect the allies to each other. Most of Sparta’s allies were such because of a need of their protection, when, in reality, it was Sparta that needed its allies for protection from the helots. The collective political ideology (oligarchy), strict economic circumstances, and obligations of the Peloponnesian League created conflict all throughout Greece. This conflict eventually developed into the Peloponnesian Wars.

After reviewing the causes of the Peloponnesian Wars, Thucydides clearly demonstrated that while power may have been the initial concern for conflict it was not what actually caused the war. Stephen Todd referred to the Peloponnesian Wars as an “ideological rivalry.”\(^{248}\) It was oligarchy versus democracy. Furthermore, the First Peloponnesian War was an Athenian response to their dismissal by the Spartans during the siege of Ithome (helot rebellion or Third Messenian War). The war may never have occurred, or would have strictly surrounded the

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\(^{248}\) Todd, Athens and Sparta, 5.
Spartan invasion of Athens in response to the Thasians request, had the helots not rebelled, which questioned the motive for war as strictly power based. As such, the entire scenario would have been drastically different in light of the incomplete Athenian walls (Long Walls completed in 458 BCE) and fewer allies on side of Athens. Many of the Athenian allies became such after the helot rebellion and the siege of Ithome, including the Messenian helots themselves, who came to reside at Naupactus. It is also worth noting that the conflict between Thasos and Athens provoked Sparta’s involvement prior to the earthquake and helot rebellion, not Sparta’s independent desire to conquer Athens.

The First Peloponnesian War was an example of Sparta’s gradual decline, as their increasingly passive attitude toward war meant a clear decrease in drive. The losses Sparta sustained by the earthquake and ten year siege of Ithome against the Messenian helots encouraged this passive mentality. For example, despite the actions of Themistocles, Sparta still attempted to remain allies. It is also clear that the political clashes between Athenian democracy and Spartan oligarchy were a significant mode of conflict.

As addressed previously, the oligarchy system was a part of the Lycurgus reforms and thus motivated by the security and control of the Spartiates and helots. During the First Peloponnesian War, Athens conquered much of Greece and became an empire while Sparta merely raided the countryside. Athens’ constant conflict with Corinth, and the losses they endured in Egypt against Persia, caused them to sue for peace with Sparta, the head of the Peloponnesian League. Simply put, peace with Sparta meant peace with Corinth, or so they believed. It was not specifically Sparta’s efforts during the war that led to its conclusion. Both sides realized they could not control Greece in its entirety.
The Second Peloponnesian War was another conflict in which the helots and Messenians played a critical role. While much went on during the Great Peloponnesian War, including the use of the Persian navy on side of the Peloponnesian League, the focal point of this study was to demonstrate the importance of the helots and Messenians on the decline of Spartan hegemony, as well as their clear and repeated demonstration of identity and capability. As a side note, Athens not only leveraged helots and Messenians during the war, they actually used their own chattel slaves as well. Pausanias stated, “In great emergencies, as toward the close of the Peloponnesian War and before the battle of Chaeronea, the Athenians appear to have freed and armed their slaves.” It was two heads, Sparta and Athens, using slaves and helots to fight a war.

With the several examples provided herein, particularly with Pylos and Amphipolis during which helots fought on both sides of the second war, it is clear that the primary strategies of Sparta and Athens revolved around the helots. The Athenians sought to leverage helots to weaken Sparta through raiding, encourage further helot rebellions, and provide havens for fleeing helots, while the Spartan strategy was to use helots in war by way of emancipation opportunities or putting distance between helot groups in an attempt to avoid their secession to the Athenian alliance. Sparta also regularly used former helots turned mercenaries called neodamôdeis. According to Pomeroy, throughout the war, Sparta managed to confine internal bloodshed to the usual suppression of helots. This is because, as in the case with Amphipolis, the helots fought on the frontlines on both sides, usually outnumbered the Spartans as much as seven to one, and were the cause of internal strife on Spartan soil. Killing the helots in any of these ways meant calming the storm while simultaneously stripping Sparta of its most depended upon asset. It was a double bind scenario. In ways, the Second Peloponnesian War became a

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Fourth Messenian War as a subcategory. It took the Persian fleet to intervene on side of Sparta to defeat Athens, which was the case in both Peloponnesian Wars. This questioned Sparta’s ability to sustain on their own.

While both Peloponnesian Wars ended with Sparta as the hegemon, conflict continued in the form of oligarchic tyrants. These Thirty Tyrants sparked an alliance between Athenian exiles and Thebes, which resulted in the expulsion of the Tyrants under the leadership of Thrasybulus. During this process, Pausanias, king of Sparta, made a peace agreement with Thrasybulus instead of seeking to destroy Athens for the last time. This “in action” led to the reestablishment of democracy in Athens only a short time after the Peloponnesian Wars concluded. Sparta clearly could not sustain their influence.

The peace arrangements caused internal conflict in Sparta, and led to the deployment of both Lysander and Pausanias to assault Thebes. Yet, Persia simultaneously provoked a war on Sparta in retaliation for Agesilaus presence in Asia Minor. This encouragement, coupled with the reestablished democracy in Athens, encouraged the development of a coalition consisting of Athens, Thebes, and Corinth as allies against Sparta. This new conflict became the Corinthian War. All of this was a direct result of Sparta’s oppressive attempts and poor diplomatic behavior.

When Lysander lost his life at the battle of Haliartus, Pausanias went on trial for his life. The council blamed Pausanias for his tardiness to the battle, and the fact that when he arrived late he sought peace instead of engaging in battle. The council sentenced him to death. Sources indicated that Pausanias’ decision to make peace instead of war directly linked to the immense loss of life prior to his arrival and his desire to avoid further disaster when Spartan population was already in diminished status. Pausanias exiled himself to avoid death, leaving only Agesilaus as the remaining Spartan commander.
Late in the war, Persia, again, switched sides back to Sparta because they felt that the Athenian navy grew too strong. This led to a stalemate between the opposing sides, and Persia again dictating the terms of the peace in favor of Sparta. These terms provided Persia with Ionia, which created more conflict throughout Greece. This conflict, after two decades, led to another attempt at peace.

During the peace meeting, Athens, Sparta, and Thebes attempted to agree to seize conflict, as all were in a weakened state. Immediately, disputes arose between Thebes and Sparta regarding how to sign the treaty. The result was Sparta’s march on Thebes, and the subsequent battle of Leuctra in 371 BCE. Still, in their weakened state, Sparta sought to subdue Thebes.

Some scholars claim that Sparta’s defeat at Leuctra was the result of greed that consumed Sparta and diminished their military discipline. However, according to H.W. Stubbs, the cultural and economic decline that plagued Sparta was the result of military and diplomatic failure. Those very military and diplomatic policies developed for the purpose of suppressing the helots and enforcing control over their neighbors. Sparta continued to attempt forceful military resolutions with a depleted treasury and decreasing military drive. They simply underestimated the Thebans, and suffered a terrible loss. Polybius stated,

So the Spartans, who had enjoyed the finest system of government in Greece ever since the legislation of Lycurgus, and who had been the most powerful military presence in Greece until the battle of Leuctra, went into decline when fortune changed and turned against them. Their system of government gradually deteriorated, and in the end no city was more plagued by trouble and strife, no city more racked by land reforms and political banishments.

Yet, as this study demonstrated, Sparta’s decline began well before the battle of Leuctra.

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252 Polybius, The Histories, 286.
After the Spartan defeat, the Thebans and Boeotians invaded Laconia and finally liberated the Messenian helots. Their goal was to cut Sparta off from their resources and put an end to their oppression. They did exactly that merely by liberating Messenia. After their liberation, all wandering Messenians finally returned to their homeland to join the liberated helots at Ithome.

In the end, while it was not necessarily the Messenians or helots themselves that defeated the mighty Sparta in battle, it was the knowledge of Sparta’s dependency on helots and the risks Sparta took to keep them under control that meant their permanent loss of power. Therefore, despite popular belief, the helots did in fact highly influence the decline of Sparta through the constant risk of rebellion, the various political reforms and establishments developed to suppress helot revolts, economic dependency, and even through limiting Sparta’s inability to travel. This was all a direct result of the helot’s persistent struggle for freedom and their collective efforts to regain their lost polis, which demonstrated their unwavering sense of identity. To imagine the drive of a group that would fight for so long to regain lost territory and freedom truly highlights the importance of the Messenians to Greek history. The simple risk of a helot rebellion eventually allowed them to return home free Messenians.
Appendix A

Adespotoi - a helot without an assigned master

Agathoergoi – A term Herodotus used for good-service men, when he described the individual responsible for recovering the bones of Orestes.

Agoge – This was the training of Spartan youth, beginning at the age of seven and lasting until approximately the age of thirty. It was essentially a military academy.

Aphetai - liberated helots

Chattel Slave – A form of traditional slavery in which people were the personal property of a master, often bought and sold or captured during conquest.

Debt Bondage – Also called debt slavery or bonded labor. It was a pledge to repay a debt via labor or services, and had undefined service requirements and durations. The pledge was subject to the lord’s discretion for release and fulfillment of debt, which often meant that the bondage passed from generation to generation.

Demokratia – Athenian direct democracy

Demos –

Demosioi – Public Slave

Dispositionautai – Helots in the navy

Doulos – Greek for slave

Erukters – a form of helot law enforcement or police

Helot – A member of the lowest class in Ancient Laconia or Messenia, constituting a body of serfs or slaves bound to the land and owned by the state of Sparta.

Homoioi – Equals, referring to the Spartan land and financial reform to remove all wealth differentiations from the masses.
Hypomeiones - free Spartan men

Kleros – Political rights

Minas (mna, μνᾶ) – an ancient Near Eastern unit of weight or currency.

Mothakes – a Greek term for a nathos in military service

Neodamôdeis – An emancipated helot that served in the Spartan military and shared in their spoils

Nothoi (nathos) – Greek term for “Bastard,” usually referencing the child of a non-citizen and a citizen in Classical Greece that was illegitimate and would not have citizenship rights

Oikos – Household.

Oligarchia - Rule by a few men

Peasant - A member of a class of persons, as in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, who are small farmers or farm laborers of low social rank.

Perioikoi (περίοἶκος, perioeci) – Greek for “neighbors,” referring to the captives of Laconia forced into military service.

Serf – A person in a condition of servitude, required to render services to a lord, commonly attached to the lord's land and transferred with it from one owner to another.

Slave – A person who is the property of and wholly subject to another; a bondservant

Syssitia – Companies of up to fifteen men.

Thes – A person without a place in the oikos
Appendix B

Amphipolis – A city in Edonia, or central Macedonia, that acted as a primary stronghold in Thrace. The Athenians tended to be a minority in the city. Collectively, this is why Sparta attacked Amphipolis, and why Athens expected them to help them get it back after they withdrew.

Fear in Spartan Youth - The penalties suffered by a Spartan youth if caught stealing were so severe that some would allow death before succumbing to such disgrace. Plutarch spoke of a story of a young Spartan that captured a fox and hid it under his clothing. This youth died because the fox began to tear out his insides while he maintained his stealth. He let himself die just to avoid punishment. 253

Importance of the Spartan Shield – Sources claim that the shield was the most important part of the Spartan hoplite. Where a helmet and greaves were for their individual protection, and the sword for slaying the enemy, the shield was to protect Spartan brothers. This is in direct relation to the structure of the phalanx, and is a reflection of the selflessness and lack of individualism encouraged in the Spartan state.

Lycurgus’ Land Reform – Laconia divided into 30,000 lots to the perioeci, and 9,000 lots of Sparta went to the Spartiates. This enabled each of them to have the same quantity of fertile land for the helots to farm for the messes.

Thucydides on the conclusion of the Thirty Years Peace –

Not many years after this there then took place the narrated events: the episodes at Corcyra and at Potidæa and all the things that constituted the occasion for this war. All these activities of the Greeks, both in relation to each other and to the barbarians, took place in this period of about fifty years between the retreat of Xerxes and the start of the

253 Plutarch. Parallel Lives – Complete, 84.
present war. In that time, the Athenians established their empire on a stronger basis and greatly advanced their own power.\textsuperscript{254}

\textsuperscript{254} Thucydides. \textit{The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians}, 69.
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