Greek Writers' Views on Sparta: Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Aristotle, Pausanias

Sample question: 10 marks
With reference to sources, explain the views of Greek writers towards Spartan society?

Suggested approach:

- Outline the view: positive/negative/favourable/biased against/biased towards/envious/admiring/pragmatic/dogmatic
- Explain how/why these views have developed, i.e. what led the historian to say whatever he said about the Spartans?
- Personal context must be outlined and utilised in any response on perspective, but in direct relation to the explanation, e.g. Thucydides was a die-hard Athenian, over-zealous about his Athenian identity and, as his duty as general calls for, staunchly patriotic.
- The other thing that must come into an explanation/evaluation/assessment of perspective is the historian’s method: where did they access their information from?
  o Did they use their library card?
  o Did they use archives of some sort?
  o Did they witness things first hand?
  o Did they interview people who witnessed things?
  o Did they travel or wait for people to come their way?
  o Did they spend time in others’ culture/city/domain or just pop by?

Here is an example of a student’s work from http://www.camden-schools.nsw.edu.au/pages/Faculties/History/SPARTA/Greek%20writers%20views%20of%20Sparta.html

When you read a section, I want you to judge if it deals with the perspective of the historian, if it is clear and comprehensive, logical, substantial, supported by evidence etc

**Plutarch**
- A Greek from Boeotia who lived between AD50-120.
- He had an interest in character, and this led him to write Lives which demonstrated the merits of his subjects and which might inspire imitation of them.
- The Lives are biographical, not a standard history.
- Plutarch had access to numerous ancient authors that are now lost and so the information available to him was considerable.
- Plutarch was able to write about Sparta with passion because during his time the city was undergoing a highly successful revival. Tourists, such as Plutarch, could witness ceremonies like the whipping of youths at the altar of Artemis Orthia.
- Much of Plutarch's account is centered on an explanation and description of the laws and institutions attributed to Lycurgus.

Your thoughts: ____________________________
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Xenophon

- the Athenian exile who lived in the declining Sparta in the early 4th C.
- his *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* gives an account of Spartan social, educational and military practices, all linked to Lycurgus' direction.
- he was the last writer to have known Sparta while the old ways still held some sway, gathered his information from a variety of sources but some of it "is pure fiction" according to Fitzhardinge.
- he is said to have been one of the first exponents of the "Spartan myth".
- Fitzhardinge argues that, "the more the glories of Sparta receded the greater the tendency to romanticise her institutions."

Aristotle

- an Athenian philosopher, in the 4thC BC.
- he is "critical of Spartan institutions and paints a vivid picture of the complete breakdown of Spartan society in his own time - a dwindling citizen body, extreme inequality of property with two-fifths of the land owned by women, and prevailing greed and luxury." Fitzhardinge.


Written during the 7th century BC, Tyrtaeus's poem eunomia is our earliest and most explicit advocate of the practice and values of hoplite Sparta. His patriotic statements such as "shameful is the corpse that lies in the dust with its wounds behind" offers the first glimpse into the world of barracks Sparta. This view of a courageous and militarily disciplined state is admired by Plato, who in his works Laws and Republic outlines his ideas on the perfect state declaring that the organization of the Spartan state "is that of an army camp, not of people who live in a town". Plato's moralistic nature sees him praise Spartan institutions and customs and leaves him oblivious to the fractures in the system.

Conversely writing in the fourth century BC Aristotle in his work Politics focuses on the breakdown of Spartan society, his description of a dwindling citizen body, imbalanced and controlled by women and the greedy explained to be the result of rapid economic and political unrest. Aristotle's lack of admiration for women and the Agoge is essential in our study of Greek perceptions on Sparta as although his writing is biased they enable us to witness the attitudes of other writers including Plutarch, Xenophon and Alcman.

Xenophon, a Spartan propagandist offers a romanticized perception of the city, the need to glorify her institutions heightened by the reduction of her glories. It is obvious that the myth of Sparta was widely accepted, the famous quote that "if the Persians block out the sun, then we shall have our battle in the shade" offering a glimpse into the idealistic view of Sparta that so many writers adopted. The focus of Xenophon is contrasted by the Maiden songs by Alcman, where he suggests that good lyre playing takes precedence over iron' and yet Thucydides opinion that "the arts and learning never flourished" in Sparta is yet another testimony to the one sided view of contemporary Sparta. In analyzing Sparta it is Plutarch who offers the most important of all historic texts, and yet his view is also tainted due to his reliance on contemporary writers such as Xenophon and Alcman.