Spartiatic Landownership and Inheritance

Wealth and property were fundamental aspects of Spartan society, and the terms of ownership and inheritance of land in particular have been an area of debate in studies of ancient Sparta. Problems with the debate arise in that there is little evidence that show the customs in landownership and the inheritance of land, and according to Stephen Hodkinson “there is little value to be extracted from the accounts of later writers upon whom scholars have often relied.”

In relation to landownership and inheritance Plutarch gives evidence for two interpretations that are widely accepted. The first interpretation states that each citizen was merely the life tenant of an indivisible lot which reverted to the state on his death; the second interpretation has the indivisible plot passed down by primogeniture to the man’s eldest son. Neither view has means for the individual landholder to divide his lot or sell it as a whole, both versions stem from the idea that land was equally redistributed in the archaic period and these allocated lots had been preserved into the fifth century BC. However both interpretations have proponents that often suggest that richer citizens owned other land more private in character. Evidence can be found in Herodotus (6.61.3; 7.134.2) and Thucydides (1.6.4) of such inequalities in Spartan landownership. In the mentioned passages activities requiring larger estates that allocated could be used as excuses for maintaining landownership outside jurisdiction. Such activities included training and housing of horses for chariot racing and the cavalry.

From the existence of two different interpretations of Plutarch’s evidence we find it to be contradictory, and Hodkinson believes this combined with the obvious impracticalness of the land tenure and inheritance laws stated and the essential elements of Plutarch’s accounts showing evidence of coming to practice in the fourth century or later, can only lead to an interpretation of the evidence that sees landownership and inheritance as a private affair that includes women in the right to landownership. Hodkinson believes the evidence show two types of land existed, one of which is called the “ancient portion” (archaia moira) and he fails to name the second type. Selling of the ancient portion was forbidden and it was seen as shameful to sell any other land, otherwise there seems to be no evidence for further restrictions concerning either type of land.

According to Hodkinson a landowner without a male child could also control the disposition of his land, wither directly, by adopting an heir, or indirectly, through the choice of a husband for his heiress. It is believed that an unbetrothed heiress was obliged to marry her next of kin, who may also give her in marriage to whomever he wished. By the method of partible inheritance the land was transmitted through the generations by division between the owner’s children. In absence of an heir, the inheritance was shared among the closest kin, starting on the male owner’s side.

Women were not forbidden from owning land and probably inherited land when no male heir was present, and it is even possible that daughters possessed rights of inheritance even in the presence of sons, not just in their absence. Hodkinson doesn’t agree with Aristotle’s reasoning (an increase in the size of dowries or marriage settlements in the fourth century) for women owning two-fifths of the land.
in Sparta, but rather believes women had long possessed the same inheritance rights as males.

Intra-lineage marriages were clearly aimed at the concentration of property and each involved a woman with a surviving close inheriting kinsman (brother mostly). This provides further evidence to support the idea that women possessed rights of inheritance equal to male heirs. Therefore Hodkinson concludes that landownership and inheritance “operated on the basis of diverging devolution according to which the property of both father and mother passed into the hands of children of both sexes.”