

# Spartan Society

The Great Rhetra

# The Great Rhetra

- Reforms introduced by Lycurgus were in the form of a *Rhetra* (a pronouncement reflecting the oral tradition of the Spartans and their laws, often based on oracles) – probably dating from 7th century BC
- Writings of Plutarch – main source on Great *Rhetra* = widely accepted that Plutarch used Aristotle's lost Constitution of the Spartans as his source.
- Plutarch – believed that the Great *Rhetra* was an utterance from the Delphic Oracle, brought back by Lycurgus and presented to Spartans.
- Problems:
- If Lycurgus presented it, then it means that it had to be preserved orally for a number of centuries because writing was not widely practised.
- Issue of Delphic Oracle – When did it become so influential that its utterances became law?

# The Great Rhetra

- Tyrtaeus, 7th century Spartan poet, however, mentions that two kings consulted the Delphic Oracle and brought the Great *Rhetra* – Scholars believe that this could refer to early kings Polydorus and Theopompus
- Significance of Rhetra? – Foundation document of the Spartan constitution. Limit the powers of the two kings and was particularly concerned with the establishment of the *Gerousia*

## The extent of the changes/reforms

- Plutarch (using Plato and Aristotle as sources) considered that the most important change instituted by Lycurgus was the Council of Elders (*Gerousia*).
- Also important, according to Plutarch, was the redistribution of the land.
- Reforms encompassed all aspects of Spartan life: economic, political and social
- Ideal underpinning all of these reforms was Greek concept of *eunomia* (good order and good government – emphasised by duty and obedience to the laws).
- This good order gave Sparta its relative stability and earned the admiration of many Greek writers, including Herodotus and Xenophon.

# Eunomia

***Eunomia***  
(good order)

## **Economic System**

Helot/*perioikoi* labour freed  
Spartiates to be full-time  
Soldiers

Citizens did not work –  
discouraged  
from pursuing luxury

## **Political system**

(based on 'Great *Rhetra*')  
Mixed constitution:  
assembly  
ephorate  
dual kingship  
*Gerousia*

## **Social system**

State ethos taught  
and maintained  
through:  
*agoge*  
*syssitia*  
hoplite training and  
service

# Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book 1.65

[Lycurgus] changed all the laws and made sure that these should not be transgressed. After this Lycurgus established military organisation, the divisions (*enomotiai*), companies of thirty (*triakades*) and messes (*syssitia*) as well as the ephors and elders. By these changes they became a well ordered state, and they dedicated a temple to Lycurgus when he died and revere him greatly. Living in a fertile country and with a numerous population of men, they immediately shot up and flourished.

# What did Lycurgus achieve?

| <b>The Lycurgan reforms</b>  | <b>Purpose</b>   | <b>Effects</b>   |
|--|--|--|
| <p><b>The Rhetra (the Law)</b><br/>Modern scholarship casts doubt on the fact that the system came into being at a single point in time. Even more recent research has cast doubt on the existence of Lycurgus at all!</p> | <p>One king led the army when in war while the other remained in Sparta. Each one ensured the other remained loyal.</p> <p>These three bodies (the gerousia, ephorate and apella) combined into a single government.</p>   | <p>A system of checks and balances</p>                             |
| <p><b>The Two Kings</b><br/>- taken from the Agiad and Eurypontid families.</p>  | <p>The system of government - elements of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy, with no one group taking precedence (at least in theory) over the other.</p> <p>Evidence suggests the monarchy existed before Lycurgus. The kings claimed descent from <i>Heracles</i> (useful propaganda).</p> | <p>Powers of the kings were limited, especially by the ephors.</p> |

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|---|---|--|
| <p><b>The Gerousia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- consisted of the <i>gerontes</i> (28 Spartan males over the age of 60).</li> <li>-chosen by merit and included the two hereditary kings.</li> <li>- initiated the business for discussion in the Apella.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Acted as a court to try murder cases and could impose the death penalty, banish the guilty party or impose fines.</li> <li>-Real power rested in their power to summon, dismiss or reject legislation of the Apella.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-the <i>gerontes</i> were meant to be experienced men, but frequently lacked training in government.</li> <li>-suggested that they might often be senile.</li> <li>-an ultra-conservative group who could be relied on to maintain the status quo.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>The Ephors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Evidence suggests that there were 5, one from each of the villages.</li> <li>-Were elected for one year, with election being open to any Spartan citizen.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Presided over the Apella.</li> <li>-They heard civil law cases.</li> <li>-They could impeach the kings.</li> <li>-They directed the <i>krypteia</i>.</li> <li>-Two ephors accompanied the king into battle.</li> </ul>          | <p>The <i>ephors</i> usurped the power of the other two bodies and were subject to bribery and corruption. (As all Spartan citizens were open to election, the presumption is that the poor ones might be bribed.)</p>   |
| <p><b>The Apella</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-consisted of all citizens (i.e. male Spartiati over the age of 30).</li> <li>-voted by acclamation (i.e. clapping).</li> <li>-effective power only on matters of war and peace.</li> </ul>                             | <p>The <i>apella</i> voted on proposals of the gerousia and elected ephors and members of the gerousia.</p>   | <p>The <i>apella</i> lacked formal training and possessed little real power.</p>   |