

The Funeral Rite of the Spartan Kings

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Abstract. *This article is a historical commentary on Herodotus' account of the funerals of the Spartan kings. It is an attempt on the author's part to explain why for centuries the royal funerary ritual continued unchanged despite its being too lavish for ascetic Sparta. The study focuses on the socio-economic composition of the funeral attendees. In the author's opinion, the participation of representatives of the lower classes - the helots and perioikoi - in the ceremony facilitated the evolvement of elites from both categories of the Spartan subordinate population. The funeral ceremony performed an important ideological and propaganda function serving as a unifying factor for all the social classes and indoctrinating the masses with the belief in the eternal and immutable nature of the royal authority and, by extension, of the Spartan state.*

Rezumat. *Articolul de față reprezintă un comentariu asupra informațiilor oferite de către Herodot asupra funeraliilor regilor Spartei. Mai concret, este vorba despre o încercare a autoarei de a explica motivul pentru care ritualul funerar a continuat să persiste sub aceeași formă, deși era mult prea lasciv raportat la ascetismul spartan. Studiul este concentrat pe coordonatele socio-economice ale participanților la astfel de ritualuri. Conform opiniei autoarei, participarea unor reprezentanți ai claselor inferioare - hiloși și perioikoi - la ceremonie a facilitat dezvoltarea unor elite în rândul ambelor categorii ale populației aflate pe treptele inferioare ale societății. Ceremonialul funerar a avut o importantă funcție ideologică, servind ca liant pentru toate clasele sociale. De asemenea, acesta avea rolul de a îndotrina masele pentru a crede în natura eternă și de neclintit ale autorității regale și, prin extensie, a statului spartan.*

Keywords: *Herodotus, Plutarch, Spartiates, helots, perioikoi, Spartan kings, Sparta.*

Not so much is known about the funerary customs in Sparta, however, it may safely be said that the burial rituals there were far more modest than in other Greek states. The Spartans, at least in the Classical period, were known for burying their dead in unmarked graves lacking the names of the deceased. That was done in accordance with the idea of equality central to the Spartan culture, the introduction of which idea they connected with the legislation of Lycurgus. Apparently, as early as the Archaic period the Spartans had already called themselves *homoioi* (ὄμοιοι), i.e., 'alike', 'equal' (Xen. Lac. pol. 13. 1 and 7; Arist. Pol. V. 6. 1. 1306 b 30), and in many respects full citizens were equal indeed. They received the same type of education in military boarding schools; they were given the same food in the so-called *syssitia*,

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i.e., mess-companies; they paid the same dues for their upkeep; all of them without exception were liable for military service and started their military careers on equal footing. Outside of Sparta historians and philosophers, such as Xenophon or Plato, also emphasized the egalitarian trends in the Spartan politics and economy while deliberately understating the extent of economic, social and political stratification in Spartan society².

Being the central national idea of the Spartans, the idea of citizen equality was actively promoted by the state propaganda. The constitutional changes enshrined in the *Great Rhetra* (Plut. Lyc. 6) altered not only the political system – eventually, the whole mode of life and, if we may say so, death in Sparta was transformed. The new developments affected the burial rituals which became an essential part of the existing legislation; they were integrated into the general propaganda trend of citizen equality. The rules pertaining to the royal funerary ritual, traditionally associated with the legislation of Lycurgus³, might have been established at the same time, i.e., in the early Archaic period.

In this article, we undertake a specific task which is the evaluation of an important aspect of Spartan civil life – the royal funerary ritual. It should be noted that in any society burial rites are an integral part of the nation's cultural code and speak volumes about their creators, thus, it is entirely true for Sparta as well. By carefully examining different facets of the ritual we will be able to discover possible reasons why the Spartans insisted on upholding kingship over the whole period of Sparta's existence as an independent state.

The concept of equality, carried to its logical conclusion in Sparta, resulted in the depersonalization of ordinary graves which did not bear the names of the deceased. It is unclear when the practice was introduced, but the reason for it was probably the intention of the authorities to deny the Spartan aristocracy the opportunity to erect magnificent tombs in order to flaunt their wealth and high rank. According to Margaret Alexiou, 'by taking such a step in good time, along with other social and economic measures, Lykourgos was able to forestall the rise of all-powerful noble families who might challenge both the position of the kings and the limitations imposed on economic and political developments'⁴. No other Greek *polis* adopted a similar practice of anonymization of ordinary graves, although in the Archaic period the burial rites underwent simplification in many cities, as evidenced by both epigraphic (Keos: SIG 1218; Delphi: Rhodes and Osborne 2–7) and literary sources (Dem. XLIII. 62–63; Plut. Sol. 12. 8; 21. 5; Cic. De Leg. II. 59; 64–66; cf. Plat. Leg. XII. 958d–960a)⁵. For instance,

² CHRISTESEN 2010, 51.

³ GARLAND 1989, 14.

⁴ ALEXIOU 2002, 17.

⁵ For instance, in Mytilene Pittacus (650–570 BC) limited the number of funeral attendees to the relatives of the deceased (Cic. De Leg. II. 66); in Syracuse the law enacted even before Gelon (540–478 BC) stipulated that funeral costs had to be reduced (Diod. XI. 38. 2); the lawgiver Charondas from Catana (6th century BC) simplified the funerary ritual (Stob. XLIV. 40). R. Garland enumerates the nine *poleis* which possibly implemented the laws regulating and simplifying

this happened in Athens in the time of Solon, who, according to Plutarch, cancelled 'the harsh and barbaric practices in which their women had usually indulged up to that time' (Plut. Sol. 12. 8, translated by B. Perrin)⁶. Apparently, singling out women as a specific group in need of being held in check reflects their previous status at funerals which Solon found unacceptable⁷.

In Archaic Sparta the burial rituals were also significantly curtailed, which apparently dealt a severe blow to the aristocratic clans and, on the other hand, alleviated the plight of ordinary citizens. Plutarch gives a list of the implemented measures standardizing and simplifying the burial practices: 'Lycurgus did away with all superstitious fear connected with burials, granting the right to bury the dead within the city, and to have the tombs near the shrines. He also abolished the pollutions associated with death and burial. He permitted the people to bury nothing with their dead, but only to enfold the body in a red robe and olive leaves, and all to treat their dead alike⁸. He also did away with the inscriptions on tombs, except of those who had met their end in war, and also did away with mourning and lamentation' (Plut. Mor. 238 d = Inst. Lac. 18, hereinafter translated by Fr. C. Babbitt; see also: Plut. Lyc. 27. 1–2). The tradition ascribes the burial laws to Lycurgus (Xen. Lac. pol. 15. 9). However, the Spartans associated any reforms introduced in the Archaic period with the name of Lycurgus⁹.

It is entirely possible that the burial laws simplifying the funerals of ordinary citizens were not included in the legislation of Lycurgus, but were in fact implemented sometime later – at the beginning¹⁰ or in the middle¹¹ of the 6th century BC – as part of sumptuary laws. We should note that it was precisely during this period that similar restrictions were introduced in other Greek *poleis*. It cannot be ruled out that the *ephor* Chilon¹² – the only major political figure of that epoch known to us besides the kings – had a hand in formulating the law¹³. It is possible that the prohibition on excessive displays of grief and sorrow was issued in his day¹⁴.

the funeral ceremony (Garland 1989, 1–15). For more information on the legislative measures curtailing the burial rites in certain Greek *poleis* and the reasons for their implementation, see: ALEXIOU 2002, 14 – 23. As a rule, such restrictions were imposed in the *poleis* that achieved greater success in fighting against the aristocracy (ALEXIOU 2002, 17, 22). Similar regulations existed in Rome. *Leges duodecim tabularum* already contained provisions restricting the lavishness of funerals. Cicero noted that these provisions were almost an exact copy of Greek statutes, including those of Solon (De Leg. II. 64).

⁶ These are the earliest burial laws which we have relatively detailed information about. It appears that we can see the genuine tradition here (GARLAND 1989, 3–8).

⁷ ALEXIOU 2002, 18.

⁸ Plutarch raises a crucial point – the funeral ceremony was the same for everybody.

⁹ On initial reforms in Sparta, see: PECHATNOVA 2020, 25–95.

¹⁰ WEES 2018, 222.

¹¹ Henceforth, all dates are BC.

¹² NAFISSI 1991, 430.

¹³ After his death Chilon, like Lycurgus, was venerated as a hero (Paus. III. 16. 6) and even had a shrine in Sparta (III. 16. 4).

¹⁴ PETROPOULOU 2009, 593.

Therefore, the Spartans, having lost the right to retain their names on tombstones, found themselves more equal in death than they had been in life; although an exception was made for two categories of *Spartiates*. The first category comprised those who fell in battle (Plut. Lyc. 27. 2; Mor. 238 d = Inst. Lac. 18). Their names survived on tombstones, but the stones themselves were most commonly located outside of Sparta and were plain in the extreme. This provision is mentioned by Plutarch: 'It was Spartan custom, when men of ordinary rank died in a foreign country, to give their bodies funeral rites and burial there, but to carry the bodies of their kings home' (Ages. 40. 3, translated by B. Perrin). At that time burying the fallen either on the battlefields (Paus. IX. 2. 5) or in the territory of the allied communities in the vicinity (Her. IX. 85; Xen. Hell. II. 4. 33) was common practice starting at least as early as mid-6th century BC. The second category consisted of the Spartan kings or, more precisely, those of them who managed to either die in battle or pass away peacefully in bed. Not only did they retain their names on the tombstones, they were also honoured with a funeral ceremony that was uncommonly lavish for ascetic Sparta. In this aspect again Sparta was the exception rather than the rule. In other *poleis* the restrictions applied to all citizens without exception, which was indicative of increasing democratization of society. In Sparta, on the other hand, the law was administered selectively and did not affect the royal funerary ritual in the slightest. The oriental splendour typical of the ancient funeral ceremony which amazed Herodotus remained intact there. According to R. Parker, '... royal funerals were surely among the most spectacular pageants that the Peloponnese ever saw'¹⁵.

Since royal funerals in Sparta are a peculiar phenomenon contrasting starkly with the modest burial rituals the rest of the Spartans observed, we should examine it in more detail. The first step is to consult the literary sources. Although non-Spartan in origin, all of them were authored by the historians very familiar with the situation in Sparta – first and foremost by Herodotus, Xenophon and Plutarch. Herodotus left the most comprehensive description of the royal funerary ceremony (VI. 58). This description is part of his excursus on the royal authority in Sparta (VI. 52–59). Since the Greeks, the Athenians in particular, knew but little about the inner workings of Spartan society due to state-implemented secrecy, as Thucydides puts it (Thuc. V. 68. 2), Herodotus attempts to fill this lacuna to a certain extent. As Nino Luraghi notes, the information about Sparta which Herodotus gives has 'a distinctly ethnographic tone, comparing the Spartans with the Persians and the Egyptians'¹⁶. This holds true for his account of the Spartan royal funerals which he definitely finds exotic. This explains why he says that 'the Lacedaemonians have the same custom at the deaths of their kings as the foreigners in Asia...' (VI. 58. 2, hereinafter translated by A. D. Godley). He also compares the heir's conduct to the Persian customs – 'this successor releases from debt any Spartan who

¹⁵ PARKER 1989, 153.

¹⁶ LURAGHI 2002, 156.

owes a debt to the king or to the commonwealth' (τῷ βασιλείῃ ἢ τῷ δημοσίῳ)¹⁷. Herodotus notes that 'among the Persians the king at the beginning of his reign forgives all cities their arrears of tribute' (VI. 59). Apparently, according to Herodotus, in this aspect the Spartans resembled the Persians whom the historian knew well, being a native of Halicarnassus¹⁸ (V. 80). He underscores the frenzy the Spartans worked themselves into at the royal funerals¹⁹ and the heir's generosity unusual for a poor country. Both these aspects were uncommon for Herodotus' contemporaries in other Greek states.

Naturally, the royal funerary ritual as described by Herodotus was not exclusive to Sparta. At one point similar rituals existed in many Greek *poleis*, yet, they disappeared with the collapse of the royal authority. It should be noted that certain changes the Spartans made to the royal funeral ceremony proceeded from the circumstances unique to Sparta. The bond between the lower classes and the Spartan kings stipulated the presence of the former's representatives at the funerals. Herodotus notes that the royal funerals had to be attended not only by *Spartiates*, but also by the *perioikoi*²⁰ and *helots*: 'When a king of the Lacedaemonians dies, a fixed number of their subject neighbors must come to the funeral from all Lacedaemon, besides the Spartans (χωρὶς Σπαρτιητέων). ... these and the *helots* and the Spartans themselves have assembled in one place to the number of many thousands (πολλὰ χιλιάδες), together with the women' (VI. 58. 2).

¹⁷ This might be an ancient legal formula that had no substance due to the diminishing authority of the Spartan kings. We know little about the Spartan treasury. It is seldom mentioned in the sources and when it is mentioned, it is generally to lament its emptiness (Thuc. I. 80. 4). H.W. Stubbs even suggests that there was no treasury in Sparta (STUBBS 1950, 34).

¹⁸ SCOTT 2005, 248.

¹⁹ In Herodotus' day excessive displays of emotions when reacting to misfortune or death were considered typical of oriental practices. For instance, in Aeschylus' *Persae* Xerxes, on witnessing the destruction of his fleet in the Battle of Salamis, tears his clothes and screams shrilly (464–469). By the end of the tragedy Xerxes' (and the chorus') emotions become even more uncontrollable and exaggerated – excessive weeping and groaning, beating their breast and tearing out the beard (910–917, 946, 1030–1033, 1040–1080). As Edith Hall notes, 'it is these features, along with the references to Mariandynian and Mysian styles of mourning (937, 1054), which ensure that the atmosphere created is distinctively 'un-Greek'' (HALL 1989, 84).

²⁰ The Spartan kings acted as intermediaries between the center and the world of the peripheral *poleis*. The *perioikoi* considered themselves members of the League of the Lacedaemonians headed by Sparta. They even shared shrines with the Spartans, e.g., the Apollo's temple on the promontory of Tenarum (SHIPLEY 2006, 68–69). On the status of the *perioikoi*, see: SHIPLEY 1997, esp. 201–206; Idem 2006, esp. 67– 1. The kings owned estates (τεμένη) in the *perioikoi*'s territories (Xen. Lac. pol. 15. 3); and their main source of income was probably the tribute (βασιλικὸς φόρος), that the *perioikoi* paid directly to them. According to Plato, this tribute was quite substantial (Alc. I. 123a). But first and foremost, the kings owed high prestige they enjoyed among the Spartan population to the fact that they were the main, if not the only, representatives of the gods and the high priests for the whole community (Xen. Lac. pol. 15. 1–2). The royal monopoly in the sphere of religion stems from the responsibility to the gods for the fates of the troops and the country that the kings had as the supreme commanders. Both the *perioikoi* and the *Spartiates* as their military leaders fell under the royal authority. The religious privilege was one of the most important indicators of the kings' prestige in Sparta.

It is noteworthy that Herodotus treats both the *perioikoi* and *helots* as the population categories well-known to his readers. He gives no explanation of their status. According to the commentary of L. Scott, ‘for Herodotus, the *helots* are just part of the Spartan landscape’²¹. Herodotus lists the three main categories of the Spartan population whose representatives had to attend royal funerals. Firstly, he mentions *Spartiates* but does not elaborate if all adult full citizens were to put on mourning and attend the ceremony. Most likely, that was the duty of the *Spartiates* who were then in the city²². In Herodotus’ day their numbers were not large, since the phenomenon of *oliganthropia* (ὀλιγανθρωπία – literally, ‘fewness of persons’)²³ had already manifested itself. In any case, the *perioikoi* and *helots* outnumbered full citizens²⁴.

Herodotus does not give the exact figures; however, his words about obligatory, and most likely, enforced attendance of the funerals by a certain number of the *perioikoi* (ἀριθμῶ τῶν περιόικων ἀναγκαστοῦς ἐς τὸ κῆδος ἰέναι) are a clear indication that a certain quota – at least for the *perioikoi* – existed. This quota was probably not a constant and could change depending on the time and circumstances of the funeral of this or that king. Taking the context into account, we may assume that a similar quote existed for the *helots* as well. The following observation by A. Petropoulou seems to be correct: ‘In fact, those participating in the royal funeral represented all sections of the population, their numbers being seemingly in proportion to their social status: a couple from every Spartan household, a smaller number of couples of *perioikoi*, and even fewer *helots*’²⁵. But any, however small, congregation of lower class representatives in one place must have been viewed by the Spartans as a real threat²⁶. It can be safely assumed that most of the time the only *perioikoi* and *helots* that could be found in the city proper were those used as domestics and artisans. Besides, it is entirely possible that the funeral attendees from among the *perioikoi* were limited to the *perioikoi* nobility – those who were building their careers in the Spartan army (Xen. Hell. V. 3. 9; Plut. Cleom. 11. 2). Apart from them, the representatives of prosperous families that were not uncommon among the *perioikoi*²⁷ could also attend royal funerals. The *perioikoi* themselves probably viewed the invitation to arrive in Sparta accompanied by their wives and to take part in the grand ceremony as a sign of belonging to the elites. For them such a trip to the capital and

²¹ SCOTT 2005, 249.

²² PETROPOULOU 2009, 591.

²³ By *oliganthropia* we mean a catastrophic decline in the number of full citizens that Xenophon commented on (Lac. pol. 1. 1). For more recent research into *oliganthropia*, see: DORAN 2018, 1–106.

²⁴ On the number of the *helots*, see: FIGUEIRA 2003, 193–239; SCHEIDEL 2003, 240–247.

²⁵ PETROPOULOU 2009, 592. See also: PARKER 1989, 153.

²⁶ The Spartans perceived all the *helots*, especially after the Third Messenian War, as a menace. They did not feel safe even in their own homes (Critias ap. Liban. Or. XXV. 63). The fear and distrust of this class were ever-present. For instance, in 369 BC it was only out of despair that the Spartans conscripted six thousand *helots* into the army (Xen. Hell. VI. 5. 29).

²⁷ On the socio-economic stratification among the *perioikoi*, see: ZAYKOV 2005, 69–85.

participation in a splendid pageant so untypical of ascetic Sparta could become a source of pride and something to remember for years to come.

What surprises the most about Herodotus' list of attendees is the presence of the *helots* as mandatory participants²⁸. While the *perioikoi* were generally loyal to the Spartans, the *helots* always remained a potential and at times a real threat to the latter. Thus, the practice of gathering the *helots* in the very centre of the state seems odd²⁹. Apparently, the presence of the *perioikoi* and *helots* could primarily be ascribed to the religious factor. The Spartan kings were considered semidivine ancestors and patrons of all the Spartans and the joint participation of the representatives of all the social groups, especially the lower classes, in the funeral ceremony was to hammer the point home. Therefore, royal funerals served as a unifying factor for all the classes: full citizens, the *perioikoi* and *helots*. Involving the *perioikoi* and *helots* in the funerary rituals was done on purpose – the reason behind this lavish and expensive ceremony was to indoctrinate the masses with the belief in the eternal and immutable nature of the royal authority and, by extension, of the Spartan state. Therefore, the corpse of the king in the eyes of the lower classes turned into a symbol of power of Sparta and the Spartans³⁰.

It is unclear whether royal funerals had to be attended by both the Laconian and Messenian *helots* or by only one of these groups³¹. Although an unambiguous answer to this question does not exist due to the scarcity of sources, speculation is certainly possible. The Laconian *helots* would naturally have closer ties with the Spartans by virtue of their geographical location and their early enslavement³². Apparently, the Spartans were not so apprehensive about admitting them into Sparta during royal funerals. Still, the very presence of any number of the *helots* in the capital seems surprising, since oligarchies or similar regimes always feared, and rightly so, mass gatherings of free people, let alone the *helots*, in the city.

²⁸ To some degree it can be attributed to the ambivalent attitude free citizens had towards slaves. There are mentions of slaves changing places with their masters during festivals – the latter waited on their slaves and feasted together with them. For instance, that happened in Athens during the celebration of Kronia (Macrob. Sat. I. 7. 37). In Cydonia on Crete slaves could even flog free people (Ephor. FgrHist 70 F 29). According to the historian Polykrates, in Sparta during the Hyacinthia 'citizens feasted all their acquaintances and their own slaves' (Athen. IV. 17. 139 f – δειπνίζουσιν οἱ πολῖται πάντας τοὺς γνωρίμους καὶ τοὺς δούλους τοὺς ἰδίους) (ALEXIOU 2002, 58)

²⁹ M. Alexiou argues that the *helots* were made to lament at the funeral of a king. Such a custom existed throughout Homeric Greece – in the Iliad, Trojan women, captives in the Greek camp, were forced to lament for Patroklos (XVIII. 339–342); but during the Classical period the custom gradually disappeared, so the main responsibility for lamentation rested with the next of kin (ALEXIOU 2002, 10).

³⁰ PARKER 1989, 153.

³¹ The commentaries on Herodotus known to us do not address this problem.

³² Fairly recent studies emphasize the difference in status between the two groups of the *helots* and assert that the Laconian *helots* were more privileged than their Messenian counterparts. See: WHITBY 1994, 99 and 109; BIRGALIAS 2002, 249–266; KENNELL 2003, 81–105; LURAGHI 2003, 109–141, PECHATNOVA 2020, 325–341.

(Arist. Pol. V. 1311a 13–14; [Arist.] Rhet. ad Alex. 1425b 8–10: μηδὲ [χρῆ] συνάγειν ἐκ τῆς χώρας τὸν ὄχλον εἰς τὴν πόλιν)³³. In any case, since the *perioikoi* and *helots* were allowed to congregate in the city, the authorities must have tightly controlled the whole process. It is possible that the Laconian *helots* themselves had ambivalent feelings about the necessity to be present at the royal funerals, viewing it not only as an ignoble and forced duty but also as a sign of trust their *Spartiate* masters put in them. If it is true that only the Laconian *helots* had a right to attend royal funerals, for them it could be a distinguishing feature that set them apart from the Messenian *helots*. At least, Herodotus insists that horsemen carried the news of the king's death throughout the whole of Laconia (κατὰ πᾶσαν τὴν Λακωνικὴν – VI. 58. 1). This is the only part of Herodotus' narrative that may suggest that the *helots* the historian refers to are indeed Laconian.

The term 'Laconia' or 'Laconian land' is hardly ever used by Herodotus, only in case when the historian wants to identify the precise location of a certain place or to mention specific dishes or units of measure existing only in Laconia. For instance, while writing about Amompharetus, the leader of the battalion from the Pitonate, one of the five Spartan villages, Herodotus uses the phrase 'τὸ στρατόπεδον τὸ Λακωνικόν' (Laconian army), since he refers exclusively to the troops recruited from the Spartan villages (*obai*) (IX. 53. 3). Mentioning a place called Thornax, the historian clarifies that it is situated in Laconia (τῆς Λακωνικῆς – I. 69. 4); likewise, the island of Cythera is located off the coast of Laconia (ἐπὶ τὴν Λάκαιναν χώραν – VII. 235). The weight and size of the king's tribute is termed by Herodotus as 'a Laconian bushel of barley-meal and a Laconian quart of wine' (VI. 57. 2). A reader can also encounter the phrase 'a dinner in Laconian fashion' (Λακωνικὸν δεῖπνον – IX. 82. 2). Therefore, it is obvious that by Laconia Herodotus does not mean the state *in toto*, but only its Laconian part. The few instances when Herodotus resorts to using this term or its derivatives leave little doubt that the historian was very clear on the difference between Lacedaemon, which was the official name of the Spartan state³⁴, and the part of its territory known as Laconia. But the hypothesis that only the Laconian *helots* were invited to attend royal funerals is contradicted by the evidence of Pausanias.

³³ SIMONTON 2018, 13 – 14.

³⁴ Herodotus generally calls the Spartan state Lacedaemon (e.g., VII. 220; 228; VIII. 124), less often Sparta (V. 75; VI. 71). The state included both the territory of Laconia and Messenia. In Herodotus' writing, the terms 'Spartans' and 'Lacedaemonians' are synonymous and often used interchangeably within a chapter or even within a sentence (e.g., I. 67; 82; 83; 153; V. 63; 65; 90; 91; VI. 60; 70; 77; 120; VII. 104; 134–136; 159; 211; VIII. 114; 124; IX. 33; 47–48). *Ephor* Chilon (I. 59), king Cleomenes (V. 49; 54; 70), king Leonidas (VII. 204) and regent Pausanias (V. 32) are termed by the historian as Lacedaemonians and Lyncurgus as a noble Spartan (I. 65). On the other hand, by the Spartans Herodotus always means full citizens, while Lacedaemonians sometimes include the *perioikoi* – mostly when he refers to the composition of the Spartan army (VI. 58; VII. 234; IX. 28).

The author of *Description of Greece* claims that the treaty Sparta and Messenia concluded after the end of the First Messenian War (late 8th century BC)³⁵ contained the following ‘ritual’ clause – ‘It was also ordained that for the funerals of the kings and other magistrates men should come from Messene with their wives in black garments’ (ἄνδρας ἐκ τῆς Μεσσηνίας καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας ἐν ἔσθῃτι ἤκειν μελαίνῃ... – IV. 14. 4–5, hereinafter translated by W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod). It should be noted that neither Pausanias, nor Tyrtaeus he quotes mention the *helots*³⁶. Judging from the political component of the treaty, the Messenians were given the same status as the Laconian *perioikoi* and were able to partly retain their autonomy. The clause about the presence of the Messenians at the funerals of the Spartan kings and *gerontes* was apparently quite typical of such treaties during the Archaic period. For instance, after Corinth defeated Megara during roughly the same time frame, the Megarians were obligated to send their mourners to attend the funerals of the Corinthian kings from the ruling family of the Bacchiadae (FgrHist 327 F 19). If Pausanias gives an accurate account of the official agreement forced by Sparta onto the Messenians as the losing side, then apparently in the late 8th century BC the Messenian *helots* did not yet exist as a legal object. Therefore, using Pausanias’ account as conclusive proof of the Messenian *helots*’ mandatory attendance of royal funerals in Sparta does not seem appropriate. It should also be reiterated that, according to Herodotus, the horsemen bearing the sad tidings travelled only throughout Laconia (VI. 58. 1).

It is also not quite clear what the phrase ‘two free persons from each house, a man and a woman, are required to wear mourning (καταμιαίνεσθαι)³⁷ in the excerpt under discussion means (VI. 58. 1). L. Scott, the author of a commentary on Herodotus, takes the sentence literally and understands the phrase ‘free people’ to denote solely the Laconian *perioikoi*³⁸. As an additional argument he quotes Herodotus’ words that disobedience to this order will result in ‘heavy penalties’ (ζημίαι μεγάλα). In L. Scott’s view, such a punishment could only befall the *perioikoi*. However, in this sentence Herodotus emphasizes the number of mourners and their gender rather than their social status. Similarly, the previous phrase merely refers to women ‘beating on cauldrons’. Therefore, ‘free persons’ should denote the *Spartiates* and the *perioikoi* together. As for corporal punishment, it could be inflicted on both the *perioikoi* and

³⁵ Apparently, 5th century historians showed no particular interest in the Spartan conquest of Messenia. Not only did they not know the details of the Messenian Wars, they were not aware there had been several conflicts. For instance, in his account of the foundation of Tarentum Antiochus of Syracuse writes that it happened ‘after the Messenian War’, apparently thinking there was only one such war (ap. Strab. VI. 3. 2. p. 278). Thucydides touches upon the matter in passing mentioning that ‘the *Helots* were mostly the descendants of the Messenians who had been enslaved long ago’ (I. 101. 2). N. Luraghi, the author of a relatively recent study on Messenia, is of the opinion that the orthodox version of the history of these conflicts did not appear, even if as a sketch, before 330 BC. (LURAGHI 2008, 78)

³⁶ LURAGHI 2008, 73–75. Judging by the excerpts from Tyrtaeus found in Pausanias, after the First Messenian War the population of Messenia was not yet turned into the *helots* (LURAGHI 2003, 129–132), since the Second Messenian war is called the fight between two *hoplite* armies (Tyrt. fr. 8 v. 31 sq. and 9 v. 21 Diehl3).

³⁷ Lit. ‘to defile oneself’. On the procedure of defilement, see: HORNBLOWER 1989, 166.

³⁸ SCOTT 2005, 248.

the *Spartiates*. The latter grew accustomed to physical abuse since childhood (Xen. Lac. pol. II. 8–9; Anab. IV. 6. 15; Plat. Leg. I. 633b).

Besides the male population, women also participated most actively in the funeral ceremony, which is mentioned by Herodotus more than once. It was women who signaled the beginning of the burial rites. According to the historian, ‘in the city women go about beating on cauldrons’ (VI. 58. 1). Together with their husbands they put on mourning and played an essential role in the proceedings (58. 3). As evidenced by the tradition, women typically had a significant part in performing funeral rites not only in Sparta but also in other Greek poleis. Apparently, before passing the law on simplification of the burial practices women carried out a prominent role in the funeral ceremony – lamentation for the departed was a duty imposed on them and an integral part of the ritual. Their weeping was by no means due to a sudden onslaught of grief. So the frenzied tearing of clothes, faces and hair, especially at the funerals of the rulers and the highest magistrates, was not a sign of overwhelming sorrow but rather an element of a sacred ritual³⁹. And while other *poleis*, such as Athens in Solon’s day, came to regard the leading role of women in the funeral ceremonies as inappropriate, in Sparta apparently their participation in the royal funeral rites was mandatory and as such had never been reassessed.

Describing the process of interment of the kings, Herodotus emphasizes the sheer number and the agitated emotions of the attendees whose exaggerated grief was not at all suppressed but rather encouraged as compulsory – ‘When these (the *perioikoi* - L. P.) and the *helots* and the Spartans themselves have assembled in one place to the number of many thousands, together with the women, they zealously beat their foreheads and make long and loud lamentation, calling that king that is most recently dead the best (*ἄριστον*) of all their kings’ (VI. 58. 3). Declaring the deceased the best of kings most likely was the obligatory refrain in the lament. It was an appeal to the new king to contend for the right to be buried to the accompaniment of the same refrain.

Obviously, in many cultures funerals went together with the extreme idealization of the departed, and Sparta was not an exception. It should be noted that the tradition traced the maxim that one should not speak ill of the dead back to the reformer Chilon in the 6th century BC (Diog. Laert. I. 3. 70)⁴⁰. Apparently, the crowd of mourners acted as a unified whole, disregarding the differences in age, gender and social status. It was a rare occurrence of

³⁹ See: ALEXIOU 2002, 4–7; 207, n. 27: references to the literary sources; n. 31: references to the images of funeral procession on vases in the Geometric style.

⁴⁰ In A. Powell’s opinion, such extreme glorification of the late Spartan kings was in a sense the lesser evil, since too often the kings and the members of the royal families were offenders against the state who were not entitled to any posthumous honours and whose names had to be expunged from memory. One may say, the civil landscape of Sparta was full of gaps. Thus, it became all the more important to honour those kings who managed to preserve their reputation. In this respect, according to A. Powell, Classical Sparta was one of the least stable Greek states of that period (POWELL 2018, 16).

inverted reality, when all things familiar and mundane appeared reversed. Undoubtedly, the laws of theatrical performance were in action then. As Plutarch notes in this regard, ‘the unusual is proper in mourning’ (Plut. Mor. 267 a = Quaest. Rom. 14) Such excessive displays of grief were probably the relics from the Homeric epoch (Il. XVIII. 23–35.), preserved in Sparta solely for the funeral ceremony of the kings and kings only. In this respect the rest of the royal family members were on equal terms with commoners.

For the Greeks of the Classical period, such magnificent ceremonies and complicated rituals enacted by a large number of people who were not related to the deceased by blood had already become exotic events with an oriental flavour. Even in Sparta public wailing and laments only accompanied the royal funerals. All other Spartans were laid to rest either in absolute silence or with their close kin showing self-restraint even in grief.

Herodotus does not provide the exact location where the royal funeral attendees gathered. It is assumed that their assembly point was at the royal tombs⁴¹. The tombs of the Agiads were in Pitane, while the Eurypontids were buried in Limnae (Paus. III. 12. 8; 14. 2). This arrangement of the royal tombs on opposite sides of the city could hardly be a coincidence. N. Richer was able to formulate a plausible hypothesis explaining the fact. In his opinion, the Spartans had a penchant for doubling the gods and heroes protecting them. As the examples of this phenomenon he mentions *Dioskouroi*, the Divine Twins, greatly venerated in Sparta, and the two different locations of the royal tombs. In his words, ‘Sparte est gardée à ses limites par les tombes des deux dynasties: celles des Eurypontides au sud et celles des Agiades au nord’⁴².

At the end of his account of royal funerals in Sparta Herodotus mentions the period of mourning which temporarily suspended all activities: ‘For ten days after the burial there are no assemblies or elections (οὐδ’ ἀρχαιρεσίη συνίξει), and they mourn during these days’ (VI. 58. 3). The historian’s remark about elections is slightly baffling since it is unclear what elections he refers to. There are speculations that Herodotus hints here at the election of a new king⁴³. Indeed, the transition of power was not fully automatic. Apparently, in the absence of disputes between the members of the royal family and objections from the *ephors* and the *gerontes* the new king was installed without discussion with *Apella*, i.e., ancient Spartan assembly. In case of any dispute the election of the new king was probably held in the form of a contest taking place in the *Apella*. At least, Xenophon’s words that ‘the state (ἡ πόλις) chose Agesilaus king’ (Hell. III. 3. 4, hereinafter translated by C. L. Brownson) ‘when the prescribed days of mourning had been religiously observed (ἐπεὶ δὲ ὡσιώθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι)’ (III. 3. 1), (i.e., after the mourning period was over) can be interpreted in this way⁴⁴.

⁴¹ PETROPOULOU 2009, 592 – 593.

⁴² RICHER 1994, 89.

⁴³ PETROPOULOU 2009, 594.

⁴⁴ In 399 BC Agesilaus was able to prove he had a better claim to the throne than the legitimate heir Leotyichidas (Xen. Hell. III. 3. 1–3; Plut. Lys. 22. 6–13; Ages. 3; Paus. III. 8. 7–10).

Herodotus mentions another peculiarity of the royal burial practice: ‘Whenever a king dies in war, they make an image of him (εἶδωλον)⁴⁵ and carry it out on a well-spread bier’ (VI. 58. 3). M. Toher, who devoted an article to the analysis of what the tradition has to say about εἶδωλα, interprets Herodotus’ words as follows: εἶδωλον should have been present at the funeral of any Spartan king slain in battle, regardless of whether there was a corpse or not⁴⁶. According to the researcher, modern commentators do not have compelling reasons to suspect Herodotus of inaccuracies⁴⁷. However, it has long been an established opinion among scholars that the use of εἶδωλα at the funerals of the Spartan rulers could have been introduced specifically for king Leonidas⁴⁸, whose body and severed head apparently had fallen into the hands of the Persians (Her. VII. 238)⁴⁹. The cenotaph⁵⁰ of Leonidas is thought to have been erected among the royal tombs of the Agiads with the purpose of placing his εἶδωλον there. According to A. Petropoulou, interring εἶδωλα might have been a burial practice exclusive to Laconia⁵¹. A Spartan king’s εἶδωλον was probably a potent visual symbol representing an important transformation the king underwent posthumously, attaining the status of a hero⁵². However, Herodotus is silent on the issue of the Spartan kings being worshipped as heroes after death. Commentators consider it a significant flaw of Herodotus’ otherwise detailed account of the Spartan royal funerals⁵³.

This lacuna can be filled with the help of Xenophon. A passage from *Hellenica* reads that ‘...he (king Agis – L.P.) received a burial more splendid than belongs to man’ (Hell. III. 3. 1); while in *Polity of the Lacedaemonians* we find information that ‘Lycurgan laws demonstrate their (Spartans’ – L.P.) intention to honour the kings of Lakedaimonians not as men, but as heroes’ after their death (Lac. pol. 15. 9, translated by M. Lipka). But do these texts prove beyond doubt that those of the Spartan kings who received royal funerals were venerated as heroes *post mortem*? It would indeed seem that such a conclusion should be drawn from the above-

⁴⁵ It was a life-sized wooden figure which was a substitute for the corpse. For more information, see: PETROPOULOU 2009, 596 – 601.

⁴⁶ The use of the image of the deceased at the funeral was not a rare occurrence in ancient times. In Rome it was common practice bearing no relation to the heroization of the dead (Polyb. VI. 53. 4–10). For instance, along Julius Caesar there was a wax figure of him on the bier (Appian BC. II. 147). Later, wax images of the Roman emperors were also present at their funerals.

⁴⁷ TOHER 1999, 115.

⁴⁸ SCHAEFER 1965, 324–325; SCOTT 2005, 360; RICHER 2007, 249.

⁴⁹ In other cases the body of the king was brought back to Sparta as per tradition. See: Agesipolis I, who died from fever during the campaign of 381 BC in Macedon (Xen. Hell. V. 3. 19; Diod. XV. 93); also Agesilaus, who died in Libya in 360 BC (Plut. Ages. 40. 3). Both were brought back to Sparta to be given a royal funeral there.

⁵⁰ Cenotaphs were known in Greece back in Homer’s day (Od. I. 289–91; II. 220–223).

⁵¹ PETROPOULOU 2009, 598.

⁵² In the more recent commentaries there is speculation that εἶδωλα of the kings slain in battle do not automatically imply awarding special honours (HORNBLOWER, PELLING 2017, 165).

⁵³ HORNBLOWER, PELLING 2017, 165.

mentioned passages by Xenophon. Even Pleistoanax in 427/6 BC was reinstated solely at the Pythia's request, since she called the disgraced king 'the seed of the demigod son of Zeus' (Thuc. V. 16. 2, translated by M. Hammond; cp.: Plut. Mor. 403b = Pyth. or. 19). As M. Flower notes, 'the permeability of the categories of moral, hero, and god, and the easy slippage between them, is more pronounced than in other Greek communities of pre-Hellenistic Greece'⁵⁴.

Regarding king Leonidas, his supposed remains were buried in Sparta forty years after his death in the specially built tomb located not far from the theatre (Paus. III. 14. 1). It is unclear why Leonidas' bones were not interred among the other royal burials of the Agiads. Apparently, by mid-5th century BC king Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans were seen as undisputed heroes whose brave deeds served to educate the next generations of Spartan citizens. That, it would seem, was the reason for situating Leonidas' tomb in the city centre. The same location, according to Pausanias, was used to erect 'a slab with the names, and their fathers' names, of those who endured the fight at Thermopylae against the Persians' (III. 14. 1). The Spartans were well aware of the power of visual propaganda and adept at using it. According to the tradition, building tombs in the city centre was permitted, sanctioned even by Lycurgus himself (Plut. Mor. 238 d = Inst. Lac. 18). Leonidas might have been the first Spartan to be given this honour. Later, in addition to the tomb of Leonidas, memorials were erected close to it to pay homage to two more outstanding Spartan commanders – the regent Pausanias and Brasidas (Paus. III. 14. 1). Plutarch explains the tradition 'to bury their dead within the city, and to have memorials of them near the sacred places' (Lyc. 27. 1, translated by B. Perrin) by the necessity to spread visual propaganda more actively and make it more relatable for the young Spartans. Plutarch customarily ascribes this provision, just like any other innovation, to Lycurgus, although the practice is likely to have appeared relatively late. The memorial to Leonidas was probably the first among the tombs eventually built inside the city⁵⁵.

It is known that by the time of Herodotus the power of the Spartan kings had significantly diminished. They retained their position as supreme commanders, but the rest of their responsibilities had to be shared with or transferred to the *ephors* and the *gerontes*. However, after their death they were still buried and venerated in a way similar to Homeric heroes. It appears that the funerary ritual remained unchanged since the earliest times. On account of its oriental splendour and considerable complexity the ceremony was at odds with the other facets of life in Spartan society. Moreover, the ritual did not truly reflect the status of the

⁵⁴ FLOWER 2009, 214.

⁵⁵ In the Classical period burials within city limits were considered extraordinary occasions. Not many were found worthy of this singular honour: e.g., Brasidas in Amphipolis (Thuc. V. 11. 1), Euphron in Sycion (Xen. Hell. VII. 3. 12), Timoleon in Syracuse (Plut. Tim. 29).

Spartan rulers either. The royal authority was not characterized by any attributes typical of Near Eastern monarchies. Rather, the Spartan kings were first among equals and their citizens could freely approach them (Xen. Hell. V. 4. 28).

The royal funerary ritual in Sparta was artificially preserved in a pseudo-archaic form since it fulfilled a vital political function of transferring the sacred power from the late king to his legitimate heir⁵⁶. This funerary lavishness persevered in Sparta despite the fact that by the 5th century BC the kings had lost a large share of their political, military and judicial power. However, as sacred figures they had a high degree of importance to the community even after their death. If in his lifetime a king did not bring disgrace upon himself, he most probably acquired the status of a hero posthumously⁵⁷. For instance, in an attempt to justify the barbaric funerary excesses so untypical of Sparta, Xenophon mentions that the Lacedaemonian kings were venerated as heroes (Lac. pol. 15. 9).

It can be inferred from Xenophon's remark that technically all the Spartan kings were awarded heroic honours after their death, i.e., their heroization was tied to their 'office'⁵⁸. The sole exception was the kings who had committed a crime⁵⁹. As the heads of state, the rulers of Sparta were sacred and their posthumous heroic cult helped to maintain the stability of the whole community. Heroization was in essence the last step of the funerary ritual. The deference with which the Spartans treated their kings as head priests in their lifetime and recipients of heroic honours after their death at least partly stemmed from Sparta's exceptional conservatism and reluctance to change anything pertaining to ideology. Sparta's steadfast refusal to alter and simplify the royal funerary ritual could probably be attributed to the fact that the ceremony performed an important ideological and propaganda functions – it unified all the classes and stressed the importance of preserving the royal authority as the core component of Spartan statehood.

Performed in a 'barbaric' manner, the royal funerary ritual strikingly exemplifies the unique, one of a kind nature of the royal authority in Sparta as contrasted with the panhellenic context.

⁵⁶ The kings acted as priests of their divine ancestor Zeus; they were symbolically connected with the god's two sons – *Dioskouroi* (Thuc. V. 16. 2; Her. VI. 56) and exercised control over all public forms of divination. Against Greek standards, the Spartan kings wielded a huge amount of sacred power. In this respect 'their tight control over public forms of divination, has a much closer affinity to the religious-political power of Near Eastern monarchs than to that of magistrates in other Greek cities' (FLOWER 2009, 213).

⁵⁷ 'Heroization' of major political figures became almost commonplace in the Hellenistic period.

⁵⁸ This, however, is open to argument. The main argument against the hypothesis is that Herodotus does not mention posthumous heroization of the kings among their privileges. It is also entirely possible to split hairs over Xenophon's wording, which is not that the kings were heroized posthumously, but merely that the kings were honoured not as mortal men but as heroes (οὐχ ὡς ἀνθρώπους, ἀλλ' ὡς ἥρωας).

⁵⁹ There are known examples of kings being dethroned for committing crimes, whether real or fictitious, so their posthumous heroization would be out of the question. For instance, the Spartans never attempted to retrieve and rebury the body of king Pausanias, who had been sentenced to death, escaped to Tegea and died there.

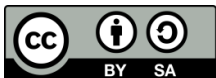
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