

Plutarch *Greek Lives: A Selection of Nine Greek Lives*. Edited by Robin Waterfield and Philip A. Stadter. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Spartan slavery

from Plutarch's *Lives*

[28] Now, there is no trace in all this of the injustice or rapacity which some people have found in Lycurgus' laws. They accuse him of framing laws which were good at promoting courage, but defective when it came to justice. Conceivably, it was the existence in Lacedaemon of the so-called *krypteia*, or secret service—assuming that Aristotle¹ is right in saying that it was Lycurgus who set it up—that gave Plato² this opinion of the man and his constitution. [end p. 36]

Here is how the *krypteia* worked. From time to time the young men's commanders would send those who gave them the impression of being the most intelligent out into the countryside—to different districts at different times—with nothing more than a dagger each and a bare minimum of supplies. By day the young men spread out and found remote spots where they could hide and rest, but at night they came down to the roads and murdered any helots they caught. They also often used to walk through the fields and kill the helots who were in the best shape and condition. Also in this context, Thucydides records in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* how once some helots who had distinguished themselves by their bravery were crowned by the Spartiates in token of their freedom and visited each of the sanctuaries of the gods in turn,

¹*Aristotle*: here and below Plutarch probably refers to the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*: there is not a similar reference in the *Politics*. Plutarch's account of the *krypteia* here is the fullest extant. The practice is extraordinary, but the use of terror to control a subject population is often attractive. We do not know the scale or frequency of this practice. At *Cleomenes* 28 Plutarch mentions a magistrate in charge of the *krypteia*. It is treated as an initiation ritual for young men by P. Vidal-Naquet, *The Black Hunter* (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 106–28, esp. 112–14. For a brief account, see H. Michell, *Sparta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 162–4; P. Cartledge, *Agisilaos and the Crisis of Sparta* (London: Duckworth, 1987), 30–2.

²*Plato*: *Laws* 633b.

but then a short while later every single one of them—more than 2,000 men—vanished, and neither straight away nor subsequently could anyone say precisely how they had met their deaths.³ There is also the point Aristotle makes, that the first thing the ephors did on taking office was declare war on the helots, so that killing them would not pollute the killer.

There were other ways in which their treatment of the helots was harsh and brutal. For instance, they used to force them to drink large quantities of undiluted wine and then bring them into the common messes, to show the young men what it was like to be drunk. They also used to get them to make fools of themselves by performing degrading songs and dances, while denying them the right to perform any which were suited to free men. This puts in context the later story that during their invasion of Laconia the Thebans wanted the helots they captured to sing some compositions by Terpander, Alcman, and Spondon of Laconia, but the helots refused, on the grounds that their masters would not approve.⁴ So the claim that there is no one more free than a free man in Lacedaemon, and no one more of a slave than a slave there, rests on sound observation of the difference between the two.

It is my view that this kind of harsh treatment of the helots was a later development among the Spartiates, starting particularly after the great earthquake, when, we hear, the helots and the Messenians seized the opportunity to attack, wrought terrible havoc throughout the countryside, and brought the city to the very brink of destruction.⁵ I myself would be reluctant to attribute to Lycurgus a disgusting institution like the *krypteia*. I base this judgement of his character on [end page 37] his equability and fairness in other respects—an assessment which the god supported as well.⁶

³*met their deaths*: Thuc. 4. 80. The connection with the *krypteia* is Plutarch's deduction.

⁴*would not approve*: the Thebans invaded Laconia several times in the years between the battles of Leuctra and Mantinea, 371–362 BC, as described in *Agesilaus*.

⁵*brink of destruction*: in the mid-460s: see Thuc. 1. 101–2.

⁶*supported as well*: cf. the Delphic pronouncement reported in C. 5. The word he uses to describe the *krypteia*, *miaros*, means not only morally 'disgusting' but 'ritually polluted', something of which a god would not approve.