

## CHAPTER I

*Memory and Mirage***Introduction: Why Sparta? Why Now?**

Sparta needs no introduction, let alone a justification for why it is worth studying. As ancient Romans visited Sparta centuries after its heyday and were treated to an exaggerated theme park of sorts of what Classical Sparta was really like, so, too, does much of the modern world retain a fascination for these strange Greeks – from Enlightenment political theorists, to modern Greek nationalists fighting for independence from the Ottomans, and to popular culture today. Ancient Sparta grabs our imagination because it was so *weird*, even to its fellow Greeks. Phalanxes of social equals fighting with peerless skill and bravery even in the face of certain death is bound to compel, and is an image drawn from carefully crafted propaganda, a public relations campaign initiated by the Spartans themselves. I am not prepared to go as far as Myke Cole, who, in his recent book, *The Bronze Lie*, argues that Sparta's military prowess and invincibility were entirely fabricated by the Spartans and repeated by credulous sources.<sup>1</sup> I do agree, however, that we need to examine this ancient society and its image with a critical eye. Even once we have done so, I believe we can still understand the Spartans as different, as outliers. Military commemoration is one subject in which this difference is starkest.

Sparta is, next to Athens, the second-most studied Classical Greek polis. It is a distant second, though, since Athens has left an overwhelming profusion of evidence by comparison – literary, architectural, artistic, archaeological, and epigraphical. Since at least the time of the Periclean Funeral Oration in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Athenian commemoration has been better understood and the inspiration for more works of scholarship than any other Greek society. Brilliant recent studies, such as Nathan Arrington's *Ashes, Images, and Memories: The Presence of the War Dead in*

<sup>1</sup> Cole 2021.

*Fifth-Century Athens*, continue to offer new insights into and interpretations of Athenian commemoration, and the relationship between soldiers, their families, and the state for which they fought and died.<sup>2</sup> Scholars such as Polly Low have begun to take these scholarly approaches to parts of Greece beyond Athens, including Sparta, but a lot more work needs to be done.<sup>3</sup> Untangling Sparta's commemorative past is a different business than doing so for Athens, but there is some interesting evidence to work with and we can make use of some illuminating comparisons.

This is a moment in history at which memory, monuments, and commemoration have never been more important and more controversial. How we think about the past is in the news every day, from the fight to remove Confederate monuments in the United States to the ideological battles waged over the history and ethnicity behind claims to eastern Ukraine while Russia continues its assault on that country as I write these words. Modern military commemoration tends to straddle the awkward divide between celebrating heroism in order to inspire patriotic service in future generations and revealing the horrors of war in order to discourage peoples and states from taking up arms. I want to investigate how one of history's most supposedly militaristic societies commemorated war, and the links that commemoration had to whether and how often that society went to war. In the process, we will learn more about the Spartans and the ancient Greeks, but we will also have occasion to think about our own forms of commemoration and our own relationship with armed conflict. The commemoration of war, ancient and modern, both reflects and forms a society's attitudes towards war. In the case of Sparta, that particular ancient society has often been brought to bear to comment on wars today.

In what follows we will consider some ideas about commemoration, remembrance, and collective memory, and how these ideas can be used fruitfully in a study of ancient Sparta. We will next take a look at the "Spartan Mirage," namely the sources we have for Spartan society and the unique challenges those sources present. This introductory chapter will conclude with some basic principles of Sparta's commemoration of war, particularly how they relate to the ideas of their fellow Greeks. These principles will be explored in depth and complicated by the chapters that follow. We will also take a tour through Classical Sparta and pause to

<sup>2</sup> Arrington 2015. For Athens, see also Low 2010; Kucewicz 2021b; Pritchard 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Low 2003; 2006; 2011; Kucewicz 2021a.

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consider the topography and monuments an ancient Spartan would have encountered, and what those monuments might have meant to the observer.

**A Note on Terminology**

Before moving on, I must clarify some of the most important terms I will use throughout this study, since just what the terms “Sparta” and “the Spartans” mean is more complicated than in the case of other Greek peoples. First, Sparta was a strange polis in that it was unwalled and was more an amalgamation of villages than a central urban core surrounded by rural hinterland as other poleis (the plural for “polis”) were. Sparta was located in the southern Peloponnese in a region later called Laconia, separated from Messenia to the west by the formidable Taygetus mountain range. The Spartan state was technically called Lacedaemon in antiquity, and its free residents the Lacedaemonians. This term was the source of the famous lambda, or inverted “V,” eventually emblazoned on Spartan hoplite shields. Sometimes, therefore, the terms Lacedaemonian and Spartan are used interchangeably in the sources, and in this book.

Classical Spartan society was stratified into three main tiers. At the top, representing a minority of the population, were the full citizens, the Spartiates, sometimes called the *homoioi*, or “similar.” These were the Spartan men who trained continuously for war and who lived as if on campaign, dining together every day in common messes, even while at home and at peace. The Spartiates were eligible to serve in important offices, such as the oversight body of five annually elected ephors, and in an assembly that ratified laws and other state actions and policies. The participation of these Spartiates in government means we can understand Sparta as an oligarchy, rule by the few, even though Sparta also had two kings, so was at the same time a type of monarchy or diarchy.

The female family members of the Spartiates had more privileges and freedom than their counterparts in places like Athens, a state exceptionally restrictive to women, but, even so, women played no formal role in Spartan government or on military campaign. Spartan women and girls, however, had an important place in Sparta’s military culture and its commemorative practices. Girls, for example, could exercise in public just like boys, and, as part of a compulsory public training, were expected to observe and mock the boys in order to spur Spartan males to greater martial excellence. A large percentage of the famous aphorisms, or sayings, attributed to the Spartans by Plutarch and other authors come from women, and many of

these aphorisms are statements of Spartan attitudes towards war and memory. After the Spartans lost at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BCE, Spartan women who lost husbands and sons walked around the city with joyful expressions, happy that their male family members had died gloriously rather than survived shamefully after surrendering. Spartan women, at least as portrayed by Greek male authors, were important for Spartan commemoration.<sup>4</sup>

Free non-citizens who lived in Spartan territory were called the *perioikoi*, or “dwellers-around.” The *perioikoi* typically lived in their own villages in Laconia. They outnumbered the full Spartiates, probably by a significant margin. They were required to serve in the Spartan army and took care of many of the state’s necessary economic tasks while the Spartiates trained for war. The term Lacedaemonian usually refers to both the Spartiates and the *perioikoi*. The ancient sources tend to specify when they mean only Spartiates instead of both groups together.<sup>5</sup>

At the bottom tier were the helots, unfree laborers who (the men, at least) mainly worked the agricultural land controlled by Sparta. We might best understand the helots as serfs, or perhaps persons enslaved by the state rather than owned as chattel by individual Spartiates and their families (as was the case with slavery in other Greek poleis, such as Athens).<sup>6</sup> Some helots came from Laconia, while others were from neighboring Messenia to the west, which Sparta conquered in the Archaic period. The helots were the backbone of Spartan power, providing all the produce and other essentials for the survival of the state. Many ancient sources claim that a need to control the helots, and the fear of helot rebellion, drove much of Sparta’s policy and way of life.<sup>7</sup>

This book deals primarily with what we might call the “official” commemoration of war in Sparta – poems recited at religious festivals and remembrance ceremonies, monuments erected in public spaces,

<sup>4</sup> See Millender 2018 for a general treatment of Spartan women, with further bibliography. See also the foundational monograph on the topic by Pomeroy 2002. For a discussion on Spartan women and war, see Powell 2004.

<sup>5</sup> For the *perioikoi*, see Ducat 2018. For non-Spartans in the Spartan army, see the recent article by Pavlides 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Athens had publicly enslaved persons too. A main difference seems to be that Spartiates did not own privately enslaved persons, whereas Athens had both categories of slavery.

<sup>7</sup> The best resource on the helots is the edited collection of Luraghi and Alcock 2003. Luraghi 2008 discusses the Messenians in particular. For an up-to-date discussion of the state of helot scholarship, and a comparison of helotage with other slave systems in antiquity, see now Lewis 2018: 125–146. For a general overview of the political and social structure of Sparta as compared to Athens, with suggestions for further reading and sources, see Sears 2022. See also Humble 2022, in the same volume, for a closer look at Sparta.

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inscriptions commissioned by “the Spartans” as a state, and so on. While I will refer to some individual monuments, dedications, and perspectives, for the majority of this study we will be considering what “the Spartans” did to remember their wars and their war dead. The sources for Sparta are lacking as it is, and it is accordingly much more difficult to assess the ideas and practices of individual Spartiates, not to mention women, *perioikoi*, or helots. These non-elites, or marginalized populations, had agency of their own (if within the confines of various systems of oppression), which would have had a bearing on commemoration. We must keep that fact in mind even as those non-Spartiate and non-“official” perspectives get lost in the shuffle. In addition to the studies pointed out in notes 4–5, I for one eagerly await further work on marginalized peoples in Lacedaemon, including in the sphere of war.

This book deals primarily with the Archaic period, dating from roughly 700 BCE (or whenever the Homeric epics were first composed, perhaps fifty or so years earlier) to 479 BCE, when Xerxes’ Persian invasion was repelled from mainland Greece; and the Classical period, which runs from 479 to 323 BCE, the year Alexander the Great died. The Hellenistic period (323–30 BCE) follows the Classical, from which several of our sources derive, as they do also from the Roman period following the death of Cleopatra VII in 30 BCE. Unless otherwise stated, all dates are BCE.

Finally, a word on the terms “commemoration” and “militarism”, which will feature prominently throughout the following chapters. Commemoration often conjures up images of formal monuments or ceremonies, such as the Remembrance Day observances held each November 11 in Canada (with analogues in many other countries). Marching bands, parades of veterans, and official services around the town cenotaph, a monument inscribed with the names of the war dead and the battles in which they fought are obvious examples of commemoration. I, however, take a far more expansive view. Wars and war heroes, battles and battlefields, permeate our discourse and our public and private spaces far more than formal commemorative activities would indicate. As I write these words, I have just returned from a lecture tour for which I spoke on Spartan topics at Canadian universities with names like “Waterloo,” the famous battle between Napoleon and Wellington, and “Brock,” a prominent general from the War of 1812. As debates rage about the nature and importance of “Western Civilization,” and Canadian or British “values,” wars past and present tend to feature prominently, if sometimes indirectly. Wars can be commemorated in speaking about Canada as a “peacekeeping nation” or the United States as being a great “experiment in democracy” just as much

as through a recitation of the names of the war dead. I will therefore consider Spartan attitudes towards war, including, but not limited to, attitudes stemming from the reception of certain military events, as part of a broad phenomenon of commemoration.

In a similar way, I conceive of militarism as a broad subject. The eminent scholar of Sparta Stephen Hodkinson cautions against the use of the term militarism in a Spartan context, since Sparta, like other Greek states, had no clear boundary between military and civic life. Modern nation-states, with clearly demarcated militaries, on the other hand, can be properly described as more or less militaristic, depending on the prominence of those militaries in various spheres.<sup>8</sup> I think of militarism differently, in a way that applies to ancient Greek societies. By militarism, I mean the extent to which war and attitudes towards war inform a society's view of itself and lie behind both real policies and actions and how those policies and actions are understood and portrayed. In this sense, Sparta was more militaristic than other Greek states. The Athenians surely thought about war a lot, but for them it was less of a preoccupation and less of a crux of their identity than it was for the Spartans – whether or not there were strict divisions between the military and other spheres. A Greek state could be militaristic without military institutions or leaders having clear distinctions or any greater constitutional power. As I will argue, a greater degree of militarism did not even necessarily entail a greater degree of formal military activities.

### How Societies Remember

My city of Fredericton is replete with monuments to Max Aitken, better known as Lord Beaverbrook, a Canadian newspaper baron who had prominent positions in the British War Cabinets of both world wars. Next to the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, centrally located along the city's riverfront, is a bronze statue of Beaverbrook himself in academic regalia. One passes the Lady Beaverbrook Arena on the way to the campus of the University of New Brunswick, which boasts the Lady Beaverbrook Residence, the Aitken University Center, and the Beaverbrook Room in the main library, containing volumes from Beaverbrook's own personal collection. Beaverbrook would be most happy that he is profusely memorialized, since he understood the power of physical and spatial monuments. As Lloyd George's minister of information during the First World War,

<sup>8</sup> Hodkinson 2006.

Beaverbrook spearheaded the commissioning of war art, specifically to commemorate the achievements of Canadians on battlefields such as Ypres. He remarked that, “[i]n the years following the war Canadians will expect to be told what Canadians have done in the war. They will want the younger generation to be taught the glory of Canada.”<sup>9</sup> Beaverbrook’s sentiments are in accord with Herodotus’ opening lines, in which the “Father of History” says he undertook his monumental literary project so that great and marvelous deeds might not be without their due share of glory.

The much-commemorated Beaverbrook set out to ensure that the era-defining wars of the 20th century were properly commemorated. “Commemoration,” as the literal meaning of the word suggests, pertains to remembrance, to ways in which people, events, and ideas are remembered, even long afterwards. To understand what commemoration is, how it works, and what its purposes are, we need to think about memory itself, and how it operates not merely on the cognitive level of an individual but at the collective level of a society or a people. Memory is related to history but operates differently. I am partial to Jennifer Wellington’s definition, which she outlines in her study of First World War memorials:

By “memory” I mean the sensation of a proprietary, emotional connection to the past, and the community of the dead, buttressed by broadly accepted impressions of that past, as opposed to “history”, which requires the recitation of facts based on verifiable evidence . . . The contours of war memory may shape a population’s willingness or reluctance to go to war in the future.<sup>10</sup>

The line between “history” and “memory” for the ancient Greeks was more nebulous than Wellington’s, as suggested by, for instance, Herodotus’ insistence that his work is itself a commemorative exercise. Her definition is helpful nonetheless, as is her insight that a people’s memory of war affects their present attitudes to war.

Human individuals have memories of their own experiences and what has been related to them by others. It seems uncomplicated to say that a given Spartan remembered war, in the sense that the Spartan could have participated in wars or at least heard about wars from others; those memories would inform that Spartan’s thinking about war. But can a people, as opposed to an individual person, have memory at all? In other words, is it accurate or useful to speak about Sparta’s commemoration

<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Wellington 2017: 52. <sup>10</sup> Wellington 2017: 7.

of war as if Sparta itself remembered its battles, its soldiers, and its war dead? By far the most influential theorist tackling this question is the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who pioneered the concept of “collective memory.” In short, while a collective does not remember like a human mind does, individuals are able to have memory at all only in a collective context. Through several case studies, Halbwachs argues that individuals can have very different memories of the past based on their participation in various collectives. The group affects and shapes the memories of the individual.<sup>11</sup> In a Spartan context, then, the way the community commemorated war would be vitally important for how individual Spartans remembered war and thought about current wars and their own roles in them.

There was quite a bit of pushback to Halbwachs’ idea, as influential as it is. Some even denied the existence of collective memory altogether, since a collective cannot actually remember anything, memory being a neurological process. Jan Assmann has softened the idea of collective memory into what he calls “cultural memory,” and in so doing has made Halbwachs’ insight both more palatable and, I think, more accurate. Assmann concedes that the subject of memory must be the individual, but the individual can organize and make sense of this memory only by relying on the “frame” provided by culture.<sup>12</sup> Assmann elaborates on the relationship between the individual and the collective in terms of memory:

Just as an individual forms a personal identity through memory, maintaining this despite the passage of time, so a group identity is also dependent on the reproduction of shared memories. The difference is that the group memory has no neurological basis. This is replaced by culture: a complex of identity-shaping aspects of knowledge objectified in the symbolic forms of myth, song, dance, sayings, laws, sacred texts, pictures, ornaments, paintings, processional routes, or – as in the case of the Australians – even whole landscapes.<sup>13</sup>

All of the factors Assmann marks as “identity-shaping” aspects of culture vis-à-vis memory were operative in ancient Sparta, and we will be looking at them throughout this book. Jay Winter, himself deeply indebted to Assmann, argues that memory and commemoration have a profound impact on a society’s view of war, including whether war is a good or legitimate choice. Today, Western Europeans tend to think of war as an

<sup>11</sup> Halbwachs 1992 is a good English edition of Halbwachs’ most important work and includes critical notes and interpretive material by the editor, L. A. Coser.

<sup>12</sup> Assmann 2011: 22.

<sup>13</sup> Assmann 2011: 72. See also Winter 2017: 205, who says succinctly that “how we remember affected deeply what we remember.”

illegitimate abomination, which is reflected in many forms of commemoration that stress war's horrors. Eastern Europe and the United States, by contrast, cling to older forms of commemoration and therefore tend to be more militaristic and see war as a viable, even good option. We will consider the extent to which Winter's paradigm holds true for Sparta.<sup>14</sup>

Of particular interest in a Greek context are Assmann's observations regarding a society's treatment of the dead, which he separates into retrospective and prospective categories. The former pertains to a society continuing to live with the dead as part of the community. The latter are actions by which the living make themselves unforgettable after they die.<sup>15</sup> The dead were a ubiquitous presence in ancient Greece, including for the Spartans, as we will see. Anyone seeking to understand how the figurative and literal presence of the dead affects society and culture would do well to read Thomas Laqueur's beautiful book on the subject, which meditates on the power of the dead "in deep time to make communities, to do the work of culture, to announce their presence and meaning by occupying space."<sup>16</sup> Many Greeks, Spartans especially, were motivated by the desire to be remembered and commemorated. Homer's heroes certainly acted as if being remembered was of paramount importance, and so, too, did historical Spartans.<sup>17</sup>

Those who study commemoration in the modern period tend to emphasize the importance of democracy. This makes sense, since if the people doing the fighting have little or no say over wars and warfare, it is much less important to have a commemorative regime that influences popular attitudes. Even though Sparta was not a democracy, Spartiates did participate in the running of the state to a marked degree – as opposed to the subjects of early modern European monarchies. For our purposes, it is reasonable to apply the observations made about modern democratic commemoration to the Spartans, since the Spartans, especially those in the phalanx, represented a genuine community with a great deal of agency (no matter how many residents of Laconia were excluded from Spartan society). The eminent historian Eric Hobsbawm sees the rise of mass politics in modern Europe as instrumental in the invention of official traditions meant to galvanize the people for war. In post-Revolutionary France, Marianne came to embody the Republic itself for which the people fight, and local notables, from the past and present, emerged as symbols in many communities. Hobsbawm notes that French democracy led to a veritable "statuomania" in which

<sup>14</sup> Winter 2017, especially 202–208. <sup>15</sup> Assmann 2011: 45–46. <sup>16</sup> Laqueur 2016: 21–22.

<sup>17</sup> As Ferrario 2014: 232 points out in relation to Brasidas in the 420s. For more on Brasidas and his desire to make himself remembered, see Chapter 4.

countless public monuments were commissioned. All of this “invented tradition” was designed to get the people on board with whatever projects, including wars, the nation was undertaking.<sup>18</sup> In his book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson traces the phenomenon of modern nationalism as a means to convince the people of horizontal comradeship, regardless of how inegalitarian a society really is, in order to persuade millions of people to kill and especially die for their country.<sup>19</sup> Official nationalism is understood by Anderson to be “an anticipatory strategy by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community.”<sup>20</sup> “Imagined communities,” “invented tradition,” and “cultural memory” are related ideas that help us understand why the people and those who seek to maintain influence over the people engage in commemoration, especially of war.<sup>21</sup>

Several scholars of classical antiquity have begun to engage with these types of analyses, and some are applying them specifically to ancient Greece. A new volume edited by Giangiulio and colleagues, *Commemorating War and War Dead*, engages with the work of Halbwachs, Assmann, and others, and provides case studies from Greek antiquity and other periods. The book is an invaluable resource for assessing the state of the field of commemoration and memory studies.<sup>22</sup> We will have occasion to assess Roel Konijnendijk’s contribution on Sparta’s use of their fearsome reputation as a weapon of war.<sup>23</sup> On a broader level, readers are directed to Giangiulio’s own chapter, which argues that a key part of being social is the ability to draw on group experiences, even ones from very long ago that did not affect the individual directly. He adds that “the past is therefore a social construct resulting from a society’s need for meaning, and from its frames of reference.”<sup>24</sup> In the same volume, Elena Franchi, herself a scholar of Sparta, draws our attention to a study demonstrating that a Vietnamese parent’s traumatic memories of the Vietnam War could be transmitted to their offspring, a sort of “vicarious memory.”<sup>25</sup> She also reflects on commemoration as a means of preserving a military culture and promoting a state’s military reputation abroad – which, I would add, the Spartans most certainly did.<sup>26</sup> In a related volume, Michael Jung

<sup>18</sup> Hobsbawm 2012, especially 267–272. Assmann 2011: 20 might take issue with Hobsbawm’s use of “tradition,” since, in his formulation, memory is a richer concept: “Dead people and memories of dead people cannot be handed down. Remembrance is a matter of emotional ties, cultural shaping, and a conscious reference to the past that over-comes the rupture between life and death. These are the elements that characterize cultural memory and take it far beyond the reaches of tradition.”

<sup>19</sup> Anderson 2016: 7. <sup>20</sup> Anderson 2016: 101.

<sup>21</sup> See also Evans 2019 for an illuminating discussion of public art in democratic societies.

<sup>22</sup> Giangiulio et al. 2019. <sup>23</sup> Konijnendijk 2019. <sup>24</sup> Giangiulio 2019: 26.

<sup>25</sup> Franchi 2019: 39. <sup>26</sup> Franchi 2019: 50.