

‘SPARTA: ANCIENT GREECE’S FOREMOST SLAVE STATE?’

By Paul Cartledge

Summary: I was deeply honoured to be invited to participate by delivering a paper in my dear friend Vincent’s 65th birthday symposium held at the Saxo-Institute, Copenhagen, on 30 November 2015. I first encountered our honorand on the page, as the author of important work on Athenian public finance, taxation and social relations in the Athenian democracy especially of the 4th century BCE, and was delighted to get to know him and his family well in the flesh later on during his tenure of a Visiting Fellowship at Wolfson College, Cambridge, 1988–89. Many thanks therefore to Peter Fibiger Bang both for co-organising the birthday symposium and for inviting me to take part in the published proceedings. For various reasons, however, including the publication of my *Democracy* book (2018), it did not prove possible for me to write up for this volume a version of my symposium talk, ‘Navy and Democracy/Democracy and Navy at Athens: A Democratic Life in Review’. Instead, therefore, by agreement with and indeed at the urging of Peter, I revisit here an old but still very lively scholarly battleground.

It is often held against ancient Greece and the ancient Greeks generally that they practised human servitude, sometimes on an industrial scale. Given the recent, utterly justified prominence in the contemporary Americano-European West of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protest movement, such a flaw as it must inevitably seem to be – I once likened it to ‘a worm in the bud’¹ – makes it all the more crucial for us scholars of ancient Greece to decide amongst ourselves just exactly what role slavery and unfreedom more generally did play in the making of ancient Greek civilization and culture and indeed exactly what we mean by the term ‘slavery’. I have long had – if the metaphor be permitted – ‘form’ in this particular game. One reason for that is that the subject of my (unpublished) 1975 Oxford archaeo-historical doctoral thesis was Sparta (with a special emphasis on the three centuries from c. 950 to 650 BCE but by no means

1 Cf. Cartledge 1993.

confined to that period), the largest polity territorially in all ancient Hellas, in which the unfree outnumbered the free and enfranchised by several magnitudes. The other main reason is that being of a decidedly Marxist historiographical bent, I viewed pre-Classical and Classical Sparta (and not only that) precisely as a polity and society based on the exploitation of unfree human labour power.²

Much about ancient Sparta was and is, as Thucydides famously lamented, a bit of a mystery, at least to outsiders.³ What is no secret is that the Spartans collectively, and especially the elite Spartiates among them, exploited a mass of Hellenic humanity whom they chose to label specifically and derogatorily as ‘Heilōtai’ (Helots) or ‘captives’, and generically and collectively as ‘the *douleia*’ (see further below). But what precisely did the Spartans mean to imply or express by those terms, and, more particularly, what kind of *douloi* should we modern historians understand the Helots to have been? Again, it helped me personally no end that in the late 1960s I was an undergraduate pupil – and later good friend – of Marxist ancient historian G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, and that in the 1970s he devoted himself to trying to describe and explain what he called, in the singular, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, the title of his quite extraordinary book first published in 1981 and then in a revised impression in 1983.⁴

Ste. Croix was peculiarly and rightly obsessed with correctness of definitions, above all of course of the very term ‘class’. But though trained as a lawyer, he was not obsessed with definitions for their own sake, but for the sake of what difference different definitions would make to historical exegesis, understanding and explanation. The Helots thus obviously fell directly within his purview, and as a comparativist cross-cultural historian he asked himself whether the language of slavery was indeed the most appropriate to use when defining the Helots and explaining their historical role.⁵ Coincidentally – or not – those same sorts of definitional questions were then also preoccupying the two other preeminent Western scholars of ancient Greek unfreedom or servitude,

2 Cartledge 1975.

3 Thuc. 5.68.2.

4 Ste. Croix 1981 [corr. impr. 1983]. See now ‘Marx-lover’ 2018.

5 Cf. Luraghi 2009.

one a Marxist, the other not (he preferred ‘anti-anti-Marxist’): viz. Yvon Garlan and Moses Finley respectively. Finley was heavily influenced not so much by Marx as by the so-called ‘Paris School’ of historians of ancient culture, society, and ideology – J.-P. Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Nicole Loraux, the list goes on.⁶ Garlan, though also a Marxist, took issue with what he considered to be Ste. Croix’s old-fashioned, fundamentalist-literalist reading of Marx. But all were on the same side in deciding that in one absolutely crucial sense the Spartans’ Helots, however positively they should be classified, were *not* best classified as ‘slaves’. Rather, they suffered ‘intercommunal servitude’ (Garlan, basing himself on ancient, crude attempts at classification that always treated the Helots as a single solidary ethnic mass); they were ‘state serfs’ (Ste. Croix); and their legal status was to be located somewhere on a spectrum between ‘freedom and slavery’ (Finley, again borrowing from an ancient definitional phrase and employing his favoured ‘spectrum of statuses’ model, but here also following the non-Marxist East German ancient historian Detlef Lotze⁷).

Finley made a huge contribution to enslavement studies both ancient and modern, especially potently in a book of 1980, later reissued in a revised and augmented volume edited by Brent Shaw, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, but adumbrated in a series of articles beginning in the 1950s and brought together in a collected volume expertly edited by Brent Shaw and Richard Saller, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*.⁸ One of his most crucial points was that, although – sadly – unfreedom of various kinds appears historically to be almost an (in)human universal, slavery in its strongest sense, that is what is sometimes termed chattel slavery, has been surprisingly very rare as the main source of exploited labour for the elite. By chattel slavery is meant a form of unfreedom in which the unfree are both depersonalised and dehumanised (living a social death),⁹ conceived of and very often treated as if they were mere things, commodities or items of property, on a par – perhaps – with four-footed animals (hence one of the dozen Greek words for unfree persons, *andrapoda*, ‘man-footed creatures’, modelled on *tetrapoda*) or at best with

6 Payen 2012; de Polignac et al. 2020.

7 Lotze 1959 and cf. 2000.

8 Finley 1998 [revised, augmented edition of 1980 original]; Finley 1981-1982.

9 Patterson 1982.

free, sub-Hellenic, non-Greek ‘barbarian’ humans. A total of perhaps as few as six societies or cultures could on this definition be confidently categorized and classified as having practised slavery of that chattel sort – and practised it not on the side, as it were, but centrally and foundationally, leaving open the possibility indeed of classifying them precisely as ‘slave societies’, societies not just having slaves but actually based on that slavery. One of those half-dozen slave societies – sociologically conceived – was ‘Greece & Rome’: i.e., within the temporal span from say 500 BCE to 200 CE and within that geographical, broadly circum-Mediterranean purview there existed significant pockets of ‘slave society’, most notably in old Greece at Athens, most notably in the Roman sphere in the very heartland of the city of Rome and Italy.

Hence, when another ancient Greek slavery expert, Page duBois, came to write the chapter on ‘Slavery’ for *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenic Studies*, she felt she could confidently assert ‘There were yet other forms of unfreedom different from the pure form of chattel slavery’, citing Finley 1964 (reprinted in 1981–2) in support, and then move on at once to consider the Helots as an ‘enslaved community’ (recalling Garlan).¹⁰ That very broadly was the picture to which I myself subscribed when it came to compiling and co-editing (with my good friend Keith Bradley) *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* vol. 1. *The Ancient Mediterranean World*.¹¹ Just to make it absolutely clear, although I had a chapter therein on the Helots, that was not because I thought they were best classified as ‘slaves’ (even though the Spartans labelled them *douloi*). Indeed, their esoteric and (possibly) unique, certainly special, legal position was one of the – it seemed to me then, as it still does to me now! – several and fundamental features of Spartan society that in combination made Sparta a radically ‘different’ if not unique polity.¹²

However, alongside – and eventually quite openly against – my position there was developing a countertendency, almost a separate tradition of the currently burgeoning field of Spartan scholarship, spear-

10 duBois 2009: 319.

11 Cartledge & Bradley 2011.

12 See most recently my introduction to Powell 2018; and the revised, augmented French version of Cartledge 2011, published in the Carlier *Festschrift* 2021.

headed by my (again, I hasten to add) very good friend, Stephen Hodkinson, who is a former doctoral pupil of Moses Finley and – in a rather special sense, following Finley’s death in 1986 – of myself. Broadly speaking, the Hodkinson project has been to try to ‘normalise’ Sparta, in the sense of emphasising what Sparta had in common with others of the 1000 or so ancient Greek *poleis* that existed between c. 600 and 300 BCE, rather than emphasising (as I – and others such as Hansen 2009 – tend to do) its essential difference(s).¹³

It is thus in the Hodkinson tradition rather than mine that by far the best recent book on servitude in ancient Greece was published in 2018, David Lewis’s *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context, c. 800-146 BC*, and it is that book – together with a most helpful pre-published chapter of his on the legal position of slaves (his word) in ancient Greece eventually to appear in the *Oxford Handbook of Law in Ancient Greece* – that is the immediate springboard and justification for this brief, honorific foray of my own.¹⁴ I should say at once that I have been immeasurably reassured and fortified in my view that I am not barking like an ancient and deaf dog up the wrong tree altogether by the review of Lewis’s book that recently appeared in the *Journal* of the Society of which I was President (2020-2024).¹⁵

In my *Sparta and Lakonia*, the originally 1979 book of my 1975 Oxford doctoral thesis, I collected together and reproduced in English translation in an Appendix (4) what I believed and believe to be a complete set of ancient literary sources for the Helots.¹⁶ (Mostly I shall not therefore be citing chapter and verse yet again in this article.) I subdivided them by theme or topic and therefore included, indeed highlighted, the issue of the Helots’ legal status. ‘Ancient’ (sources) encompassed many stemming from the ‘Roman’ period of Greek history, sources therefore composed after, sometimes long after, the system of Helotage had been more or less unwillingly terminated (by the end of the first millennium BCE). It also encompassed sources of the Hellenistic era, which all therefore were composed after what many – including of course none other than

13 Hansen & Nielsen 2004; Hansen 2009.

14 Lewis 2018.

15 Figueira 2021.

16 Cartledge 1979 (2nd ed. 2001).

Thucydides¹⁷ – considered to be by far the more important of the two constituent components of *hê heilôteia*, namely ‘the Messenians’, had been liberated permanently.¹⁸ Indeed, it is sometimes not realised that even Ephorus or Aristotle, both ‘Classical’ sources, were compiling respectively their *Universal History* and their *Politics* and the (mainly lost) *Politeia of the Lakedaimonioi* after – and indeed well after – the liberation of the Messenians in 370/369, by when the Spartans may well have opted to vary the conditions under which they – themselves by now very few in number indeed – clung on to the remaining, Lakonian Helots. One of Figueira’s chief causes of complaint against Lewis, one of his ‘profound disagreements’, is that – apart from omitting to cite some of his own work (!) – he overhomogenizes sources emanating from very different eras.

My own beef with Lewis is in sympathy with that criticism but is rather differently focused. The nub of our disagreement concerns whether or not Helots were, as Lewis powerfully contends, individually and privately owned. Now, all ancient Greek notions of ownership were – for example by Roman juristic standards – hazy in the extreme (as the trained lawyer Ste. Croix and Finley were always quick to insist). Then, there’s the special problem that Sparta – a non-democratic polity without written laws, without specialist jurists, without a popular judiciary, without indeed a justice system that could be decently called that, by comparison at any rate with the elaborate contemporary legal apparatus of the democratic Athenians – barely understood the concept of Law as such.¹⁹ So, given those limitations, how best to proceed?

One initial necessary step is to remind readers that the very notion of private as opposed to public – as in, a public versus a private sphere or space – is itself hard to discern even in surely the most ‘liberal’ of all ancient Greek polities, namely democratic Athens.²⁰ I say that despite the best efforts of brilliant pioneer historian of the ancient Athenian democracy, Mogens Herman Hansen, to identify and insist on its existence, as a

17 Thuc. 1.100-1.

18 Thanks chiefly to Epameinondas of Thebes, my favourite ancient Greek as it happens: Cartledge 2021b.

19 MacDowell 1986 did his best, so far as the Spartans themselves were concerned.

20 Cartledge 1996.

necessary part of his argument that ancient democratic Athens was significantly democratic in the same way as post-Enlightenment democracies are today.²¹ A second necessary step, I would insist, is to remind readers that what we today – following ultimately in the footsteps of Thomas Hobbes – call the capital-S State as separate from and opposed to community or society was evanescent to the point of nonexistence in almost all ancient Greek polities – the chief, but still only very partial exception being ... Sparta. I owe that I believe correct and fundamental observation to my former PhD student, Moshe Berent – though again Mogens Hansen would beg to disagree.²² Which brings me on to my next and third step, which is to re-examine the definition of the Helots that was finally settled on by Ste. Croix, namely ‘state serfs’.²³

‘Serfs’ he chose precisely in order to differentiate it from ‘slaves’, thinking that a word ultimately derived from Latin *servus*, which was the Roman-Law all-purpose equivalent of the – helpfully or unhelpfully vague – Greek term *doulos*, would at least be apropos. But against that appropriative usage (which I had a go at using myself) the objection could instantly and probably fatally be raised that serfs – whether of the Late Roman antique variety or of the far more common mediaeval European kind – functionally and definitionally operated within very different socio-economic-political-ideological parameters from those of the *polis* of ancient Sparta.²⁴ There was no feudalism, no feudal conditional land-tenures, in Sparta, just to state the most obvious point of difference. What then about (lower-case) ‘state’?

By that term Ste. Croix intended to emphasise that control and management and possession (to avoid ‘ownership’) of Helots was vested not in any individual or individuals (contrast the case of the Thessalian *Penestai*, similar to the Helots in some other respects²⁵, but in the *koinon*, the *kosmos*, that is, the political community of Hoi Lakedaemonioi or, as they sometimes alternately referred to themselves (in Doric), *Toi Spartiatai*. Hence – it is that fact that explains how and why – it was only the

21 Hansen 1989.

22 Berent 2004.

23 Ste. Croix 1988.

24 Cartledge 1988.

25 Ducat 1994.

Spartan state, the political community, that could free Helots from their hereditary, genetic servitude. Which it did periodically, under duress – and not by any means unconditionally: the largest category of such state-sponsored manumissions was deployed for military purposes, by definition purposes of state, so that those ex-Helots ‘newly smelling of the damos’ (that’s what Neodamodeis seems literally to mean) could make up for the rapidly depleting numbers of full Spartan citizens in a time of acute *oliganthropia* – the shortage of citizen military manpower that, according to Aristotle, eventually ‘destroyed Sparta’ (Pol. 1270a29-32).²⁶ There were no individual or private manumissions in Sparta, except just possibly of actual non-Helot private slaves, whoever precisely had owned them, a massively controversial issue arising from some Classical-period inscriptions from the sanctuary of Pohoidan/Poseidon at Tainaron (IG V.1, 1228-33). This was a sanctuary – in more than one sense – with which the Helots, and presumably especially those of Lakonia, had a special affinity, but that does not exclude the possibility that the manumitters in question were Lakedaimonioi in another sense than ‘Spartans’, that is, Perioikoi.²⁷ Lewis, however, accepts the validity of a dubious statement by Ephorus, to the effect that Spartans might sell their Helots, a form of alienation though not of course manumission.²⁸

Conversely, and possibly uniquely in all human history, it was the Spartans precisely as a political entity who formally, ritually and annually *via* each new board of Ephors (the state’s chief executive officials apart from the two joint kings) declared war on all the Helots collectively, thus on the state’s principal workforce.²⁹ They thereby at a stroke transformed the Helots literally into the enemy within and as such liable to being murdered by state-sponsored Spartan terror bands or individual Spartans without risk for the latter of incurring ritual religious pollution (*miasma*) let alone suffering any legal redress.³⁰ Just how significant this all was may be gauged from Herodotus’s repeated shrewd comment, that

26 For sources on and discussion of *oliganthropia*, see Doran 2018.

27 Ducat 1990a.

28 *FGrHist.* 70 F 117, quoted by Strabo 364-65.

29 Plut. *Lyc.* 28, citing Aristotle’s lost *Lak. Pol.*

30 Ducat 2006 on the notorious, partly ritual *krypteia*.

the Spartans were of all Greeks exceptionally if not uniquely pious or superstitious: for they ‘valued the things of the gods above those of men’³¹ – well, all Greeks did that, so Herodotus clearly meant that the Spartans did so to an exceptional degree and in exceptional ways, as indeed they did.³²

And, finally for my purposes here, hence too the fact that in a formal treaty of alliance of 421 BCE inscribed and publicly exhibited in major religious sanctuaries of both the swearing parties the Spartans could refer to the Helots precisely as a single collectivity, *hē douleia* or – to paraphrase somewhat – ‘the servile class (or population)’.³³ Of course, it speaks worlds in and of itself that the Spartans were so acutely aware of the possibility of collective servile revolt, perceived to constitute a threat to the state’s very existence – that’s the other side of ‘state’ in any definition of the Helots’ status – that they felt obliged to refer to that threat explicitly (‘should the slave population revolt’) in such an acutely sensitive context as a formal military treaty. No other servile collectivity in ancient Greece was so perceived or so constituted, because the Helots were clearly a subjugated and dependent population (or perhaps two populations treated as one), not an aggregate of individual slaves. I rest my case.

Concluding Remarks

Finally, to wrap up, we must ask in the immortal words of Moses Finley, revered mentor, ‘so what?’ What does all that stuff about what and who and why the Helots were signify? David Lewis himself provides a clue: if one were to accept his definition of Helots as slaves, that would make it no longer Athens but Sparta that was the ancient Hellenic world’s foremost ‘slave society’, i.e., following Finley again, a society not just with slaves but a society based on slaves, a society which but for those slaves either would not have existed at all as such or would have been measurably different. To which I respond, yes, Spartan society and polity were

31 Hdt. 5.63, 9.7.

32 Richer 2012.

33 Thuc. 5.23.3.

indeed based on the exploitation of unfree human beings – who happened, unusually, also to be no less Greek than the exploiting masters themselves; and yes, but for the Helots the Spartans’ *polis* would not have been as it was. But no, that society was not a society in which the notion of private property had made any great inroads, and certainly was not one in which the principal exploited workforce was ‘privately’ ‘owned’ (both terms in scare quotes). Rather, although Spartan polity and society were unquestionably ‘based on’ the Helots, that top-down relationship was complex, not unidirectional but dialectical³⁴, and – dare I say it – despite all the comparisons drawn in antiquity between the Helots (eliding key differences between the Messenians and the Lakonians) and other Greek and non-Greek servile collectivities – unique.³⁵

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34 Luraghi & Alcock 2003.

35 Since this article was composed, a massive re-evaluation of the nature and role of the *polis* in the ancient Greek world has appeared: Ma 2024. For John Ma (pp. 94, 134, 194) the status of the Helots was ‘serfdom’, and their labour ‘serf’ labour.

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