Eos CVI 2019
ISSN 0012-7825

IMAGES OF MOTHERS OF CLASSICAL AND HELLENISTIC SPARTA*

by

MAGDALENA MYSZKOWSKA-KASZUBA

The legendary allure of Sparta and its enduring place in historiography up to the modern day stems largely from it being perceived as a *polis* that bred the best of the Greeks – paragons of traditional virtue and patriotism. Such virtues were said to be bred into Spartan men by their mothers: formidable, self-sacrificing women who prioritised the good of the state over their children. The legend of Spartan mothers, of their courage and virtue, lives on in the European tradition as a literary, cultural and historical phenomenon[1]. The aim of my doctoral dissertation was to analyse this motif: its rise, development and deployment in ancient Greek literature. My other aim was to assess whether the legendary virtue and demeanour of Spartan mothers reflected in any measure the social milieu of classical and Hellenistic Sparta.

---

* This paper is a summary of a PhD dissertation that was written as part of the Project "The Eastern Mediterranean from the 4th Century BC until Late Antiquity". The project was coordinated by Professor Krzysztof Nawotka (Uniwersity of Wrocław) and ran between 2011 and 2015 within the International PhD Projects Programme of the Foundation for Polish Science, co-financed by the European Union from the Regional Development Fund within the framework of Measure 1.2 "Strengthening the Human Potential within the Science Sector", part of the Operational Programme "Innovative Economy". The dissertation was supervised by Professor Ryszard Kulesza (University of Warsaw) and Professor Christopher Tuplin (University of Liverpool) and defended at the Department of History, University of Wrocław, on January 29, 2019. The dissertation was reviewed by Professor Danuta Musiał (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń) and Professor Gościwit Malinowski (University of Wrocław).

[1] About Sparta in Western thought, see e.g. E. Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought*, Oxford 1969; V. Metha, *Sparta in the Enlightenment*, PhD diss., The George Washington University, 2009; S. Hodkinson, I.M. Morris (eds.), *Sparta in Modern Thought: Politics, History and Culture*, Swansea 2012; M. Borowska *et al*. (eds.), *Sparta w kulturze polskiej* ["Sparta in Polish Culture"], vols. I–II, Warszawa 2014–2015; A. Powell (ed.), *A Companion to Sparta*, vol. II, Hoboken, NJ 2018.

Any serious study on ancient Spartan mothers, either factual or fictionalised, needs to acknowledge and address two major research obstacles concerning Sparta. The first is the dearth of sources on the Spartan motherhood: our not entirely trustworthy evidence on this matter comprises non-contemporaneous literary accounts by non-Spartan authors, showing tell-tale traces of distortion and embellishment. The second obstacle, the so-called 'Spartan mirage', stems from the first one: many scholars, unsatisfied by the paucity of dependable sources on ancient Sparta, extrapolated wildly from the available material, allowing their own prejudices and ideas to colour and misshape their understanding of Sparta. To name but one example: Spartan women, said to enjoy relative independence from men, were occasionally interpreted through the lens of feminist theory as paragons of women's liberation, a far-fetched interpretation with very little basis in fact. Sparta, more than any other *polis*, was thought to remain wholly exceptional among the Greek city-states – politically, economically, socially and educationally – a militaristic state that controlled every aspect of her citizens' lives. Accordingly, in this exceptional society women were believed to reject their 'natural' feminine traits in favour of civic-mindedness and a focus on military service, their chief contribution being to rear future generations of warriors. So much for the 'Spartan mirage': however, some surviving evidence does not support such interpretations and suggests that Spartan exceptionalism was little more than a carefully crafted illusion. From the 1980s onwards, historians such as P. Cartledge, A. Powell, and S. Hodkinson began to question Sparta's exceptional position among other *poleis*, conducting more nuanced studies on Spartan society and its complexities. Nevertheless, these scholars were not the first to cast doubt on the veracity of the Spartan legend – that distinction belonging to F. Ollier[2] and E.N. Tigerstedt[3]. Relevantly to the topic at hand, these researchers re-examined the social status of Spartan women. Further works in that vein followed, with the most significant contributions in the field including studies by A. Bradford[4], P. Cartledge[5], M. Dettenhofer[6], M. Dillon[7],

---

[2] F. Ollier, *Étude sur l'idéalisation de Sparte dans l'antiquité grecque du début de l'école cynique jusqu'à la fin de la cité*, Paris 1943.

[3] E.N. Tigerstedt, *The Legend of Sparta in Classical Antiquity*, vols. I–II, Stockholm 1974.

[4] A. Bradford, *Gynaikokratoumenoi: Did Spartan Women Rule Spartan Men?*, AncW XIV 1986, pp. 13–18.

[5] P. Cartledge, *Spartan Wives: Liberation or Licence?*, CQ XXXI 1981, pp. 84–105.

[6] M.H. Dettenhofer, *Die Frauen von Sparta. Ökonomische Kompetenz und politische Relevanz*, in: M.H. Dettenhofer (ed.), *Reine Männersache? Frauen in Männerdomänen der antiken Welte*, Köln 1994, pp. 15–40; idem, *Die Frauen von Sparta. Gesellschaftliche Position und politische Relevanz*, Klio LXXV 1993, pp. 61–75.

[7] M. Dillon, *Were Spartan Women who Died in Childbirth Honoured with Grave Inscriptions?*, Hermes CXXXV 2007, pp. 149–165.

T.J. Figueira[8], S. Hodkinson[9], R. Kulesza[10], E. Millender[11], A. Powell[12], J. Redfield[13], and L. Thommen[14]. They grounded the fictionalised Spartan female in the quotidian life, exploring women's roles and activities in Spartan religion, economy, politics, war, and domestic life. Regrettably, some scholars seem unable to ignore the siren call of the 'Spartan mirage': remaining unable or unwilling to untangle fact from fiction, they accept aspects of the Spartan legend at face value and put forward unlikely hypotheses, the most striking examples of which can be found in S. Pomeroy's writings[15].

The purpose of the dissertation was to re-examine and re-interpret sources concerning mothers in classical and Hellenistic Sparta. Discussing divergent images of Spartan mothers in ancient literature, I re-examined women of Sparta in their maternal roles. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, I addressed complexities of the Spartan reality, searching for historical facts while sifting through layers of ever-changing and negotiable Spartan customs and beliefs. My chief intention, however, was to gauge the extraordinariness of Spartan mothers – or lack thereof – among other Greek women.

The dissertation was divided into two main parts, the first analysing the surviving literary sources and the second re-analysing them in the light of modern methodological approaches to historical Sparta. The first section was devoted to a thorough analysis of the literary sources, crucial for understanding the cultural

---

[8] T.J. Figueira, *Gynaecocracy: How Women Policed Masculine Behaviour in Archaic and Classical Sparta*, in: A. Powell, S. Hodkinson (eds.), *Sparta: The Body Politic*, Swansea 2010, pp. 265–296.

[9] S. Hodkinson, *Female Property Ownership and Empowerment in Classical and Hellenistic Sparta*, in: T.J. Figueira (ed.), *Spartan Society*, Swansea 2004, pp. 103–136.

[10] R. Kulesza, *The Women of Sparta*, Anabasis. Studia Classica et Orientalia IV 2013, pp. 7–36.

[11] E. Millender, *Spartan Women*, in: Powell (ed.), *A Companion...* (n. 1), pp. 500–524; idem, *Athenian Ideology and the Empowered Spartan Woman*, in: S. Hodkinson, A. Powell (eds.), *Sparta: New Perspectives*, Swansea 1999, pp. 355–391.

[12] A. Powell, *The Women of Sparta – and of the Other Greek Cities – at War*, in: Figueira (ed.), *Spartan...* (n. 9), pp. 137–150; idem, *Spartan Women Assertive in Politics? Plutarch's Lives of Agis and Kleomenes*, in: Hodkinson, Powell (eds.), *Sparta...* (n. 11), pp. 393–419.

[13] J. Redfield, *The Women of Sparta*, CJ LXXIII 1978, pp. 146–161.

[14] L. Thommen, *Spartanische Frauen*, MH LVI 1999, pp. 129–149.

[15] E.g. S.B. Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, Oxford 2002. See also e.g. V. French, *The Spartan Family & the Spartan Decline: Changes in Child-Rearing Practices and Failure to Reform*, in: Ch.D. Hamilton, P. Krentz (eds.), *Polis and Polemos: Essays on Politics, War, and History in Ancient Greece in Honour of Donald Kagan*, Claremont 1997, pp. 241–274; E. Fantham, *Spartan Women: Women in a Warrior Society*, in: E. Fantham (ed.), *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text*, New York 1995, pp. 56–67; B. Zweig, *The Only Women Who Give Birth to Men: A Gynocentric, Cross-Cultural View of Women in Ancient Sparta*, in: M. de Forest (ed.) *Woman's Power, Man's Game: Essays on Classical Antiquity in Honor of Joy K. King*, Wauconda 1993, pp. 32–53.

wellsprings of the Spartan legend. Having defined the research problem and possible risks, I highlighted and classified problems to be addressed within the dissertation. The main research question for this part of the dissertation was how the legend of the Spartan mother arose and what purpose it served as a motif. To that end, I carefully read and dissected all references to mothers in classical and Hellenistic Sparta: the corpus comprised texts by Greek authors from the classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods, occasionally including earlier and later authors. My interpretations showcased the fact that the motif of the Spartan mother was employed in diverse manners across a range of texts, authors and genres. I described in full the surviving accounts of Spartan mothers, identifying their affiliation, status and the expectations they were meant to fulfil: in other words, their role models and desirable traits to be emulated. Building upon particular issues of praxis and performance appearing in the context of Spartan motherhood, I developed an ideology of 'Spartan' motherhood: the system of ideas, ideals, and norms of conduct, obeyed to produce excellence and sound moral fibre. This constructed model of the ideal Spartan mother formed the basis for the next stage of research: to juxtapose the idealised image of the Spartan motherhood against the historical reality (as far as we are able to reconstruct it).

I opened my analysis with a chapter devoted to the literary portrayal of the Spartan mother as a mother of a warrior. Recasting the mother–son dyad onto the war domain, such discourse sought to prioritise military prowess and national glory over family matters: a mother's behaviour, roles and status were shaped and restricted by the warrior code. This type of reconceptualisation had a Spartan mother serve her *polis* through birthing new generations of citizens and rearing them as elite warriors; to promote excellence, she had to be harsh and show no mercy to her sons. This interpretation of Spartan motherhood surfaces in a limited number of sources, mostly in Plutarch's *Sayings of Spartan Women* and in Hellenistic epigrams. In turn, the following chapter examined writings that interpret Spartan mothers as primarily fulfilling the role of aids to statesmen and kings; integrally related to the political domain, a mother's role was once again to promote the public affairs of her *polis* over her familial interests. A politically motivated figure with considerable clout, this type of idealised Spartan mother was an affluent woman of style who used her connections and wealth to support her son's political ambitions, in turn sacrificing her own. Such politicised readings of Spartan mothers appear chiefly in examples drawn from Plutarch's *Lives of Agesilaus*, *Agis and Cleomenes*. The chapter juxtaposes figures of famous Spartan queen-mothers, mostly Hellenistic women, with other (primarily Roman) renowned mothers, with Plutarch delving into the exploration of cross-cultural notions of motherhood. The subsequent, third, chapter focused on Spartan women as begetters of children in the light of the 'laws' of the legendary Lycurgus. The textual sources for this chapter come by and large from Xenophon's *The Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, as contrasted with

passages from Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*. This part of my dissertation investigated the relation between the role of women in concepts of the ideal state and the image of Spartan mothers, with the body of the chapter comprising a careful reading of Xenophon's work against Plutarch's. The passages read demonstrate clearly that any ancient Greek authors attempting to design a perfect *polis* knew that city-states require both excellent men and excellent women to produce new generations of citizens; thus, women in their capacity as child-bearers played the central part in the making of the best *politeia*. The fourth chapter of this dissertation was devoted to the analysis of the roles of mothers and motherhood in Plato and Aristotle's ideal states, as well as to these authors' remarks about Spartan women. In turn, the fifth chapter examined assorted ancient Greek narratives and sayings concerning general beliefs held about Spartan women. Drawing from works of Attic dramatists, Herodotus, Pausanias, and Spartan poets Alcman and Tyrtaeus, this chapter considered select stories about the imaginary past of Sparta, her origins and nature and also patterns of female behaviour that made a *polis* successful.

My comprehensive analysis of the writings of authors on Spartan mothers and motherhood revealed the existence of several images of Spartan motherhood in antiquity. Such images, appearing in surviving sources from the 4th century BC onwards, shifted and evolved over the centuries, being creatively adapted by writers to new political, social and literary contexts. A Spartan mother depicted by the Athenian authors of the 5th and 4th century BC was not exactly the same as the one represented by Hellenistic writers; then again, the one which appeared in post-Hellenistic Greek authors differed from the figure employed by Latin writers. Intertextually, it appears that Plutarch's depictions of Spartan mothers exerted the strongest cultural influence over later Latin authors, who admired many Spartans customs and who related the patriotism of idealised Spartan women to that of Roman matrons. In general, the authors of the classical Greek era consciously moulded the image of Spartan women as outliers among the Greeks, categorising them conceptually by juxtaposition. The unusual way of living of Spartan women was pitted against the normative one of Athenian women and then compared against non-Greek women and idealised Greek women in utopian *poleis*. In turn, authors of the Hellenistic era were less interested in prototypical categories and more in extremes of behaviour: not only did they highlight heroic and utopian images of Spartan mothers as completely devoted to their *polis*, but they also delighted in describing them as merciless, harsh and unwomanlike. Later authors tempered the more vicious aspects of Spartan mothers, painting them as epitomes of maternal love and devotion towards their sons. Such bowdlerised depictions came from various texts associated with the so-called Spartan legend, such as the propaganda of the 3rd century BC, depictions of Spartan Helen and other warrior women, and, last but not least, Lycurgus' 'laws'. All these literary depictions stressed that Spartan mothers supposedly held the good of their

polis and obeying her laws in higher esteem than the good of their families, with maternal love expressed chiefly through unswerving loyalty to their city-state. Due to the aforementioned tendency to depict Spartan women as exceptional in Greece, the mothers' contribution to the Spartan *oikos* and *polis* were seen as outstanding among other Greek women. In literary portrayals, Spartan women were endowed with male traits and qualities, which they used to excel at their natural and traditional duties as mothers. Taking all of the above into consideration, in my dissertation I argued that literary depictions of Spartan women/mothers simultaneously employed three types of characterisation: the real, the fictive, and the semi-fictive. Some women were historical individuals whose deeds were recorded relatively faithfully, some were fictional characters, created by authors for moral edification, whereas others were historical characters whose biographies yielded well to being fictionalised, passing into the realms of storytelling and legend. As such, a portrayal of a Spartan mother is a composite image, a mélange of historical facts, consciously fabricated fiction, and unconsciously transmitted stereotypes about women in general and Spartan mothers in particular. Such depictions shifted in time to prioritise different aspects of the Spartan mother persona and thus to fulfil whichever role was required of these women in particular historical contexts. Nevertheless, such depictions were more or less fabricated, with the realities of life in ancient Sparta often proving incompatible with the visions of ancient authors.

The first part of this dissertation explored how ancient authors imagined Spartan mothers; in turn, the second part of my analysis meant to uncover the historical system of beliefs, behaviours and rights by which the concept of Spartan motherhood was construed and regulated. Building on current research, I engaged critically with often unreliable ancient sources to re-examine commonly held scholarly preconceptions and beliefs about the position of women in Sparta. Of particular use to my analysis were critical junctures when historical sources hinted at conflicts between Spartan ideals of motherhood and historical realities of life in this *polis*. Such junctures and conflicts were uncovered through careful juxtaposition of the idealising literary passages analysed in the first part of this work with other types of sources. Certain literary passages paint Sparta and her mothers in a more critical light; similarly, much can be gleaned from available archaeological evidence and from comparing what we know about Sparta with data coming from Athens, Gortyn and Rome in selected contexts. Using these types of evidence, I reconstrued the lives of Spartan women, considering economic, social, political and religious aspects of motherhood in Sparta. Also significant were other categories such as social status and the roles played by Spartan mothers, as individuals and communities, in specific timeframes. It was vitally important for this study to not examine women by focusing on the exceptional and extraordinary but to look for the commonplace and quotidian. Among the questions considered were whether: Spartan women wielded any

considerable authority within the family and society; they directly influenced the politics of the day; they prioritised the good of their *polis* over their families; they were used primarily for reproductive purposes or played other roles in the society.

The first chapter of the second part of my dissertation listed 101 women from classical and Hellenistic Sparta, with information provided concerning their lifespan, name, familial affiliation, activities, and reasons for being well-known which led to their appearance in the surviving source material. Among the 101 women I analysed, I found 42 mothers, all from royal or elite families. In turn, the second chapter examined roles played by women in the religious rites of Sparta: I enumerated known cults with female celebrants and discussed hypotheses that the dominance of fertility cults and the absence of private rituals was characteristic of Spartan religious life. The following, third, chapter focused on the status of Spartan mothers, their legal rights, economic activities, and their contributions to family and community life, my focus being to look for signs of maternal 'independence' and authority over children. The fourth chapter was concerned with the official and customary laws promoting the *teknopoiia* or begetting of children, examining the supposedly extraordinary significance of reproductive success in Sparta. The fifth and final chapter traced social changes that occurred in Spartan society between the 5th and 2nd centuries BC. It showcased how general expectations towards Spartan mothers and motherhood were changed in specific historical realities.

Having analysed the available evidence, I must stress that reconstructing the everyday lives of Spartan mothers is an exercise in speculation. Our evidence on mothers in classical and Hellenistic Sparta comes from sparse written sources scattered across time and space. What survives reveals a carefully curated set of information about exceptional Spartan mothers – queens and aristocrats, enjoying unique economic, financial, and educational privileges, women of power and presence, upholders of the social order and beacons of patriotism. In contrast, my enquiry into the social status of Spartan women unveiled that ordinary Spartan mothers, just like their counterparts in other *poleis*, held relatively little power over the affairs of men, their alleged liberation being a figment of corrective feminist imagination. Apparently, in gender-segregated Spartan society women did rise in status after childbirth, becoming guardians of their households and primary socialising agents (together with fathers, grandmothers, nurses, and other members of the household). The Spartans, as other Greeks, entered into monogamous marriages by betrothal, followed diverse marriage practices and promoted eugenics; however, certain discrepancies existed. As for women's rights in classical and Hellenistic Sparta, the available source material suggests that Spartan women held a measure of authority, since they could inherit wealth and manage their households in their husbands' absence. This privilege influenced marriage practices and, in time, led to the concentration of property and land

in the hands of a few individuals and, consequently, to the demographic crisis among the elites, who could not replenish their dwindling numbers. Arguably, Spartan mothers of the time period under discussion played crucial roles in socialising their children, although available evidence comes chiefly from data on aristocratic mothers and may not reflect the everyday custom. The highest social status was attained by widowed queen mothers (especially in the Hellenistic period), who apparently had a measurable influence on the political decisions of their next of kin. It is possible that because of the aforementioned demographic crisis, in order to increase the number of citizens the Spartan men practiced marriage by seizure, the 'love hut', and polygamy from the classical period onwards. In that period, women of reproductive age became a coveted asset among the Spartans. Characteristically for that *polis*, the age of brides at their first marriage was at the upper limit of what was customary in Greece and neared the age of grooms; this narrowing of the age gap between spouses most probably served to uphold the balance between generations. The inheritance laws in Sparta necessitated marrying fertile and healthy childbearers who would produce legitimate offspring for the elites, successors of kings and heirs to landed estates. Despite the crucial significance of marriage and the begetting of children in Sparta, however, not enough evidence surfaced to support the opinion that the fertility and motherhood of Spartan women actually conferred any special privileges on them in comparison to other Greek mothers. Furthermore, my study demonstrated that many peculiar beliefs, rituals, and customs ascribed to Spartans and their exceptional attitude towards motherhood were fiction rather than fact: no reliable source confirms that Spartan women were actually superior to other Greek women in terms of their fertility, military courage, moderation, simplicity in life, great wisdom, or sense of justice. In contrast to the opinion of some scholars, Spartan girls probably did not follow a special diet, were not commonly taught how to write and read, and did not exercise as men did. Similarly, the notion that the Spartan state promoted having as many children as humanly possible does not appear historically accurate. Last but not least, what I argued we can accept as pure fabrication are beliefs that Spartan mothers killed their children, sent letters to their sons on the battlefield and examined their wounds. The sphere of life where Spartan mothers wielded real influence was inheritance customs and politics, and even there their power becomes visible chiefly by the Hellenistic period.

To conclude, the main argument of my dissertation was to demonstrate that the legend of the Spartan mother overshadowed and continues to overshadow the Spartan reality of the classical and Hellenistic times. I made a case that the apparently extraordinary position of Spartan mothers among their peers is not a fact but a mirage that grew out of such influences as the stylistic constraints of specific literature genres depicting Spartan mothers, the accidents of source survival that limit our data to evidence on royal and elite women, the promulgation of archaic and heroic ideals about women, and, crucially, modern wishful

thinking among scholars. As the very first monograph on mothers in classical and Hellenistic Sparta, this dissertation is part of a greater research project designed to deepen our understanding of the social status of women in Sparta, their family relations and the general *modus operandi* of Spartan society. In other words, it constitutes an introductory treatise on the origins and rise of the motif of the Spartan mother in Western culture.

University of Wrocław
magdalena.myszkowskakaszuba@gmail.com