

Democratic elements in the Spartan political structure

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Abstract. *The article deals with the dynamics of the Spartan statehood. We argue that this development was going in a different direction than, for example, in Athens. In Sparta, where the initial elements of democracy were quite strong, gradually went a process of strengthening of oligarchic principles. Even the Ephorate, which initially functioned as an organ of the Spartan democracy, had lost all of its democratic features by the end of the classical period. We believe that at this time the board of ephors had already become an integral part of the ruling oligarchs. Sources' analysis shows that in the classic period the state system of Sparta gradually evolved from the traditional "hoplite politeia" to the clanish oligarchy. As a result, the ruling elite became less dependent and accountable to the common people than it was before. If the late Sparta can be called democratic polis, it is only in comparison with the oriental despotism.*

Rezumat: *Autoarea discută dinamica organizării statale a Spartei. Ea argumentează faptul că dezvoltarea acestuia mergea într-o altă direcție decât în Atena, bunăoară. În Sparta, unde elementele inițiale ale democrației erau destul de puternice, principiile oligarhice s-au întărit în mod gradual. Chiar și Eforatul, care funcționa la început ca un organ al democrației spartane, și-a pierdut toate trăsăturile democratice la sfârșitul perioadei clasice. Autoarea consideră că în acel moment consiliul eforilor a devenit o parte integrantă a oligarhiei conducătoare. Analiza izvoarelor demonstrează că în perioada clasică sistemul statal al Spartei se schimbă din tradiționala „hoplite politeia” într-o oligarhie de clan. Drept urmare, elita conducătoare a devenit mai puțin dependentă și responsabilă față de demos decât era înainte. Dacă Sparta târzie poate fi numită o polis democratică, acest lucru se poate face doar în comparație cu despotismul de tip oriental.*

Keywords: Sparta, democracy, oligarchy, Aristotle, Lycurgus, historiography of modern time.

Introduction

Even in ancient times there was no unanimous opinion about classification of Sparta as a type of state. Sparta was the symbol and the model for imitation to the adherents of the oligarchy at Athens as well as for other Greek poleis. They had no doubts that Spartans invented the best political system possible. A different conclusion could not be made in relation to the state that supported oligarchies and repressed democracies (Xen. Hell. II. 2. 5–9;

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Diod. XII. 11; XIII. 104; Plut. Lyc. 13). There is a good reason for Critias to say that “the constitution of the Lacedaemonians is, we know, deemed the best of all constitutions” (translated by C. L. Brownson) (Xen. Hell. II. 3. 34: Καλλίστη μὲν γὰρ δήπου δοκεῖ πολιτεία εἶναι ἢ Λακεδαιμονίων). When Critias became the leader of the most odious collective tyranny—The Thirty at Athens—he, at least for brief period, was able to establish in Athens an oligarchy with “Spartan face”. Some features of Sparta’s political system were imitated by Critias with perfect accuracy: the members of the committee that prepared the coup were named ephors; and just like the Spartan gerousia the ruling council consisted of 30 members. Moreover, the number of citizens with full rights (within three thousand) practically coincided with the number of Spartiates that time; the persecution of the well-off *metoikoi* probably had its model in the Spartan expulsion of foreigners (Xenelasia: Lys. XII. 6–7; Diod. XIV. 5. 5). Critias made an attempt to embody the theoretical provisions in practice, apparently imitating the oligarchic Sparta. The successes of Sparta in the Peloponnesian war demonstrated the exceptional efficiency of its political system and of the Spartan way of life in general. But the Greek political thought certainly considered Sparta as an oligarchic state, and such perception is fixed by Greek historians; on the contrary, the works of ancient philosophers show a somewhat different picture.

Even at the ancient times the uniqueness of Sparta confused theorists of polis and made it especially difficult to identify its political system as any known “simple” political form. Say Plato using Sparta as an example more or less accurately formulated a new position and a new opinion about pure political forms. According to him, the prevalence of the democracy or the aristocracy is equally disastrous for a state; and only the mixture of the best elements taken from all known political systems can give a state the necessary long life and stability. Plato and Isocrates, the theorists of polis, using Sparta as a prototype for their ideal political constructions analysed the Spartan system to make it an amalgam of almost all known pure political forms. However, ancient sociologists could perfectly well distinguish between the real Sparta and its ideal model that they invented. The best evidence is the example of Aristotle. His *Politics* contain quite different statements concerning the political system of the Spartan state. Fr. Ollier, the author of “*Le Mirage Spartiate*”, regarded alternation of positive and negative estimates in Aristotle’s views on Sparta as incoherence and contradiction. According to Fr. Ollier, when one reads *Politics* it seems that Aristotle speaks of “two Spartas”, that are in opposition to each other². This statement reflects the main issue — the impossibility to make accurate formulations when Spartan pattern is mentioned.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle usually considers Lycurgan Sparta as a purely aristocratic state (V. 1316a 29–35). As A.I. Dovatur correctly noticed, for Aristotle “all evolution of Spartan life was going on within the aristocratic system, although it mostly was the strengthening of

² OLLIER 1933, 315 ff.

oligarchical features”³. Apparently, Aristotle considered all the political development of Sparta as a number of deviations from Lycurgus’ strictly aristocratic constitution. From A.I. Dovatur’s point of view, Aristotle never described Sparta as a “pure” oligarchy, because for Aristotle even Sparta of his own times still remained aristocracy, despite the concentration of lands in the hands of a few people and the corruption of power⁴.

All these did not prevent Aristotle to use a dual system when he regards Sparta from the point of view of the political theory. He considered Sparta as an oligarchical state that deviates towards democracy (Pol. IV. 1293b; 1294b). For him Sparta is “the model... of a good mixture of democracy and oligarchy...” (IV. 1294b)⁵. According to Aristotle all public life in Sparta was based on the democratic principles: a common meal (syssitia) for adults and equal education for children and teenagers. These aspects of social life of the Spartans were controlled only by the state. According to Aristotle, in Sparta “the sons of the rich are brought up in the same way as those of the poor, and are educated in the manner in which the sons of the poor also could be educated...” (Pol. IV. 1294b 23–25). For Aristotle it is the first and the main democratic feature of the Spartan polity.

The concept of Sparta as a mixed polity that was first articulated by Plato⁶ and then developed by Aristotle (Pol. IV. 1294b), is more than once repeated in ancient literature (Isocr. Panath. 153; Polyb. VI. 10; Archyt. Tarent. ap. Stob. Flor. IV. 1. 138). So Polybius considered Sparta and Rome as the examples of the mixed polity, where political balance was provided with a “happy” combination of three simple forms: in Sparta the monarchic element was represented by two kings, the aristocratic element by gerousia (the council of elders), and the democratic one by the board of ephors; respectively there were consuls, the senate and the popular together with plebeian tribunes in Rome (Polyb. VI. 10–18).

I.E. Surikov perfectly expressed the way in which the ancient Greeks perceived the Spartan polity and their life-style: “All in all it is easy to notice that Sparta actually confused the Greek authors. It did not belong within their accurate schemes due to the fact that in the Greek world Sparta was an unique phenomenon and was not like any other city states”⁷.

³ DOVATUR 1965, 249.

⁴ DOVATUR 1965, 249.

⁵ Hereinafter it translated by H. Rackham.

⁶ Let’s quote this fragment for it taken as an example, will be spread widely around further by ancient political scientists: “In truth, Stranger, when I reflect on the Lacedaemonian polity, I am at a loss to tell you by what name one should describe it. It seems to me to resemble a tyranny, since the board of ephors it contains is a marvelously tyrannical feature; yet sometimes it strikes me as, of all States, the nearest to a democracy. Still, it would be totally absurd to deny that it is an aristocracy; while it includes, moreover, a life monarchy, and that the most ancient of monarchies, as is affirmed, not only by ourselves, but by the entire world” (Plat. Legg. IV. 712d–e / translated by R.G. Bury).

⁷ SURIKOV 2005, 228.

However, except for the theoretical developments of Greek philosophers who used Sparta as the model for their theory of the mixed rule, it can be noticed that since the ancient times Sparta has been considered as the mainly oligarchical state. And that is generally true. Sparta was not an oligarchic polis from the beginning; it only became so in Late Classical and Hellenistic periods. Despite the idea that Sparta was a state where nothing changed for ages, the closer examination shows that Spartan political system did not remain invariable throughout the centuries, but in fact evolved into the direction that at first glance seems to be unforeseen. In this respect, as well as in so many others, Sparta does not fit the typical development of a classical Greek polis. Sparta is quite unique, differing from the other Greek states by a number of parameters: starting with the vast territory and ending with the unique social structure. The political organization of Sparta was also unusual. The city, second for its significance in Greece, was ruled by a very small elite, consisting of only 35 people (2 kings, 28 gerontes and 5 ephors). This number of highest “managers” remained invariable practically throughout all the time of the existence of independent Sparta. This fact, of course, testifies to the extreme backwardness and conservatism of its social organization. Only at the end of the Peloponnesian war a new highest military magistracy was added to the ruling corporation—*nauarchia* (the supreme command of the Spartan navy)—, but its value after the collapse of the Spartan power became negligible.

Two of the three basic structural elements of the Spartan political system—the double kingship (*diarchia*) and the board of ephors—were typical for neither democratic nor oligarchic traditional poleis. Classical Greece did not know such magistrates. Spartan *gerousia* strongly differed from usual council of popular assembly too. It is not without reason that it is usually compared to *Areopagus*, the oldest judicial board of Athens (Isocr. *Panath.* 154). Both institutes were exclusive due to two factors: firstly, members of these chambers had their chairs for life, secondly, their activity was not accountable to any other authority. Of all ruling structures of Sparta perhaps only *apella* is typologically close to similar popular assemblies in other Greek poleis. Partly because of this ordinariness in ancient tradition, Spartan *apella* (assembly consisting of all the citizens) always remained in the shadow. A number of intractable problems connected with the activity of Spartan *apella* emerge due to the almost complete lack of the information in the sources. It is still open for discussion how the Spartan government cooperated with the assembly and to what degree actions of *apella* were formalized and subordinated to the highest authorities. In any case, at the beginning of the 4th century BC along with the usual “large assembly” there was a so-called “small assembly”, a mysterious structure mentioned only by Xenophon (*Hell.* III. 3. 8). The creation

of duplicating structure which apparently had acquired some powers of apella is an indirect evidence that the Spartan society was moving towards the rigid oligarchy.

For centuries Sparta did practically nothing in order to change its social policy and reached a phenomenal result: it ended up with very few full citizens. The circle of so-called equals (*homoioi*) was reduced to several hundreds of families. At the second half of the 3rd century BC the form of government in Sparta can be described as the clan oligarchy. It was not much better in Aristotle's time. The philosopher believed that the reason for the sharp decrease in the number of full citizens lays in the wrong social policy of the great legislator Lycurgus. Yet Lycurgus was hardly responsible for the regeneration of the Spartan state, whose political system was not originally like a narrow oligarchy and even had some democratic features.

The Spartan constitution, the authorship of which is attributed to Lycurgus, had a very archaic origin. The Great Rhetra, the most important Spartan constitutional document, which briefly stated the new political structure, dates back to 8th or 7th centuries BC. In any case, Rhetra is the first document of this kind which is known to us. Let us remember that Solon's legislation belongs to as late as the beginning of the 6th century BC. This presents another paradox: the backward Sparta adopted the new constitution one and a half or two centuries earlier than other Greek states and made it in a written form. The content of the Great Rhetra is even more surprising: it names apella as the ultimate authority which all other bodies should obey. At least this is how commentators usually understand the short phrase at the end of the Great Rhetra (Plut. Lyc. 6. 2). This political act had some democratic features, although it was written in lapidary style and not quite clear language.

The second step in this direction was made with the creation of the new collegial magistracy: the ephorate. In the state where the ruling clique consisted of two kings, descendants of Heracles, and gerousia, the aristocratic Council of Elders, emerged a new democratically elected authority, which also was democratic in respect of the type of members and their term of service. It was an actual republican magistracy. As well as the Great Rhetra, the ephorate appeared quite early, possibly in the second half of the 8th century BC. In any case, whichever date we take (various scientists' opinions fluctuate from the beginning of the 8th century to the middle of the 6th century BC) the ephorate as an institute emerged as early as the archaic period.

Thus, some innovations in the political system of archaic Sparta can, with some reservations, be regarded as basically democratic. Let's consider in more details two major events for our subject: creation of the Great Rhetra and foundation of the board of ephors. In fact, ancient authors considered the ephorate as the only really democratic element among other ruling institutes of Sparta.

Lycurgus's legislation and Great Rhetra

Despite the different attitude both to chronology and to the perception of separate items of the Great Rhetra, practically all researchers agree on one thing: Rhetra reflects the political decision which changed the vector of development of the Spartan state and gave it the chance to avoid a stage of early tyranny. As I.V. Andreev noticed, "Here we can see the first definition of the power of the people in the Greek legal history"⁸. Indeed, "the first hoplite constitution of Greek history"⁹, where it was written down that "the people must have the decisive voice and power" (Plut. Lyc. 6. 1)¹⁰, seemed to be if not democratic, but at least, liberal and progressive. Thus, as J. Huxley wrote, "Apollo of Delphi gave to Sparta a government on the Cretan model more liberal than any in mainland Greece before the time of Solon"¹¹. It was often noted in historiography that the inclusion of all Spartan citizens into the military elite and their provisioning with sufficient land was the result of direct legislative activity of one or several legislators. In this context the Great Rhetra is traditionally considered as the first-ever written constitution which became the initial push that brought about a quality change of the whole Spartan society¹².

Legal and partly even economic equality of all citizens was reflected in the new informal term "equals", or in the Greek version *homoioi* (ὅμοιοι) (Xen. Lac. pol. 13. 1 and 7). This word arose among Spartiates themselves and was used by members of civil corporation for honourable accentuation of their specific aristocratic equality. Its emergence shows the triumph of new ideology according to which all citizens began to recognize themselves as members of aristocratic corporation. Isocrates, as well as many of his contemporaries, looking with envy on the civil peace in Sparta, extremely rare for Greece, traditionally considered it as the result of the ancient legislation. According to Isocrates, the preservation of corporate unity was the main goal of the legislator: "They themselves ... set up amongst their own class the only kind of equality and democracy which is possible if men are to be at all times in complete accord..." (Panath. 178 / translated by G. Norlin). Isocrates, not being an admirer of Sparta, nevertheless recognizes the high qualities of Spartan state system. In "*Areopagiticus*" he writes: "For I know that ... the Lacedaemonians are the best governed of peoples because they are the most democratic; for in their selection of magistrates, in their daily life, and in their habits in general, we may see that the principles of equity and equality have greater influence than elsewhere in the world..." (Areopag. 61 / translated by G. Norlin). As O. Shultess correctly noticed, "nur ist das, was dem in der Demokratie aufgewachsenen

⁸ ANDREEV 1998, 94.

⁹ ANDREWES 1956, 74.

¹⁰ Hereinafter it translated by B. Perrin.

¹¹ HUXLEY 1962, 47.

¹² See, for example: CARTLEDGE 1979, 131; HODKINSON 2005, 46; RAAFLAUB, WALLACE 2007, 37.

Isokrates als demokratische erscheint, tatsächlich alte, echt aristokratische Gleichheit, in der Demokratie dagegen Kopie”¹³. Not without reason Aristotle, keeping in mind Sparta and Carthage, say that “in some states there is no body of common citizens (Ενίαις [πολιτείαις] γὰρ οὐκ ἔστι δῆμος) and they do not have the custom of a popular assembly but councils of specially convened members...” (Pol. 1275b 6–8).

This is a very important Aristotle's point. We shall take a risk, although with some limitations, to argue that in the Spartan civil collective there was no *demos* in ancient understanding of this word¹⁴. This observation was made more than once. So, according to M.T. Arnheim, the aim of Lycurgus' legislation was to move apart the borders of aristocracy and to include, at least *de jure*, in its structure all full citizens under the uniform name “equals”, or “spartiates”¹⁵. The term “equals” (*homoioi*) as no one other shows nature of a compromise between Spartan “patricians” and “plebs”, a compromise that brought about the political structure that was unique for the Greek world. By the time of Tyrtaeus all citizens of Sparta were the military elite which gradually developed its particular life-style and special scale of values. That is not to understand that in the post-Lycurgan Sparta the clannish aristocracy completely merged with the rest of the citizens and disappeared entirely, as some scholars believe¹⁶. The entire corpus of ancient sources attests that Sparta actually had the rich land aristocracy and, despite strongest egalitarian tendencies in the field of economics, politics and especially ideology, the complete unification of the people with the aristocracy never happened¹⁷. To a certain extent the equality of *homoioi* was formal even at the moment of culmination of the very idea of “equals”. However specifics of the Spartan “democracy” was that the *demos*, on one hand, saw aristocratic institutes as their own¹⁸, while the aristocracy, on the other hand, made a number of concessions for the sake of the civil peace: in particular, they avoided public demonstration of wealth and established the life-style that did not cause social envy. Speaking about it (I. 6. 4) Thucydides uses the word *ισοδιαίτοι* (verbatim “equal life-style”). During the archaic period the so-called Small Rhetrari, the Spartan version of laws against luxury (Arist. ap. Plut. Cleom. 9 = fr. 539 Rose³; Plut. Lyc. 13; Ages. 26), were introduced, which created a favorable climate for emergence of really close-

¹³ SCHULTHESS 1913, 2254.

¹⁴ As a matter of fact, it was *perioeci*, who really became “people” for Spartans. On the other hand, their position did not coincide at all with the position of *demos* in other Greek *poleis*. *Perioeci*, apparently, were citizens of their own Laconian communities subordinated to Sparta, and were legally considered as foreigners.

¹⁵ ARNHEIM 1977, 109.

¹⁶ Presence of the nobility among the “equals” denied, for example, Ed. MEYER (1892, 255), V. EHRENBERG (1933, 290) and G. MICHELL (1952, 43). Certainly they are right in the sense that the ancestral aristocracy ceased to be ruling class, but it did not disappear completely.

¹⁷ M. Arnheim drew attention that vestigial traces of an inequality in Sparta were shown mainly in exclusive access of the aristocracy to *gerousia*. The aristocratic council of Elders was a counterbalance to “democratic” dictatorship of the board of *ephors* (ARNHEIM 1977, 88).

¹⁸ SURIKOV 2004, 20.

knit political organism. The whole ideological apparatus, aimed at formation of stable stereotypes, supported such a pleasant illusion of equality among ordinary Spartans. Egalitarian trends, though partly formal, got into all spheres of Spartans' life. It became the basis of Sparta's ideology and the main national idea.

Lycurgus's legislation and the Great Rhetra are testimonies of the Spartan aristocracy's ability and resolve to make the compromise, which brought about the inevitable diminution of their clan interests for the sake of the whole society. Creation of the first and the only army in Greece that completely consisted of citizens-hoplites was for Sparta the most important result of the legal acts adopted at the right time. That is how the elite class of homoioi began its existence.

We don't know how the Spartans themselves called the political system created by Lycurgus. Bearing in mind their usual inclination to make even revolutionary innovations sound archaic, it is possible that they kept word "eunomia" (εὐνομία), i.e. good legislation¹⁹, to describe the politeia created by Lycurgus. This was the title of Tyrtaeus' poem, which glorified the political system of Sparta (this name was witnessed by Aristotle (V. Pol. 1306b), Strabo (VIII. 4. 10) and Solon (Sol. 3 Diehl³)). The same term or derivatives from it was used by Herodotus (I. 65. 2–66. 1) in his story about Lycurgus' political reforms, and by Thucydides (III. 18. 1), who described the same events although he did not mention Lycurgus' name. The word εὐνομία successfully combined two important points: the idea of an isonomia (ἰσονομία)²⁰, i.e. equality of all citizens before the law, and the idea of good laws, as opposed to bad ones (kakonomia) or even anarchy (disnomia). Spartans probably did not use any other name to describe their political system.

The Great Rhetra was a too democratic document for its time. At the first chance—prolonged state of war—some changes were introduced into the Rhetra that were definitely reactionary. Movement began in the opposite direction — from the liberal constitution which had granted the considerable rights to the demos towards the oligarchic one. The well-known modification, or addition to the Great Rhetra that, as a rule, is deemed to be accepted under the kings Theopompos and Polydoros²¹, corrected original Lycurgan constitution towards the diminution of democratic potential (Plut. Lyc. 6. 7–8). Apparently, too many rights given to the people's assembly by the Great Rhetra caused a response from traditional aristocratic structures. As a result the freedom of speech in the apella was limited and the kings and

¹⁹ Meaning of this term is widely discussed in literature. See, in particular, comments to words εὐνομία and εὐνομείσθαι at A. GOMME (1945, 128) and N. HAMMOND (1973, 71–72, n. 1).

²⁰ Here it means here the aristocratic isonomia. Herodotus first used this word as a synonym of democracy (III. 82. 6). About isonomia, see: EHRENBERG 1950, 526, 530–532.

²¹ Some scholars, contrary to Plutarch's explanation, consider the addition as an integrated part of the Great Rhetra. For more literature on this problem and its discussion, see: WEES 1999, 20–22.

gerontes, possibly, got the right of veto²². M.T.W. Arnheim, who assessed the importance of this amendment, argued that it apparently shifted the balance back in favor of the aristocratic gerousia²³. The important restriction of apella's sovereignty, apparently did not cause serious objections from the people: during the long Messenian wars Spartans lived under wartime laws, which only strengthened the "political infantilism", so typical for Spartan society as a whole. But adoption of the amendment did not mean that Spartan citizens became passive participants of apella from now on. We do not exclude that hypothetical possibility of discussion nevertheless remained in classical Sparta, but it is not known how often the ordinary citizens used it. The establishment of a new polis magistracy—the board of ephors—apparently was in retaliation for the adoption of the amendment. It is not important, whose initiative it was to create this post and what were their original goals. As soon as ephors replaced kings as chairmen of apella (it occurred, most likely, in the middle of the 6th century BC), the amendment to the Great Rhetra lost its power.

Board of ephors as democratic element in governmental structure

Due to the ephorate, it was not only ancient authors who spoke about Sparta as a democratic state (Isocr. Panath. 178; Arist. Pol. II. 1270b 17), but some modern researchers also consider Sparta as the democratic polis. In many respects such view concerning the political structure of Sparta derives from Aristotle. In his brief remark about ephorate, Aristotle makes a statement, which at first sight seems to be paradoxical, that it is a democratic institute. As we can see from the context, Aristotle meant only the method of selection of ephors which he called "too childish" (παιδαριώδης – Pol. II. 1270b 28). Probably decisions were made according to the strength of shouting²⁴. Of course, this method of voting is apt to manipulation, though at the first sight it seems quite democratic (Pol. II. 1265b 35–40; 1270b 16–26; IV. 1294b 19–31). According to Aristotle, this most important magistracy operated as a counterbalance to purely aristocratic institutes and guaranteed Sparta its political stability so valuable in times of Stagirite. "Thus this office does, it is true, hold together the constitution – for the common people keep quiet because they have a share in the highest office of state..." (Pol. II. 1270b 18–19). Aristotle believed that the board of ephors brought significant changes to the political system of Sparta just by the mere fact of its existence. According to him, "... for out of an aristocracy came to be evolved a democracy" (δημοκρατία ἐξ ἀριστοκρατίας συνέβαινεν – II. Pol. 1270b 16–17). However, one should not

²² The innovation consisted in removal of the common folk's right for free and unlimited discussion. Now only gerontes had the right to decide, whether to continue the discussion or to stop it and dissolve the meeting.

²³ ARNHEIM 1977, 90.

²⁴ We will dare to point out a possible parallel. From the word's etymology *suffragium* (*fragor* – noise, loud applause), the vote in *comitia* during the roman regal period could also occur via screaming.

exaggerate the significance of this short formulation, because it allows different interpretations. Let's pay attention that the predicate *συνέβαινε* in this phrase stands in the imperfect. This imperfect transfers us from the area of unique specific actions to the area of possible iterative situations. In general it can be understood in a way that from time to time some democratic elements which did not change the essence of the political system itself were introduced into the aristocratic constitution of Sparta. The sense of the phrase of Aristotle, *literatim* means that "the aristocracy came to be evolved into the democracy", apparently means, that the aristocratic regime in Sparta was gaining some democratic features with the strengthening of the board of ephors.

For further explanation let's turn to Plutarch who also wrote about the nature of the ephorate, but in a somewhat different way: in "*Lycurgus' Life*" we find Plutarch's comment to the above mentioned Aristotle's phrase. He describes the inherent essence of this highest office as follows: "For the institution of the ephors did not weaken, but rather strengthened the civil polity, and although it was thought to have been done in the interests of the people, it really made the aristocracy more powerful" (Plut. Lyc. 29. 11). It is necessary to remind here that "*The Lacedaemonian constitution*" by Aristotle was the main source for Plutarch when he wrote "*Lycurgus' Life*". It is this book that Plutarch quoted Great from the Rhetra's text. And Plutarch's assessment of the ephorate also, most likely, has this treatise as its source. Aristotle, apparently, considered the board of ephors as a quasi-democratic institute. In fact, the ephors reinforced the existing system by providing the stability of the ruling aristocratic class. Though formally common people could be elected as ephors, the Spartan aristocrats and plutocrats, of course, had more chances to be elected²⁵. They tried to "push" only their own people into the body of the ephors. At the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 4th century BC rich and noble Spartiates were apparently more and more often becoming ephors. For Spartan notables it was extremely important, because only ephors could initiate the adoption of the laws that they needed (Plut. Agis 5).

By the time of Aristotle, the board of ephors had already completely entered into the hierarchy of the highest polis officials and lost its original quality of the magistracy being in opposition to kings and gerontes. Later, in the second half of the 3rd century BC, the ephorate became an "aristocracy reservation" and nothing remained of its former democratic and opposite character. The most tell-tale evidence of degradation of this institute was the ephors' behaviour in the course of Agis and Cleomenes' reforms. All Spartan kings who were involved in this conflict used the board of ephors as a trouble-free tool in their fight against each other²⁶.

²⁵ RAHE 1980, 387.

²⁶ Ephorate stopped the existence in 227 BC. Though Spartan kings-reformers, using violence or bribery, with extraordinary ease eliminated any disagreeable ephor and appointed to his post of their own protégé, but, eventually, even such "pocket" ephorate seemed to Cleomenes a burden, and he got rid of it (Plut. Cleom. 10. 1).

Due to Aristotle's indisputable authority the ephorate is quite often represented as a democratic element of the constitution of Sparta in the historiography of the 19th and 20th centuries. It became an almost obligatory stamp each time when this office is mentioned. The very existence of this quasi-democratic authority continues to confuse scholars and does not allow them to come to a consensus on the political structure of Sparta. As far back as the 19th century, some scholars expressed the opinion that since ephorate was a democratic institution, the Spartan political system cannot be unconditionally attributed to the oligarchy. Thus, for example, N.I. Kareev, in his well-known manual on the ancient state and law, wrote: "It should be noted that this institute (ephorate – *L.P.*) also grew in Sparta on democratic basis if, of course, it is possible to speak about democratic basis when we discuss Sparta"²⁷. The author of the article on ephors in *RE* followed the same point of view. According to him, "zweifellos vertritt in historischer Zeit das Ephorat die Macht des Volkes gegenüber dem Königtum und lässt sich in gewissem Sinne als ein demokratisches Element auffassen..."²⁸. While Bertrand Russell, the author of the classical work on history of the Western philosophy, unconditionally describes the board of ephors as a democratic organ in the state system of Sparta: "They were a 'democratic' element in the constitution, apparently intended to balance the kings"²⁹.

Assessment of Spartan political system in modern and contemporary historiography

But while in representation of modern scholars the board of ephors contained some democratic potential at certain stages of its development, Sparta as a whole was seldom considered to be a democratic state. This view can usually be found in general descriptions, which as a rule contain certain political undertones. Thus, Ed. Meyer wrote about Sparta as a democratic state. He believed that in Sparta the aristocratic families did not have any additional political rights and were completely equal with the common people. According to him, all ancient authors without any exception reported that the Spartiates were absolutely equal among themselves and, therefore, Sparta was a democracy³⁰. Johannes Hasebroek, the author of several general works on the Greek economy, considers Sparta as a democratic state³¹. But, as I.V. Andreev fairly noted, some of Hasebroek's statements were highly politicized and made absurd in their straightforwardness. According to I.V. Andreev, "Hasebroek's statement that only in Sparta during the reforms of the 6th century the ancient

²⁷ КАПЕЕВ 1903, 122.

²⁸ SZANTO 1905, 2861.

²⁹ RUSSELL 1945, 97.

³⁰ MEYER 1892, 255.

³¹ HASEBROEK 1931, 202.

democracy developed in its most radical form, for only in Sparta and in Crete the absolute political and social equality of all citizens was achieved sounds absolutely paradoxical”³².

In the 1990s some European and American scholars, enthusiastic about the indisputable (according to their believes) victory of the Western democracy over “the empire of evil”, were inclined to perceive Sparta as a democracy, because it possessed advantage which was the most important for them — it was a polis of the European type³³. Let’s give the most typical examples. Thus, British scholar S. Hornblower in his article which was published in the collection dedicated to the development of the Western democracy, asserted that the history of the European democracy began in Sparta³⁴. M. Hansen, the well-known Danish scholar, also in a festschrift dedicated to the development of democracy in the ancient time, noted that if the Great Rhetra is an original document of the 7th century BC, there is no need to trust Aristotle and all the other sources of the 4th century that considered Solon responsible for introduction of the democracy in Athens in the beginning of the 6th century³⁵. Sometimes scholars even saw the fact that there were two Spartan kings instead of one as a step towards democracy. Nicholas Jones in particular adheres to such an opinion: “True, despite the general regressive trend of Spartan arrangements, collegial kings did admittedly mark a kind of advance toward democracy. One of the kings might serve to check an otherwise unbridled authority of the other...”³⁶.

Yet, the studies which are less politically bias assess Sparta’s constitution with a certain caution. As a rule, modern scholars tend to see only some elements of democracy in the Spartan state system. In any case, historians always speak about Sparta as the democratic state very cautiously and with multiple exceptions and conditions. It is typical for both western and Russian historiography. Thus, P. Cartledge, the author of a number of works devoted to Sparta, believes that the political system of Sparta, of course, cannot be equated to such democracies as Athens. But, on the other hand, according to him, the Spartan oligarchy—such as it was—was to some extent more open and “popular” than oligarchies of other states, even in the classical period³⁷. Oswyn Murray saw signs of the democracy in the fact that “the Spartans were always remarkably free in criticism of their kings (...) and were

³² ANDREEV 2004, 31–32.

³³ The well-known Western political scholar Karl Popper also had a point on view that was determined by contemporary realities. He contrasted the Western democracies with the Eastern totalitarianism, the main example of which was Soviet Union. In his famous work “*The Open Society and Its Enemies*” Karl Popper characterizes Spartan political system as the stagnant oligarchical tribal regime that was exclusively hostile towards the human rights. He accuses Plato for his admiration for Sparta (like other militarists) and for copying the institutions of Spartan totalitarian polis in his “*Laws*” (ΠΟΠΠΕΡ 1992, 141, 223).

³⁴ HORNBLOWER 1993, 1.

³⁵ HANSEN 1994, 33.

³⁶ JONES 2008, 45.

³⁷ CARTLEDGE 2001, 33, n. 63.

able to depose or exile them”³⁸. Curt Raaflaub was more careful and spoke only about “protodemocratic” features of Sparta’s system³⁹.

Russian scholars are also very careful when they speak about Sparta as the state where there were only a few democratic features. Let us quote the words of Igor Surikov: “In this rigid, militarized state there were some elements of democracy (very moderate, rather than radical), but they were pushed into background by principles of discipline and hierarchy...”⁴⁰. The fact that “the Spartan policy looks more democratic, than a typical oligarchy”, he explains by a too serious role of Spartan apella in the terms of a classic oligarchy: “we are talking in particular about the role of people’s assembly. That role was quite significant, moreover, and this is the most important point, it was institutionally established at a very early stage...”⁴¹.

As a rule, scholars distinguish between the political systems of Sparta before and after the Peloponnesian war. Hence, Jury Andreev, an indisputable authority in the field of Spartan studies, regularly pointed out a somewhat democratic character of the Laws of Lycurgus embodied in the Great Rhetra. According to him, “Lycurgan Sparta from a certain point of view might seem to be an even more radical form of democracy, than Athens in the time of Pericles. Here, not in Athens, the most important slogan of the Greek democratic movement—total redistribution of land—was implemented”⁴². In one of his earlier works I.V. Andreev not entirely correctly called Archaic Sparta “the peasant democracy”⁴³. He believed, and we agree with him, that before the turn of 5th–4th centuries BC Sparta was “a hoplite polity”, i.e. a moderate democracy⁴⁴. Eduard Frolov also wrote about the rapid formation of Dorian civil community and a possible existence of “a hoplite democracy” in early Sparta⁴⁵. However, every time when Spartan state is mentioned, elements of democracy are found only in the early period of its political history.

The traditional opinion in modern historiography is that Sparta initially was an aristocratic state which political system gradually degenerated into an oligarchy of the most rigid type. E.g. Anthony Andrews, the author of the article about administration system in

³⁸ MURRAY 1993, 162.

³⁹ RAAFLAUB, WALLACE 2007, 40.

⁴⁰ SURIKOV 2007, 110.

⁴¹ SURIKOV 2005, 227.

⁴² ANDREEV 1998, 94.

⁴³ That expression is not very good because the Spartan citizens were not peasants. They lived on a rent and did not cultivate land themselves.

⁴⁴ ANDREEV 1983, 209, 215.

⁴⁵ FROLOV 2004, 236.

Sparta, which became a classic long ago, assessed the Rhetra as the document which “exemplifies a form of government normal to Greece, but in an oligarchic rather than a democratic version”⁴⁶. As for Isocrates’ words that Sparta is a democratic state living in full harmony (Panath. 178), A. Andrews notices that representation of the inner structure of Spartan politeia as democratic must be a deliberate paradox⁴⁷. Let’s mention several similar opinions. According to A.W. Gomme, the politic constitution of the Spartans with the exception of the oddity of having two kings represented a usual aristocratic type⁴⁸. P. Cartledge, who is sometimes inclined to see some democratic features in the Spartan constitution, nevertheless, while analysing its legal system, deduced that “the Spartan demos, or citizen body as a whole, was not formally involved or consulted at all at any stage of the proceedings...”. Then P. Cartledge wrote: “In practice therefore it makes little or no sense to call Sparta a ‘democracy’, even if one were to have in mind the most moderate of Aristotle’ sub-species of democracy... Instead, all of those three entities—kings, Gerousia, Ephorate—should in my judgement be regarded as the forming part of the Spartan oligarchy, even if it was very much a *sui generis* oligarchy. The justice that it meted out was correspondingly oligarchic, that is, non-or rather anti-democratic”⁴⁹.

Such view about Sparta as a mainly oligarchical state is right in our opinion, as long as we consider the late Classical or the Hellenistic Sparta. The importance of differentiated approach to the Spartan political system was expressed among others by I.V. Andreev. “As to Sparta”, he wrote, “usual for our literature enrollment of this state to the category of oligarchies, and at that the most extreme ones, is based, from our point of view, on misunderstanding. In confirmation of this thesis, the modern scholars usually give the evidence of writers of the 4th century. But those ancient authors found Sparta in crisis and decline when the oligarchic elements in its constitution had already come to prevail over the democratic ones”⁵⁰. Like ancient authors who avoided to call Sparta an oligarchic state directly, modern scholars also find it difficult to characterize the political regime which had formed itself in late classical Sparta as undoubtedly oligarchic. As a rule, when Spartan oligarchy is discussed, scholars use a lot of clarifications and interpretations because the Spartan model of oligarchy was too different from its classical samples.

Thus, according to the American historian D. Dawson, the expert in an ancient utopia, Sparta was an oligarchy, although it had some special features⁵¹. P. Cartledge, calling Sparta an oligarchy, adds that it was a peculiar (*sui generis*) oligarchy. I.E. Surikov also pointed out

⁴⁶ ANDREWES 1956, 73.

⁴⁷ ANDREWES 1966, 16.

⁴⁸ GOMME 1945, 129.

⁴⁹ CARTLEDGE 2000, 21–22.

⁵⁰ ANDREEV 1979, 25.

⁵¹ DAWSON 1992, 27.

that Spartan oligarchy was non-typical for Greece: “In any case, if it is possible to consider Sparta as oligarchy, it is necessary to agree that it was a strange, indistinctive oligarchy, very different from typical oligarchic regimes such as existed in Corinth or Megara...”⁵². Apparently, both Sparta and Athens, despite their dissimilitude, show two models of the Greek poleis in their extreme manifestations. As a fine expert on Spartan realities Stephen Hodkinson stated, the Spartan “society which we may view as standing at one end of the spectrum of Greek *poleis*, somewhat extreme perhaps, but no more so than democratic Athens standing equally firmly at the other extremity”⁵³.

Sometimes the desire for definition as precise as possible leads to oxymorons. For example, the professor of Sorbonne N. Richet, the author of the most complete research about Spartan Ephorate, characterizes the political system of Sparta as “totalitarian democracy of oligarchs”⁵⁴. Of course, such a definition is unacceptable, but there are good reasons for it.

Conclusion

“Aristocracy? Oligarchy? Democracy? It is difficult to label the Spartan constitution of the 5th century”⁵⁵. Certainly, the reality is always more complicated than theories, and “pure” political forms never existed in real life. When Sparta just appeared on the historical arena, it probably was a mostly aristocratic state. Having made radical changes to its constitution, Lycurgus directed Sparta’s political development towards democracy, yet without destroying the previous social distinctions. We have to remember that the “democratizing” elements in the political system of Sparta did not survive early infancy⁵⁶. Even the board of ephors got gradually built into the oligarchic hierarchy and came to express interests not of the society as a whole, but only of its aristocratic-oligarchic elite, i.e. not really the interests of apella, but those of gerousia. As it has been repeatedly noticed, such a metamorphosis of the ephorate⁵⁷, corresponds to Sparta’s evolution towards an oligarchy. I.E. Surikov pointed out this uniqueness of Sparta’s development which is opposite to the mainstream. Indeed the Spartan state did not develop in the same direction as, for example, Athens. “In Sparta where the initial elements of the democracy were quite strong, on the contrary, the oligarchic principles were gradually getting stronger, and the later, the more pronounced it was”⁵⁸. By the end of the 5th century BC there was nothing left of the social balance which Spartans were so proud

⁵² SURIKOV 2005, 226.

⁵³ HODKINSON 2005, 51.

⁵⁴ RICHER 1998, 301.

⁵⁵ WILL 1972, 440.

⁵⁶ RAAFLAUB, WALLACE 2007, 41.

⁵⁷ See, for example: HAMMOND 1973, 55.

⁵⁸ SURIKOV 2007, 110.

about. By this time there were too many “errors” in the preserved sociopolitical structure of Sparta.

In the classical period the Spartan state system gradually evolved from traditional “hoplite politeia” into clannish or caste oligarchy, in which the ruling elite became much less dependent on and accountable to the common people than it had been before. The executive power in Sparta was given too much power that was not limited by any laws. It led to the actual usurpation of power by kings and gerontes, i.e. those who belonged to the most notable and rich citizens of Sparta. At the end of the 5th century the so-called small ecclesia was established (Xen. Hell. III. 3. 8), which was functioning alongside the usual popular assembly, and this fact probably is a symptom of the complete separation between the Spartan ruling class and the common people. This is exactly the process which Aristotle, possibly, had in mind when he said that “oligarchical governments break up when they create a second oligarchy within the oligarchy” (Pol. V. 1306a 13–16). At the turn of the 5th–4th centuries BC the division of the civil society into several unequal groups became quite obvious. So-called hypomeiones (ὑπομείονες – “younger”, “lower”, “fallen”) stopped being regarded as full citizens (Xen. Hell. III. 3. 6). What Aristotle spoke of and what modern scholars pointed out several times took place: “Aus der engen Oligarchie der Spartiaten wurde eine noch engere der Homoioi”⁵⁹. For the 4th–3rd centuries BC saw not all Spartans as the homoioi anymore, but only “the best”, i.e. the propertied class.

Such a result was brought about by the artificially frozen ancient legislation with its destructive idea of general equality for all the citizens. Aristotle noted that the obligation to make equal contributions for syssitia despite its apparent democracy was not actually a democratic measure: “Also the regulations for the public mess-tables called Phiditia have been badly laid down by their originator... among the Spartans everybody has to contribute, although some of them are very poor and unable to find money for this charge, so that the result is the opposite of what the lawgiver purposed. For he intends the organization of the common tables to be democratic, but when regulated by the law in this manner it works out as by no means democratic...” (Pol. II. 1271a 27–36). The cited remark shows that Aristotle understood the social essence of the Spartan state: where legal equality depends on economic equality, with the violation of the last the whole social system cracks too. In the conditions of economic inequality, which greatly increased by the end of Peloponnesian war, the retention of the archaic *census* for determination of the civil rights led to the fact that Sparta over one and a half century practically remained without full citizens, i.e. without those who could call themselves “equals”. Such situation, when no more than one percent of the total number of the free population had full civil rights, never existed in any Greek polis. As I.V. Andreev

⁵⁹ EHRENBURG 1929, 1402.

noticed, “such a state, in the opinion of the ancient world, could hardly aspire to be considered truly democratic”⁶⁰.

Sparta began with adopting the very liberal and to a certain degree even democratic constitution, but later it refused to move towards democracy. Even the ephorate, which originally functioned as the body representing Spartan common people and was in sharp opposition to traditional aristocratic institutes, by the end of the classical period had already lost all its democratic features and became an integrated part of the ruling hierarchy of oligarchs.

We can call the late Sparta a democracy only in comparison with east despotism. As Irina Shishova justly remarked, “There is no doubt that the Spartan community of equals was immeasurably more democratic than any ancient East society. However, the democracy in Sparta neither reached, nor even came close to the levels of democracy in those Greek poleis where the common people won a total victory over the nobility”⁶¹.

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⁶⁰ ANDREEV 1998, 95.

⁶¹ SHISHOVA 1991, 103.

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