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AN APPRECIATION OF THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF THE SPARTAN SYSSITIA*

In the last few years some specific works, principally those of Figueira (who has dealt with the economic factors), Fisher (who focused on the sociological and socio-political plane), and Nafissi (essentially ideological), have been added to the very interesting theme of the syssitia or Spartan common mess. We aim to contribute to this subject by carefully tackling various socio-political aspects of this important Spartan institution.

Prima facie, we can define the συσσίτιον as the reunion of Spartiate males in full rights (δύομον) to tighten and to reinforce the bonds of union that made possible their socio-political predominance through the symbolic act of a common meal. Thus these symposia grouped together exactly those who took part in the Spartan ἐκκλησία and adopted the political decisions, namely that themes later raised officially in the Assembly were plotted and discussed from different points of view by the syssitai. Consequently, as B.L. Kunstler has claimed, agelai and syssitiai worked as mini-poleis inside the more extensive framework of the Spartan state. The enormous significance of this social practice is greater yet considering the endemic oligandry suffered by Sparta, based in the restricted access to citizenship and in the high percentage of subject population. Indeed, we may conceive the syssitia as a sort of lodge that brought together and identified its members in a community of interests and purposes and even required the acceptance of new fellows by the old ones and secrecy as to conversations and events that took place during the sessions. This kind of political association in the purest sense served as a model for the hetairiai and synomosiai of oligarchic character that in other states pretended to be a group of social pressure that tried

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* We are indebted to Professor Domingo Piácdido for his estimable criticism in the definitive presentation of this paper, but we are entirely responsible for any errors that remain. César Formis wishes also to thank the Fundación Caja Madrid for its support; Juan-Miguel Casillas thanks Professor Julio Mangas (Universidad Complutense) for financial help for a stay at the Institute of Classical Studies, London University.


2 Kunstler 1983: 448. Adult lovers kept an eye on how their young loved ones were undertaking military instruction in the agelai; cf. Chartraine 1956: 32-3 and Vidal-Naquet 1985; Nafissi 1991: 177 puts in connection the agelai and the syssitiai, though he admits that the main regulation in the transition of the young people from the one to the other is not well known.

3 It is very difficult to establish a total for the servile population in Lacedaemonia because it depends on a great deal on how scholars read the ancient sources; thus, until the middle of this century, the investigators ventured some dates: Beloch 1889: 506 thought that before the Peloponnesian War the number of helots was c. 175,000, 60,000 of them males, reaching the whole population of Laconia and Messenia (230,000 inhabitants approximately); Grundy 1908: 81 considered feasible a ratio of 1:15 between helots and Spartiates in the fifth century B.C., i.e. c. 25,000 Spartans for 375,000 helots, without including periokoi. Nowadays, Talbert 1989: 23 estimates a helot population of between 170,000-224,000 in mid fifth century, coinciding in general with the previous figures. For the Spartan population, see Hdt. VII 234, IX 10.1, 11.3, 28.2, 29.1; Thuc. V 683; Xen. H.G. VI 1.1, 4.14-15; Arist. Pol. 1270 a 16-17; Plut. Lyc. 8.3, 16.1; de Ste. Croix 1972: 137-8, 331-2 and more recently Figueira 1986.

4 Cf. Plut. Lyc. 12.6 for the ceremony of admission and Lyc. 12.8 for the silence demanded of the members of the syssitia.
to impose the interests of the kaloikagathoi, i.e. of those that by birth, education and way of life considered themselves the most fit to govern through the eunomia and the eutaxia.\footnote{5}

As with most Spartan institutions, the origin of the syssitia was ascribed to the legendary Lykourgos, with the set of problems about the historicism and chronology of this personage which is involved\footnote{6}. Xenophon says that the lawmaker aimed to promote respect and obedience to the laws issued by the state, at the same time as reducing indiscipline\footnote{7}. Aristotle mentions also the legislator's desire to introduce the common state property in Sparta and Crete\footnote{8}. Just like other institutions, the syssitia preserved its framework and original sense moulded in the Archaic period, without showing transformations till after the Peloponnesian War, when a slow evolution began towards forms of social integration of groups of inferiors that finally would break down the stagnation and traditionalism of Lacedaemonian society\footnote{9}. In short the syssitia was a perfect symbol, down to the mid third century B.C., of the Spartan roots as a conservative, totalitarian and militaristic city-state; Plutarch takes up this idea saying it is a great convenience that 'the peoples with the best government among the Greeks, and those that have shown the most love of country in the maintenance of ancient custom, kept their rulers together over wine\footnote{10}'.

Unlike most Greek symposia, in the Spartan syssitia the guests did not get drunk, living up to their reputation as moderate drinkers, a characteristic that was extended to every kind of party or celebration\footnote{11}. Certainly, as Plutarch says, the homoioi did not want 'to make the men's eating together less beneficial\footnote{12}', fogging their good development and sense. Instead, the helots drank lots of wine to the extent of singing and dancing ridiculously which in the opinion of Figueira (1983: 97) functioned 'as psychological reinforcement of their inferiority to the Spartiates'. However, this scholar takes for granted the presence of helots serving at the dinner tables and the enlarged consumption of food and drink to argue that the syssitia was 'not only an institution for communal living for the Spartiates, but a mechanism for the recirculation of large amounts of food down the social hierarchy'.\footnote{13} Even if we do not deny this economic function of the syssitia that yielded a complement to the regular feeding

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\footnote{5}{For the organization, scope and activities of the hetairiai along with a general character, cf. Calhoun 1964 and Sartori 1957. For his ideology, Donlan 1980 and Whebley 1975.}

\footnote{6}{Hdt. I 65.4-5; Xen. Lyc. 5.2 and Lyc. 12.1; Arist. Pol. 1271 a 31-34 and 1272 a 9 attributes it 'to the legislator', presumably the same Lykourgos.}

\footnote{7}{Xen. Lyc. 5.2.}


\footnote{10}{Plut. Mor. 714 B. Although we cannot rule out that some Spartan institutions go back to the Dark Ages, the larger part -syssitia included- seem to date from the early seventh century B.C., being connected with the Messenian conquest and the enlargement of the productive lands allocated to the Spartiates; cf. Cartledge 1979: 170.}

\footnote{11}{For the wine in the syssitia, see Plut. Lyc. 12.7: 15.3; for the Hyacinthia, Athen. IV 139 d; cf. also Xen. Lyc. 5.4-7, Nafissi 1991: 178-91; Dietrich 1975; and Pettersson 1992: 16-17.}

\footnote{12}{Plut. Mor. 218 D 4.}

\footnote{13}{Figueira 1983: 97 and Fisher 1989: 34.}
of the lower classes, we think that Figueira goes beyond the permissible in claiming that unmarried women and helots participated in these celebrations as syssitia. Whilst the self-same scholar admits his lack of evidence to explain the presence of unmarried women, we consider it unacceptable that the servile population might gain admittance to conversations, rites and other kinds of manifestation of the political and social élite when the Spartiates themselves were compelled to remain silent and when, on the other hand, helots were a potential threat for the stability of the state. On the contrary, we must fit into the sources, that never show the helots serving at table, but impute to them the rôle of simple buffoons, observing too that the ingestion of alcohol was produced apart from the Spartiates’ tables and that only finally were the helots introduced into the syssition by way of educational example so that the young men were aware of the effects of intoxication. Neither is it likely that foreigners, be they kalokagathoi related by xenia links to some homoioi, could attend to these banquets so politically and ideologically significant to the community.

Precisely young people were allowed admission to the syssition in the capacity of listeners as a part of their education. In this way, in front of their younger brethren the adults conducted themselves respectfully, avoiding dirty jokes and displays of anger. The agoge considered it good for the young men to be introduced to social activities such as the hetairiai, gymnasia and symposia, according to the requirements of the aristocratic atmosphere in which they grew up. A link was established between adults of political competence and young people apprenticed to learn the mechanisms of power that crystallized in the majority of cases into a homosexual relationship. The exclusively masculine associations, exalting the virile virtues, established that an adult lover selected a boy and took on the moral authority of guide and leader, as long as the selected young man should look on him as a rôle-model (erastes–eromenos relationship), in the bosom of a culture where the state assumed responsibility for the education of individuals at an early age, even breaking ties of blood. So, according to Fisher (1989: 33), in the syssitia the adult lovers would also seek to place their paidikai in their own syssition or in another suitable one. Not in vain, Xenophon proclaims roundly that pederasty was considered τῆς καλλίστης παιδείας.

The Spartiates had to bring to the syssitia large contributions in terms of provisions and some money—ten oboloi according to Dicaearchus of Messenia—for possible extra food.

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16 Plut. Lyc. 28.4; Demetr. 1.4; Mor. 239 A; of the same opinion is Nafissi 1991: 190. Nevertheless, Ducat 1974: 1457-8 supposes that the true intention of the ceremony was rather to express contempt for the helots.
17 As Fisher 1989: 34 argues without consistent basis.
18 Plut. Lyc. 12.4; Lac. 5.6.
20 For institutionalised pederasty in Sparta within the agoge, cf. Cartledge 1981b.
22 Xen. Lac. 2.13. Plut. Mor. 761D places the Spartans among the peoples 'most devoted to pederasty'.
23 Plut. Lyc. 12.2; Dicaearch. fr. 72 Wehrli. Nevertheless, coined money was not very used before early
This created a difficulty for some Spartiates because not all of the kleroi could maintain a regular productivity either in quality or quantity, as this depended on the geographic situation, sort of cultivation adopted, and the fertility of the land. So there were citizens of a special grade of wealth who were allowed the luxury of giving to the mess wheaten bread in addition to the normal contributions.

As the high point of the dinner, the ἔσσιςιον, a kind of desert, was served; this worked as a tool to induce and acquire social prestige, being as it was offered in a voluntary manner by wealthy purveyors whose names were announced while the plates were being served. Thus a sort of competition (agon) was being established in order to receive honours in the eyes of the syssitoi and by extension of all the homoioi. At the same time, according to Fisher (1989: 34), their less well off fellow diners appreciated this practice of evergesia which was conceived as a manifestation of solidarity reaffirming the cohesion of the body civic.

This inequality in the productivity of the kleroi leads to us to the problem of whether the homoioi were really equals as the name implies. In our opinion plainly not, at least not at a practical level. In origin a Spartan belonged to the social elite, a status that could be notably raised through the occupancy of a political post or through deeds that brought honour to the polis, performed in battle or in the Panhellenic Games. At the heart of Spartan society until the fourth century B.C., the state controlled theoretically the administration of the kleroi by the means of the peers and was the final beneficiary of the property when the owner died. Yet, from this date, a greater degree of openness to the outside produced constitutional reforms and inheritance became permissible; also the conferring, purchasing and selling of title deeds. This fact facilitated the accumulation of land into the hands of a few gene whose members had founded the basis of their wealth on the profits derived from the tenure of a post, either political, military or administrative, outside the Peloponnesian.

Considering this socio-political panorama, we can well imagine what it was for a homoioi, born a Spartan, to lose his political rights. This dreadful consequence could


25 Athen. IV 141 d.
27 So, among the peers it is probable that the 300 hippoi (knights) and the agathoergoi (whom were entrusted the secret missions) had a special status or consideration (Hdt. I 67); cf. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1989: 87; contra Lazenby 1985: 53. We agree with Cartledge 1977: 27 in that ‘if we can give a concrete sense to the self-styled Spartan homoioi (peers), it is to the uniformity of their hoplite training and experience, not to the equality of their property nor even their shared way of life as a whole, that we should primarily look’; cf. also Vidal-Naquet 1986: 161-2.
29 This is attested by the whole range of sources (Xen. Lyc. 7.6, 14, An. II 6.1-5; Ephel. FGrH 70 F 148-9; Plut. Lyc. 30.1, Agis 4.1, 5.1, 5.5, Lys. 17 and Mor. 239 D-240 A; Arist. fr. 544; Posidonius FGrH 87 F 48; D.S. XIV 12; Aelian VH. 14.29; Theopomp. FGrH 115 F192 and 232). E.g. Gyllippos, a Spartan manarchos, was accused of embezzling money for personal use and that is why he was exiled in early fourth century B.C. Cf. Smith 1948: 147; David 1981: 6-8; Hamilton 1979: chap. i-II; Vattuone 1982.
happen, among other circumstances, if products of the stipulated quantity were not supplied to the syssitia; if so, the Spartan was deprived of his rights as a peer and relegated to second-class citizenship. These were the so-called ἵππουμεοῖοςες, suspended of their political, but not their civil rights, because for example the klēros was a consubstantial right with one’s Spartan birth; the position of the hypomeion in the Lacedaemonian society can not have been very different to that of the tresantes, those that had been deprived of their status of homoioi for cowardliness or disobedience during a military campaign, and both were probably situated in the social order somewhere between the neodamodeis (freed slaves) and the periōkoi. The most representative example of a hypomeion was Cinadon, who in 398 led a conspiracy of the oppressed classes against his peers. This exclusion as a result of failure to comply with the demands of the banquet was criticised by Aristotle, who deemed more equitable and just the organisation of the Cretan common mess, where the all of the expenses were met by public funds, a measure which, for the Stagirite, constituted the whole essence of citizenship.

Another aspect to be considered is whether or not the μόθοιαίς took part in the Spartan common meals. The above Greek term refers to the sons of the Spartiates who had lost their status of homoioi, either due to a dishonest attitude while carrying out their duties or to a betrayal of Lykourgos’ ideals. This fact deprived them from having full citizenship. Nevertheless, the mothakes were closely linked ideologically with the Lacedaemonian political and military elite, and enjoyed a high social position—by virtue of both birth and education—in regard to the subject population. Moreover, they were able to regain their status of homoioi, provided they offered distinguished service to the state. Since the early fourth century they could also accumulate considerable wealth. Thus there is the case of Lyssander, who according to Plutarch, behaved like a homoioi in every aspect even before he was awarded full citizenship in the late fifth century for his services during the Ionian War. We also have the examples of Kallykratidas and Gyllippos, equally dated to the end of the Peloponnesian War. They were all mothakes at the time of being appointed navarchoi and

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30 Arist. Pol. 1271a 31-32, 1272a 7; cf. Xen. Lac. 10.7.
33 Xen. HG. III 3.6.
34 Xen. HG. III 3.4-11; Arist. Pol. 1306 b 3; Max. Tyr. 35.8 C; Polyaenus. II 14.1. Specific articles about Cinadon’s plot are Vattuone 1982 and David 1979; see also Cartledge 1987: 162-79, 273-5, 321-4.
36 Phylarch. FGrH 81 F 43 (= Athen. VI 271c-f); Aelian VH. 12.43; Cartledge 1987: 28. Contra: Chrmes 1949: 97, 117 and 220-3, Wist 1959: 60-3; Michel 1964: 89, who defend the servile status of mothakes. On the other hand, Loizze 1962: 427, Oliva 1971: 177; Bruni 1979; 2, Forrest 1980: 136, and Nafissi 1991: 175 n.74, included in this term not only the sons of homoioi deprived of full citizenship, but also the bastard sons of Spartiates in full political and civil rights and the sons of helot mothers.
37 Ael. VH. 12.43; cf. Plut. Lys. 2.1; Athen. VI 27 e-f.
later became full citizens and achieved great personal power. It does not come as a surprise that this kind of individual took part in the common meals to the same extent as the *homoioi* did, on account of their complete assimilation within the state apparatus, of which the *syssitia* was a key element, was expected.

Attendance at the *syssition* was obligatory for all Spartiates and one was only excused if hunting or making a sacrifice, in which case one had to send the common mess a share of the captures got in hunting or the sacrifice’s first fruits. An active right of the Lacedaemonian king was to take part in the *syssitia* without having to attend the *syssition*, so that he received at his home two *khoines* of barleyflour and one *kotyle* of wine; if he decided to appear in the commone mess, he was offered a double portion of all foods. However, this royal privilege had to be subject to some sort of control by the authorities of the polis (at least in the fifth century), seeing that, for example, Agis II was forbidden a private meal with his wife to celebrate a victory over the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War: when he sent for his portion and this was denied by the polemarchs, his anger even provoked the imposition of a fine on him for refusing to make a sacrifice.

The fact that the polemarchia was a military charge points to a possible origin of the *syssitia* in the frame of military campaigns, in the development of which the common mess (*σύσσιον*) had an essential rôle in the daily life style of the Spartans, with the intention of creating bonds of union and comradeship that aroused the necessary feeling of mutual protection amongst the eating partners. In this case, the partners were the so-called *enomotes*, namely those who composed the inferior unit of the Spartan army called *enomotia*. In this way, the minimum age for integration into the common mess was twenty years, the same as that to be allowed into the army. It goes without saying that for the Spartan state the war was an extension of civic life, since only the Spartiates could take up arms, whilst the subject population only did so as a last resort. Herodotos also seems to allude to this origin in the bosom of the army when he includes the *syssitia* in the military order, along with the *enomotia* and the *triekades*.

As the last item in our study we are going to focus on the changes which took place in the *syssitia* in the middle of the third century B.C., included into the constitutional reforms carried out by king Agis IV. From the late fifth century there arose in Sparta a gradual reduction of the citizen’s rights because of greater social differentials in the rate of wealth, owing in turn to the cost of maintaining the Empire inherited from the Peloponnesian War.

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39 Plut. Lyc. 12.4; Xen. Lec. 5.3.
40 Hdt. VI 57.3; according to Figueira 1983: 97, kings received a larger quantity of food because they had more helots in their service, in line with his hypothesis of the redistribution of nourishment among the servile population. On the other hand, Fisher 1989: 32 with n.33, following to Carlier 1984: 250 ff., argues that it is possible that these royal privileges were not already in effect in Herodotos’ day.
41 Plut. Lyc. 12.5.
42 Both Forrest 1980: 46 and Lazenby 1985: 7, 12 esteem that the *enomotia* was made up by forty Spartiates.
43 Cf. Cartledge 1998b: 22 and Fisher 1989: 33. Forrest 1980: 52 raises the minimum age to thirty years, bearing a relation with the access to the sessions of the *Ekklesia*.
44 Hdt. I 65.5.
45 The occupation of political and military posts in the Spartan Empire pioneered the differentiation in wealth for a part of the Spartiate population; the presence of gold and silver in Sparta, practically unknown till
The figures are eloquent: in 418 there would about 3,600 Spartiates males; before the disaster of Leuctra (371), the number had decreased to 1,000-1,200; in the mid fourth century there were less than a thousand; and, lastly, in the mid third century their number did not surpass 700. As long as a few homoioi, identifiable with the families sharing political power, continued to prosper significantly, the remainder suffered such impoverishment as, in many cases, brought about an incapacity to pay the expenses of the syssitia, or the pressing need for selling the kleros, which one way or the other implied the immediate loss of full political rights. At this critical moment for the lower classes we must site the aforementioned conspiracy of Cinadon. We can not deny the likelihood pointed out by Fisher (1989: 35) that at the time that lack of able bodied men made necessary the induction into the army of the dependant population from the Peloponnesian War onward, the syssitia also opened up to the lower social elements gaining citizenship albeit not with full rights. But lacking precise testimonies, it is preferable to wait for the reforms at the middle of the third century with a clear decadence of Sparta, so that circumstances are favourable to the realization of these institutional changes.

Consistently, the fall in the number of male citizens signified an increase in the percentage of cultivable land in the hands of women—approximately 40 per cent by the mid fourth century—and in the possibility of the hypomeiones looking for a marriage of convenience with these female landowners as means of access to the lost citizenship. All this is revealed in the growing weakness of the Spartan state in the Hellenistic period.

According to the previous statement, we must understand the institutional reforms of Agis IV (244-241 B.C.) that included the concession of political rights to a significant part of the non-citizen population, which meant among other things a regulation in the rules of the syssitia, for which we only have evidence in the variation in the distribution of guests, now between 200 to 400 persons in each of the fifteen established tables. Unfortunately we

46 Thuc. VI 68.3.
48 Arist. Pol. 1270 a 16.
49 Plut. Agis 5.4-5.
50 Xen. L ac. 7.1-2. On the other hand, the long established legislation introduced by Lykourgos prevented the citizens from working in cheaper activities like trade or crafts, usually in the hands of perioikoi, thus restricting the future development of second-class citizens; see Berthiaume 1975 and Cartledge 1976.
51 Xen. H.G. III 3.4-11; cf. above n. 34.
53 Plut. Agis 8.2, Cleom. 11.4; cf. above n. 9.
54 Plut. Agis 8.3. Cf. Cartledge and Spawforth 1992: 41, 46, 52, 78 and Pipers 1984-85: 85-8 and 1986: 34. It seems that in the classical period the members were distributed in groups of fifteen per table within the syssitia or dining room (Plut. Lyc. 12.2).
do not know if this modification was extended to other characteristics of the original organization of the common mess55. But whether or not this reform was limited purely to a numerical alteration, it seems evident that with the integration of new citizens the sysitia lost its primary function as a tool for identifying and reinforcing the Spartiate socio-political élite.

55 Forrest 19805 and Lazenby 1985: 182 argue that the reform was restricted to the number of members and that it did not affect other aspects of the institution; contra Figueira 1983: 98 with n.32, who dates the reform of the sysitia between 265-254 (so, out of the reign of Agis IV), when it left off being a mechanism for the redistribution of foodstuff to the servile population to become a means of help from the rich Spartiate to the poor one.

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