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Κρυπτεία: A Form of Ancient Guerrilla Warfare

The night was still, the moon hanging with translucent beauty in the blackness of the sky. Wraiths emerged stealthily from the shadows, swooping down upon the unsuspecting peasants on the beaten path. The moonlight glistened on the blades of their daggers, unsheathed only in the moment before the strike. Within seconds, the unaware peasants lay dead on the ground. The twisted, cloaked forms of men vanished without a trace into the darkness of the mountains, as quickly and silently as they came. They were the krypteia.

Modern scholars have debated the exact nature of the Spartan *krypteia* (κρυπτεία), a group of young men who roamed the countryside killing helots. Some have seen it as a form of education, others as a form of suppression. However, not many scholars have pointed out that the *krypteia* was a form of guerrilla warfare against the helot population. The members of the *krypteia* were not, as some have presumed, youths in need of harsh, bloody education or a secret police force. Instead, they were elite guerrilla soldiers used to keep the helots in line, and perhaps even played a role in the larger Spartan military in special operations.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Two rival schools of thought separate modern perception about the *krypteia*. One is the view that the *krypteia* was essentially a brutal final exam for select members of the *agōgē*, or Spartan educational system. The skills learned during this gruesome test would be later utilized in their militaristic lifestyle as hoplites. Conversely, other scholars see the educational aims of the *krypteia* as secondary; rather they presume its purpose was nothing other than a means to control the helot population through state-sponsored terrorism. Generally the two groups of scholars acknowledge both components, but they differ on which purpose has dominance.

Some scholars feel that the *krypteia* was exclusively a part of the educational system in Sparta. For example, T. Rutherford Harley in 1934 briefly noted that young men of eighteen years old joined the *krypteia* after intense training and the *agōgē*.[1] Essentially the *krypteia* was the next step in Spartan education according to Harley, while in 1956 H. Marrou took a stronger stance on the *krypteia* in stating that it "in the beginning seems to have been not so much a terrorist expedition against the helots as a campaign exercise designed to accustom the future combatant to the harsh life of ambushes and war."[2] Richard J. A. Talbert, writing over thirty years later, agreed with Marrou when he wrote "the purpose of the [*krypteia*] looks likely to have been much more to 'blood' young Spartiates than to keep down the helots."[3] Both

[1] T. Rutherford Harley, "The Public School of Sparta," *Greece & Rome* 3, no. 9 (1934): 139.
[2] H. Marrou, "Spartan Education," in *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. G. Lamb (New York: Sheed & Ward Publishers, 1956), 23.
[3] Richard J. A. Talbert, "The Role of the Helots in the Class Struggle at Sparta," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 38, no. 1 (1989): 34.

Marrou and Talbert claimed that the primary purpose of the *krypteia* was education and training for the Spartan military rather than a technique of suppression.

However, many scholars have disagreed with this assessment. Preston H. Epps in 1933 acknowledged that "the participation in this inhuman practice was a part of the Spartan system of education," but also stated that the institution of the *krypteia* was a "system of organized assassination" that reflected the fear that Spartans had for the helots.[4] More recently, Paul Cartledge has ascribed to the view that the task of the *krypteia* "was to control the Helots as well as prove their readiness for the responsibilities of warrior manhood."[5] Nino Luraghi has also seen the *krypteia* as a form of terror to keep the helots under control.[6] Historians, such as Victor Davis Hanson, have further compared the institution to the Gestapo and called it an early form of secret police.[7] While its purpose in the educational system was a vital component, in their view the *krypteia* was more importantly a method to control the helots through terror.

When considering the nature of the *krypteia* and Spartan society, the latter group's argumentation seems more convincing than the former. Training, while important to the military, is secondary to practical applications. Furthermore, if the *krypteia* was merely a final part of the *agōgē*, it raises the question of why it focused on a manner of fighting not utilized in hoplite warfare.

THE NATURE OF THE *KRYPTEIA*: CONFRONTING THE PRIMARY SOURCES

There is very little primary source material explicitly concerning the *krypteia*. Despite the paucity of the evidence, most scholars have not disputed the existence of the institution. However, given the nature of the *krypteia*, this is not unexpected. The etymology of the word is derived from κρυπτός, which means "hidden" or "secret". Therefore, one does not expect a large amount of ancient evidence to exist when the subject by its very nature is clandestine.

Plato presents the earliest evidence we have concerning the *krypteia*. Through a Lacedaemonian named Megillus in his *Laws*, Plato writes:

> …it is the training, widely prevalent amongst us, in hardy endurance of pain, by means both of manual contests and of robberies carried out every time at the risk of a sound drubbing; moreover, the *krypteia*, as it is called, affords a wonderfully severe training in hardihood, as the men go bare-foot in winter and sleep without coverlets and have

[4] Preston H. Epps, "Fear in Spartan Character," *Classical Philology* 28, no. 1 (1933): 22.
[5] Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece, from Utopia to Crisis and Collapse* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 70.
[6] Nino Luraghi, "Helotic Slavery Reconsidered," in *Sparta: Beyond the Mirage* (Oakville, CT: David Brown Book Co., 2002), 231.
[7] Victor Davis Hanson, *Wars of the Ancient Greeks*, ed. John Keegan (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 80.

> no attendants, but wait on themselves and rove through the whole countryside both by night and day.[8]

Based solely on the words of Plato, there is a sense that the *krypteia* was merely a form of harsh training for the Spartans. Its nature was essentially a mountainous warfare/survivalist training program designed to acclimate soldiers to unforgiving conditions and clandestine operations.

The only other author who mentioned the *krypteia* was Plutarch. The first instance in which Plutarch mentioned it was in *Lycurgus*:

> …It may be that Plato was likewise led to this opinion of Lycurgus and his constitution because of the Spartiates' so-called *krypteia* – assuming this really was one of Lycurgus' institutions, as Aristotle has maintained. Its character was as follows.
>
> Periodically the overseers of the young men would dispatch into the countryside in different directions the ones who appeared to be particularly intelligent; they were equipped with daggers and basic rations, but nothing else. By day they would disperse to obscure parts in order to hide and rest. At night they made their way to roads and murdered any helot whom they caught. Frequently, too, they made their way through the fields, killing the helots who stood out for their physique and strength…Aristotle makes the further notable point that immediately upon taking office the ephors would declare war on the helots, so that they could be killed without pollution…personally I would not attribute such a foul exercise as the *krypteia* to Lycurgus…[9]

With *Lycurgus*, the *krypteia* developed from a form of training found in Plato's *Laws* to an institution centered instead on killing the helots. Part of the reason for this was that the *Laws* were written around 360 B.C.E. and *Lycurgus* was written in 75 C.E.[10] Plato and Plutarch also differed in their purposes. Plato wrote on laws and various aspects of society that influence law-giving. However, most of Plutarch's works, including *Lycurgus*, were written to show its readers the ideal Greek role models in history. Therefore it is expected that the two sources would differ somewhat.

According to *Lycurgus*, the members were selected for their intelligence and sparingly equipped; it must be assumed that resourcefulness in the face of scarcity

[8] Plato, *Laws*, trans. R.G. Bury, 1.633
[9] Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, trans. Richard J. A. Talbert, 28.
[10] Daniel C. Stevenson, *The Internet Classics Archive*, http://classics.mit.edu.

must have been a virtue for the elite *epheboi* of the *krypteia*. During the day the members would remain hidden and conduct their terror at night. Nighttime raids are significant since they were a deviation from the norm; early hoplite warfare in Greece was limited to daylight hours.[11] Sometimes the killing was random, other times it was a purposeful selection of helots deemed to be most of a threat. Furthermore, the ephors declared war on the helots annually.[12] In this way, the helots could be killed without any legal or moral ramifications: *it was an act of war*. Plutarch was hesitant to attribute such a cruel institution as the *krypteia* to Lycurgus, but did not dispute the existence of it. If there was any question as to its existence, it would seem Plutarch would opt for putting the vicious rumors surrounding his beloved Lycurgus to rest rather than discussing the nature of the *krypteia*.

Plutarch also mentions the *krypteia* in his *Cleomenes*:

> He showed himself an admirable general in the hour of peril…but he was overwhelmed by the superior character of his enemies' armour and the weight of their heavy-armed phalanx…
>
> For Antigonus ordered his Illyrians and Acarnanians to go round by a secret way and envelope the other wing…and then led out the rest of his forces to battle; and when Cleomenes, from his post of observation, could nowhere see the arms of the Illyrians and Acarnanians, he was afraid that Antigonus was using them for such purpose.
>
> He therefore called Damoteles, the commander of the secret service contingent[13], and ordered him to observe and find out how matters stood in the rear and on the flanks of his array…[14]

This excerpt from *Cleomenes* illustrates a military application of the *krypteia* that scholars have scarcely considered. Cleomenes was confronted with an enemy general who successfully hid the location of two units to make a flanking maneuver by a secret path. When faced with this serious predicament, Cleomenes turned to

[11] Hanson, 72.

[12] Robert J. Bonner and Gertrude Smith, "Administration of Justice in Sparta," *Classical Philology* 37, no. 2 (1942): 121. Plutarch here is clearly citing the lost Constitution of the Lacedaemonians by Aristotle (F 538 Rose).

[13] The translator, Bernadotte Perrin, used the English phrase 'secret service contingent' rather than referring to the Greek name '*krypteia*'. Refer to Plutarch, *Cleomenes*, trans. Richard J. A. Talbert, 28 for an alternate translation of this selection.

[14] Plutarch, *Cleomenes*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, 28. To simplify matters, the part of the source that discusses Damoteles' betrayal of Cleomenes by accepting a bribe from Antigonus has been omitted. It is unimportant, and potentially confusing, when discussing the nature which Cleomenes sought to utilize the *krypteia* as opposed to what really happened (Plut. Cleom. 28.3).

Damoteles, most likely to the *krypteia* in general since Damoteles was its commander, and ordered him to do reconnaissance.

The battle described by Plutarch was the Battle of Sellasia in Laconia.[15] It is perhaps unfortunate that this description of the *krypteia*'s role in the battle happened to take place near Sparta. If the battle had occurred farther away, it would be a strong confirmation for the idea that the *krypteia* had a presence in the Spartan military on campaign. We cannot be sure if the *krypteia*, as a unit, traveled with the Spartan army abroad – given the lack of concrete evidence – but it is very plausible. It would have served a very practical function in the larger military because of their specialized and unconventional training to operate independently and clandestinely. If this was the case, Spartan commanders would have had an elite unit able to conduct special operations such as reconnaissance (as seen in *Cleomenes*), and possibly other functions, at their disposal.

There may be another primary source that implicitly mentioned the *krypteia*. Thucydides wrote in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*:

> Indeed fear of their numbers and obstinacy even persuaded the Lacedaemonians to the action which I shall now relate, their policy at all times having been governed by the necessity of taking precautions against them. The Helots were invited by a proclamation to pick out those of their number who claimed to have most distinguished themselves against the enemy, in order that they might receive their freedom; the object being to test them, as it was thought that the first to claim their freedom would be the most high spirited and the most apt to rebel.
>
> As many as two thousand were selected accordingly, who crowned themselves and went round the temples, rejoicing in their new freedom. The Spartans, however, soon afterwards did away with them, and no one ever knew how each of them perished.[16]

There has been much debate on the interpretation and veracity of this passage, but it is certainly plausible that, if events really did proceed similarly to how Thucydides described, the *krypteia* would have been the executor.[17] If there was an instance where Sparta needed assassins skilled in clandestine operations, the *krypteia* was without a doubt the best available option to accomplish it. This was because of the differences between the institution of the *krypteia* and hoplite warfare.

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[15] Ibid., 27.
[16] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, 4.80.
[17] Paul Cartledge, "Rebels and *Sambos* in Classical Greece," in *Spartan Reflections* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 128-130.

MOUNTAINOUS VERSUS HOPLITE WARFARE

The development of hoplite warfare in Greece was a paradoxical manner of fighting according to some scholars. The focus in hoplite warfare was on group solidarity and impenetrable defense rather than offensive mobility, speed and range; this made the hoplite a cumbersome, slow, but well-protected infantryman.[18] Cartledge noted the irony that hoplite warfare, conducted on level ground by slow-moving heavy infantry, developed in Greece where the land is predominantly mountainous. One would expect the emphasis to be instead on light armor, mobility and speed to take advantage of the terrain.[19] To explain this paradox, scholars have referred to the agrarian nature of Greek society and that battles were fought to suit the interest of farmers. Hoplite warfare developed to protect agricultural property of the *polis*.[20]

However, it is interesting to note that at least Sparta did have a system in place perfectly suited for mountainous warfare. The *krypteia* did not have the heavy armor panoply and the large, cumbersome spears of the hoplite soldiers, but only had daggers and basic equipment to survive. Also, they did not remain in large groups but dispersed into the countryside. Hoplites relied on group cohesion and the shield of the man next to them for protection in the open field. In contrast, the *krypteia* would have found protection in smaller numbers for concealment, greater speed, increased mobility and the element of surprise. Hoplites fought in broad daylight whereas the *krypteia* took advantage of the cover of darkness. In many ways the *krypteia* was diametrically opposed to hoplite warfare. It is easy to infer that the *krypteia* utilized the natural defenses of mountainous terrain to conceal their positions. This however leads to a debate whether the *krypteia* can indeed be considered military combatants when their methods clearly differ from the conventional military practices.

THIS IS WAR! DECLARATION OF WARFARE BY THE EPHORS

Plutarch stated that the ephors would declare war on the helots upon taking office. Since the ephors were elected annually, open warfare against the helot population was declared every year.[21] By declaring war, the Spartan state condoned the slaying of the helots by the *krypteia*. In strictly legalistic terms, killing a helot when in a state of war was not murder, despite the obvious ethical considerations. Furthermore, in a conservative society where devotion to the state reigned supreme over all other values, the slaying of helots was not only considered ethical, but would be held as a duty in service of the state. To not kill helots would be to shy away from one's responsibilities to Sparta.

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[18] Hanson, 62.
[19] Paul Cartledge, "Hoplites and Heroes: Sparta's Contribution to the Technique of Ancient Warfare," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 97 (1977): 18.
[20] Cartledge, "Hoplites and Heroes," 22-23. Hanson, 68-75.
[21] Bonner and Smith, 113.

Some historians maintain that the *krypteia* was an early form of secret police. Robert J. Bonner and Gertrude Smith claimed the ephors had control over the police and the *krypteia* was a secret police force.[22] A police force protects the rights of the state's citizens and maintains social order. However, a police force does not require a declaration of war nor does it operate in a state of war.[23] Comparison to the Gestapo further clouds the issue.[24] Adolf Hitler never declared war for the Gestapo to operate, though he did strip citizens' rights through the Enabling Act after coming to power in 1933. While Germany existed for most of Hitler's reign in a state of war, warfare was declared on nations and never even formally declared against those considered enemies of the Nazi state, such as Marxists and Jews.

Through this declaration of warfare, the *krypteia* must therefore be considered military combatants, not a police force as many scholars have claimed. If the ephors did not declare war on the helots, the *krypteia* would be considered a secret police force of murderous assassins. However, by operating within the confines of warfare, the *krypteia* were soldiers, albeit not conventional ones.

KRYPTEIA: AN EARLY MODE OF GUERRILLA WARFARE

Many aspects separate guerrilla warfare from conventional tactics. Instead of organized units with large numbers to present a solid front, guerrillas form into cells which are usually autonomous and smaller in size. Conventional campaigns utilize a standing army whereas guerrillas conduct hit-and-run tactics with minimal contact time with the enemy and then disperse after the attack. Also, conventional forces require supply lines; guerrillas do not. The guerrillas find an advantage in treacherous terrain, such as mountains and thick foliage, and conventional forces are usually encumbered by it. Speed and secrecy are even more important in guerrilla operations since they lack the numbers and defenses of a conventional army.

Guerrilla fighting developed as a method for an inferior fighting force (in terms of numbers, military technology and logistics) to master a superior force. Thucydides noted the helot's superior numbers with respect to the Spartans. Precise figures are vague but Herodotus seemed to note a seven to one ratio of helots to Spartans, which is a substantial difference.[25] While the Spartans had superior weaponry and training, the numbers were vastly in the helot's favor. Also, the mountainous terrain of Greece further enhances guerrilla warfare. The tactics of the *krypteia* seem to take this knowledge into account. It is appropriate therefore to begin shaping an alternative view of the *krypteia* into one of a guerrilla force.

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[22] Ibid., 121.

[23] Modern concepts such as "the war on drugs" and "the war on terrorism" are not strictly wars and must not confuse the difference between the police and the military. War is a state of open conflict, usually declared, between states (or in the case of the helots, a group of people), not on concepts.

[24] Hanson, 80.

[25] Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield, 9.10, 9.28-9.29.

The *krypteia*, as discussed previously, was an elite force of lightly-armed soldiers sent to fight the helots using unconventional methods. They would attack both day and night whereas the hoplites would only attack in daylight. They also had very little in the way of provided standard equipment, which would require them to obtain the necessary supplies by other means. The members of the *krypteia* would disperse into the countryside, most likely into small teams, rather than remain together as a single unit. Furthermore they would attack targets of opportunity and then hide using the advantages of the terrain. Not only does the nature of the *krypteia* match an emphasis on mountainous fighting, it matches the model of guerrilla warfare perfectly.

It is also possible that the Spartan military took the expertise of the *krypteia*, gained through guerrilla warfare on the helots, with them on campaigns. Leonidas selected three hundred Spartans for the Battle at Thermopylae; it is possible that many were former members of the *krypteia*.[26] Most likely these men that Leonidas selected were the *hippeis*, an elite body of three hundred men. Quite possibly the *hippeis* started as a detachment of the Spartan army, but later formed the front line of the phalanx when Spartan faced demographic problems.[27] There exists little evidence linking the *hippeis* with the *krypteia*; however, it seems logical that the elite Spartan unit of its time would recruit its members from the elite in the educational system. Since the *hippeis* had advanced training through the tactics of the *krypteia*, perhaps it acted similarly to a Special Forces unit when it was a detachment to the Spartan army. Cleomenes also called upon the commander of the *krypteia* for a reconnaissance mission. With these examples it is plausible to formulate a picture of the *krypteia* supplementing the Spartan military with their knowledge on guerrilla tactics, mountainous fighting and the arts of observation and concealment.

CONCLUSION

The nature of the *krypteia* very much reflects the roots of its name. Scholars have debated over the function the *krypteia* might have truly served in Spartan society. The primary evidence is scarce but it is enough to get a sense of the institution. The description of the *krypteia* embraces the ideal of mountainous warfare rather than the way of the hoplite. Since the ephors declared war on the helots, the *krypteia* was a military organization, not a police force. Lastly, and most importantly, the founding principles and methods of the *krypteia* perfectly match the model for guerrilla warfare. It is plausible that the knowledge gained by the *krypteia* would then be utilized in some fashion by the Spartan military as a whole. The ways of the *krypteia* will always remain secretive and hidden from our modern eyes, but with the proper mindset we can discover new ideas in history to illuminate our way.

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[26] Michael A. Flower, "Simonides, Ephorus, and Herodotus on the Battle of Thermopylae," *The Classical Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1998): 373.

[27] Thomas J. Figueira, "Population Patterns in Late Archaic and Classical Sparta," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 116 (1986): 180-181.

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