

Konstantakos, Leonidas
On Cleomenes and Sphaerus: How Stoic was the Spartan King?

ANAIS DE FILOSOFIA CLÁSSICA

ON CLEOMENES AND SPHAERUS: HOW STOIC WAS THE SPARTAN KING?

Leonidas Konstantakos
Florida International University

ABSTRACT: The Lycurgan reforms of Hellenistic Sparta by King Cleomenes III and the Stoic philosopher Sphaerus of Borysthenes have been seen as either propaganda for a ruthless, upstart king by an opportunistic intellectual or as a return to the archaic and classical Spartan warrior code influenced by the principles of early Stoicism. I begin with a brief history of Cleomenes and Sphaerus and the relevant events of 3rd BCE century Sparta. Next, Stoic themes in Plutarch's account are discussed. I then give a summary of some main points on both sides and various reasons in support of these arguments. An evaluation follows, with an argument supporting the latter view.

KEYWORDS: Sphaerus, Stoicism, Sparta, Cleomenes.

RESUMO: As reformas licurguianas da Esparta helenística pelo rei Cleomenes III e pelo filósofo estoico Esfero de Borístenes foram vistas como propaganda para um cruel e arrogante rei por um intelectual oportunista ou como um retorno ao arcaico e clássico código guerreiro espartano influenciado pelos princípios do estoicismo primevo. Começo com uma breve história de Cleomenes e Esfero e os acontecimentos relevantes do século III a.C. em Esparta. Em seguida, são discutidos temas estoicos presentes no relato de Plutarco. Então, ofereço um resumo de alguns dos principais pontos de ambos os lados e vários motivos de apoio a esses argumentos. A avaliação segue, com um argumento a favor da última visão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Esfero, estoicismo, Esparta, Cleomenes.

And so the Stoic philosophy is a dangerous incentive to strong and fiery dispositions, but where it combines with a grave and gentle temper, is most successful in leading it to its proper good.

Plutarch

Sparta Reborn

Cleomenes succeeded to the Agiad throne in 235 BCE. After building a solid reputation for military might against the dominant Peloponnesian force- the Achaean League, he turned his attention inward to Sparta itself. A coup was staged, opponents exiled or killed, including four ephors. With no recorded opposition, the king began his military, social, economic, and educational reforms. The military was retrained and equipped in the Macedonian style. Debts were cancelled and land redistributed equally among citizens, who now included *perioikoi* and mercenaries- eventually even *helots*- and presumably Spartans who had lost their citizenship due to poverty. Constitutional changes ensued, and the *agoge* was reinstated, along with the *syssitia* and *gymnasia*, with the assistance of Sphaerus. Despite initial successes the bankrupt and outmaneuvered Spartan army was crushed by an overwhelming Macedonian-Achaean alliance at Sellasia in 222 BCE. Cleomenes died a few years later by his own hand in exile in Egypt, but many of his and Sphaerus's reforms would last (with a brief interruption during Sparta's rule by the Achaean League) until the end of Roman Greece nearly five hundred years later.

The Stoicism of Plutarch's Spartans

Several Stoic (although some are not *only* Stoic) themes can be found in Plutarch's moralizing tale of the lives of his notable Spartans- *Lycurgus*, *Agis*, and *Cleomenes*. Plutarch quite possibly used Sphaerus's books on Lycurgus and the Spartan Constitution to reference the events and the interpretation of Cleomenes's actions. Most notably, Stoic concepts can be seen in *Lycurgus* (31) by his references to *homonoia* and the particularly Stoic term *dichonoia*, unity and disunity, respectively. These are central concepts of the Stoic Ideal City that can be found in the works of other notable early Stoics. (Erskine p.139) *Homonoia* is a feature of the harmonious relationship of wise men in Zeno's Republic, but Plutarch uses this concept specifically when referring to the effects of the reforms imposed by the lawgiver Lycurgus. (Ibid. p.19) Also, Plutarch

is known to use Platonist themes and put them into the mouths of characters in his biographies (Schutrumpf, 1987), but there are a few conversations in the *Cleomenes* that exhibit the Stoic indifference to externals like life and bodily health. This concept is represented by the king's mother Cratesicleia when she consoles him about the danger she faces as a hostage in Ptolemy's court: "[L]et no one see us weeping or doing anything unworthy of Sparta. For this lies in our power, *and this alone*; but as for the issues of fortune, we shall have what the Deity may grant." (22.7 italics are mine, Erskine p.133) Here Cratesicleia is differentiating what is up to her (her emotional responses) from what is essentially out of her control (her life and bodily health). Later, the Stoic concept of *kathekonta* is also represented when a Spartan officer attempts to convince Cleomenes that suicide is the only viable option for them in the aftermath of the tremendous defeat in Sellasia. Plutarch has his protagonist reply that suicide should not be an escape from action but rather an action in itself. This remark is consistent with Diogenes Laertius's claim that in the Stoic view a man will not die for himself alone but for his countrymen and friends, unless he is suffering hopelessly extreme bodily pain or mutilation. (D.L 7.130, Long & Sedley p.425) He will live while there is still hope for his country- the time for suicide is when all hope is lost. (Erskine p.134) More to the point, Cleomenes responds that being "betrayed by fortune or overwhelmed by numbers" is no evil. To give in to the impressions of hardship, however, or to the "censorious judgments of men" is to be "vanquished by [one's] own weakness." (31.5)

Sphaerus: Propaganda Minister or Stoic Social Reformer?

Evidence of influence between Stoicism and Spartan history "is sparse and interpretation sometimes requires a degree of speculation." (Robertson, 2013) The truth is that Spartan and Stoic ideas of virtue influenced each other. Thomas Africa interprets Sphaerus as an opportunistic propagandist who was equally friendly with Ptolemy III who later "betrayed" the Spartan and Ptolemy IV who imprisoned Cleomenes and later desecrated his corpse. (Africa p.10) However, there was more going on in Hellenistic Greece that can help us shed light on Sphaerus and his philosophical work. To do this we must look at the relation of Sphaerus's political ideals to the work of his Stoic forebears.

Zeno's *Republic* has been argued quite convincingly by Malcolm Schofield in *The Stoic Idea of the City* to have been based on Lycurgan Sparta¹. (p.40) Andrew Erskine considers Zeno's *Republic* not to be the work of a young student of philosophy heavily influenced by his Cynic teachers, from which later Stoics would try to distance themselves and their philosophical leader. Rather he argues that Zeno's *Republic* was taken to be a serious, influential work by the early Stoics. (Erskine p.11) Zeno's position is that in the Ideal City of sages, wealth and property would be abolished. (p.37) Although before Chrysippus it may be anachronistic to speak of an orthodox Stoicism, one can suspect that Zeno's teachings influenced Sphaerus's philosophy and his vision of the best of archaic and classical Spartan society and its near-mythical law-giver, Lycurgus. Although Lycurgus probably did not intend anything of the sort, equalization of Laconian land, the *kleroi*, was later attributed to him by Plutarch. Erskine makes his point by discussing the economic upheavals of Hellenistic Greece under the rule of Macedon. (Ch. 4) Another associate of Zeno, Chremonides, had only recently taken the role of general in the unsuccessful fight against Macedonian rule in the Chremonidean War (in fact, his Chremonidean decree² uses the term *homonoia*). (Erskine p.94) After the defeat, Stoics like Sphaerus may have sought other berths in which to support uprising by leaders who were equally anti-Macedonian and egalitarian. In this light, Sphaerus is not merely the Greek Goebbels. He is just as likely a cosmopolitan patriot and a philosopher traveling across the Hellenistic world teaching the Stoic idea that, despite Macedonian hegemony, men are by nature equal- except for virtue.

Sphaerus's contributions to the Spartan revolution were enabled by the *kathekonta* (appropriate acts) of a sincere, Stoic-influenced Spartan king. The evidence in both the historical data and the physical remnants of the renovations to the *agoge* at the temple of Artemis Orthia show the changes in Sparta to be remarkable. There was evidently enough genuinely Lycurgan elements in Sphaerus's reforms to convince Spartan citizens and *perioikoi* to consolidate and redistribute wealth and property and make any restoration of the *agoge* sustainable. Kennell suggests there may also have been a degree of tension in the scholastic ideology between Sphaerus and the new head of the Stoic school, Chrysippus. The colleagues apparently disagreed on the importance of traditional education. Possibly Sphaerus's reforms on the Spartan *agoge* may have

¹ a voice of dissent is Dawson, *Cities of the Gods* (p.166)

² Bagnall & Darrow for the English translation of the Decree

been his way of confirming his and Zeno's theory on what is in fact necessary for a proper education. (p.102)

The details are interesting, but what concern us here are the way and the extent to which the reforms were conducted. Although the *agoge* was primarily a religious rite of passage for boys in Lacedaemon inseparable to the *diaita* (way of life) in archaic and classical Sparta, Sphaerus seems to have transformed it into an education system based on the Hellenistic age-grade model. However, a typically Spartan emphasis was placed on physical prowess and virtue rather than the typical Greek liberal arts, like geometry and astronomy. (Kennell, *Gymn.*, p.100) Endurance, a major component of the Stoic virtue of fortitude, is brought to a bloody reality in Sphaerus's changes to the ritual contest at the altar of Artemis Orthia, where boys from Sphaerus's time onward competed in taking flagellation without complaint, sometimes (on hopefully rare occasions) until death. (Ibid. pp.73-4) Among the later Stoics who would nod to this was Epictetus, asserting that only the irrational is unendurable to a rational being: "Observe how Lacedaemonians take a scourging when they have learned that it is rational." (*Discourses*, 1.2)

Cleomenes: Upstart or Idealist?

T. Africa considers Cleomenes "a most unconventional Spartan." (p.11) He finds Cleomenes's early education under Sphaerus attested by Plutarch as dubious, and considers Sphaerus's role in the reforms obscure and slight, if any at all. The latter, at least, is refuted by the evidence found in the remnants of the *agoge* from Hellenistic times during the reign of Cleomenes. (Kennell ch.5) Cleomenes did indeed kill opponents; he murdered or at least allowed the murder of his coregent heir apparent, and enfranchised *helots* by selling them freedom and arming them for his war. However, we need not be so cynical. In one way Cleomenes was quite a typical Spartan leader, for better or worse. No Spartan ever had the monopoly on ruthlessness if Herodotus and Thucydides are our guides: Cleomenes I before him bribed the Pythia to exile his coregent Demaratos. (Herodotus 6.75) Lysander, the victorious general of the Peloponnesian War was notoriously cunning and resourceful. As to conveniently freeing *helots*, this would become more typical as Sparta's problems increased and their numbers of citizen hoplites decreased over the centuries of constant warfare and catastrophic events- like the earthquake of 465 BCE. Brasidas had 700 who had been emancipated used as his corps of crack troops. (Thucydides 4.80) 6000 more were

armed during the Theban invasion of Laconia. (Xenophon, *Hellenica* VI.5.28) Moreover, if Plutarch is right about the betrayal and murder of the previous reforming king, Agis IV along with his mother and grandmother, then the removal of all opponents one way or another does not seem to be quite the same stain on Cleomenes's character than it would be otherwise.

What is noteworthy is the fact that Cleomenes did not export his reform program to the rest of the Peloponnese. In *Spartans*, Nigel Kennell is convinced that he never intended to, but "simply wanted to reassert Spartan dominance." (p.175) The disappointed inhabitants of the occupied cities revolted over the snub and Sparta one again lost any chance at regaining her hegemony. This may be seen as tipping the scales in favor of Cleomenes as merely paying lip-service to Stoic ideals, but we should be more careful. It is possible that Cleomenes might never have had the opportunity or that he just was not able. It does not follow that the reforms that worked in Lacedaemon would work in other cities with their different circumstances, with their own aristocratic factions that certainly would have resisted- as they certainly did in Sparta. At the Achaean assembly at Argos for example, Cleomenes was in effect not allowed to even enter the city and address the crowd for fear that he "would carry all his points by either winning over or constraining the multitude..." (*Cleom.*, 27.1)

Regardless of his actions, or lack of action, outside Sparta the evidence points to changes that were much more drastic than required for revitalizing the military and social cohesion of 3rd century BCE Laconia. Interpreting the laws of Lycurgus in a way that would be plausible to the Spartans does not require the complete redistribution of wealth and property that Plutarch mentions. Nor does it require making citizens of foreigners and Laconians that were disenfranchised by the turns of fortune. Even sources hostile to Cleomenes argue not against his actions attested to by Phylarchus³ and Plutarch, but the motivations. (Erskine p.168) There is no convincing evidence for any equality in Laconian land distribution in the writings of Thucydides and Xenophon in the 4th century BCE. Later writers like Plutarch who are interpreting the actions of previous reformers like Lycurgus and Agis IV are influenced by the Cleomenean revolution of the 3rd century BCE, possibly by the works of Sphaerus himself. (Ibid p.139) The question as to why these changes happened to the degree that they did, if not at all, lies in Sphaerus's Stoic ideals.

³ Phylarchus was a contemporary historian favorable to Cleomenes and one of Plutarch's sources. Polybius rebukes him for his "careless" approach. (2.56)

Whatever the truth of the influence of Stoicism on Cleomenes he was primarily a Spartan king, not a professional philosopher, and at any rate his social role would have kept him from realizing Zeno's and Sphaerus's concept of equality among all rational beings outside his kingdom in the Eurotas valley (or to the *helots* until circumstances were dire). Or just as likely, Sphaerus's goal was to establish his and Zeno's Ideal City in Sparta, a place as resentful to Macedonian rule as possible. When considering the influence of Sphaerus (and Stoicism) on Cleomenes it is as unfair to hold him accountable for not exporting his reforms to the rest of the Peloponnese as it is to hold Seneca and Cicero accountable for not freeing their own slaves in accordance with their high-minded ideals, or Marcus for not sending court philosophers to spread Stoic wisdom to the Germanic tribesmen. The upheavals caused by the redistribution of wealth and cancellation of debts inherent in the reforms of Cleomenes and Sphaerus that were so distasteful to aristocrats, and applauded by the disenfranchised Peloponnesians, caused the later Stoics to have no truck with the extreme social equality inherent in the philosophy of the early Stoa (Erskine ch.7). Certainly they had no qualms with slavery *qua* slavery. It is not always easy to see the implications of one's own ideals, nor is it necessary to be a *sophos* to be influenced by Stoic philosophy.

Conclusion

In our ironical post-modern world the reforms conducted by King Cleomenes III and the Stoic philosopher Sphaerus of Borysthenes have been either cynically attacked or suspiciously dismissed. This work attempts to stop the Spartan retreat and rally against the caustic, unwarranted view of the Spartan as merely a power-hungry, upstart usurper and of the Stoic philosopher as an obsequious, opportunistic intellectual. In light of the inglorious circumstances of Hellenistic Sparta prior to Cleomenes and Sphaerus, and the social and economic upheaval of the rest of Greece under Macedonian rule, the reforms were an enlightened attempt to return to a Spartan hegemony schooled by the archaic Spartan warrior code of courage and discipline, now wisely influenced by the egalitarian principles of early Stoicism. For better or worse, the successes and failures of the reforms influenced later Sparta and Stoic philosophers alike. The mixed outcomes would have been an indifferent to a Stoic, but the *kathekonta* of the king and the philosopher deserve their proper respect and place in the history of the Early Stoa and Hellenistic Greece. For, as the Spartan Cratesicleia stoically

remarked, “this lies in our power, and this alone; but as for the issues of fortune, we shall have what the Deity may grant.”

REFERENCES:

- AFRICA, T. (1972). Cleomenes III and the Helots. In *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* (pp. 1-11). University of California Press.
- BAGNALL & DARROW. *The Period of Stability (276-221)*. Retrieved June 12, 2014, from Greek Historical Documents: colombia.edu
- CARTLEDGE, P. (2003). *Spartans*. New York: The Overlook Press.
- DAWSON, D. (1992). *Cities of the Gods*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- EPICETUS. (Translated 2008). *Discourses and Selected Writings*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- ERSKINE, A. (1990). *The Hellenistic Stoa*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- FORREST, W. (1968). *A History of Sparta 950-192 B.C.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- HERODOTUS. (1987). *The Histories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- KENNEL, N. (1995). *The Gymnasium of Virtue*. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press.
- KENNEL, N. (2010). *Spartans*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- PLUTARCH. (2006). *Lives of Agis and Cleomenes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- PLUTARCH. (2013). *Lycurgus*. Lexington: Another Leaf Press.
- POLYBIUS. (2010). *The Histories*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- ROBERTSON, D. (2013, May 8). *How Spartan were the Stoics?* Retrieved May 2014, from Stoicism and the Art of Happiness: philosophy-of-cbt.com
- SCHOFIELD, M. (1999). *The Stoic Idea of the City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- SCHUTRUMPF, E. (1987). The *Rhetra* of Epitadeus: A Platonist's Fiction. In *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 28 (pp. 441-457).
- SEDLEY & LONG. (1987). *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- THUCYDIDES. (1954). *History of the Peloponnesian War*. New York: Penguin Books.

[Recebido em julho de 2014; aceito em julho de 2014.]