

## Plutarch, *Life of Lykourgos*, 19, 20, 24, 25, 27

Translated by B. W. J. G. Wilson, (2017)

### Laconic speech

[19.1] They taught boys also to express themselves with a combination of economy and elegance, contriving to say a lot in a few words. As I have already explained, Lykourgos gave to his iron coinage a great deal of weight for very limited value; but for the currency of speech he did the opposite, encouraging the use of economical and spare language to express a rich and complex range of ideas, thus contriving to teach the boys through this habit of silence to produce answers that were both terse and yet manifestly well-educated. For just as those who indulge in unbridled sexual activity generally tend to sterility and infertility, so unbridled verbosity tends to generate vacuous and mindless speech. **2.** King Agis was once mocked by an Athenian for the fact that Spartan swords were rather short and were therefore easily swallowed by theatrical entertainers. “You are right,” he said;” but these little daggers seems to reach our enemies’ hearts all right.” It is clear to me that such a Laconic observation is certainly short, but it seems to get to the heart of the matter all right, and grabs the attention of the listener.

**3.** Lykourgos himself seems to have been similarly Laconic and epigrammatic in his speech, to judge from the record of his sayings. For example, on the subject of constitutional reform, he said to someone who suggested that they should establish a democracy in the city, “Well, you had better make a start in your own household.” On the subject of sacrifices, when someone asked him why he had ruled that they should be small and inexpensive, he said, “To make sure that we never fail to honour the gods.” **4.** In athletic contests, the only competitions that he allowed citizens to take part in were those where an outstretched hand (as if begging for mercy) was not used to signal acceptance of defeat. They say that he gave the following responses in writing to his fellow citizens. How do we keep out an enemy invasion? His reply: “Stay poor and don’t desire to be greater than anyone else.” On the subject of city walls: “A city is well fortified by a circle of heroes, not bricks.” All these sayings and written responses are as credible or otherwise as you choose to make them.

[20.1] But of their intense dislike of long speeches, the following sayings offer ample evidence. Someone once tried to discuss at length with King Leonidas a clearly important matter, but at a thoroughly inappropriate moment, “My friend,” he replied, “the issue is pressing; the time is not.” Lykourgos’ nephew, Charilaus, was once asked why he had passed so few laws. “Men of few words,” he said, “don’t need many laws.” **2.** Some people criticised Hecataeus the Sophist for failing to contribute to the conversation when he was a guest at the mess supper. Archidamus’ comment on this was that “a wise man how *and when* to speak.” Here are some examples of of the sort of remarks I mentioned earlier, which were pointed, but neat. A rather tiresome person was going on and on at Demaratus with a series of tactless questions, not least his repeated demand to know who he thought was the greatest of the Spartans. “The one who is least like you,” he replied. **3.** Someone began to commend the people of Elis for running the Olympic games so efficiently and with such scrupulous fairness. King Agis’ reply was to ask, “What’s so special about the Eleans’ being able to practise scrupulous fairness for one day every five years?” When a stranger showed Theopompus particular kindness, smugly explaining that amongst his

fellow citizens he had a great reputation for liking Spartans, the latter replied, "It would be better, Sir, to have a reputation for liking your own fellow citizens." 4. Pausanias' son, Pleistonanax, once heard an Athenian speaker call the Spartans "an ignorant lot." "You are right," he said. "We are the only Greeks who have learned nothing - from Athens." And when Archidamus was asked by someone how many Spartans there were, he replied, "Enough to keep out undesirables."

5. It is also possible to get some idea of Spartan character from their more humorous remarks. They habitually refused to waste words to no purpose or to open their mouths without saying something that was in some way a thoughtful observation which deserved attention. A Spartan was once invited to listen to a man giving an imitation of a nightingale. "No thanks," he said. "I've heard the real thing." Another Spartan once read the famous epitaph:

*Here lie those who strove to quench the fires of Tyranny.*

*Bronze-clad Ares cut them off. Selinus saw them die before her gates.*

"Serve them right," he exclaimed. "They should have let the fires finish the job."

6. Someone else once promised to give a youngster a set of fighting cockerels who would fight till they were killed. "No thanks," he said. "I'd rather have ones that will fight till they kill." Another youngster happened to see some men seated in the public lavatories. "Pray god," he said, "I never have to sit somewhere that makes it impossible to give up my seat to an older man." The particular quality of such witticisms is enough to justify the comment that to be a Spartan is to be an intellectual rather than an athlete.

[Plutarch, *Life of Lykourgos* 19-20]

### **Spartan everyday life**

[24.1] Spartan education, therefore, lasted until full adulthood. As in a military camp, life in the city for everyone was fully regimented, with a way of life that was regulated and focused entirely on public service. They always saw themselves as the property of the state and not their own masters. When they were not carrying out some other compulsory activity, they spent their time supervising the young by giving them some form of practical training, or else themselves learning from their seniors. 2. Indeed this was one of the most valuable and inspired features of Lykourgos' legacy to his fellow citizens, that they had abundant leisure, since he forbade them to engage in any form of practical or mechanical craft. As for the laborious and time consuming effort to acquire wealth, there was absolutely no need for it, since its acquisition was neither a cause for envy nor a source of honour. 3. The Helots worked the land for them, paying them a tithe of their produce as explained above (VIII.4.) There was a Spartan who was once visiting Athens during the period when their courts were sitting. He was told that one of them had been fined for idleness and had gone home in a state of great depression, escorted by a group of sympathetic friends who were distressed on his behalf. He asked those around him to identify for him the man who had been punished for living like a free man. That shows clearly how demeaning and servile Spartans thought it was to work like a slave at manufacture or moneymaking. 4. Inevitably, also, law suits disappeared along with the coinage, since there was no such thing as greed or poverty, only an equality of shared prosperity and a leisurely way of life born of simple living. Choral dances, festivals and feasting, activities such as hunting, sporting contests, and good conversation – these were the things that filled their days when they did not happen to be out fighting.

[25.1] As a general rule those under the age of thirty did not go to the market place; their household requirements were supplied by their relatives and lovers. For the more elderly generation, too, it was regarded as somewhat disreputable to be seen regularly wasting their time on such matters instead of spending the better part of their days at the gymnasia or the so-called *leschai*, (public meeting places). By gathering in such places they could relax with one another in a respectable fashion, without thinking about things like money-making or commercial transactions. **2.** Instead the main focus of their activity in such places was to congratulate youngsters on their successes or criticise them for their failures, using light-hearted jokes and mockery, which made such admonishment or correction easier to accept. Lykourgos himself was far from being a total killjoy. Sosibius records that he even dedicated that well known little statue of Laughter, as a way of bringing to their drinking parties and similar activities a welcome sweetening amid the hardships of their rigorous education.

**3.** In summary, he taught his fellow-citizens not to seek or even be aware of the idea of a private life; rather, like bees, they were to be always part and parcel of their community, clustering with one another around their queen, in an almost hysterical state of religious fervour and heroic ambition to be utterly dedicated to their country. You can even get some idea of this frame of mind in some of their sayings. **4.** For example, when Paedaretus failed to win selection to the army's elite corps, The Three Hundred, he went off beaming with delight, as if he was thrilled to think that the city had three hundred men better than himself. Polycratidas was once sent as a member of an embassy to the generals of the Persian King. They were asked whether they were there in a private capacity or publicly, on behalf of their country. "If we are successful, public; if we fail, private," he replied. **5.** Argileonis, the mother of Brasidas, asked a number of visitors from Amphipolis who came to see her whether he had died nobly and worthily of a Spartan. When they praised him extravagantly and declared that Sparta had never had another like him, she told them not to speak such nonsense." My Brasidas was a good and brave man," she said. "But Sparta has many better."

[Plutarch, *Life of Lykourgos* 24-25]

### **Spartan funeral customs**

[27.1] In addition to all this, the arrangements Lykourgos made for burials were excellent. He started by getting rid of all superstitious practices by permitting burials to take place within the city's boundaries and allowing tombstones to be set up near the temples. As a result young people grew up with such sights and became familiar with them, thus ceasing to be frightened or horrified by the idea of death and the concept of pollution acquired from touching a corpse or walking among tombs. In addition, he forbade the burial of grave goods with the body, insisting that the body be laid out wrapped in its scarlet robe on a bed of olive leaves. **2.** It was forbidden to inscribe the dead man's or woman's name on the tombstone, unless the man had fallen in battle or the woman was a priestess. Mourning was limited to a brief period of eleven days. On the twelfth, there was a mandatory sacrifice to Demeter and an end to expressions of grief.

[Plutarch, *Life of Lykourgos* 27.1-2]

### **Spartan xenophobia**

[27.2] In fact he left no aspect of life untouched or neglected. Rather he blended with all essential activities incentives to virtue and discouragement of vice. He left the city filled full of models of exemplary behaviour, with the inevitable result that those who chanced upon them or grew up among them were shaped and moulded on the path to excellence. **3.** This was why he refused to allow those who wished to live or travel abroad to do so, because there

they would associate with foreign customs and learn to imitate the way of life of uneducated people and strange forms of government. Indeed he actually expelled the hordes of immigrants who poured into the city for no useful purpose. It was not, to quote Thucydides, that he was afraid that they might copy his constitution and thus acquire useful lessons in virtuous living, but rather to prevent them from providing bad examples to others. **4.** It is unavoidable that the physical presence of foreigners is a guarantee that strange ideas will come in with them. New ideas are an inevitable source of new values, which are bound to cause social conditions and attitudes out of sympathy with the established order and harmony. This, he believed, made it even more essential to prevent the city from becoming filled with immorality and vice than to protect it from bodily diseases.

[Plutarch, *Life of Lykourgos* 27.2-4]