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Slavery: The Main Ingredient to an Ancient Greek Polis' Military Dominance

Steven T. Tran
Clackamas High School

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Steven Tran

Mrs. Balzer

Western Civilization

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Slavery: The Main Ingredient to an Ancient Greek Polis' Military Dominance

From the Persian Wars to the Peloponnesian War, considering the fact that Athens and Sparta continually defeated the Persians, the far-reaching influence of slavery must have been morally and socially accepted in Greek society, an ancient outlook that differs from modern acceptance of slavery. In order to understand slavery's success in the Greek poleis and its lasting significance—serving as an example for modern society to forbid slavery—in the western world, it is vital to analyze slavery in its primitive level in Ancient Greece circa 700 to 400 B.C.E.

Although several factors such as geography and government allowed for development of Sparta's military and Athens' economic dominance, the poleis' dependence on slavery in social and economic spheres of life maximized their military powers over other Greek poleis.

A polis was simply an independent city-state. Most poleis were self-ruled governments, but Sparta was an exception as an authoritarian city-state ruled by two kings and limited by a 28 elderly-member council. Moreover, Athens and Sparta accepted the institution of slavery as their economies' foundation, and philosophers such as Aristotle justified slavery as “advantageous and just for [the Greeks]” (Millett 183). Before determining the magnitude of slavery's influence on Athens and Sparta's military might, it is essential to understand the differences between slaves in each polis and the prevalence of slaves in Greek society's social and economic spheres.

Slavery in Greek culture differed from modern slave ownership specifically through the types of slavery present in Athens and Sparta. In the Greek language, “there is no single Greek word that translates our term slavery,” (Vlassopoulos 117) because Athens possessed chattel slavery, slaves who were treated as objects that could be traded, and Sparta possessed communal “slaves” or unfree servants called helots. Athens distinguished captured and sold slaves as “andrapodon” and Athenian-ruled slaves as “doulos” (Vlassopoulos 120). In contrast, Sparta’s helots were unfree servants who weren’t treated as property and could raise families. Regardless of either polis’ type of slavery, the Greeks saw slavery as a necessary evil:

[The] Greeks found it impossible to conceive a society without douloi. . . Douleia is the pragmatic result of the fact that there exists inequality of power and wealth among individuals and communities. Some people are douloi, because there are others who have the wealth and power to force people to execute their orders or to afford not to do things on their own but to have other people do them on their behalf. . . douleia could not be extinguished. (Vlassopoulos 120)

Therefore, slavery’s commonness in Greek life existed at a massive scale. If slavery was a minor factor in Greek life, then the Greeks wouldn’t have perceived it as inextinguishable in society. The slave population in Athens was estimated by “[scholars who varied the number] from a low of 20,000 slaves to a high of more than 150,000” (Kamen 9), and the helot population in Sparta was “comprised [of] between 170,000 and 224,000” (Talbert 23). Given these numbers, the difference between the two ranges correlates with chattel slaves and helots’ economic prevalences in each individual polis. With large domestic and agricultural sectors, Sparta’s

subsistence economy required more slaves, or helots, than Athens; in contrast, Athens possessed fewer slaves because the city-state heavily supported its industry and trade sectors.

Notably, Athens' economy flourished by utilizing slaves in industry and agriculture and accumulating more slaves by either conquering or trading them. In mining, stone quarrying, pottery, and household jobs, industries and domestic service were the only tasks always assigned to slaves. Other than industry, chattel slaves held an integral role in agriculture:

Classical Greece was primarily an agricultural society and that the large role slavery played cannot, even in Athens, be separated from agriculture. The model Athenian citizen was a man owning farmland, supporting his family from the produce of that land. . . and with sufficient freedom from work to engage in his social functions-ritual, political, and military. In these aspirations the Athenian was one with most other Greeks.

(Jameson 124)

As chattel slavery collected a grand amount of resources and supported families' farmland businesses, Athens had to increase the slave population by "[acquiring regular supplies of slaves] mainly through Mediterranean networks" to maintain its economy (Kamen 8). In order to increase the slave population, Athens regularly shipped prisoners of war from islands including Scythia and Thrace, Greek islands conquered by Athens. As a result of this slave network, Athens became "a center for trade and industry" (Jameson 123).

Similar to Athens' economy, Sparta conquered other states to gain helots; by doing so, Sparta could then tax helots and force helots to work in agriculture. With Sparta's powerful military force, the polis conquered Messenia, a western territory of Greece, during the 8th

century B.C.E., and enslaved all the Messenians. As a result of the sharp increase in helot population, Spartan landowners spent their lives in constant military training in order to maintain control over the helots, who outnumbered them by seven to one. In order to maintain the economy, Spartiates supported the helots within a *sussition*, a social group of Spartiates who dine together at a mess hall:

[The] mess 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. The Helots were taxed to provide the support of the Spartiates but a part of their taxes was return to them through the mess. (Figueira 97)

In contrast to Athens' economy, Sparta did not encourage trade with outside poleis, but Sparta had successfully established monetary circulation by distributing purchased food and wines to helots. In addition to helots being taxed in order to support their masters' social activities, helots worked in agriculture and "gave half of their production to the Spartiates" (Figueira 103-104). As opposed to Athenian chattel slavery, the Spartiates maintained a self-sustaining economy using helots.

Despite the differences between chattel slaves and helots, both forms of slavery contributed to Athens and Sparta's prospering economies. The slave population in Athens was much smaller than in Sparta as Athenian chattel slavery controlled a trading center through industrial jobs and involved fewer social aspects such as dining in a mess hall which alleviated the need for as many slaves as in Sparta. In contrast, Sparta used large numbers of slaves to provide immense agricultural and social support. With Athens and Sparta's economic and social spheres upheld by major dependence on slavery, the poleis were able to maximize their power by

further utilizing chattel slaves and helots in the military—Athens with its naval development through massive slave-labor industry and Sparta with its infantry forces drawn from the large helot population—from the Persian Wars to The Peloponnesian War.

Athens' first success on land warfare can be attributed to combining slave infantry and Athenian citizens during the Battle of Marathon, the first Persian invasion. When Persian King Darius led an invasion in Marathon, a village in Athens, Athens was victorious and lost only 192 men. In contrast, the Persians had lost about 6,400 men. To defeat Persia, Athens' upperclass hoplites, "reportedly armed three hundred slaves, probably as hoplites, to fight at the battle of Marathon against the Persians" (Brown 21). By arming their slaves, middle to high class hoplites were able to increase manpower and "[to make] a financial sacrifice for the community's benefit" (Brown 21). Moreover, the higher class hoplites were promising freedom to their slaves—knowing that slaves would return to their masters due to economic challenges—in order to defeat the Persians, thus bringing peace to the community. In addition, the higher-class hoplites maintained their higher-class dominance by arming slaves instead of lower-class citizens called thetes. These hoplites ultimately show the upper class' control in maintaining the disparity between rich and poor. Because of that disparity, the Athenian upper-class continued to manipulate slaves for military might.

After the Battle of Marathon, Athens' forthcoming success was due to deploying slaves in the industry for constructing an overwhelming naval army. During the Second Persian War, the Athenians fended off the Persians again. Although Themistocles, a military strategist, persuaded the Athenians to use some newly found veins of silver in their mines to greatly increase the size of their fleet, the essential manpower came from the chattel slaves who worked

in the silver mines. As a result, the Athenians were able to construct 200 ships, and Athens was victorious against the Persians. By defeating the Persians, Athens demonstrated supreme naval power through its dependence on large domestic and industrial slave populations.

Similar to the Athenians' strategy to defeat Persia in the Battle of Marathon, the Spartans used a much more massive slave infantry deployment to defeat the Persians. During the Battle of Plataea, the Spartans coalesced a considerable amount of helot troops into a phalanx, a close body of infantry with long spears and overlapping shields:

Herodotus reports repeatedly that thirty-five thousand Helots accompanied five thousand Spartiates at the battle of Plataea. . . [they] made up the mass of the Lacedaemonian phalanx while the Spartiates formed the front row. Herodotus' ratio of seven Helots to each Spartan is derived from his knowledge that. . . a phalanx was eight men deep.

(Hunt 129)

Sparta had used a fraction of its enormous helot population of about 200,000 to overpower and outnumber Persian infantry. As opposed to Athens' massive silver production to construct a powerful navy and deployment of fewer slaves for land warfare, Sparta had used massive helot populations along with military strategies in order to win The Battle of Plataea.

By the end of the Persian Wars, both poleis had become economically and militarily dominant as demonstrated in their slave usage for naval and land strategies. The Athenian Empire rose to great economic and political power as it became the leader of the Delian League, an alliance consisting of many Greek city-states. Athens used the league to transfer its treasury from Delos to Athens which indicated the Athenian Empire's political and economic might over other Greek poleis. On the other hand, Sparta did not join Athens in its efforts to revenge against

Persia, but held considerable influence in other poleis such as Corinth. Later, the alliances between the Greek city-states waned as they warred against each other, specifically Corcyra against Corinth, and thus began the Peloponnesian War which involved two rival alliances: the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta and the Delian League led by Athens.

Unquestionably, the deciding factors for the victorious polis included managing slave population and manipulating slaves for military purposes. In Athens, the “slave numbers were at their highest immediately before the Peloponnesian War, [but those numbers] fell dramatically during the war” (Kamen 9). The Athenian Empire failed to maintain the slave population because the Spartans were more shrewd in terms of exploiting slaves, and had deployed slaves more efficiently to battle on land while Athens heavily focused on its naval forces. In the early stages of the war, the Athenian crew ships were filled with “between 20 and 40 percent of [rowers who were slaves]” (Brown 26). Near the end of the war, Athens had realized its poor efforts to develop both large land and naval armies; in the “Arginusae campaign, late in the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians needed to mobilize their slaves en masse for a relief force” (Brown 26). At this point during the war, it was too late for Athens to overturn Sparta’s power.

A state’s loss over slave control meant a loss in the war. Prior to the Arginusae campaign, Athens had lost a major battle at Syracuse. Thucydides’ recount of Athens’ failure to manage slaves discusses a major factor to why Athens lost the war: “More than twenty-thousand slaves, most of them skilled workers, ran away from their Athenian masters and escaped to a fort established by the Spartans in the Athenian territory at Decelea” (Brown 16). Athens’ failure to control a dominant naval force consisting of thousands of slaves led to disasters at many campaigns, specifically at Sicily, where Athens’ fleets could not sail away from Peloponnesian

armies. Provided that the Spartans had “promised freedom to some Helots and [had] them fight distinct campaigns for them,” (Brown 24) Sparta’s success in land warfare and later in naval warfare, was the result of the polis’ successful exploitation of many slaves to fight against Athens. The naval dominance soon shifted to Sparta near the end of the war, and the polis captured the Athenian fleet at a spot called Aegospotami. Without the trading network and navy supported by chattel slavery, the Athenian Empire succumbed to hunger and, finally, to Spartan military dominance. Sparta had won the war by successfully maintaining its high slave population and exploiting slaves for military deeds.

On the other hand, some historians including Paul Cartledge “[question] the presence of so many helots [and so little Spartiates in the Spartan army]” (Hunt 142). These historians’ question leads to the argument that the deployment of slaves and helots in the military is a disadvantage, rather than an advantage for Athens and Sparta’s power. This argument is true to an extent because slaves and helots in both Athens and Sparta rebelled or deserted at times during war. During the Battle of Plataea, Sparta’s helots “[were] most notorious as perennial rebels whose brutal suppression occupied much of Sparta’s energy. Would the Spartiates arm the Helots and then station them behind themselves in battle?” (Hunt 142). Although helot rebels could have impacted the Spartan army negatively throughout the Classical Greek wars, the fact that the Spartans were able to “trust [helots] with arms” (Hunt 143) demonstrates Sparta’s confidence in the risk of arming numerous slaves who could have rebelled. Sparta’s confidence allowed its armies to outnumber Persia, and win The Battle of Plataea. In Athens’ instance of slave deployment during The Peloponnesian War, the “antagonists took [an active role to encourage] slaves to desert or rebel” (Evans 492). This instance directly refers to Athens’ loss of

nearly 20,000 slaves who deserted or rebelled against the navy during the war. As a result, the slaves' desertion or rebellion contributed to the fall of the Athenian Empire. In spite of the disadvantages for Athens to utilize slaves in the navy, the Athenians would have struggled to maintain the naval development without using slaves. Considering that nearly every middle to high class Athenian master possessed a slave, these masters would face many difficulties including the building and manning of naval ships without deploying slaves. Ultimately, despite Athens' loss in the Peloponnesian War, the deployment of slaves and helots in the military empowered both Athens' naval force and Sparta's land warfare.

Athens and Sparta's dependence on slavery in the social and economic spheres greatly maximized both city states' military might over other Ancient Greece poleis. However, the accepted institution of slavery in Classical Greece has an overarching influence throughout history. As mentioned before, Vlassopoulos argued that some people are meant to be slaves to others because there are always people in society who have greater wealth and power. His argument remains true throughout human history. During the 19th century, a majority of the United States' citizens declared slavery as a necessary evil. This view of the past Americans greatly resemble how Aristotle stated that slavery was solely for the Greeks and advantageous. In today's age, slavery continues to exist in evolved forms such as sex trafficking, all due to the inequality of power and wealth. Unlike the Greeks, who philosophically and socially accepted slavery, the United States today is battling against slavery of all forms. The similar acceptance of slavery and the eventual abolishment of slavery throughout history since Ancient Greece show the modern age's changing ideology of slavery, an improvement upon reviewing the past.

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