Power Structure

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Generally, people don't leave their kids on the side of the road for no reason. This was no different in the ancient world, where infanticide, as a widespread and long-held practice, served societal needs. In the Greek world, the practice was widely accepted by the state, and was even encouraged in some areas. While today this might seem barbaric, social norms in the ancient world varied vastly from those of the 21st century. In Athens and Sparta, the practice reflected certain characteristics of the states in addition to keeping the population in check, something which was essential at the time due to a more pronounced struggle for resources. However, a closer analysis of infanticide reveals that it was more than a simple means of population control. Athen's and Sparta's institutionalized policies of infanticide, beyond being methods of population control, were used as tools to reinforce societal and governmental systems: in Athens the focus on the male head of the family, and in Sparta the functionalist focus on the state.

The practice of infanticide was carried out throughout Greek and Roman history and long before, only ending after the advent of Christianity around the year 34 CE. This was due to the new moral code that Christian belief brought with it, decrying the policy
of killing youths as being wrong and against the will of god. In the 21st century, such policy seems abhorrent, but this is largely the result of the morality that Christianity brought with it (Cameron 105). Looking at the practice of infanticide through a 21st century lens would be illogical and misleading, as social norms and concepts of morality were so completely different. As Isocrates pointed out long ago in his commentary on Evagoras, "It is a very rare and very difficult thing to have both fine children and many children," (Ingalls 247) implying that to have capable children, one might have to weed out the weak ones. In a society where resources were scarce, offspring with reduced mental or physical abilities would be a much more serious burden than they are today. At the time, infanticide was a way of disposing of children who could not be cared for, and prevented overcrowding in cities. It was additionally used as a way to enforce and reinforce social policy (Cameron 105).

Understanding what the practice of infanticide was is essential to understanding how and why it affected ancient peoples. Infanticide is the practice of disposing of children shortly after their birth, removing them from the family and almost always causing their deaths. This disposal of the child was usually done by leaving them in a clay pot by the roadside or outside the place of residence, although this was variable and is still a subject of some contention (Van Hook 135). Regardless, the practice of infanticide was used to remove unwanted children from a family after childbirth and usually after some appraisal of the child's well-being. Additionally, the use of the word "disposal" instead of "murder" is significant, as it is an accurate description of the distinction between outright killing the children and leaving them to die that the Greeks believed existed. The method used to get rid of unwanted children affected the ethical
viability of the practice in the minds of ancient peoples. Specifically, killing the children by direct action was frowned upon (Cameron 107). Females were more likely to be the victims of infanticide in the Greek world, although exactly how much more often they were disposed of than males is unclear. While both Sparta and Athens killed off females at higher rates than males, it was only in Athens that the reason for killing disproportionate numbers of females explicitly due to their gender (Van Hook 134).

Sparta, a Greek city-state that rose to dominance around 650 BCE, was successful due to its strong focus on the importance of the state and military might. Its military was large for the period, and the entire society was trained to use weapons and fight. Because there were few Spartan farmers, they demanded tribute from their neighbors, among them the Helots, who were a subjugated people that lived in Laconia and Messenia. This powerful military government sustainable because of the concept of eunomia. This idea was central to the ideology of the Spartan existence. Under the principles of eunomia, all people were expected to keep the state first in their actions, working to help their community even at personal loss. Perhaps because of this clear goal for society, Sparta was a notably practical state, with few wasted resources and exclusively practical ideologies. The role of women was more privileged in Sparta than in surrounding states, where women were often treated as second class citizens and given fewer rights. In Sparta, women were expected to give back as much as they could to society, and could not do this if they weren't given sufficient rights to do so. Spartan women were given basic combat training, were allowed to compete in athletic events, and were given basic property and political rights (Cartledge 87). Sparta was
characterized by its focus on the state, which was reinforced by its tactics regarding infanticide ("Eugenics in Ancient Greece" 1502).

Infanticide in Sparta was used as a tool to reinforce servitude to the state in Spartan society. One of the main distinguishing components of the way Sparta carried out infanticide was the fact it assigned a council to decide whether children should be disposed of. This was different from the rest of the Greek world, where the father was usually the one responsible for deciding whether to commit infanticide. Sparta's choice to have representatives of the state make the choice demonstrated its power over the people, to the people, deciding definitively whether they had the right to live ("Eugenics in Ancient Greece" 1503). The choice made by the state to take the power away from the father further impressed upon the populace the importance of the state by implying that the will of many was more important than the ego of one. This was extremely uncommon for the period, and must have sent a strong message (Schrader). In this way, the state-sponsored practice of infanticide helped to change the structure of the family in a way that clearly reinforced the power of the state in the eyes of the populace of Sparta.

The qualifiers for what children were killed in Sparta were designed to reinforce the values of Spartan society in its members from a young age. As part of the ritual of infanticide, children were alleged to have been bathed in wine, and had their strength put to tests. Strength was central in Spartan society, and was one of the main expectations for citizens. By emphasizing this at a young age with the disposal of unfit children, Sparta indoctrinated its youth with the expectation that they would grow up strong and capable of keeping the state safe.
The higher rate of infanticide for females in Sparta also enforced the state’s desire to upkeep its strong military structure, as youths who observed the fact that women were not as physically strong as men would notice the higher rate of infanticide for females and connect weakness with death. Females were more likely to be killed, not due to the supposed worthlessness of their gender, but rather on the function-based grounds that men were stronger (Cartledge 89). Even the kings in Sparta were expected to breed in a way that would yield offspring well-suited to fighting. When one king married a short woman, there was a negative reaction from the populace, as it was felt that the new king should be as suited to fight for his nation as possible ("Eugenics In Ancient Greece" 1503). Because no member of Spartan society was exempt from the expectations for fitness, the population was taught to value strength. The practice in Sparta of removing weak children from the gene pool reinforced the focus on strength that the state desired.

Sparta was not alone in practicing infanticide. Athens was a Greek city-state that rose to dominance around 600 BCE which had a strong class-based system in which males were in control. Though it described itself as a democracy, and is historically often known as the world’s first democracy, through the lens of the present era the state is more often perceived as an oligarchy. Only the upper classes of land-owning males were permitted to vote. Women, more than they were in Sparta, were placed in a subservient position to men, marrying years earlier than their male counterparts, and obligated to follow the wishes of men in their lives (Pomeroy 158). Athens was a patriarchal society, and the eldest father acted as the head of the family. The power of the male head of the family was more significant than in most patriarchal societies
today. The father had power over all those born to him, and the offspring of his progeny, until his death. When women were married off, they were still considered to be a part of the father's family, not the husband's (Pomeroy 2). The poor were also granted fewer privileges, not allowed to vote, thus keeping them in a weaker position. Athenians in power accepted this structure, rarely going out of their way to vote for measures which would help the poor, or individually helping disadvantaged families. Athens was characterized by its patriarchal class-based power structure (Christ 254).

Infanticide in Athens was used to reinforce the patriarchal family structure. In Athens, females were far more often the victims of infanticide than males (Van Hook 135). The attitude towards females in Athens is epitomized quite well by a quote from Posidippus, a comedian who said of infanticide, "One rears a son even if one be poor, but exposes a daughter even if one be rich" (Van Hook 136). This led to an imbalance in age groups, so it was more difficult for men to find women their age to marry. Marrying girls at younger ages was the solution Athenians found for this problem. Because there were many eligible older bachelors, women had great societal pressure to marry early in life to an older man (Golden 321). Older males kept more control in the relationship, having had more experiences and resources to draw on because they were not tied to a family from as young an age. The pressure to find a man to marry meant that Athenian women had to focus their lives on men more than men had to focus theirs on women. The high perception of men was reinforced by infanticide, and gave them power which was increased by the extensive control that males had over their extended family.

The mortality for females as a result of infanticide in Athens additionally reinforced the patriarchal structure of Athenian society. By disposing of females at
higher rates than males, Athenians caused women to appear less valuable than men. Females weren't aggressively killed off, but rather, it was a simple hallmark of the practice that boys were thought of as being more important to raise than girls (Golden 316). Boys appeared more welcome in society as a result of this norm. This was complementary to other aspects of Athenian society, where, because the power of male patriarchs spanned across generations that would today be considered multiple familial lines, they wielded substantial control.

The devaluation of females that came from the practice of infanticide made it seem more reasonable that men should be given so much power. The male head of the family, within the patriarchal system, decided which babies should be disposed of. This allowed fathers to devalue females by killing them at higher rates than males, leading to the perception that women were mainly for producing viable offspring: part of a father's marriage oath for his daughter was the line, "I give this women for the ploughing of legitimate children" (Pomeroy 4). This demonstrates how the value of women was very tied up with birth, and thus, the practices surrounding birth. Infanticide's common practice in Athens not only was a cause of the patriarchal family power structure in Athens, but also was used as a tool to reinforce and preserve it.

Infanticide in Athens was used to reinforce the societal values which allowed for a class system in which the poor were oppressed. The wide acceptance of the basic principles of infanticide--that the weak and unwanted members of society could be morally disposed of and ignored--excused the apathy of the upper echelons of society to the lower. Morally, the practice of infanticide was considered acceptable on the basis that the children disposed of were not directly killed; rather, they were left to their own
devices, even though they had no real chance of surviving given their situation (Cameron 109). This was similar to the attitude Athenians took towards poverty, never directly harming the under classes, but believing it was their responsibility to bring themselves up. In one example of this, the upper classes of property owning males were the only ones who were allowed to vote, which wasn’t directly harmful to the lower classes, but prevented them from advocating their own issues. Athens was a society that valued the moral intentions, with a plethora of philosophers writing on the morality of infanticide. The general belief that sprouted from this philosophical discourse was that infanticide was an acceptable practice because the children were left in pots outside where they could, in the abstract, safe themselves or be saved by others (Patterson 112). This did not place much value on human life. As a system that was present from early in the life of any Athenian family, infanticide spread a moral judgment throughout society which made it easier to ignore the plight of the poor. This reinforced the stratified systems of control in Athenian society. The normalization of certain beliefs regarding self-responsibility that the widespread implementation of infanticide brought with it reinforced the values that allowed the upper classes to feel disregard for the plight of the poor was morally acceptable.

In both Athens and Sparta, the specifics of how the protocol and practice of infanticide was conducted worked to reinforce the political and social structure of the societies. Infanticide, as an important event that occurred early in life, sent important messages to the populace. It firstly gave power to those who decided who chose to live who lived or died. In Athens, infanticide being decided by the patriarch of the family helped to keep the patriarchal family structure in place. Spartan society, by having a
council of elders decide whether to dispose of the child, instead kept the state first in the mind of its people (Cartledge 89). The moral basis upon which children were determined to be worth keeping also clearly outlined and elevated the characteristics that the societies valued. In Athenian society, the moral question was how to dispose of the child, and their explanations for how it was acceptable to leave a child on its own made it easier for them to leave the poor to suffer as well (Patterson 112). This kept their stratified society as it was by making it seem more morally acceptable to leave those with little money as they were. For Spartans, the focus on strength in determining which children would not pass the council showed to all the society how important physical prowess was. This allowed the government, which relied on a warlike people sustain itself, to stay in place. In each city state, the qualities that the state valued were used to keep the social structure in place by demonstrating what was important to live for the people of the state. Infanticide in ancient Athens and Sparta was used as a tool to keep the power structures of the time in place.

Some historians believe, contrary to the majority of the evidence, that infanticide did not occur with any prevalence in ancient Greece, and thus was not used to reinforce societal norms. One historian, Donald Engels, is particularly vehement in his argument, claiming that the it would have been impossible for infanticide to occur in Greece, as it mathematically would have caused such a significant rise in mortality that the population would have died off within a few generations. At most, Engels claims, the disposal of children at "a rate of more than a few percent of live female births per year was highly improbable for more than a short period" (Engels 112). Furthermore, Engels claims that the skeletal record cannot be trusted, as female skeletons are weaker than male ones
and archeologists would likely discard them, altering the records of what balance of males and females there were. He also dismisses the texts of the time as being untrustworthy, claiming that his explanation of the reality of the period is more accurate. He claims that a high rate of female infanticide, above even a few percent, would be impossible for any ancient civilizations without resulting in massive population decline. Engels is not alone in his belief, and is backed by several other historians (Pomeroy 158). The belief that infanticide did not exist in the ancient world is an opinion for which a body of work exists, if not a well-argued one.

Despite the efforts of Engels and like-minded individuals, the overwhelming majority of the records kept and archeological evidence point to the commonness of infanticide. Perhaps even more essays that directly contradict Engel's ideas exist than ones that support him; at least, essays contradicting him and his fellows abound (Ingalls). The argument which contradicts Engels does so using many different points, but perhaps the even stronger point is how many papers that do not even mention Engels go into rich and substantive detail of how infanticide fit into the period. Beyond this, Engel's mathematical approach to disproving the possibility of infanticide in any society falls is blatantly misguided: even in the modern world, infanticide is often practiced by peoples who do not immediately die out as a result, and in early modern Japan, there is well documented evidence that infanticide occurred at high enough levels to affect population growth without shutting it down (Cornell). In general, Engels and those with similar ideas to him come under fire for ignoring evidence which does not fit into their beliefs, using rare and often questionable sources, and making assumptions as to how archeologists work without a real understanding of the process.
(Golden). Even those who have a more moderate view on the controversy generally accept that infanticide did occur with some pervasiveness over time, and that the limiting factor was not that it would end the society altogether as a result of the death of most of the child-bearing females (Ingalls 247). While Engels is right to not simply accept what he is told without questioning it, he does not support his ideas well in the face of a vast amount of contradictory information.

Infanticide is a commonly reviled historical practice. However, this wasn't the case when it was practiced. Then, infanticide was a part of life, an efficient way of reinforcing societal values and keeping populations from getting out of control. It was a benefit to the societies that practiced it, or at least had some benefit associated with it. While this might seem immoral now, in ancient Greece, modern day practices might seem equally depraved. Today, the common practice of being in debt would have been unimaginable, as at the time such a thing was unheard of. Infanticide has its place in life, and served its purpose to help successful governments stay in place. The ancient use of infanticide to reinforce societal values shows how something can be functional given a certain goal but still come up against what might seem moral to the individual.
Works Consulted


