

**The Spartans at War:
Poetry, Music, Hairdressing and Love**

by S.L. Ager

In the world of ancient Greece there were no more fearsome fighters than the Spartans. The very thought of having to face them on the battlefield was enough to chill the blood of the most courageous soldier, and with good reason. "Each Spartan fighting alone, they are as good as any man," says their exiled king Demaratos, "but together, they are the best soldiers in the world. The command of their law never varies: it is never to retreat in battle, no matter what the odds, but always to stand firm, and to conquer or die."

It's no surprise that the Spartans were the soldiers that they were. From childhood each Spartan male was dedicated to serving the state. If a Spartan baby survived the scrutiny the state officials gave him when he was born (sickly infants were left out on the mountainside to die), he spent only a few years in his mother's care before being taken away and placed in the state barracks. There he began a rigorous training that was geared to turning out the perfect soldier. In addition to the techniques of fighting, he learned endurance: to go barefoot, with only one garment, all year round, to go hungry or steal to eat, and to bear without complaint a beating if he was caught in the theft. Spartan men continued to live with their comrades in the barracks long after they had become fully-fledged fighters. The camaraderie that developed was at least as important as the actual physical training. Even after the age of 30, when a Spartan might set up his own home, in company with a wife, he continued to return to the mess halls to eat with his army comrades.

So everything in a Spartan's life was geared to turning him into a mindless military machine, a kind of Arnold Schwarzenegger of the ancient world. But it doesn't do to use too many modern stereotypes of the 'macho soldier' to conjure up a vision of the ancient Spartans at war. To put this another way, we should realize that what constitutes 'macho' behaviour changes over time.

Perhaps one of the most obvious distinctions between social beliefs in the ancient world and in the modern one lies in the area of sexuality, particularly when it comes to men at war. In recent centuries, homosexual behaviour has historically been unacceptable, and has generally been stereotyped as effeminate. It has certainly been considered a threat in the military sphere, since it was thought to involve degeneracy, cowardice and

even treasonous activity. It was simply not 'manly', and hence it was of course inappropriate for a soldier.

But, in ancient Greece, things were different. Homosexuality and bisexuality were accepted by society to a much greater degree than they are even today. To many, a homosexual relationship was the only really profound erotic relationship a man could have, since men believed that women were incapable of the intellectual and spiritual depth that would make such a relationship satisfying. So deep and lasting homosexual attachments were common enough in ancient Greece. And surprisingly, at least to those who subscribe only to today's definition of 'macho', homosexuality was not only common among the soldiers of ancient Sparta, it was even officially encouraged. It was believed that a homosexual attachment between a youth and an older man had a useful function. The man, already a trained Spartan soldier, would be able through his love to pass on to the youth all that he had learned by way of physical prowess and military virtue; and both partners would be all the less likely to behave with cowardice in the face of an enemy, each knowing that his lover was fighting beside him. Plutarch reports a story that once, when a youth was so craven as to let slip a cry of pain during a fight, the Spartan magistrates punished not him, but the older man who was his lover.

So love played an important role in the development of a Spartan warrior. And there were other aspects of the Spartans at war that may at first glance seem contrary to the 'macho' ideals of today. One is the emphasis placed on poetry and music and dance in the course of their education. These fine arts are aspects of culture that today are often (again) stereotyped as effeminate; yet aside from the purely military part of their upbringing, this is all the education the Spartans got. But, as Plutarch says, "anyone who has studied Spartan poetry, and the rhythms which they used with the accompaniment of the flute-players when advancing upon the enemy, would not think the poets wrong to connect bravery and music."

Plutarch was right: the poetry for which Sparta was noted was the poetry of war, not of love; and the music of the flute (actually, the Greek *aulos*) accompanied them into war, not at a dinner-party. "Take courage," are the words of Sparta's most famous poet, Tyrtaios, "you are of the unconquered race of Herakles. Do not fear and tremble at the sight of a multitude of men. Let each man bear his shield straight into the ranks of the champions, filling his heart with hate, and let him hold the black spirits of death as dear as the light of the sun." As they marched into battle, "slowly, and to the music of many flute players", the Spartans would chant or sing poems of a similar spirit, and the shrill sound of the *aulos* would keep them in step. The song and the music, no less than the steady controlled pace of their march, probably had a more chilling effect on their enemy than any

precipitous mad dash would. "It was a sight at once solemn and terrifying to see them marching in step to the pipes," says Plutarch, "approaching the confrontation calmly and happily in time to the music."

"For the Spartans alone among mankind," Plutarch goes on to remark, "war represented a relaxation of their military training." Once the Spartans were actually on campaign, they believed that the various elements of their military training had already done their work, and they could relax the excesses of their discipline. While their enemies were frantically preparing for war, the Spartans, on the contrary, might have been heaving a sigh of relief, and letting themselves indulge in pursuits that not only the modern world, but even the ancient one, might have thought of as 'un-macho'. For example, at home in Sparta, luxury of any kind was most strictly forbidden. But on campaign, a Spartan soldier could indulge himself in the aesthetic pleasure of dressing up his clothing and decorating his weaponry: "the Spartans were pleased at the sight of the young men like horses prancing and neighing before a contest," says Plutarch.

And perhaps the oddest thing of all, to contemporary observers, was the attention they gave to their hair. The 'proper' way for a man to wear his hair, in the days of Classical Greece, was short; but the Spartans, who had to be different, wore theirs long. It was a coiffure so closely identified with the Spartans that to the Athenians, the enemies of Sparta, anyone wearing his hair long was politically suspect as an effete aristocrat or a Spartan sympathizer. But to the Spartans, unlike the Athenians or the society of the 1960's, long hair was a sign of the true 'macho' man. A legendary Spartan had once decreed that long hair made a handsome man handsomer, and while it might not make an ugly man handsomer, it at least had the benefit of making him more terrifying to the enemy. For the Spartans, that was really what it was all about. Before every battle, they gave particular attention to their hair, grooming it in an almost ritual way. Their behaviour dumbfounded the Persian king Xerxes, just before the great Battle of Thermopylai, in which every one of 300 Spartan warriors, and a Spartan king, fought to the death to try to keep the Persians out of Greece. Xerxes was astonished at their absurd actions, not understanding that it was Spartan practice to pay careful attention to their hair when they were about to risk their lives. He soon learned differently.

Xerxes' initial response to the Spartans was not surprising. They were a society unique in ancient Greece. Their reputation as soldiers was formidable and well-deserved; but as we've seen, the characteristics which the Spartans themselves thought of as manly were not necessarily seen that way by others, either in the ancient or the modern world. It just goes to show that 'macho' is nothing more than a frame of mind.