

The Good Ole Days: Ephorus on the Early History of Sparta

The basic facts of Ephorus' account of early Spartan history are preserved in two lengthy fragments (*FGrHist* 70 FF117 and 118). As part of the initial conquest of Laconia by the Heraclids, the native population was driven out. Immigrants were invited to replace them and initially given significant civil and political rights, which were then abrogated in the next generation. Those who accepted the change became Perioikoi; those who did not were defeated and became Helots. Parmeggiani sees in this abrogation the seeds of the endemic instability that was thought to have plagued the Spartans before Lycurgus and concludes that Ephorus intended to criticize their short-sighted treatment of the immigrant population (2004, 2011: 193-95, and 2024: 180; see also Parker 2011: *BNJ* 70 F117). The attempt to bring Ephorus into alignment with the broader ancient tradition as well as modern progressive attitudes toward immigration ignores what the fragments manifestly imply: that Ephorus presented early Spartan history favorably and evinced no sympathy for the displaced and disenfranchised.

In stark contrast to Herodotus and Thucydides who claim that the early Spartans were poorly governed (Hdt. 1.65 and Thuc. 1.18), Ephorus characterizes them as wisely ruled from the beginning (καὶ κατ' ἀρχὰς μὲν ἐσωφρόνουν: F118 with Jacoby 1926: 68 and Barber 1935: 117). He goes on to note that the kings who abrogated the rights of the immigrants were honored because they governed "justly," while those who had initially granted those rights were viewed unfavorably because "they accepted immigrants and ruled through them" (F118). Ephorus is clearly reporting Spartan local tradition here, but there is no hint in the fragment that he disagreed. Indeed, he cites that tradition specifically to counter the alleged errors of his predecessor, Hellanicus of Lesbos. If, as Parmeggiani concludes, Ephorus were underscoring the

tendency of Spartan tradition to misrepresent the past, it could not then function in the one way we know Ephorus intended, to undercut Hellenicus.

Ephorus' elaborate treatment of native and immigrant populations in early Spartan history is unique among our surviving sources. It is also worth noting that similar issues appear prominently in his treatment of the first Heraclid kings of Messenia (F117) and possibly Argos as well (Luraghi 2014: 146). Taken together, they suggest that displacement, immigration, and the resulting tensions with privileged in-groups played a prominent, perhaps even programmatic role in his Book 1, which began with the Return of the Heraclids (T10).

Ephorus' decision to begin with the Heraclids and the peculiarities of his account of them are often explained in reference to the events of the early and mid-fourth century (Parmeggiani 2004 and Luraghi 2014). But the last event noted in the *Histories* was in fact the beginning of Alexander the Great's campaign against Persia (F223), and there is every reason to conclude that this was the present that influenced his treatment of the Return of the Heraclids (Yates 2022). Indeed, both campaigns were led by descendants of Heracles and involved or anticipated significant demographic disruptions. Alexander's later policies would famously raise serious questions about the status of the various peoples living within his empire, but even as early as 338 Isocrates could compare the future of the conquered peoples of Asia to that of Helots in his second letter to Philip, which suggests that a connection with Sparta and its early history was already gaining traction among Greek intellectuals (*Ep.* 3.5 with Weißenberger 2003 and Hirsch 2025: 222-23). I submit that Ephorus began with the Return of the Heraclids and emphasized the tensions that can arise from mass population movements because it proved an ideal analogue for the challenges of his own present.

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