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Plutarch On Sparta (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Plutarch's vivid and engaging portraits of the Spartans and their customs are a major source of our knowledge about the rise and fall of this remarkable Greek city-state between the sixth and third centuries BC. Through his "Lives of Sparta's leaders" and his recording of memorable "Spartan Sayings", he depicts a people who lived frugally and mastered their emotions in all aspects of life, who also disposed of unhealthy babies in a deep chasm, introduced a gruelling regime of military training for boys, and treated their serfs brutally. Rich in anecdote and detail, Plutarch's writing brings to life the personalities and achievements of Sparta with unparalleled flair and humanity.

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Customer Reviews

It is with a slight reservation that I recommend this book to classical history buffs & fans of the ancient Spartans. Those (like myself) who lick their chops @ the chance to read a book about the Spartans in their prime might be a bit disappointed. The Lacedaemons were never the same after their defeat at the hands of the Thebans @ Leuctria in 371BC. A good chunk of this book (about 1/3, in fact) is spent on Agis & Cleomenes. These personages were post-Leuctria fellows who tried to resurrect the Lycurgan principles and traditions which the Spartans were so well known for. Both failed, but gave noble efforts to these ends. Basically, they represented the death-knell to the hardcore Laconian way of life. Now, both figures are certainly important to classical history; that much is not in debate. However, confronting them in a book entitled "On Sparta" by a historian the calibre of Plutarch is a bit anti-climactic. Again, I was so looking forward to reading about this

magnificent culture while it was in its prime - cover to cover. On the upside, the best part of the book deals with Lycurgus. It was he who founded the famous "Spartan way of life" around the 8th century BC. It was he who contrived such innovations as the long hair on Spartan males, the Lacedaemonian distaste for \$\$ and all things artistic (with the exception of music) as well as virtually all luxuries and comforts of life. It is because of Lycurgus that the Laconians who came after shunned all things effeminate and became such a brutal fighting force. It was also he who promoted egalitarian distribution of land - noted as his most significant reform. Here Plutarch furnishes one of the most detailed biographies of this great man that you will find.

Funny and action-packed? Well, yes. I wouldn't have guessed it before picking it up, but Plutarch is a page-turner. In this updated collection of Ian Scott-Kilvert's original translation of Spartan Lives for Penguin, Richard Talbert adds the Life of Agesilaus as well as revisions to the original translation. The result is a highly readable, not like the free translations you can find online that are often archaic and difficult to follow. (At least for this modern brain!) On Sparta includes the lives of Lycurgus, Sparta's lawgiver, Agesilaus, Agis and Cleomenes, as well as Spartan sayings and Xenophon's "Spartan Society." The Lives themselves read like something out of George Martin's Song of Ice and Fire: political intrigue, assassinations, coups d'état, manufactured wars, betrayals. But behind all the grittiness, Plutarch shows some examples of true honour. His approval of Spartan society is clear, and I have to admit, there's a lot to like (there's a lot not to like, as well, of course). Many of Lycurgus' laws strike me as many degrees more sane than our own, and it seems clear to me that whoever he was, he had a plan and knew what he was doing. This chapter alone provides much food for thought. The further Lives show the progressive downfall of Sparta, and this is where things get gritty. The Sayings sections are a real treat as well. The Spartans were raised to express themselves in few words, so pithy witticisms abound. Some of them are laugh-out-loud funny. Take the Spartan men's tendency to wear their hair long, bearing in mind Lycurgus' statement that "it renders handsome men better looking, and ugly ones more frightening.

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