A Comparison of Spartan Helotry and Ancient Near-Eastern Slave Systems

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Spartan helotry is one of the more curious cases of slavery, in large part due to the lack of primary sources.[1] This lack of evidence has encouraged historians to adopt comparative methods as a means to better understand the nature of helotism. This method is best explained by Stephen Hodkinson, who advocates for a comparative approach with more modern slave systems in order to better understand the seemingly unexplained aspects of helotry.[2] This approach proved to produce some very intriguing results and insights into the nature of Spartan helotry. However, the use of later slave systems relies upon the influence the Spartan system had upon them. The use of Ancient Near Eastern slave systems[3] allows for an analysis of predecessors that may have influenced the Spartan system. While the availability of sources is just as much of a concern for the Ancient Near East as it is for Sparta, the available sources contain rich information regarding slavery and reveal very interesting similarities in those systems with helotry.

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[1] The helots were the enslaved population of Messenia and Laconia that were forced to serve the Spartans following their defeat in the Messenian Wars in the eighth century B.C. For more information on the helots refer to Paul Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300–362 BC,* 2nd Edition, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), chapter 10.

[2] Stephen Hodkinson, "Spartiates, Helots and the Direction of the Agrarian Economy: Towards an Understanding of Helotage in Comparative Perspective," in *Helots and Their Masters in Laconia and Messenia: Histories, Ideologies, Structures*, ed. Susan E. Alcock and Nino Luraghi, (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2003).

[3] The Ancient Near East refers to the regions of Mesopotamia, the Levant, Persia, and Ancient Egypt. These are the earliest civilizations and their relatively close geographical proximity, trade patterns, warfare, and political interactions has led historians to study these regions as a whole, which is referred to as the Ancient Near East. For more information explaining the Ancient Near East and the regions included within it refer to William H. Stiebing Jr, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture* 2nd Edition, (London: Pearson Education, 2009).

The aim of this paper is to explore these connections in order to understand the policies enacted in Sparta to regulate their helots and highlight the possibility of Ancient Near Eastern influences on this system. Even if these connections do not prove to be direct influences, they help to provide a comparative method to understand this system. Due to a lack of sources throughout the Ancient Near East, this paper uses sources ranging over the third millennium B.C through the first millennium B.C. from these regions. The Spartan sources are based on the Archaic and Classical periods, which range from the eighth century B.C. through the fourth century B.C. However, the lack of Spartan authors forces the incorporation of authors from different regions that have an interest in Sparta, including sources from the Roman Empire. This paper also allows for the character of Spartan helotry to serve as an explanation in certain cases, in particular the civic demands of the Spartiates, rather than assuming all forms of slavery must fit a strict and universal definition.

Citizenship and Debt Bondage

One of the major differences between Spartan helotry and Ancient Near Eastern forms of slavery was the implementation of debt bondage. The Spartans did not use debt bondage as a means to produce slaves, while many of the Ancient Near Eastern slave systems used it as a primary and productive source of slaves. In order to understand why the Spartans did not implement this practice it is necessary to understand the nature of Spartan citizenship. The Lycurgan Reforms, if they actually occurred, redefined what it meant to be a Spartiate and this is best detailed within the works of Xenophon, who was writing around the fourth century B.C.[4]

[4] The Lycurgan Reforms refers to the reforms that were implemented by Lycurgus of Sparta. It is unknown if Lycurgus was a real man or a mythical hero of Sparta, but he is mentioned by several ancient historians like Herodotus and Plutarch as the lawgiver that reformed Sparta. His laws are called the Great Rhetra, credited for establishing the principles that led to the formation of Classical Sparta. For more information of

In his Constitution of the Lacedaemonians,[5] Xenophon described the necessity of male Spartans to fit the Spartan eugenic model, complete their education through the *agoge*,[6] serve as member of the military, join a communal dining hall, and make the necessary donations to maintain their membership in the dining hall.[7] This last concept was extremely relevant for the absence of debt bondage in the Spartan system. Ideally, service in debt bondage allowed one to pay back an acquired debt and would allow them to regain their status as a citizen. Whether or not this ideal system was ever experienced is more relevant in the discussion for Ancient Near Eastern slave systems, for the Spartans the relevancy was mainly twofold. The first point was that it potentially undermined the nature of Spartan citizenship in that one could avoid paying their dues and serve as a slave for a time and then regain their status as a Spartiate. The other point is how definitions of citizenship were defined in opposition to the status of helots. The first challenge was the requirement of civic

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Lycurgus and the Great Rhetra refer to W.G. Forrest, *A History of Sparta: 950–192 B.C.* (New York: Norton, 1968), Excursus I.

[5] The term "Lacedaemonian" refers to the entire population in Laconia, which included Sparta. It can also include other non-Spartan populations that inhabit the region. The term "Spartiate" is used to refer to a Spartan male that had obtained full citizenship status. Due to the fact that Xenophon addresses how the Lycurgan Reforms affected Spartan women and enslaved populations in Laconia, the term Lacedaemonian is more applicable for his title. For more information on the titles used in the Spartan social classes refer to W.G. Forrest, *A History of Sparta: 950–192 B.C.* (New York: Norton, 1968), Excursus II.

[6] The *agoge* is the school system created by the Spartan to train the Spartan males. Young male Spartans were trained in Spartan culture and military tactics at this institution. Spartans joined the *agoge* at the age of seven and helped run the institution or served in the military until the age of thirty. This institution is credited to Lycurgus and his reforms for Sparta. For more information on the *agoge* refer to W.G. Forrest, *A History of Sparta: 950–192 B.C.* (New York: Norton, 1968), Excursus I.

[7] Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians,* trans. E.C. Marchant and G.W. Bowerstock. (Harvard University Press, 1925), http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0032.tlg010.perseus-eng1:1.2, (accessed February 19, 2018).

duties for the maintenance of Spartan citizenship. Spartiates were required to participate in the communal dining halls as well as serve in the military whenever Sparta was engaged in a war. These requirements were a major reason why the Spartiates relied upon the helots because serving as a slave would prevent a Spartiate from performing these duties and thus prevent them from being a citizen.

Slave systems in the Ancient Near East presented varied definitions of citizenship and requirements that allowed for the implementation of debt bondage. Slavery became largely a reflection of the economic sphere in the Ancient Near East and contributed to the frequent appearance of debt bondage. Isaac Mendelsohn argued a majority of slaves came from this form of bondage because it provided the poorer citizens an alternative way to provide for themselves in a market where the polarization of wealth and resources prevented them from being contributors. This prompted people to sell their children, or even themselves, into slavery as a means to obtain housing and resources from a slave master rather than face the realities of extreme poverty.[8]

In contrast, the Lycurgan Reforms advocated for a redistribution of land among the Spartiates. The land they obtained through the Spartan campaigns in Laconia and Messenia was meant to be utilized to provide the resources needed for the dining halls and thus ensure that Spartiates could focus on their civic duties for maintaining citizenship rather than economic ones.[9] There was some scholarly debate concerning the validity of this redistribution and how much land was actually given to each citizen, but the overall point was that the Spartans portrayed themselves as being provided for by the state and thus not in need of the support of another through slavery.

This was clearly not the case in the Ancient Near East and is made further evident by the many accounts of debt bondage, which Mendelsohn described as being a result of the credit system.

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[8] Isaac Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East: A Comparative Study of Slavery in Babylonia, Assyria, Syria, and Palestine from the Middle of the Third Millennium to the End of the First Millennium* (Oxford University Press, 1949), 5–19, 23–33.

[9] Forrest, *A History of Sparta*, 52–53.

This credit system took advantage of the poorer citizens, who were forced to accept loans that they could only repay through service as a slave.[10] The extent to which citizens were being served by others repaying loans through debt bondage is highlighted by Ah-Mose I of Egypt's record of slaves, which he had recorded in the sixteenth century B.C. He kept a detailed record of the slaves he owned, and a vast majority of those slaves actually had Egyptian names, implying that they were also Egyptians.[11] Another striking piece of evidence regarding the prevalence of debt bondage was found in Hammurabi's Code, which were the laws composed by Babylon's ruler Hammurabi, who ruled from the late eighteenth century through the early seventeenth century B.C. Several of these laws deal directly with the treatment and service of those serving in debt bondage. The primary aim of these laws was to ensure that these people would have a limited term of service and could return to their citizenship status.[12] This attention to the reinstatement of citizenship to former citizens also tied into a striking similarity with helotry, such as the incorporation of slaves to bolster the population numbers.

Population Growth Through Slaves

The Spartans were well known for their eugenic beliefs, especially in the writings of Xenophon, and they utilized this belief to define their status in opposition to other Greeks.[13] One would assume then that the Spartans would be extremely selective about who was allowed to marry a Spartan woman and produce children in the Spartan state. This notion was challenged by a story told by Athenaeus of Spartans utilizing helots to bolster their population.

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[10] Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East,* 23.

[11] Ah-Mose I, "The Expulsion of the Hyskos" trans. John A. Wilson, in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, 2011), 226–228.

[12] Hammurabi, "The Code of Hammurabi" trans. Theophile J. Meek, in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, 2011), 155–179.

[13] Xenophon, *The Constitution of the Lacedaemonians,* trans. J.S. Watson.

It is important to first note that Athenaeus was writing in the third century A.D.; much later than when helotry was occurring in Sparta. Additionally, Wiedemann believed Athenaeus was more concerned with highlighting how well read he was on Greek history than appropriately questioning the validity of the sources he introduced.[14] Nevertheless, Athenaeus provides a unique insight upon helotry that details the legacy it had left upon later writers, who, like Athenaeus, prided themselves upon knowing Greek history. The Spartans suffered heavy losses in their campaigns against the Messenians and they were afraid that this loss of males would make Sparta appear weak and vulnerable to their enemies. The solution was then to force the helots to marry the widowed Spartan wives and keep the population numbers consistent. Those helots that did marry and reproduce with the Spartan widows were given the name *epeunaktoi*, meaning those married in, and were granted citizenship.[15] This story highlights one way in the Spartans utilized the helots to strengthen their population numbers. The records then transition away from granting full citizenship to helots for their service and there are fewer accounts of stories that required similar service from the helots. It is not entirely clear why the Spartans decided to not utilize the helots in this manner following the First and Second Messenian Wars. One possible explanation could be the strict citizenship defined by the Lycurgan Reforms, but they did use the helots to strengthen their army. Helots that served in the Spartan army were granted an improved status and land but not citizenship. This new status was referred to as *neodamodeis*, which provided freedom from the oppressed status of a helot, however it did not provide them with an equal standing with the Spartiates. The *neodamodeis* were given plots of land to manage, but they were not allowed to leave this land. This method allowed the Spartans to essentially establish permanent garrisons in their territory and thus strengthen their hold on the land by forcing the

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[14] Thomas Wiedemann, *Greek & Roman Slavery* ed. Thomas Wiedemann (New York: Routledge, 1981), 73.

[15] Athenaeus, "The Banqueting Sophists," trans. Thomas Wiedemann, in *Greek & Roman Slavery* ed. Thomas Wiedemann. (New York: Routledge, 1981), 83–84.

neodamodeis to protect their new homes.[16] This became a very different form of utilizing slaves than that seen in the Ancient Near East, but its origins were strikingly similar.

The strongest document that explains how Ancient Near Eastern slave systems used their slave populations to strengthen their own populations is Hammurabi's Code. There was a selection of laws that dealt exclusively with the legitimization of children produced between a male slave master and his female slaves. The law stated that if the master were to ever refer to the children he had with his slave as his children in the presence of his legitimate children from his marriage, the children from his slave would be legitimized and become part of his inheritors.[17] This practice revealed how there was a tendency to not only reintroduce slaves that were engaged in debt bondage, but to also increase populations through the use of slaves.

The practice and necessity of laws targeted at slavers to protect the rights of citizens and prevent extended years of exploitation had a clear influence on the Greeks. This concept was most clear in Aristotle's *Constitution of the Athenians*, written in the fourth century B.C. Aristotle state that the Athenians prided themselves on Solon's reforms, which prevented Athenian citizens from being exploited in debt bondage, as a means to separate themselves from other advanced societies that still threatened their citizens with debt bondage. Wiedemann cites the laws of Hammurabi and those in Israel that were created to put a time restraint on debt bondage to prevent continuous forms of exploitation as a means to provide a larger context for the benefits of the reforms Aristotle mentions.[18] This text highlights the

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[16] Paul Cartledge, "Raising Hell? The Helot Mirage—A Personal Review," in *Helots and Their Masters in Laconia and Messenia: Histories, Ideologies, Structures*, ed. Susan E. Alcock and Nino Luraghi, (Hellenic Studies Series 4. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2003), 12–30.

[17] Hammurabi "The Code of Hammurabi" trans. Theophile J. Meek, in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, 2011), 155–179.

[18] Aristotle, "Constitution of the Athenians," trans. Thomas Wiedemann, in *Greek & Roman Slavery* ed. Thomas Wiedemann (New York: Routledge, 1981), 34–35.

continued influence Ancient Near Eastern slave systems had on the Greeks and it is not entirely implausible to assume such influence had reached the Spartans as well. Both the Spartiates and Athenians prided themselves on the benefits that accompanied their citizenships, mainly being that they could not enslave one another.

Ancient Near Eastern slave systems had to balance their citizens and former citizens serving temporarily under debt bondage. This allowed them to more openly utilize slaves to increase their populations. There exist instances where slaves were married to freemen, once they obtained their freedom or even as an incentive for a female citizen who was sold into slavery. Mendelsohn cites the propositions in which arrangements were made for female children to be married off to either their new male master or his heirs once the child reached the appropriate age.[19] Another interesting document that highlights the structure of these marriages was from Persia. In a marriage contract, which was composed in 420 B.C., between a freeman and a former slave, both parties were held equally responsible through financial stipulations for upholding the marriage and playing their individual parts in ensuring the longevity of their union.[20] The contract seemed to imply a much more level standing between the partners here based on the financial responsibilities placed upon both the husband and wife. This practice of marrying slaves into the population and granting them equal status can be seen as a direct influence of the emergence of the *epeunaktoi* in Sparta, or at least a similar practice of incorporating slaves to strengthen populations. While this text is clearly not written before the conception of helotry, it does highlight the enduring influence of Ancient Near Eastern practices during the same time as Sparta's dominance in the Peloponnese. This further implied the continued influence of these slave systems and a contemporary empire that could have influenced the Spartan system, or simply reaffirmed previous practices that the Spartans had already adopted. It is not

[19] Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East,* 10–12.

[20] Unknown, "Marriage Contract of a Former Slave Girl Who is Subject to Paramone, 420 BC," trans. Theophile J. Meek, in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, 2011), 203–204.

until after the First and Second Messenian Wars that the Spartans adopted a seemingly different method for incorporating the helots that did not include marriages.

Economic Influences

The practice of elevating helots to *neodamodeis* may seem to be unrelated between these systems, but upon further inspection a fair amount of Ancient Near Eastern influence can be seen in this Spartan practice. A slave document from the Third Dynasty of Ur, between the twenty-second and twenty-first century B.C., detailed a case of manumission and the expectations that still existed for the released slave. The document outlined the economic factors that lead to the slave Ammazaza's freedom, which were six and half minas of silver and a cow, and the continued expectations for her in freedom. These expectations were that Ammazaza would continue to provide services for her former master and his family until the master and his wife died and then she could go wherever she wished.[21] The main concept to understand from this example is that freedom came with some steep prices, which were both an immediate economic one as well as a continued service role. This example was similar to that of the *neodamodeis* in that the slave had to provide an immediate service for their freedom and carried the expectation that they would continue to provide a service to their former masters for their freedom.

Another interesting example of this practice was evident in a contract from Persia that also dealt with the expectations of freed slaves. In this document written in 427 B.C., the slave was promised freedom, and the master explicitly stated that the slave and the daughter she bore him would be freed upon his death; his family would have no claim over them and they would suffer financial penalties for attempting to make any such claims. In response to the master's decree the slave pledged her service as well as her daughter's to the master's son and stated that they

[21] Unknown, "Slave Document from Ur III," trans. Amélie Kuhrt, in *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC,* Volume 1, ed. Amélie Kuhrt, (Routledge, 2005), p. 62.

would receive a financial punishment if they fail to do so.[22] This case was strange because while it does not show the master demanding an extended role of service from his slaves, the slaves seemed to anticipate that such service was expected and offered it themselves. In both of these examples, it is clear that the expectation of service remained in the Ancient Near East following manumission. This form of exploitation was clearly evident in the roles the *neodamodeis* played in Sparta, with the main exception being that the *neodamodeis* primarily served as soldiers rather than the agricultural laborers they were prior to their rise in status. In order to properly understand why the slaves in both systems were expected to remain in service and why the role of the helots changed it is necessary to analyze the economies and the roles slaves played in maintaining these economies.

The Spartan economy was heavily influenced and ultimately shaped by their exploitation of both the helots and the lands the helots occupied. The actual date for the Spartan acquisition of Messenia and Laconia remains a point of contention, but it is fair to assume it came after the First and Second Messenian Wars. The key point to understand is that this acquisition occurred when the Greek economic world was dominated by agriculture and a fair amount of time prior to its efflorescence achieved in the Classical Period, which came as a result of innovation, involvement, and specialization.[23] The problem that occurred for the Spartan economy was that it became too dependent on a practice Josiah Ober calls "rent-seeking," which entailed one party enacting unnecessary restraints upon another party in order to exploit the second party for resources.[24] The Spartans forced the helots to toil their own lands and give some portion of the proceeds to the Spartans, which turned out to greatly enhance the Spartan market. The Lycurgan Reforms pushed Spartiates away from material

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[22] Unknown, "Manumission of a Female Slave and her Daughter, June 12, 427 B.C." trans. H.L. Ginsberg, in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, 2011), 202.

[23] Josiah Ober, *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, (Princeton University Press, 2015), 13.

[24] Ober, *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece,* 107.

possessions and forced them to embrace their sole roles as military specialists. This type of specialization prevented the Spartiates from ever innovating because they were never encouraged to be involved in any form of economics. In fact, the Spartans did not even carry a form of coinage to exchange with other poleis, instead they used iron spits to exchange with one another, because they relied exclusively upon the helots for their resources.[25]

Slaves in the Ancient Near East carried a larger financial burden than the helots did for the Spartiates. Mendelsohn argues the Ancient Near East had a fairly common economic structure, which was centered on the agricultural sphere. While this does seem to be strikingly similar to the case of the Spartans, the major difference was in the management of the slaves. Slavers had to weigh the costs of buying a slave and then training that slave and caring for the slave all year or hiring a seasonal worker that was already trained. Mendelsohn argues that most citizens saw more benefits in hiring these seasonal workers because they could not afford to manage slaves annually.[26] A major difference was that owners and slaves worked the land alongside each other.

This was not the case in Sparta and therefore they could not afford to let the helots leave the fields. The Spartans were not trained to work the fields and their economy was based so heavily upon "rent-seeking" tactics that it could not include free laborers. This is made evident by the laws enacted in Sparta that prevented any Spartiate from selling the helots that were attached to the plots of land they controlled.[27] The argument could be made that this law was enacted to emphasize the state's control over the helots as opposed to individual ownership, but it is clear that this law's main purpose was to prevent the loss of Sparta's strongest source of economic production.

Management Tactics

There was another key difference in the economic treatment of helots and Ancient Near Eastern slaves regarding the management tactics. For those slaves in the Ancient Near East they were

[25] Ibid., 142.
[26] Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East,* 106–112.
[27] Forrest, *A History of Sparta,* 31.

provided and cared for by their masters, which is the main reason why Mendelsohn believes working class laborers would choose seasonal assistance over slaves. The Spartan method of management was an entirely different matter. The absentee nature of Spartan management tactics both largely characterized helotism and became the focal point of many criticisms this system received from authors in other slave systems. Hodkinson provides the most detailed account of helot management and why it was so much easier to maintain than more personalized methods. The strict military and civic requirements of the Spartiates did not allow them to be far away from Sparta for an extended period of time. The helots in Messenia were essentially located on plots of land to live, where they were expected to toil the land and provide the tribute to the Spartiate that owned the plot of land. Hodkinson points out that the civic responsibilities of the Spartiates, coupled with the distance of the Messenian plots from Sparta, forced the Spartans to devise an alternative approach to management.[28] This approach became a type of self-management among the helots that essentially freed the Spartiates to engage in their civic duties, while also providing a greater economic advantage for the Spartans. This form of non-personal management, coupled with the ability for the helots to grow their own crops and manage their own estates, freed the Spartiates from the financial burden of caring for their helots. This economic freedom did not produce the level of hesitation present in Mendelsohn's argument concerning Ancient Near Eastern slaves; in fact, the exact opposite is true as it did not cost the Spartiates anything to manage their Messenian helots. More to the point, the Spartiates did not possess the skill set to replace the helots as farmers even if they desired to do so. The Spartiates did pay a price for this form of management, however, as their system became a point of criticism among other Greeks.

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[28] Stephen Hodkinson, "Spartiates, Helots and the Direction of the Agrarian Economy: Towards an Understanding of Helotage in Comparative Perspective," in *Helots and Their Masters in Laconia and Messenia: Histories, Ideologies, Structures*, ed. Susan E. Alcock and Nino Luraghi (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2003), 248–285.

The Messenian helots were able to live a more liberated life in the sense that the consistent oppressive force of the Spartans was in actuality not so constant. This liberated lifestyle led to the Messenian helots harboring and spreading notions of a shared identity and freedom that very likely contributed to notions of rebellion against the Spartans. This belief was best articulated by Aristotle when he discussed the ideal stipulations regarding the management of slaves. Aristotle argued the ideal agricultural slaves would free the citizens from the burden of this labor and allow those citizens to pursue their civic duties. However, these slaves should not share the same language or ethnicity as this would lead such slaves towards a tendency to revolt against their masters.[29] This work, composed in the fourth century B.C. after the helot revolt in 465, seems to be a direct response to the Spartan method; addressing both an admiration for the system while simultaneously offering advice on how to improve it. The main problem was the shared language and nationality among the helots, which Aristotle suggested would lead slaves to harbor notions of revolt. This notion does seem to be supported by the fact that when the Messenian helots revolted in 465 B.C. they were supported by neighboring helots and *perioikoi*. The *perioikoi* were a separate class of oppressed people in Messenia that can be described as having a higher status of freedom than the helots, but still forced to provide labor and follow the orders from Sparta.[30] This notion is further supported by the establishment of the polis Messene, which was the supposed polis of the Messenians before their subjugation to the Spartans, following the liberation of Messenia by Thebes in 371.[31] Based on these facts, it is plausible Aristotle's reference was to the Spartans inability to separate the native helots, thus allowing them to harbor revolutionary tendencies.

The management practice of assigning groups of slaves to specific plots of land was not an exclusive feature of helotry. Varro, who was an ancient Roman scholar and writer in the first

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[29] Aristotle, "Politics 7, 9," trans. Thomas Wiedemann, in *Greek and Roman Slavery,* ed. Thomas Wiedemann, (New York: Routledge, 1981), 127–128.
[30] Forrest, *A History of Sparta,* 101–103.
[31] Forrest, *A History of Sparta,* 130.

century B.C., describes how the process of attaching slaves to plots of land was widespread practice. He cited specific examples in Asia Minor and Egypt as places in the Ancient Near East where such practices had continued into the first century B.C. Varro offered advice similar to Aristotle regarding the housing of slaves, which was that slaves should not be housed with others of the same nationality as it would lead to revolutionary tendencies.[32] This document made it clear that the housing arrangements of the helots was not exactly a novel concept. However, the Spartiates decision to keep Messenian helots with other Messenians and Laconian helots with other Laconians was a different tactic that received harsh criticisms from contemporary writers and later historians alike.

The practice that brought these two systems on a similar level was the approaches towards regulating behavior and keeping slaves distinct from the citizens. The character of the Ancient Near Eastern approach towards the regulation of slave populations can be described as violent. This is made evident by the texts written by Ahiqar, composed in the late fifth century B.C. in Upper Egypt, in which he offers advice on how to manage slaves. Ahiqar advocates for a violent approach to managing slaves in order to obtain the best results. He also advises against buying runaway slaves as it would be a waste of money and bring disgrace to the family.[33] While this text was written during the midst of helotry, it serves a similar function as the Persian examples did in that it offers a contemporary source that validates the continuance of Ancient Near Eastern slave practices. The most strikingly violent example of slave systems was found in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, from the eighth century through the seventh century B.C. Their practices included torturing the leaders and, in more extreme cases, large percentages of a conquered population in order to

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[32] Varro, "Agriculture, 1, 17," trans. Thomas Wiedemann, in *Greek & Roman Slavery* ed. Thomas Wiedemann (New York: Routledge, 1981), 133–134.

[33] Ahiqar, "The Words of Ahiqar," trans. H.L. Ginsberg, in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, 2011), 379–383.

subdue the new slaves.[34] This example is more closely aligned with those that existed in Sparta in that violence was handed out en masse to subdue a large subservient population.

The Spartans maintained an aggressively violent regulation practice when dealing with the helots. The violent nature of the Spartiates actions are especially detailed by G.E.M. de Ste Croix in his work dealing with the perceived threat of helots towards the Spartans. Ste Croix focuses on four examples that highlight the threat the Spartans felt from the helots and the violent responses the Spartiates enacted to combat these perceived threats. The most striking of these examples is when the Spartiates supposedly murdered two thousand helots in 424 B.C. The story is recorded by Thucydides and he states that the Spartiates summoned the helots and asked them to put forward those that had served Sparta the best in order to receive a reward. The two thousand that were sent forward were then executed by the Spartiates as a means to remove any potential threats that existed among the helots.[35] This could be seen as a more violent approach to that of the *neodamodeis* practice in that the Spartiates recognized the largest potential threats among the helots and removed them; except in this case, the threats were violently murdered rather than relocated and utilized by the Spartan state.

Another interesting case discussed by Ste Croix is the annual declaration of war made against the helots by the ephors[36]of Sparta. He explains how such a law would prevent any Spartan from the "pollution" that would mark them had they killed

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[34] William H. Stiebing Jr, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture* 2nd Edition (London: Pearson Education, 2009), 290.

[35] Thucydides, "Book IV 80.3–4," trans. G.E.M. de Ste Croix, in "The Helot Threat" by G.E.M. de Ste Croix, in *Sparta,* ed. Michael Whitby (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 194.

[36] The ephors were five annually elected officials in Sparta that assisted the two kings in running the state. They were chosen from the entire citizen population and meant to provide a balance of power between the two competing kings in Sparta. For more information on the ephors refer to Forrest, *A History of Sparta*, Chapter 6.

someone within their borders without the due processes of law.[37] This carries some strong implications with it regarding the amount of violence imposed by the Spartiates and the encouragement of an organized form of violence to regulate the helots. The fact that the Spartan government had to address the religious pollution that came with unlawful murders strongly implies that many Spartans had been placed in this dilemma by murdering helots. This annual declaration of war and the murders mentioned by Thucydides highlight the violent nature of the Spartan and helot relationship. The violent character of this relationship, while unique to the character of helotry, can be better understood when it is compared to those violent practices within Ancient Near Eastern systems, most notably the Neo-Assyrian model.

Another characteristic practice of helotism was the use of alliances to maintain the system and such practices were not exclusive to the Spartan system. Ste Croix provides another explanation for helotry and in this instance, it has to deal with Sparta's alliances and their role in the regulation of the helots. Sparta's alliances were based on the premise that their allies would help to return any runaway slaves as well as help put down any slave revolts.[38] This policy of creating alliances to cement the uninterrupted continuation of helotry, as well as deny potential sympathizers from the helots' revolutionary aspirations, would dominate Sparta's foreign policy. However, such policies were not entirely novel, nor unique to the Spartan system. A strikingly similar example is evident in a treaty composed around 750 B.C. between the unknown KTK and Arpad. This treaty dictated that both parties must exchange runaway fugitives as well as help to squash any rebellious slaves in the other nation.[39] In this treaty the requests for both parties were very similar to what the Spartans would place in their alliances centuries later. In both cases there

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[37] Aristotle, "Fr. 538" trans. G.E.M. de Ste Croix, in "The Helot Threat" by G.E.M. de Ste Croix, in *Sparta,* ed. Michael Whitby (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 193.

[38] de Ste Croix, "Sparta's 'Foreign Policy," 219.

[39] Unknown, "The Treaty between KTK and Arpad," trans. Franz Rosenthal, in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, 2011), 307–309.

was a clear concern with slaves running away and an inability to suppress slave revolts alone. The Spartan foreign policy then does not seem to be as unique when compared to this Ancient Near Eastern model of foreign policy, which was also influenced by the necessity to regulate slave revolts and prevent runaway slaves from escaping.

Systematic Humiliation and Oppression

Both systems used systematic humiliation to control and subdue slave populations. One of the definitive sources on helotry and especially the treatment of the helots is Paul Cartledge. He cites Plutarch (*Life of Lycurgus, 28)* to explain the instances in which the Spartiates forced the helots to drink large amounts of unmixed wine and would then ridicule the intoxicated helots as examples of what a Spartiate was not supposed to be.[40] This practice was used to provide a consistent distinction between the Spartiates and helots, while providing a consistent form of humiliation that would prevent the helots from challenging the Spartiates to grant them an equal status. Cartledge also draws his readers' attention to the actual name "helot" and the implications it may carry.[41] One interesting theory to consider would be the neglect given to the history and nationalities of the separate helots when this term was applied to all of the Messenian and Laconian helots.

Richard Talbert also provides several examples of the policies of systematic humiliations imposed upon the helots by the Spartiates. Talbert cites the instance in which the Spartiates forced the helots to wear dog skin caps, leather, and receive a number of lashes regardless if they had acted inappropriately or not. He then discusses how any helot whose physical well-being surpassed what was deemed acceptable for a helot was murdered by the Spartans.[42] These regulations highlighted the stipulations put in place to distinguish the helots from the Spartiates. Moreover, these forms of humiliation served to prevent the helots from ever

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[40] Cartledge, "Raising Hell?" 13.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Richard J. A. Talbert, "The Role of the Helots in the Class Struggle at Sparta," in *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte,* vol. 38, no. 1 (Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989): 36.

potentially being seen as an equal to their Spartiate masters by distinguishing their physical beings, literacy, and cultural apparel.

Systematic forms of humiliation were also used by Ancient Near Eastern slave systems as a means to regulate status and behavior. One interesting means of humiliation was the marking system that Mendelsohn discusses. In this system it is unclear whether the markings were either a tattoo, scar, or simply a tablet worn around the neck, but it is clear that these markings were used to distinguish runaway slaves.[43] This was more important than just a means of humiliating a slave for attempting to run away. Runaway slaves were considered to be too much of a risk to purchase, which Ahiqar advises against in his collection of advice, and this would deter slavers from purchasing them.[44] Many slaves turned to slavery as a means to pay off debts or even as a means to survive against poverty and such a humiliating mark would prevent these slaves from gaining the assets they need to return to citizenship or even survive.[45]

A strikingly similar practice of humiliation tactics in these slave systems was the use of terminology. Daniel Snell explores the different words used to refer to slaves and the implications behind such usages. Snell points out the Sumerian terms used to refer to slaves had meant "head male" or "head female." These terms were used to refer to animals and Snell makes the argument that this usage demeans the slaves to the status of animals.[46] While the use of language in this scenario is not identical to the usage of the term helot, both cases show how language was used to essentially identify a group into a subordinate role. Language became a primary tool for humiliation in the Ancient Near East and this usage was later exploited by the Spartiates as they forced the helots into a subordinate role.

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[43] Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East,* 42–47.

[44] Ahiqar, "The Words of Ahiqar," trans. H.L. Ginsberg, in *The Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures,* ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, 2011), 379–383.

[45] Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East,* 23.

[46] Daniel C. Snell, "Slavery in the Ancient Near East," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery, Volume 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World* eds. Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.

Conclusion

The Ancient Near Eastern slave systems provide a viable comparative system for comprehending the nature of helotry. While both systems have an issue with the availability of sources, it is clear from the existing sources that the two systems were remarkably similar. The continued service of the *neodamodeis* does not seem so obscure once the continued service of slaves in Persia and in Ur is considered as well. It is also important to note the unique characteristics of helotry and allow the individual character of Spartan history to help define these ambiguities. This is most clear in the management tactics of the Spartans regarding the helots, which is only clear once one takes into consideration the tremendous amount of civic duties required from each Spartiate and their inability to manage their helots as actively as other slave systems allowed.

The reluctance of the Spartiates to incorporate helots as equal citizens is best understood in conjunction with the unique definition of Spartan citizenship, which was never such an explicit issue in the Ancient Near East. Orlando Patterson makes it evident that the Spartiates shaped their conception of citizenship off their ability to manage themselves as well as dominate helots. He uses the Americans and African slaves as a modern comparative example to better illustrate his point.[47] This analysis makes it clear that a comparative method has limits and one must allow the unique character of each system to be a consideration when analyzing the nature of any slave system. The Ancient Near Eastern systems help illuminate many of the obscure elements of helotry and provide similar and earlier examples, which helps readers to not classify helotry as a complete anomaly. The unique character of Sparta can then fit in and explain those seemingly contradictory practices because it allows for different, yet similar systems to exist without having to fit under a universal definition.

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[47] Orlando Patterson, "Reflections on Helotic Slavery and Freedom," in *Helots and Their Masters in Laconia and Messenia: Histories, Ideologies, Structures*, ed. Susan E. Alcock and Nino Luraghi (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2003), 306.