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The Homeric Origins of Spartan Helotage

Toynbee wrote that ‘there are at least four different and mutually irreconcilable accounts of the date and the circumstances in which helotage originated. This indicates that all four accounts are guesses, and that there was no authentic record.’ (Toynbee 1969: 195). Despite his warning, many scholars have accepted the account of the origins of helotage in terms of a war of conquest as related in Theopompus *FGrHist* 115 F122 (e.g. Finley 1981: 123; Scheidel 2008: 118; Cartledge 2011: 76). This trend provoked a series of revisionist studies by Nino Luraghi (2002, 2003, 2009), who restated Toynbee’s position in much greater detail. Rather than relying on late charter myths, Luraghi argued that this question could be seriously investigated from two angles: first, one could analyse slavery in the Homeric epics to gauge its role in the early archaic period and assess whether it was a credible precursor for the later institution. Alternatively, one could utilise comparative data to delimit a number of possible scenarios in which helotage might have developed. Luraghi rejected the former approach and turned to comparison, conjecturing that a process of ‘internal differentiation’ transformed vulnerable groups in archaic Sparta into the helot population we know from classical sources.

This approach suffers from two weaknesses. First, Luraghi’s rejection of the Homeric material is based on Finley’s outdated theory that slavery played no important role in Homeric Greece, a view that has been disproven in several recent studies (Van Wees 1992: 49-53; Thalmann 1998: 50; Harris 2012). Second, the comparative approach followed by Luraghi is only able to suggest a series of theoretical possibilities and operates in a void bereft of textual evidence.

This paper aims to explore the possibility that helotage developed out of traditional forms of slavery represented in the Homeric epics, and evolved under the same pressures that shaped other institutions in Sparta during the archaic period. I will focus on six areas in which helotage as described in fifth and fourth century sources can be seen in terms of continuity (albeit admitting some adaptations and changes) with traditional practices illustrated in the Homeric epics. First, helot status has undergone much reassessment in recent years: many scholars now view it as a heavily restricted form of private ownership rather than state ownership (Ducat 1990: 19-29; Hodkinson 2000: 113-17; Luraghi 2002; Nafissi 2009: 121; Kennel 2010: 75-88), which can be seen as a development of early archaic conditions (where privately owned slaves are well attested but public slaves not at all). Second, the relations between helots in the country and their masters in town has been treated in a superb recent study (Hodkinson 2008), but it has rarely been noticed that many of the features of these arrangements (residence of slaves far from town, their subsistence from the products of their labour, their hierarchical organisation, and the organised delivery of agricultural products to the owner’s house in the *asty*) are nothing new, but represent traditional arrangements already described in the *Odyssey*. Third, slave families, the social institution upon which the numerical reproduction of the helot population rested, are also prominent in Homer: the classical Spartan helot ‘supply’ was not a distinctively Spartan phenomenon, but represented a traditional practice writ large. Fourth, the variety of privileges often erroneously considered ‘rights’ enjoyed by helots (e.g. the accumulation of possessions, a house and a spouse) are also present in Homeric epic. Fifth, the use of helots in warfare and the use of manumission as an incentive to fight are prefigured in Homeric poetry (although in classical Sparta the practice had become a state monopoly). Finally, the practice of raising the sons of Spartan citizen males and helot women as warriors (Hodkinson 1997: 53-5) is abundantly paralleled in Homeric epic.

Although the origins of helotage are clouded in obscurity, this paper will provide a fresh perspective for considering its development. I argue that helotage, far from a Spartan oddity, represents a traditional form of slavery that underwent changes during the archaic period caused by broader forces that shaped other Spartan institutions. Rather than an abrupt transformation of the aboriginal inhabitants of Laconia and Messenia into helots, I suggest an organic development of the institution in tandem with the general evolution of Spartan society.

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