

# Lycurgus

## Background

- We do not have a primary source. The closest we have are Herodotus' and Xenophon's accounts of Lycurgus' story, written centuries after the fact
- The Spartan Mirage: a phenomenon that saw historians and writers romanticize spartan society as being more capable, idyllic, and put-together than it likely was historically.
  - Impacts even the earliest sources on Lycurgus

## Herodotus-Histories

- Oldest, likely most accurate source (~430 BC)
- Briefly recounts Lycurgus' story in the context of greater political development in Greece, simply as a basis for how the Spartans got good laws and "escaped from great calamities"
- Addresses both possible origins for the laws themselves: that they were instructed by the oracle of Delphi, and that they came from Cretan society
  - The similarity between Crete's and Sparta's laws was likely just because of the common Dorian ancestry of both places, calling into question the legitimacy of Lycurgus' association with them
- Gives Lycurgus credit for "all that related to war." That being the meal houses, military bands of 30, and council of elders.
- Gives no date for when Lycurgus lived

## Xenophon-The Constitution of the Lacedaemonians

- Written shortly after Herodotus' (~390 BC)
- Goes into detail about the laws themselves and how they improved the Spartan way of life and capability for war and governance, likely influenced by the Spartan Mirage
- Frames Lycurgus as something of an abstract figure that saw problems in Spartan life, and then made laws that fixed them, similar to depictions of some gods or mythological figures
- Doesn't try much to tell the story of Lycurgus or the laws he made, potentially assuming that to be background knowledge for the reader.

## Plutarch-Lives. Lycurgus

- Written during Roman rule, a tertiary text with potentially a millennia between its writing and its source material (~110 AD)
- Is an attempt at a comprehensive history of Lycurgus, looking back on older texts from greek writers (Thucydides, Eratosthenes, Tyrtaeus, etc.) and trying to synthesize the whole story of his life from their (now mostly lost) texts.
- Starts with "nothing can be said that is not disputed," highlighting how ambiguous the details surrounding Lycurgus' life and legacy already were.
- Mentions theories that there were two Lycurguses at different times, which may be the cause of the confusing timeline

## Aristotle

- Also mentions Lycurgus a few times, mostly just in the context of being the person who codified Spartan Law and "led" Sparta, similar to Xenophon, but more in passing

