

Paul A. RAHE: *The Spartan Regime: Its Character, Origins, and Grand Strategy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016, xiv+212 pp., 4 Maps, 3 Photographs. ISBN: 9780300219012.

Shina Alimi
Obafemi Awolowo University

The Spartan Hegemony and Mystery of Survival

The knowledge of archaic and classical Sparta has been spread through various sources that lack accuracy and render the tasks of many scholars of ancient Greece to a mere guess work. The secretiveness with which the ancient Spartan regime conducted its affairs, the idealisation and romanticisation of its unique achievements have enigmatically wrapped mystery around the history of this highly respected but much misconstrued people of Lacedaemon. Professor's Rahe's latest book, *The Spartan Regime: Its Character, Origin and Grand Strategy*, offers a systematic synthesis of old insights and new finds about Spartan hegemony on the Peloponnesian peninsula. The book is a «prelude to a projected trilogy on the grand strategy of ancient Lacedaemon and on the external challenges that polity faced in the late archaic and classical periods».



There are four chapters with a prologue and a separate section for the conclusion. Without any pretence for presenting new facts, Rahe through analytical artistry focuses on aggregating, synthesising and reinterpreting relevant information from scattered sources. By approaching the work from inter-disciplinary point, Rahe explores uncommon sources in the Greek literature and ancillary materials. The adoption of regime analysis keeps his argument and analysis comprehensive, penetrating and in line with the perspective of the earliest writers and scholars such as Thucydides, Xenophon, Ephorus, Plato and Aristotle, without losing its originality.

The way Professor Rahe discusses Lacedaemon's education and moral formation (*paideía*) in the first chapter is particularly brilliant. The world of Lacedaemon was structured around its system of education (*agogé*). Male citizens were subjected to rigorous exercise coupled with various lessons on communal songs, dances and Spartan literature. Professor Rahe draws connections of music, dances and poetry to war and discipline in ancient Lacedaemon. He notes that fear determined “the real” and “the ideal” for both the regime and its citizens. He argues that fear as a factor contributed to the conservatism, stability and harmony within the Spartan regime. Fear, superstition and enforcement of communal spirit/feelings were used to reinforce total obedience among the Spartiates. Professor Rahe also observes that the regime instilled discipline, reinforced obedience and inspired courage among young and old Lacedaemonians through poems and songs of Tyrtaeus. The Spartan system of education no

doubt earned these Greek people enviable reputation in the ancient world. Other themes well analysed by Professor Rahe include marriage and individual privacy. Like education, marriage was constructed as a civic duty and deliberately geared towards moulding communal individuals. Here, Professor Rahe presents the conflicts between individual interests and the community's interests. But the greatest paradox in the Spartan regime is found in its system of privacy. He summarises this as the «contradiction between desire and duty, between unaccommodated human nature and the needs of the polis...»

A refreshingly innovative way is how he meticulously analyses the complexity of political structure of ancient Spartan polis. Lacedaemonian *politeía*- citizenship, form of government and regime- has remained for so long a subject of conjecture and mystery. He notes that Lacedaemonian polis was not a «conspiracy of self-seeking individuals joined for mutual profit and protection in contemporary legal partnership» but it was a community and commonwealth borne out of «a common way of life». At Lacedaemon individual virtues and glory were sacrificed for the civic virtues and the commonwealth. Professor Rahe demystifies the existing narratives which limited the interpretation of the Spartan regime within the framework of totalitarianism. He argues that, the presence of two monarchs (the *basileís*) with divine rights, the magistrates and overseers (the *ephors*) and the elders (the *gerousía*), testifies to the complexity of the Spartan political system. Because the system possessed extreme features of aristocracy, gerontocracy, monarchy and extra ordinary democracy, Professor Rahe summarises the Lacedaemonian system as a «mixed constitution». The third and the fourth chapters focus on the military exploits, diplomacy, politics and geopolitics, and the rise of Lacedaemon as an hegemonic power in the ancient Greece.

In the third chapter, the author reflects on major problems that confront scholars reconstructing history of ancient civilisations using unconventional sources, like oral traditions and literature. He notes that these hyperskeptical scholars are quick to dismiss traditions as bias, invented and confused stories. He argues that whether original or forged, no traditions exist in a vacuum. They contain a modicum of useful information which drives us closer to the truth. On the traditions of origin, migration and peopling of the Peloponnesus, the author demonstrates that working with these unconventional sources does not preclude researcher from arriving at plausible conclusion even when these sources disagree, overlap or coincide. The way he synthesises traditions and legends transmitted by the Arcadians, the Argives and the Messenians to trace the origins of the Agiad and Euryontid kings is telling. Within the same chapter, the author deconstructs the misconceived view about the military order and system in the classical Lacedaemon. Drawing evidences from, and comparing the experiences of Egypt and Mesopotamia Assyrian, Babylonian and Hittite states during the Bronze age, Professor Rahe argues that the use of chariot for military combat by the Spartiates was hardly different from other regions of the world. This sharply contrasts with Homer's account of aristocratic deployment of chariot as a mere carriage to the battlefield. A sketchy outline of the Greek military system and order is prudently provided by the author. Rahe describes the *prómachoi* (forefighters), the hoplite (infantry) warfare, squaring combat, phalanx formation and hoplite panoply as part of the Greek military revolution. While describing Greek military discipline and technology, he does not forget to emphasise that this military revolution survived on moral revolution. Again, the author creatively piece fragments of information from

Aristotle and Plato's testimonies, Tyrtaeus' poems, vase paintings and hoplite figurines to reconstruct the image of Lacedaemonian hoplite warfare.

In the fourth chapter, the author solves another puzzle, the origin of Spartan politics and nature of its geopolitics. Like any diligent historians, in analysing the origin of Spartan political institutions, Professor Rahe is confronted with the problem of the "big man" theory in history. While Lycurgus was remembered in many traditions as a Spartan genius around whom the political transformation of the people was woven, other traditions suggested Theopompus and Polydorus as the eponyms of Lacedaemon euphorate. In spite of complexity that characterised these traditions, Professor Rahe thesis seems more plausible. For him transformations experienced within the Lacedaemonian *politeia* was "a tale of two revolutions" dictated by peculiar circumstances and time. The author notes that the radical shift of Lacedaemon external policy from aggression to friendly disposition towards its neighbour represented part of its grand strategy for survival. This chapter is by far the most interesting though somewhat complex. The stories of the Spartan military triumph over, and alliances with its neighbours, and sudden change from aggressive posture to the vanguard of liberty are woven as parts of revolutions that shape the thinking and conduct of the Lacedaemonian grand strategy.

The concluding chapter of the book summarises and reflects Professor Rahe's ultimate view about the Spartan regime. He concludes that the grand strategy of Lacedaemon was carefully planned to fulfil the purpose of preserving the Lacedaemonian hegemony at the Peloponnesus. This chapter anticipates two more volumes on our bookshelves.

Professor Rahe has saved his audience the headaches associated with chronological approach in history by adopting a thematic style. This style affords him ample space to employ uncommon sources, analyse and criticise same. The language and the style are straightforward and fascinating. The maps, abbreviations and short titles are excellent. The maps bring ancient Sparta near the readers in space and time. The illustrations are strategically positioned but the indexes are not adequate. The author also demonstrates familiarity with the Greek language and etymology by providing English interpretation of Greek words in the book. One major fault in the work lies in the way the author digresses from his narration. This is abundantly encountered throughout the book. An impatient reader may find this an extravagant form of analysis and boring.

Generally, this is an impressive contribution to existing volumes on the history of archaic and classical Greece. The theme chosen by Professor Rahe seems to me highly innovative, while the way he carefully handles it is adeptly artistry. Few bold historians venture into studying ancient civilisation, while fewer will consider Sparta as a research theme. The Spartan Regime has no doubt unravelled the mystery around the Spartan ways of life. For the students and teachers of ancient civilisations, this book has created another perspective to study the Greek people. While the book itself is a telescope of understanding the Sparta, it is a clear lense to see the Greek past and build a narrative beyond the Athenian standpoint. One other merit of the book is that it reinforces the possibility of mixed constitution in any polity. This refreshing reinterpretation of data by Professor Rahe has no doubt pushed the frontiers of knowledge about Sparta beyond idealisation and doubt. Most interested readers who could not afford \$36 will be eager to see the paper-back edition published soon.