

# Plutarch on Sparta

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## Simplicity

On noticing a house in Asia roofed with square beams, Agesilaus asked the owner whether timber grew square in that area. When told no, he said: "What then? If it were square, would you make it round?"

Ecprepes, when ephor, took an adze and cut away two of the nine strings from the musician Phrynis' lyre, declaring: "Don't do harm to music!"

To the man who was amazed at how modest his clothes and his meals were, and those of the other Spartans as well, Agesilaus said: "Freedom is what we reap from this way of life, my friend."

Agis came alone on an embassy to Philip. When the latter said: "What's this? Have you come alone?", he replied: "Yes, since I've come to see one man."

After seeing Aristagoras having his shoes put on by one of his servants, Gorgo said: "Father, the stranger has no hands."

## Few Words

At a council meeting Demaratus was asked whether he was keeping quiet because he was stupid or because he was at a loss for words. "Well certainly," he said, "a stupid person wouldn't be able to keep quiet."

Anaxandridas said to the man who, while giving necessary information to the ephors, used more than enough words: "Stranger, you meet the need, but at needless length."

When the envoy from the Achaean had stopped after a lengthy speech and was asking what he should report back to his fellow citizens, Agis said: "Say that throughout the entire time you needed for speaking, I continued listening in silence."

When envoys from Samos were urging him to go to war against the tyrant Polycrates and made protracted speeches for the purpose, Cleomenes said: "I don't recall the beginning of what you said, and consequently I also don't grasp the middle sections, while the part at the end I don't approve of."

When some sophist was about to read a eulogy of Heracles, Antalcidas said: "But who finds fault with him?"

When someone was making constant threats against the enemy, Polydorus said: "Don't you realize that to a very great extent you are wasting your vindictiveness?"

Lysander said to the man who declared his admiration and special affection for him: "I have two oxen in a field; even though neither says anything, I'm fully aware of which one idles and which one works."

### Small Possessions

When someone asked him how much property he owned, Teleclus said: "No more than enough."

When amongst the spoils some people were amazed at the extravagance of the Persians' clothing, Pausanias said: "Better for them to be men of great worth rather than to have possessions of great worth."

### Serious Occupations

When some advocate was making jokes, Pleistarchus said: "My friend, as you keep cracking jokes, shouldn't you take care not to turn into a clown, in just the way that those who keep wrestling turn into wrestlers?"

When some harpist had been a great success, Eudamidas was asked his impression of him and said: "In his own small line he puts on a great show."

As he was listening to a harpist, Demaratus remarked: "To me it's just foolery, but he does it pretty well."

When he was invited to listen to the man who used to imitate the nightingale's song, Agesilaus declined, with the statement: "I've heard the bird herself often."

To the man who was praising a lyre-player and marvelling at his ability, Archidamus said: "Dear friend, what kind of compliment will you find to bestow on true men, when you praise a lyre-player in these terms?"

After he had seen Xenocrates, by now quite elderly, having a philosophical discussion with his pupils in the Academy, Eudamidas inquired who the old man was. When somebody said that he was a wise man and one of those who search for virtue, Eudamidas said: "And when will he make use of it if he is still searching for it?"

#### Courage and Despising Death

When Xerxes wrote: "Deliver up your arms," Leonidas wrote back: "Come and take them."

When another person said: "They are close to us," Leonidas replied: "Then we're also close to them."

When someone was saying: "It isn't even possible to see the sun because of the Persians' arrows," Leonidas said: "How pleasant then, if we're going to fight them in the shade."

As someone was remarking that the enemy's numbers were substantial, Pedaritus said: "Then we shall win greater fame since we shall inflict higher casualties."

When someone was inquiring what the number of Spartans was, Agis said: "One sufficient to keep out undesirables."

When Panthoidas was on an embassy to Asia and some people were showing him a great high wall, he said: "By the gods, my friends, what splendid women's quarters!"

As he was passing through the Corinthians' walls and observed their height and strength and great extent, Agis said: "What women live in this place?"

When he was trapped in an ambush by the Athenian general Iphicrates and his soldiers asked what was to be done, Anaxibius replied: "What else, except that you save yourselves, while I die fighting?"

Lochagus, the father of Polyxenides and Seiron, when informed by somebody that one of his two sons was dead, said: "I have long been aware that he has to die."

After hearing a philosopher who had argued that the wise man is the only good general, Eudamidas said: "It's a wonderful claim, but the man who makes it is untrustworthy, because he has not heard the battle-trumpets sound."

When someone was inquiring why they keep their laws about bravery unwritten, without setting them down and handing them to the young men to read, Zeuxidamus said: "Because it's better for them to get used to acts of bravery rather than to study written documents."

When asked how one should remain a free man, Agis said: "By despising death."

Questioned as to how he had gained his great reputation, Agesilaus said: "By having despised death."

When a messenger came from Crete to report Acrotatus' death Gyrtias said: "To hear that he died in a fashion worthy of me and the city and his ancestors is pleasanter than if he were immortal but a coward."

A woman, as she was handing her son his shield and giving him some encouragement, said: "Son, either with this or on this."

A woman, in reply to her son who declared that the sword he had was a small one, said: "Then extend it by a stride."

#### Excellence and Self-esteem

When not selected as one of the Three Hundred (which was rated as the outstanding distinction in the state), Pedaritus withdrew with a bright smile. Yet when summoned back by the

ephors and asked what was making him cheerful, he said:  
"Because I congratulate the state on having three hundreds  
citizens better than I."

When he was assigned the last place in the chorus by the man  
who was organizing the dancing, Damonidas said: "Splendid,  
director! You have discovered how even this undistinguished  
place may become distinguished."

When Agesilaus was still a boy, at a celebration of the  
Gymnopaediae the choral director put him in an inconspicuous  
position. Even though he was already in line to become a king,  
he complied, and remarked: "That's fine, for I shall show that  
it isn't positions which lend men distinction, but men who  
enhance positions."

When someone said to him: "Except for being king you are not at  
all superior to us," Leonidas replied: "But were I not better  
than you, I should not be king."

When Lysander's friend were asking him to allow them to do away  
with one particular opponent of theirs in exchange for fifty  
talents, Callicratidas as navarch refused, even though he was  
desperate for money to provide rations for his sailors. His  
adviser Cleander said: "But I would certainly have accepted if  
I were you." To which Callicratidas replied: "I would have too,  
if I were you."

When someone asked him which type of government he considered  
the best, Charillus said: "The one in which the largest number  
of citizens are willing to compete with each other in  
excellence and without civil disorder."

#### Fairness toward Equals

When the great Agesilaus was once chosen by lot to preside at a  
drinking session, and the cupbearer asked him how much to serve  
each man, his answer was: "If plenty of wine has been provided,  
then as much as each pleases; but if there is only a little,  
then give evertone an equal amount."

As he saw the runners at Olympia eagerly seeking to gain an  
advantage at the starting-line, Leon remarked: "How much more  
concerned the runners are about speed than about fairness."

## Patriotism

Once when the ephors said to him: "Take the young men and march against this man's country: he will personally conduct you to the acropolis," Agis replied: "And how is it proper, ephors, for so many young men to trust this one man who is betraying his own country?"

One of the Persians had revolted from the Great King and had been persuaded by Demaratus to return to him. The king was about to have this Persian disposed of when Demaratus said: "O king, what a disgrace it is that when this man was your enemy you could not punish him for his revolt, but now that he's become your friend, you are executing him!"

## Various

Since Periander the doctor was professionally well respected and very highly recommended, but used to write dreadful poetry, Archidamus said to him: "Why ever is it, Periander, that you are so keen to be called a bad poet instead of an expert doctor?"

When Cleomenes was dragged down by a long bout of illness and turned to ritual healers and seers (which he had not done previously), somebody expressed amazement. But he said: "What are you amazed at? I'm not the same person that I was before, and not being the same, what I approve of isn't the same either."

When asked what dowry she was giving the man marrying her, a poor girl said: "My father's common sense."

A Spartan woman who was up for sale and was asked what skills she possessed, said: "To be trustworthy."

When a woman was asked by somebody whether she would be good if he were to buy her, she said: "Yes, and even if you don't buy me."

When someone inquired of him what children should learn, Agesilaus said: "What they will also use when they become men."