

## **The fate of sickly and disabled new-born babies in ancient Greece (Sparta and Athens)**

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### **Abstract**

Many authors are convinced that in ancient Sparta if a disabled baby was born, then an assembly of aged men ordered it, without compassion, exposed on a special fearful place (Kaiadas) on the mount Taygetos to die. Our ancient and only testimony is the biographer Plutarch who lived seven centuries later from the period that the alleged cruel custom took place. Plutarch's statement is unclear, dubious and ambiguous for a number of good reasons: a) Plutarch does not mention his sources, even though he very often does it in other cases. b) Ancient Greek authors who wrote on Sparta, its constitution and education of young boys and girls seem to ignore this brutal and merciless practice. c) Plutarch himself admitted the fact that he is not writing history, but simply tells stories of important people. We still lack the proper evidence to accept Plutarch's statement. In fact the material evidence from the abysmal cave of Kaiadas, situated outside Sparta on the gorges of mount Taygetos shows that the cave was used by the Spartans for the execution of traitors, Messenian Helots and criminals sentenced to death. Archaeologists were very much impressed by the quantity of human bones found there. The archaeological and anthropological reports on Kaiadas as well as the historical and literary evidence indicate that this place was the ancient Kaiadas mentioned by many ancient authors. The important matter in regard to this paper is the age of bones found in this cave-precipice: No bones have been found related to babies. It is evident that Plutarch's statement regarding the exposure of sickly infants to perish is difficult and hard to accept.

**Keywords:** Kaiadas; exposure; infants; Sparta; Athens.

### **1 Introduction**

According to Plutarch (*Lycurgus*: 16), a Greek biographer from Chaeroneia, in Boeotia, who lived in the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries A.D., the Spartans used to expose their disabled babies to die, since Sparta was not a place of weak, infirm, and sickly infants. Today the majority of writers and authors believe that Plutarch's statement contains essential truth. It is the purpose of this study to throw considerable light upon this alleged cruel custom and to demonstrate that the above statement is not a historical thesis but a narration and rehearsal of a great narrator of the past. By doing so we took into consideration, ancient literary sources, archaeological finds and reports of many modern authors.

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## 2 Method

In undertaking this research, a number of methods have been employed: analytical and synthetic process, comparative and historical approach, descriptive and interpretive procedure.

## 3 Current Scholarship

According to Plutarch (*Lycurgus*: 14) the educational system of Sparta was ascribed to Lycurgus the lawgiver. It was an unusually tough system of education which created the heroic Spartan soldier and the unrivalled Spartan mother, a unique occurrence in the history of the ancient world. A number of ancient Greek philosophers and writers praised the above system, even though they were critical of its shortcomings. It has been pointed out that Plato, the philosopher, in writing his ideal state had in mind the Spartan method of education for the training of his guardians (Forbes, 1971; Bloom, 1968). Plato's student Aristotle (*Politics*: 1180a) admired the Spartan public education and praised the Spartans for their display, as a body politic, of very great zeal in regard to the discipline of their children. Besides being obligatory and enforced, the way under which the Spartan boys and girls lived was very rigid. In fact, no other Greek city state had a system of education so rigorous, severe and demanding.

Today it is generally agreed that in ancient Sparta, if an invalid infant was born, an assembly of elders ordered it without compassion or mercy whatsoever, exposed on a special ravine on mount Taygetos to perish (Forbes, 1971). It has also been pointed out that the sickly infants were exposed to die or to be brought up by the Helots and the Perioikoi, since Sparta was not a place of invalids (Freeman, 1969). Perioikoi (dwelling round) was the name used by the Greeks to describe neighboring people constituting groups of subjects, normally half-citizens, that is, citizens with lesser rights. Some modern authors who accept, without reservation that the exposure of weakly infants did take place in ancient Sparta, describe it as a criminal act (Giatsis, 2006) or as a policy of inhuman eugenics (Albanidis, 2004). Other writers express some doubts about the exposure of sickly infants in ancient Sparta (Anastasiou, 1998; Mouratidis, 2010), while it has been pointed out that the exposure of feeble babies was not only a Spartan practice but a common policy in many other Greek city states and that in some cases the exposing included healthy children as well (Birgialas, 2000). It is generally believed that the Spartan educational system was only for the healthy and strong children and that the infirm ones were thrown in a ravine, called apothetes to die. Apothetes was a site in Sparta into which disabled new-born babies were thrown or as the word apothetes means, "to must set aside". Many archaeologists, in fact identify the apothetes with the precipice on mount Taygetos, called Kaiadas (Papyrus Larousse, 2007).

## 4 Ancient Sources

For such an important subject which occupied the minds of many modern scholars, there is just one ancient source, that of the philosopher and biographer Plutarch. Plutarch in his book on the lawgiver *Lycurgus* states that if a baby was born in Sparta, it was taken before the elders of the tribe to which its parents belonged. If the elders of the tribe believed that the child was weak or sick, they ordered it to be exposed and consequently to die on Taygetos in a place called *apothetes* (Plutarch, *Lycurgus*: 16). However, Plutarch's statement is uncertain and doubtful, for a number of reasons:

- a) Plutarch was born in Chaeronea (Boeotia) in 50 A.D. and died in the year 120 A.D. The alleged Spartan policy of the exposure of invalid infants took place seven centuries earlier.

- b) Plutarch in his works, both in the *Lives* and *Moralia* very often mentions his sources of information, something he does not do in this case of exposure of weak babies in Sparta. His silence is curious, strange and unusual.
- c) Ancient Greek authors who wrote extensively on ancient Sparta, its laws, education of young men and women, rights of newly born babies, their bringing up and nurture, mention nothing about the alleged Spartan practice of exposure of invalid babies. Both Plato and Aristotle who praised the Spartan system of education know nothing about the above Spartan custom of exposure. It is interesting that 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian historian Xenophon who wrote a book on the Spartan constitution (*Constitution of Lakedemonians*) ignored such an important matter as that of the exposure of invalid infants by the Spartans. In fact, Xenophon is an accurate and reliable source (Hammond and Scullard, 1985) on Spartan education and laws (Xenophon, *Constitution of Lakedemonians*: 2.4).
- d) Plato and Aristotle, both defenders of eugenics seem to utterly ignore the above-mentioned Spartan practice closely related to eugenics (Plato, *The Republic*: 460c; Aristotle, *Politics*: 1335).
- e) Pausanias, a Greek geographer-traveler of the second century A.D. sketches the history and topography of many Greek cities, including Laconia and Messenia. In fact, he wrote two books on Laconia and Messenia. In his two books he describes worships, superstitious customs, educational practices, mythology, memorials, artistic monuments and the like. Pausanias is unusually silent regarding the Spartan custom of exposure. However, Pausanias did not fail to mention the *Kaiadas*, a well-known precipice on the mount Taygetos where the Spartans threw alive traitors or rebel Messenians. According to Pausanias (4.18.4-6) the Spartans used the Kaiadas precipice to exterminate fifty Messenian insurgents including Aristomenes, their leader, during the second Messenian war (650-640 B.C).
- f) A clear indication of the existence of Kaiadas is the testimony of Thucydides, a great historian of the fifth century B.C. According to him the Spartans decided to throw the dead body of their king Pausanias "the traitor", in the precipice of Kaiadas, but finally changed this decision and buried it outside the ravine (Thucydides: 1.134.1). The historian mentions nothing about the exposure of invalid Spartan babies in Kaiadas.

In solving our doubts and answer our questions in regard to the above matter, the help of Plutarch himself is of vital importance. Plutarch admitted the fact that he is not writing Histories, but simply tells stories of important men (οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους, οὔτε ταῖς ἐπιφανεστάταις πράξεσι) (Plutarch, *Alexander*: 1.2). Plutarch, a prolific writer wrote many books on the lives of important Greeks and Romans and a major book on ethics called *Moralia*. In his *Lives* there is one thing which seems to dominate everything: narration, while in his *Moralia* the dominant factor is the philosophical and moral approach. In regard to Plutarch's historical credibility some modern authors pointed out that since 1800 A.D. "his influence has receded" (Hammond & Scullard, 1985). There is no doubt that Plutarch was master of narration and story recital. His work is considered today as an important piece of ancient literature. He wrote with charm and lucidity, fascination and delight, joy and grace. This was probably the main reason that both Greeks and Romans loved to read Plutarch and his accounts of lives of important persons.

Looking upon the story of Lycurgus, to whom Plutarch ascribed the invention of the exposure of sickly babies to Taygetos, we are facing with a number of major problems and obvious difficulties. According to tradition he was the founder of the Spartan

constitution, social and military systems. The earliest surviving evidence of Lycurgus is in Herodotos (1.66), where he appears as the protector of the king Leobotes (ca. 900 B.C.) while other writers (Hammond and Scullard, 1985) connect him to the Eurypontid Charillos (ca. 775 B.C.). There are of course many other traditions about him and his political position in the Spartan society. Plutarch (*Lycurgus*: 1) was of the opinion that Lycurgus was contemporary of king Iphitus with whom re-established the Olympic Games and the Olympic festival. In the fifth century B.C. was a common belief that Lycurgus was the lawgiver of the famous Spartan laws but Plutarch (*Lycurgus*: 13, 16) informs us that the Spartans did not have written laws. Tyrtaios (*Fragments*: 3), the earliest Spartan poet of the seventh century B.C., makes it clear that the Spartan laws were given to Sparta by the Delphi oracle, utterly ignoring the existence of Lycurgus or his association with the so called *rhētra* (constitution). Some contemporary authors (Michel, 1952; Huxley, 1962; Boring, 1979) assume that Lycurgus was the Spartan lawgiver while others reject it (Mouratidis, 2010). So opinions, both modern and ancient (Plutarch, *Lycurgus*: 3.16, 5.4.5; Plato, *Laws*: 632, 634; Aristotle, *Fragments*: 335, 544; Diodoros Sikeliotis: 1.20.2, 3.55.10, 7.12.6; Strabo: 8.5.5, 16.2.38; Plutarch, *Moralia*: 403, 789, 1103; Xenophon, *Constitution of Lakedemonians*: 8.5; Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*: 14.29), differ regarding Lycurgus, his actions, laws, life and even existence. No author has been able to prove with a certain degree of persuasion, that Lycurgus was the lawgiver of Sparta. Even Plutarch who presents Lycurgus as the lawgiver of Sparta admits that: For Lycurgus, the Spartan legislator there is nothing that can be said with certainty since we do not know the date he was born, the year of his death and his legislation. There are many accounts regarding his life and even his existence, so it is very difficult to say something about him with accuracy or some degree of probability (Plutarch, *Lycurgus*: 1).

Taking into consideration all the above, it is reasonable to assume that the alleged story, of the exposure of weakly infants to Taygetos, becomes very difficult to accept.

## **5 Archaeological evidence**

As we have pointed out the majority of the modern authors believe in Plutarch's account on the exposure of sickly infants to apothetai, that is, a precipice in Taygetos identifying it with Kaiadas. The existence of Kaiadas is not in question. Ancient authors (Thucydides: 1.134.1; Pausanias: 4.18.4) refer to it and the archaeological finds of the last few decades point to its very existence. Ten kilometers outside Sparta on a site of mount Taygetos, an abrupt precipice has been discovered matching the ancient descriptions. In fact, this rare precipice is according to archaeologists an uncovered hole that even today carries the name of Kaiadas. It is considered a dreadful place even though the major earthquake of 464 B.C., that destroyed Sparta altered somehow its abysmal form and feature, without however diminishing or belittle the purpose it served (Themelis, 1985). At the end of this fearful cave-precipice, the existence of great masses of bones leaves no doubts about its use in earlier times. In February 1983 some specialists possessing adequate experience in cave research, with the valuable help of archaeologists, paleontologists, speleologists, anthropologists and geologists, managed to descend down into the cave. Needless to say, that the help of local authorities and particularly of regional shepherds was very important. All experts involved in the project were very much impressed by the quantity of the bones, which were almost exclusively human, arranged in successive and stratified layers. The exploration team of the experts mentioned, taking into account this evidence and the historical literary sources concluded that this horrible place was the historical Kaiadas indeed (Themelis, 1985). The exploration team was of the opinion that the Spartans used to hurl down into the cave the whole bodies of their Messenian captives, criminals sentenced to death, or state traitors and not dismembered parts. The experts were very



much impressed by the quantity of the bones and their thickness which were well above the three meters (Themelis, 1985). What is really important for the purpose of the present paper is the age of bones found in the cave-precipice. The majority of bones found belongs to individuals of age between 20 and 30. A number of bones attributed to persons of 30-40 ages and only in one case the bones were related to a person of 10 years of age (Themelis, 1985). It is evident that Plutarch's reference of the exposure of invalid Spartans babies into Kaiadas is not supported by the material evidence, since no bones belonging to babies have been found, as the skeletal testimony and attestation has showed.

## 6 In Athens

Some scholars, as we have seen, maintain the view that the disable infants were either exposed to die or brought up by the Helots (Freeman, 1969). In addition, they have asserted that this practice of exposure was not only a Spartan system but was common in almost all Greek cities. It is believed that in Athens the exposure included healthy children as well (Birgialas, 2000). Regarding Freeman's point of view, there is no ancient testimony that the Helots used to take care of the disable children. As for the occurrence of the custom of exposure in all Greek city states, there is no support from literary or traditional sources. It is true however, that like Sparta, Athens had its own precipice to throw in the traitors and those condemned to death. The Athenian orator Demosthenes (8.61) informs us of the existence of this abrupt declivity with no mention whatsoever of children thrown from this precipitous place. Both Xenophon (Hellenica: 1.7.20) and Plato (Gorgias: 516e) make reference to this place without any allusions or hints of a practice throwing disable children into it. It is rather probable that Birgialas (2000) perplexed the opinions of ancient Greek philosophers on eugenics with the exposure of disable children to perish. It is true that Plato in writing his ideal state, places emphasis on the guardians of this state: *"And on the young men, surely, who excel in war and other pursuits we must bestow honors and prizes, and, in particular, the opportunity of more frequent intercourse with the women, which will at the same time be a plausible pretext for having their beget as many children thus born will be taken over by the officials appointed for this, men or women or both, since, I take it, the official posts too are common to women and men... The offsprings of the good, I suppose, they will take into the pen of crèche, to certain nurses who live apart in a quarter of the city, but the offsprings of the interior, and any of those of the other sort who are born defective, they will properly dispose of in secret, so that no one will know what has become of them. That is the condition of preserving the purity of the guardians' bread (Plato, The Republic: 460c)"*.

Some authors (Leroux, 2016), apparently misinterpreting the above Plato's remarks, believe that the philosopher's statement is euphemism for exposure, but this is not the case, since Plato's interest for the sickly babies is beyond doubt: *"So, let's take this as our basic principle in both cases: all young children and especially weakly infants, benefit both physically and mentally from being nursed, and kept in motion, as far as practicable, throughout the day and night; indeed, if only it could be managed, they ought to live as though they were permanently on-board ship. But as that's impossible, we must aim to provide our new-born infants with the closest possible approximation to this ideal (Plato, Laws: 790d-e)"*.

Furthermore Plato (Laws: 789, 789e) recommended for the well-being of the new-born babies, mild and gentle exercises for the pregnant women, by saying that "But we are aware the rapid growth without frequent and appropriately graded exercises leads to

a lot of trouble for the body. It is believed (Vijoen, 1959) that in fact Plato recommended to treat disabled children more humanely and leniently than the usual practice.

Plato's pupil Aristotle believed in the importance and necessity of eugenics for the benefit of the state: *"Pregnant mothers should pay attention to their bodies: they should take regular exercise, and follow a nourishing diet. The legislator can easily lead them to a habit of regular exercise if he requires them to make some daily pilgrimage for the purpose of worshipping at the shrines of the goddesses who preside over childbirth. Their minds, unlike their bodies, should be kept free from exertion; for children evidently draw on the mother who carries them in her womb, just as plants draw on the soil. The question arises whether children should always be reared or may sometimes be exposed to die. There should certainly be a law to prevent the rearing of deformed children. On the other hand, there should also be a law in all states where the system of social habits is opposed to unrestricted increase, to prevent the exposure of children to death merely in order to keep the population down. The proper things to do is to limit the size of each family, and if children are then conceived in excess of the limit so fixed, to have miscarriage induced before sense and life have begun in the embryo (Aristotle, Politics: 1335)"*.

From Aristotle's above statement some things become evident: a) The philosopher obviously is for the exposure of deformed children. b) In ancient Athens there was no such a law pertaining the exposure of babies. c) In order to limit the size of each family the philosopher recommends miscarriage in cases that children are conceived in excess of the limit so fixed, but before sense and life have begun in the embryo. It has been rightly suggested that the philosopher takes into account public feelings and "is unwilling or unable to disregard prevailing customs" (Vijoen, 1959).

In this *Ethics* Aristotle clearly demonstrates his feeling and tenderness for those in situations of physical weakness and disability. It is also true that the philosopher had no sympathy for those whose physical deficiency was the result of lack of exercise: *"Nobody blames those who are naturally ugly, but we do blame those who became so through a lack of exercise and care for their appearance. Similarly, too in the case of physical weakness and disability. Nobody would criticize a person who is blind by nature or as the result of a disease or injury; he would more likely be an object of pity, but anyone would blame a person whose blindness is due to heavy drinking or some other self-indulgence (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics: 1114a)"*.

The philosopher wanted the prospective parents to exercise regularly but nothing in excess or in deficiency. Both these cases are ruinous to the health of their children (Aristotle, *Politics*: 1336a). Alike Plato, Aristotle advised prospective mothers to take care of themselves, exercising regularly every day and adopting a proper diet, so every effort should be exerted to make their children healthy and active (Aristotle, *Politics*: 1335b).

Taking into consideration the ancient literary sources, ancient traditions, writers, testimony and material evidence we can reach a rather safe conclusion that the alleged exposure of disable kids in ancient Greece does not have the support of the above-mentioned sources. Golden (1981) finds it hazardous to set the extent of any social custom by reference to scattered casual remarks in ancient literary sources. The same point of view has been expressed by other writers as well (Cameron, 1932; Patterson, 1985).

## 7 Conclusions

It is believed that in ancient Greece, particularly in Sparta the disable infants were exposed on a special place (Kaiadas) on the mount Taygetos to die. For such an important matter, there is just one ancient source, that of the biographer Plutarch. The evidence, however, shows that Plutarch's statement is uncertain, doubtful and open to question. It is surprising that many ancient authors who wrote extensively on ancient Sparta, its constitution, laws,

education of boys and girls and rights of the new born babies, did not mention anything on the alleged exposure of sickly infants in ancient Sparta or in Greece in general. All these authors lived and wrote during the Spartan greatness (classical period) with the exception of Plutarch who lived seven centuries later. Plutarch however admitted the fact that he is not writing history, but simply tells stories about the lives of important persons. The existence of Kaiadas is not in question, since several ancient authors refer to it and the archaeological finds clearly show its existence. The material evidence and the literary sources indicate that Kaiadas was a fearful precipice where the Spartans used to hurl down Messenian captives, or criminals sentenced to death. The skeletal testimony indicates that no bones belonging to babies have been found. It is reasonable to assume that the exposure of disabled infants was not a practice in ancient Greece, neither in Sparta nor in Athens.

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