Delphi, place and time in Plutarch’s
Lycurgus and Lysander

Abstract: In the Life of Lycurgus and in the Life of Lysander, Delphi represents a symbolic place associated with extremely important events in Spartan history: the birth of the constitution thanks to Lycurgus and the political and institutional crisis of the fourth century BCE caused by Lysander. In both cases, Plutarch narrates these episodes emphasising the centrality of the oracle of Delphi and the close relationship between the Pythian god and the Spartan leadership. Lycurgus established the strong bond with Delphi by consulting the oracle before beginning his reforms. His journey is described by Plutarch as a separation from Sparta. Lycurgus’ second journey to Delphi ‘consecrated’ the Spartan constitution and won the support of the god to Sparta as long as the Spartans would maintain the Lycurgan laws. This projects the readers towards future phases of Spartan history, when the relationship with the god would in fact be broken. Such a critical period of Spartan history coincides with Lysander’s leadership as a navarch and his victories against the Athenians. First, at the beginning of the Life of Lysander Plutarch portrays Lysander’s ambiguous nature by describing a marble statue placed inside the treasury of the Acanthians at Delphi. Subsequently, later in the Life he describes again a monumental complex at Delphi, with which Lysander celebrated his military successes. In both passages, different temporal layers are conflated: the past of Lycurgus, the present time of Lysander, and the future of his later actions; the past of Lysander and the present of both Plutarch/external narrator and the readers. In the narrative, therefore, Delphi constitutes a location where place and time cannot be separated.

The city of Delphi was certainly very important to Plutarch. Not only was he priest at the sanctuary of Apollo for many years, but he also devoted some of his writings to exploring philosophical and theological themes related to the oracle and the cult of the Pythian god.¹ Yet, while the The E at Delphi, the On the Oracles of the Pythia, and

¹ I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Aristoula Georgiadou and Katerina Oikonomopoulou not only for organising the beautiful congress of the I.P.S. at Delphi but also for their hard work in editing this volume. I also would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of my chapter for his/her useful suggestions: any remaining errors or inaccuracies are my own responsibility. For the Greek text of Plutarch’s Parallel Lives I have followed the most recent Teubner editions, while the translations are my adaptations of Talbert, Scott Kilvert, and Pelling (2005) and Romm and Mensch (2012).

On Plutarch’s duties as priest and diplomat of Delphi, see Flacelière (1943); Swain (1991); Stadter (2004); Stadter (2005) 197–198; Talamo (2007); Casanova (2012). Further bibliographical references on Delphi can be found in Stadter (2005) 198 n. 6. In general, on Plutarch’s religious spirit, see

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the On the Obsolescence of Oracles probably constitute the most significant results of Plutarch’s theological reflection, his religious sensibility permeates all of his works. Not surprisingly, then, Plutarch also attached a great value to Delphi in the Parallel Lives. In particular, Delphi often represented a symbolic place, where numerous solemn acts (e.g., the dedication of statues, the making of offerings, and so forth) were performed to celebrate crucial events that carried major implications for Greek and Roman history. Suffice it to recall how in the Life of Flamininus Plutarch depicted Titus Flamininus’ dedication of silver bucklers, his own long shield, and a golden crown to Apollo after setting Greece free. By mentioning the celebratory inscriptions where the Romans were identified as the descendants of Aeneas and Flamininus defined himself as divine (θεος), Plutarch exposed Flamininus’ arrogance as much as the ambivalent nature of the liberation of Greece (Flam. 12.11–12). Thus, as Stadter thoughtfully notices, ‘Delphi for Flamininus is a theatre to display and augment his own fame and to claim special closeness to the divine’.²

Indeed, in the Parallel Lives what happened in Delphi can illuminate the broader historical circumstances that occurred in the same period. From a narrative perspective, moreover, the episodes concerning the sacred city—primarily those where the protagonists were directly involved—offer a key to the interpretation of the biographies in which they are variously inserted. In this chapter, by adopting this approach, I aim to explore the significance of Delphi for Spartan history. In particular, I concentrate on the Life of Lycurgus and the Life of Lysander, where this topic becomes highly relevant inasmuch as it connects the two Spartan Lives with one another. I shall argue that to some extent Delphi represents a place that allows the readers to go across time within the narrative, moving from archaic to classical Sparta.

The Life of Lycurgus

The importance of religion and superstition at Sparta is well-known. As Flower puts it, ‘the Spartans arguably paid a more scrupulous attention to religious rituals and acted more often from religious motives than did any of the other Greeks’.³ This e-
lement of Spartan culture was extensively treated by Herodotus and became a central feature of his characterisation of the Spartans (e.g., Leonidas decided to remain at Thermopylae in obedience to the Delphic oracle; Hdt. 7.220). In Plutarch’s *Life of Lycurgus* too, the Spartans’ religiosity and close connection with Delphi assume great relevance and are viewed as inextricably linked to the reforms conducted by Lycurgus.

As Plutarch narrates, before introducing his new legislation, Lycurgus went to Delphi, offered sacrifices to the god, and consulted the oracle (Lyc. 5.4):

διανοηθεὶς δὲ ταῦτα πρῶτον μὲν ἁπεδήμησεν εἰς Δελφοὺς, καὶ τῷ θεῷ θόσας καὶ χρησάμενος, ἐπανῆλθε τόν διαβόητον ἐκεῖνον χρησμὸν κομίζων, ὡς θεοφιλὴ μὲν αὐτὸν ἢ Πυθία προσέπει καὶ θεόν μᾶλλον ἢ ἄνθρωπον, εὐνομίας δὲ χρησάμενοι διδόναι καὶ καταλεῖν ἔφη τὸν θεόν ἢ πολὺ κρατίστῃ τῶν ἄλλων ἐστι πολιτείων.

Once Lycurgus had formed this intention, first he travelled to Delphi. After making sacrifices to the god and consulting him, he returned bringing that famous oracle, according to which the Pythia on the one hand addressed him as ‘dear to the gods’ and ‘a god rather than a man’, on the other hand, since he had asked for good order, she declared that the god granted this and promised that his constitution would be by far the finest of all.

In the 54 passages of the *Parallel Lives* (counted by the *TLG*) where Delphi is mentioned, as one would expect, verbs of movement or verbs that imply an idea of movement such as ἔρχομαι (‘to go’), πέμπω (‘to send off’), ἀποστέλλω (‘to send’), or πορεύομαι (‘to march’), and so forth are often employed. Doubtless, for the Greeks as much as for the Romans Delphi was a centre of attraction where they would go in person or send various types of offerings. Only in Lyc. 5.4, however, did Plutarch choose the verb ἀποδημέω (‘to be or go abroad’), which added to the sense that, in order to change Sparta, first Lycurgus had to visit different places outside the Peloponnesse (cf. at Lyc. 4 his journeys to Crete, Ionia, Egypt, and possibly Libya, Iberia, and India too, where he studied the local customs and compared the different constitutions). Indeed, the journey to Delphi is viewed from Lycurgus’ perspective. As one can also infer, moreover, the passage hints that at this stage of Spartan history Delphi and Sparta were imagi

In fact, Lycurgus is portrayed as the initiator of the special relationship between the oracle and the Spartans. The scene described in the *Life of Lycurgus* is an adaptation of the account offered by Herodotus on the same subject: the origin of the Spartan legal and political system (Hdt. 1.65). Yet, while in Herodotus the second part of the response does not have absolute certainty (‘only some people say’, oἱ μὲν δὴ τινὲς λέγουσι) and is recorded as an addition to the first part (‘in addition

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sidering Sparta’s religious practices distinctly different from those of the other *poleis* (a question that, however, does not concern foreign sanctuaries such as the oracle of Delphi).

4 On space and focalisation, see de Jong (2012b) 8–9. Cf. also Beck (2012).
to this the Pythia also declared to him the constitution that now exists at Sparta, πρὸς τούτοις καὶ φράσας αὐτῷ τὴν Πυθήν τῶν νῦν κατεστεώτα κόσμον), Plutarch simply condensed the two sets of information as if the god, recognising Lycurgus’ exceptional nature, made a serious commitment to the future of Sparta. This can also explain the presence of an already positive evaluation of the future Spartan constitution in the Life of Lycurgus, something that, conversely, Herodotus does not present in these terms. As a result of such a close connection between the god and godlike Lycurgus, the temporal dimensions of the present and the future are conflated (the god’s promise now anticipates the success of Lycurgus’ future acts) in what can be defined as an internal prolepsis, which the Great Rhetra, prescribing what temples the Spartans had to build, in what groups they should distribute the population, and how and where they should hold their general assembly, fully actualises (Lyc. 6).

Indeed, there is historical evidence that in the archaic and classical period Sparta exerted a strong influence on Delphi. Particularly important, in this regard, was the permanent presence at Delphi of the Spartan sacred ambassadors called Πύθιοι, who consulted the oracle on affairs of state and reported directly to the kings (see Hdt. 6.57.2; Xen. Lac. 15.5). Yet one should also consider that from a purely historical perspective the role of the Delphic oracle as initiator of political and social reforms is attested not only in the case of Sparta but also in other cities (e.g., Solon’s reforms at Athens or the foundation of and the reforms at Cyrene). Furthermore, despite the fact that the literary sources insist on the part played by divine agency in establishing the Spartan polity, they give amplier space to human decisions. In Herodotus, for instance, the Spartan account relates the origin of the Lycurgan legislation to Crete (Hdt. 1.65). Diodorus Siculus (= Ephorus) also offers details about Lycurgus’ own initiative (Diod. Sic. 7.12.2–4). In Xenophon’s Polity of the Lacedaemonians, Plato’s Republic, and Aristotle’s Politics too, human agency has a preponderant function.

To some extent, the Life of Lycurgus is not very different, considering that, after mentioning the Great Rhetra, Plutarch goes on to discuss the numerous aspects of Spartan society and politics that Lycurgus transformed pursuing his agenda for the city: the distribution of land and wealth (Lyc. 8–9); the institution of common meals (Lyc. 10 and 12); the education of the young (Lyc. 14–21); the military disci-

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5 On the oracle in Herodotus and Plutarch, see Manfredini and Piccirilli (1980) 228–229; Asheri et al. (2007) 127, Nafissi (2010). Another (more complete) version of the oracle can be read in Diod. Sic. 7.12.1 (probably depending on Ephorus), where the author included the god’s declaration that the Spartan system of laws would be better than those of all the other Greek cities. Thus, despite closely following Herodotus’ text, Plutarch seems to have used Diodorus (= Ephorus) to supplement it. Other echoes of the connection between divine agency and the origin of the Spartan constitution can be found in Xenophon (Lac. 8.5) and Plato (Resp. 691d–692a).
6 On internal and external prolepsis, see de Jong (2007) 5. On Plutarch’s use of this technique, see Beck (2007) and in this volume. See also Brench in this volume.
pline (Lyc. 22); the education of the adult population (Lyc. 24–25); the election of the Gerousia (Lyc. 26); burial norms (Lyc. 27). Plutarch, however, employing his typical biographical technique, shapes the narrative so that he can once more give prominence to Delphi and the Pythian god towards the end of the Life. Apart from the need to create a conclusion for a biography that contains very few data about the protagonist, Plutarch’s choice can be reasonably explained by the fact that the information about the constitution alone was not enough to show the impact of Lycurgus on the history of Sparta and her future generations.

At the end of the long section briefly summarised above, Plutarch portrays Lycurgus returning to Delphi after completing his program of radical changes in order to ‘leave the constitution immortal and immovable for the future’ (ἀθάνατον αὐτὴν ἀπολιπεῖν καὶ ἀκίνητον εἰς τὸ μέλλον, Lyc. 29.1). Before leaving Sparta, however, he made the kings, the elders, and all of the citizens swear that they would continue to apply the existing constitution until his return. In this case too, Plutarch uses a verb (ἀπαίρω) that indicates departure from Sparta rather than a simple movement towards Delphi: ‘he set out for Delphi’ (ἀπῆρεν εἰς τοὺς Δελφοὺς, Lyc. 29.4). Once again, then, Plutarch presents Lycurgus’ journey from the protagonist’s perspective as a complete separation from his hometown. This time, moreover, to some extent Lycurgus seems to have tried to ‘seal’ Sparta off from outside contacts and potentially negative external influences, which could contaminate the purity of the Spartan system, just as anticipated by Plutarch earlier in the Life with regard to the prohibition against travelling abroad and admitting foreigners (Lyc. 27.6–9).

The scene at Delphi repeats that in chapter 5 of the Life. Lycurgus made an offering and subsequently interrogated the oracle (Lyc. 29.5–6):

παραγενόμενος δὲ πρὸς τὸ μαντεῖον καὶ τῷ θεῷ θύσας, ἠρώτησεν εἰ καλῶς οἱ νόμοι καὶ ἰκανῶς πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν καὶ ἀρετὴν πάλεως κείμενοι τυγχάνουσιν, ἀποκριναμένου δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῖς νόμοις καλῶς κείσαται καὶ τὴν πόλιν ἐνδοξοτάτην διαμενεῖν τῇ Δυκούργῳ χρωμένην πολιτεία, τὸ μάντευμα γραφάμενος εἰς Σπάρτην ἀπέστειλεν.

Once he reached the oracle and sacrificed to the god, he asked whether the laws that he had laid down were of sufficient quality for the happiness and the virtue of the city. As the god replied that the laws were established well and the city would continue being held in high esteem by using the constitution of Lycurgus, having written the response, he sent it to Sparta.

Despite the characteristic oracular style, one can notice that, in addition to answering Lycurgus’ question, the god also gave him a message for Sparta. According to Plutarch’s narration, as we saw earlier in this chapter, Lycurgus must have already known that his constitution, being supported by the god, was good. His query concerned the future of Sparta and the preservation of happiness and virtue: the god’s reply, then, spoke to the Spartans directly. Just as in the first oracle, here as well two different temporal layers—present and future—are intertwined: as long as the Spartans would maintain their present condition, determined by the Lycurgan constitution, Sparta’s future would be glorious.
Lycurgus’ subsequent decision not to return to Sparta and to put an end to his life forced the Spartans to remain faithful to their existing laws, keeping their oath. Thus, thanks to the self-sacrifice of Lycurgus, whose intentions appear to have been clear even before leaving Sparta, Delphi and the oracle became counterparts in a covenant with Sparta guaranteed by their respect of its constitution, a bond that linked them for centuries.⁸

The Life of Lysander

The Life of Lycurgus already anticipates (with an external prolepsis) that the Spartan general Lysander, despatching to Sparta a huge sum of money after his victories in Asia and Greece against the Athenians, later filled the city with love of riches (φιλοπλουτια) and luxury (πρωφη), and irremediably overturned (literally ‘subdued’, καταπολεμήσασαι) the laws of Lycurgus (Lyc. 30.1). The Life of Lysander begins with an opening section that confirms the ambiguous character of the protagonist and alerts the readers to his problematic relationship with Sparta, a theme that is emblematically related to Delphi.

Plutarch narrates that still in his time inside the treasury of the Acanthians at Delphi there was a statue of a man with long beard and hair, whom many identified as Brasidas because of the inscription reading ‘Brasidas and the Acanthians from the spoils of the Athenians’ (Βρασίδας κοι Ἀκάνθιοι ἀπ᾽ Ἀθηναίων). Plutarch, however, explains that the statue represented Lysander, recalling the traditional custom established by Lycurgus according to which the Spartan soldiers had to remain unshaven so as to make the handsome (καλὸς) look more attractive (ἐὐπρέπεστοι) and the ugly (αισχροῖς) more fearful (φοβερῶτεροί) (Lys. 1.1–3).⁹

Modern scholars have convincingly associated these adjectives with moral categories as much as with aesthetic ones, emphasising how Lysander was portrayed as a figure very difficult to interpret: was he good or bad?¹⁰ Indeed, the style of the statue symbolically expresses the idea that Lysander—as atypical a Spartan as Brasidas—

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⁸ Manfredini and Piccirilli (1980) 284 argue that leaving the city after changing its laws, so that the citizens can become accustomed to them, was a common motif for ancient legislators. They also suggest that in this respect the tradition about Solon probably influenced Plutarch’s account of Lycurgus. Despite the similarity concerning the separation from their countries, the differences between Lycurgus and Solon are remarkable too. For after completing his reforms in Athens, Solon started travelling, but later returned to Athens (cf. Plu. Sol. 29.1–2), while Lycurgus’ separation from Sparta was definitive.

⁹ Cf. Plu. Lyc. 22.2 and Apophth. Lac. 228 E; Xen. Lac. 11.3.

¹⁰ Stadter (1992) 42. Duff (1999) 165 suggests that Lysander conformed to Brasidas’ pattern, while he rejects the idea that Brasidas represented the Spartan tradition, since he was an ‘atypical’ Spartan, contra Mossman (1991) 111. On Plutarch’s use of statues to describe not only the physical traits of the protagonists but also their moral qualities, see Wardman (1967), (1974) 140–152; Mossman (1991); Tatum (1996) especially 135–139; Duff (1999) 163–165.
challenged the Lycurgan tradition, a topic that Plutarch examines throughout the Life. The fact that Delphi was the stage where Lysander’s ambivalence, crystallised into a statue, was put on display and still generated uncertainty centuries after his death is very significant. Just as in the Life of Lycurgus, here too Delphi and Sparta are closely interconnected and their ties prove again to have been very strong.

Similarly, different temporal dimensions—the time of Lycurgus, the time of Lysander, the time of Plutarch/the external narrator, and, indirectly, the undetermined time of the readers of the Life—merge into one another. For, on the one hand, the statue links together various historical periods because of Lysander’s emulation of (and, as Plutarch seems to suggest, difference from) the Lycurgan tradition. On the other hand, the Life encourages the readers to assess and evaluate different phases of Spartan history, that of Lycurgus as much as those of Brasidas and Lysander. Through the pair Lysander–Sulla, moreover, Plutarch invites the readers to compare and contrast these periods of Spartan history with the time of Sulla and their present time, in some respects still showing the scars of Sulla’s campaigns in Greece. Finally, while in the case of the Parallel Lives’ immediate audience the time of the readers partly coincides with Plutarch’s time, it can also differ if we consider the future readership that Plutarch surely envisaged.

Delphi, therefore, constitutes the ideal centre where different past and present times are made to converge. It also represents the place where the future of Sparta is anticipated. In particular, the first chapter of the Life of Lysander makes the readers foresee the development of the narration and Lysander’s involvement with Delphi when he was navarch of Sparta (Lys. 18.1–3):

ο δὲ Λύσανδρος ἔστησεν ἀπὸ τῶν λαυφύρων ἐν Δελφοῖς αὐτοῦ χαλκῆν εἰκόνα καὶ τῶν ναυάρχων ἑκάστου, καὶ χρυσοῦς ἀστέρας τῶν Διοσκούρων, οἱ πρὸ τῶν Λευκτρικῶν ἡμαρτήσανταν. ἐν δὲ τῷ Βρασίδῳ καὶ Ἀκάνθιον θησαυρὸν τρίήρης ἔκειτο διὰ χρυσοῦ πεποιημένη καὶ ἐλέφαντας δύον πιγίων, ἣν Κύρος αὐτῷ νικητηρίων ἐπεμψεν. Ἀναξανδρίδης δ’ ὁ Δελφὸς ἱστορεῖ καὶ παρακαταθήκῃ τὴν ἐνταῦθα Λυσανδρίου κείσα τάλαντον ἄργυρου καὶ μνᾶς πεντήκοντα δύο καὶ πρός τούτος ἕνδεκα στατήρας, οὓς ὀμολογομένα γράφων τοῖς περὶ τῆς πενίας τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ὀμολογομένους.

At Delphi, from the spoils of war Lysander set up a bronze statue of himself and each one of the navarchs, and golden stars of the Dioscuri, which disappeared before the events at Leuctra. A trireme two cubits long, made of gold and ivory, which Cyrus sent him as a prize of victory, was placed in the treasury of Brasidas and the Acanthians. The Delphian Anaxandrides also records that a deposit of Lysander lies there, consisting of a talent of silver, fifty-two minas, and, in addition to this, eleven staters too, but he writes something that does not correspond with the information commonly accepted about Lysander’s poverty.

In this passage too, then, the presence of a Spartan leader at Delphi is connected with a great change for Sparta (the establishment of Sparta’s hegemony over the other Greek states), which is vividly put on display just as at the beginning of the Life. Indeed, the complex monumental sculptures described by Plutarch celebrated the Spartan victory at Aegospotami, where the Dioscuri were thought to have assisted the Spartans, as suggested by the vision of two stars shining above the helm of
Lysander’s ship (Lys. 12.1). At the same time, however, Plutarch projects the readers towards the end of Sparta’s imperialism by mentioning the disappearance of the golden stars before the battle of Leuctra (another case of external/extradiegetic prolepsis). Lastly, the connection between different historical episodes and time layers also involves the anticipation of Lysander’s conspiracy to subvert the Spartan constitution and abolish the dyarchy, traditionally correlated with the Dioscuri (an internal prolepsis).¹¹ For the expensive and luxurious materials employed to create the sculptures and Lysander’s very large deposit contrasted markedly with Lycurgus’ rejection of any form of luxury. This may be considered an act of arrogance and a serious alteration of the relationship between the Pythian god and the Spartan leadership. Such a distortion of a key aspect of the Lycurcan tradition became evident both when Lysander favoured Agesilaus’ accession to the throne of Sparta by interpreting an obscure oracle in his favour (Lys. 22.11–12; cf. Ages. 3.6–8; De Pyth. or. 399 B-C; Xen. Hell. 3.3.4) and when, later in his life, he started to fabricate false oracular responses and tried to bribe the Pythia in order to convince the Spartans that the kingship of Sparta should not remain a prerogative of the two Spartan royal families only, but should return to all of the Heracleides or the Spartiates (Lys. 24.3–26.6). Indeed, one would hardly imagine a more sacrilegious machination for a Spartan.¹²

Conclusion

In both the Life of Lycurgus and the Life of Lysander, Delphi and the relationship between the oracle and Sparta play an important role, which is not limited to the time when the encounters between the protagonists and the Pythian god occurred. Rather, as we have shown, Delphi constitutes a symbolic place with which the most important phases of Spartan history (at least, those that Plutarch discusses in his biographies) are associated: the birth of the Spartan constitution and the crisis of Sparta in the fourth century BCE. The centrality of Delphi in Spartan history and the conflation of various temporal dimensions are closely connected with a specific idea of movement (a separation from Sparta) in the Life of Lycurgus and with material objects in the Life of Lysander. Indeed, in the interrelation between Delphi and Sparta place and time cannot be considered separately.

¹² On the manipulation and abuse of the oracles, see Stadter (2005) 203–205.