

5.1. Plutarch / The Great Rhetra of Sparta

From Life of Lycurgus of Sparta, 6—The orally established constitution of ancient Sparta, according to legend established by Lycurgus at the direction of the oracle at Delphi. It is preserved in Plutarch, who quotes the rhetra and an addition, which scholars call “the rider.” Plutarch is writing in the late 1st century CE; the rhetra dates from the Archaic period (8th or 7th century BCE).

Plut. *Lyc.* 6. Source: Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives*. Trans. John Dryden. London: J.M. Dent, 1910.

So eager was Lycurgus for the establishment of this form of government, that he obtained an oracle from Delphi about it, which they call a ‘rhetra’. And this is the way it runs:

When thou has built a temple to Zeus Syllanius and Athena Syllania, divided the people into phylai, and divided them into ‘obai’, and established a Gerousia of thirty including the Archagetai, then from time to time ‘appellazein’ between Babyka and Knakion, and there introduce and repeal measures; but the Demos must have the decision and the power.

In these clauses, the phylai and obai refer to divisions and distributions of the people into parts, some of which are named clans and others obes. By Archagetai the Kings are meant, and appellazein means ‘to assemble’ the people, and that the beginning and cause of the constitution was the Pythian. The Babyka is now called Cheimarros, and the Knakion the Oineus; but Aristotle says that the Knakion is a river and Babyka is a bridge. Between these they held their assemblies, having neither halls nor any other kind of building for the purpose. For thus Lycurgus thought that good counsel (eubouleia) was not promoted, but rather discouraged, since the serious purposes of an assembly were rendered foolish and futile by vain thoughts,

as they gazed upon statues, and paintings, or scenic embellishments (‘proscenia of theaters’), or extravagantly decorated roofs of Bouleuteria. When the multitude was assembled thus, no one of them was permitted to make a motion, but the motion laid before them by the Gerontes and Kings could be accepted or rejected by the Demos.¹

Later, however, when the Demos, by additions and subtractions perverted and distorted the sense of motions laid before them, the Kings Polydoros and Theopompos inserted the following clause in the Rhetra:

But if the Demos should choose badly, the Gerontes and Kings shall be ‘apostateres’—

That is, they should not ratify the vote, but dismiss and dissolve the Assembly outright, on the ground that it was perverting and changing the motion contrary to the best interests of the state. And they were actually able to persuade the city that the God authorized this addition to the Rhetra... !

Here is a different translation of the Rhetra from Daniel Ogden:

[I order you,] having founded a temple of Zeus Syllanios and Athene Syllania, having tribed [or preserved] the tribes and obeyed the obes, having established thirty as a council of elders together with the leaders/kings, from time to time to celebrate Apollo/hold assemblies between Babyca and Cnacion, thus to bring in and to set aside. Ultimate authority and power is to be the people’s.

[I order that] if the people speaks crookedly, the elders and leaders/kings be set aside.

¹ The popular assembly.