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BOOK REVIEWS

Nicolette A. Pavlides, *The Hero Cults of Sparta. Local Religion in a Greek City*, London: Bloomsbury, 2023. 288 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78831-300-1.

This book explores the hero cults of Sparta in the Archaic and Classical periods through the rich archaeological remains and literary sources. The volume is one of the first comprehensive investigations of the hero cults of Sparta. Pavlides approaches these cults as local religious traditions in a fresh and welcome departure from traditional scholarship, which has considered Sparta distinct from other ancient Greek city-states because of its supposed seclusion and militaristic, quasi-authoritarian society. This rather distorted image appears not only in academic works but also in the popular imagination, which has linked Sparta with racial supremacist ideologies. The book, therefore, is aligned with the efforts of scholars who have begun to deconstruct the “Spartan mirage” through careful examinations of the region’s culture and history.¹ Also refreshing is Pavlides’s avoidance of a narrowly political perspective, in particular, moving beyond the longstanding explanation for the large number of hero cults in Sparta as a form of propaganda supporting a conscious ethnic ideology. Without disregarding the significance of the political dimension of the cults, Pavlides follows a path less traveled with a focus on their social and religious significance for the worshippers. Overall, then, rather than highlighting external stimuli such as political motivations, the book foregrounds specific contexts in Spartan communities during the Archaic and Classical periods. In studying these cults at the local level, Pavlides explores the local idiosyncrasies of ancient Greek religion and the place of heroes within it. The volume is also well illustrated and brings plans of the cultic places and photos of the terracottas, architectural elements of the shrines, vases and others.

The book consists of an introduction that lays out its aims and plan followed by six chapters and final conclusions. Chapter 1 provides a framework for the discussion with an examination of the meanings of the term “hero” and the evidence for hero cults in early Greece, beginning with early literature, especially Homer and Hesiod. Pavlides distinguishes carefully between hero cults and the veneration of the dead, reviewing the archaeological evidence from the Geometric and Archaic periods. Particularly valuable are the observations about the tendency to generalize the term “hero” such that some scholars classify long-dead or recently deceased individuals whose tombs received honors as heroes despite the lack of evidence for the use of the term by those who engaged in these practices. One of the main merits of this chapter is the demonstration that the term was not static, at times including the veneration of those killed in battle or, during the Hellenistic period, the recently deceased. Pavlides concludes the chapter by observing that the similarities between hero cults and the veneration of the dead reflect the general perception that powerful human beings, real or mythological, deserved acknowledgment and veneration in cult.

Chapters 2 and 3 present the evidence for hero cults in Sparta and are accompanied by a map and a chart of the sites and finds. Chapter 2 presents the material associated with the heroes’ shrines. To identify these sites, Pavlides considers the typology of the votive deposits accumulated within the temenos, any available inscriptions, and the architectural remains. The catalogue of the sites and

¹ P. Cartledge (1979). *Sparta and Lakonia*, London/New York: Routledge; S. Hodkinson and A. Powell (1999): *Sparta: New Perspectives*, London: Duckworth; A. Powell (2018). ‘Sparta: Reconstructing History from Secrecy, Lies and Myth’, in: A. Powell (ed.), *A Companion to Sparta (vol. 1)*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 3–28. I. Malkin (1994): *Myth and Territory in the Spartan Mediterranean*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the overview of the votives, reliefs, pottery, clay and lead figurines, and other metal objects together with the chronology of each site provides not only the context for the arguments in the remaining chapters but also a useful framework for exploring and interpreting hero cults generally and, thus, will certainly be of great use for scholars interested in the topic.

In Chapter 3, the author discusses in detail the votive patterns, architecture, and topography of the cult sites, showing that most of the shrines were located near the civic center of the polis of Sparta. She remarks that the architectural designs of these shrines often mirror those of the main temples in the polis, suggesting that Spartan hero cult was closely tied to civic religion, with members of the community uniting around the worship of local figures. Observing that some cults, however, seem also to have been important to the families that established them, Pavlides concludes that hero cults generally were not in competition with the polis cults but, rather, complemented them.

Chapter 4 presents the textual evidence for the sites at which heroes were venerated in Sparta, in particular, the Menelaion where Menelaus and Helen were worshiped, the Amyklaion where Hyacinthus and Apollo were worshipped, and the cult of the Dioskouroi. Pavlides shows that these local hero cults reflected the developing communal and social consciousness of the polis and emphasizes their diversity. Thus, while the cult practices at the Meneleaion resembled those for divinities, with Menelaus and Helen being treated as gods, these figures retained their heroic identity. She also argues that at the Amyklaion, Hyakinthos may have been an older divinity whose cult preceded that of Apollo, or both Hyakinthos and Apollo may have been introduced at the site some time after it first came to be considered sacred. The author demonstrates that together, these cults exemplify how local religious needs fueled the creation of various types of hero cults in response to changes in the communities that supported them over time.

The focus in Chapter 5 is on the heroization of historical individuals such as King Leonidas, the Spartans who died at Thermopylae, and Chilon. Pavlides shows that, though it is not certain that the Spartan kings were heroized, they had a communal importance that encompassed ways of thought similar to the conceptualization of heroes as symbols of the polis. Likewise, stamen and the war dead were considered exceptional individuals who deserved the most distinguished post-mortem treatment, that is, heroization. Chapter 6 expands this discussion with a consideration of other Spartan burials that provide archaeological evidence of connections to hero cults, including one from the Geometric period and two cult sites from the first century BCE (Ergatikos Katoikies and the Stravropoulos plot).

Pavlides's study of the hero cult tradition in Sparta provides from late eighth and early seventh century to the Roman period, then, demonstrates the importance of local perspectives on the religion and habits of the polis. The book also has the great merit of presenting hero cult as a dynamic rather than a monolithic phenomenon in which the boundaries between divine, heroic, and mortal remained fluid, allowing for a great deal of variation in cult practices. This stimulating volume contributes both to understanding and rethinking the place and function of heroes in ancient Greek religion. Accordingly, it will be of interest to those wishing to know more about not only Spartan religion but also hero cults generally and their many dimensions and interactions with other features of local pantheons.

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