

Convergent Warrior Cultures: Ancient Sparta and Pre-Modern Japan

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Abstract:

On the surface, there would appear to be few similarities between two such distinct cultures as Sparta at its peak and pre-modern (specifically Heian- and Kamakura-era) Japan. The crucible of demographic, topographic and geographic challenges in the Peloponnesus and in the Japanese archipelago differ greatly, and as a result, the weapons and strategies used by the representative warrior figures (hoplites and samurai) naturally diverged as well. These surface differences notwithstanding, strong cultural and even tactical similarities abound.

In this paper, I will identify key examples of convergence between warrior cultures in these two very different times and places. Specifically, each society approached the topic of gender and sexuality, childrearing and other domestic matters, and women's status in almost eerily similar ways. In particular, elite women in these societies enjoyed rights and freedoms denied women almost anywhere else in recorded human history until the modern era.

I will offer tentative conclusions as to how and why two such radically different societies nonetheless converged so closely. To do so, it will be necessary to peel back the obfuscating layers of Laconophilia as well as Orientalist fantasies about the samurai; the true values which appear to have been held by Spartiates and by Heian-era *bushi* (samurai) bear little resemblance to the heavily embellished and hypermasculine popular cultural depictions of these societies.