Sexuality and the Body-Politic: Polyandry in Sparta

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Abstract:

This paper re-examines polyandry in classical Sparta as a distinctive form of socially sanctioned and state-encouraged erotic and civic practice. Defined as the negotiated maintenance of multiple sexual relationships by married women, Spartan polyandry functioned not as a private anomaly but as a civic mechanism serving demographic stability and eugenic aims, particularly in marriages between older men and younger wives. Drawing on a critical reading of Xenophon, Polybius, Plutarch, and other ancient sources, the study situates wife-sharing within a biopolitical framework characteristic of Sparta's civic mentality and ideological matrix, in which sexual desire was subordinated to collective ideals of reproduction, discipline, and cohesion.

Although Spartan women enjoyed greater social and economic autonomy than their counterparts elsewhere in Greece, gender relations within polyandry remained decisively asymmetrical. Male authority determined legitimacy and access, while women exercised agency only within constrained boundaries—selecting partners and advancing family interests when circumstances allowed. The *syssitia*, communal dining groups central to Spartan life, are interpreted as performative homosocial spaces shaped by honour, secrecy, and emotional discipline, where masculine identity, rivalry, and solidarity could encourage, through subtle psychological pressure, the emergence of polyandrous arrangements.

Methodologically, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating historical and philological analysis with gender theory and sociology. In doing so, it interprets Spartan polyandry as a state-shaped system of negotiated desire and affective regulation, while contributing to gender studies by showing how erotic practices could sustain political aims yet permit limited individual agency within a pre-modern form of authoritarian civic order.

Keywords:

Eugenics, gender relations, reproductive politics, state control.