

Licurgo di Sparta nella letteratura greca e latina

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Preview

In the field of Spartan studies, and of research on Lycurgus in particular, long shaped by works focused on discrete historical or institutional questions, the appearance of Martina Gatto's *Licurgo di Sparta nella letteratura greca e latina* is especially timely. The volume, based on her doctoral dissertation at the Università di Roma Tor Vergata, is devoted to the reception of the Spartan lawgiver in the Greek and Latin traditions. It situates itself within a well-established scholarly tradition, one often approached through thematic or narrowly focused perspectives, and offers a comprehensive reconstruction of the processes through which the image of Lycurgus was transmitted and reinterpreted in subsequent periods.

The book is structured in six chapters that examine the sources diachronically, enabling the reader to trace the development of the Spartan lawgiver across the various cultural contexts in which this figure was received and reworked.

The volume opens with an "Introduction", structured in two parts. The first outlines the methodological framework guiding the study, which calls for a comprehensive reconsideration of all available sources, including minor ones, with the aim of broadening the documentary basis from which the figure of Lycurgus may be approached and of preparing the reader for the analysis that follows. The second offers a concise *status quaestionis*, focusing on the main interpretative trends developed from the nineteenth century to the present, with particular attention to the debate over the historicity of the lawgiver and the persistent difficulty of reaching definitive conclusions. The introduction thus provides a historiographical framework of reference and situates the reader before a problem whose complexity has gradually led scholars to distinguish between the figure of Lycurgus and the history of Sparta. The aim of the volume is not to advance a new historical

reconstruction, but rather to promote a renewed reading of the lawgiver through the history of his reception.

The first chapter, “Le prime attestazioni di Licurgo nel V sec. a.C.”, focuses on the earliest testimonies concerning Lycurgus and on the manner in which, at a distance of roughly two centuries, the figure enters the written tradition. The analysis begins with the earliest surviving references in Simonides and Herodotus, where, alongside occasionally consistent information, the dynastic placement of Lycurgus is not yet firmly established. This oscillation, linking him alternatively to opposing royal houses, reveals a fundamental instability in the historical identification of the lawgiver and his gradual use as a marker of aristocratic prestige. At this stage, the tradition remains fluid.

From the Herodotean account, the author identifies interpretative strands that would exert lasting influence on the later tradition. Prominent among these is the question of the origin of the laws, understood either as divinely inspired through their association with the Pythia and the Delphic sanctuary, or as the result of Cretan importation. Within this framework, particular importance attaches to the attribution of *eunomia* to Lycurgus, a tradition later reinforced by the testimony of Cyriacus of Ancona, who reports a now-lost Delphic inscription said to reproduce verses transmitted by Herodotus. The chapter also examines the reconstruction of Lycurgus’ cult, traceable from Herodotus to Aristotle and later authors, with references in Nicolaus of Damascus and the *Suda* suggesting the existence of a hero cult. The discussion advances hypotheses such as the possible original connection between the *syssitia* and military divisions, thereby shaping the image of a lawgiver endowed with direct military experience, as reported by Plutarch and attributed to Hippias (Plut. *Lyc.* 23, 1). This representation undergoes significant transformation in the fourth century BCE, when Lycurgus becomes increasingly associated with political stability and institutional order, as indicated by Demetrius of Phalerum and Aristotle. The chapter concludes with an excursus on fifth-century genealogical traditions, including the notice transmitted by Plutarch and attributed to Simonides, as well as with consideration of authors such as Pindar, Hellanicus, and Thucydides, whose silence regarding Lycurgus is interpreted in light of their respective historiographical priorities.

The second chapter, “Licurgo nel IV sec. a.C.”, addresses one of the central axes of the volume. The analysis is directed not only toward the construction of the so-called “Spartan mirage” and the idealization of Sparta and its lawgiver, but above all toward demonstrating Lycurgus’ presence within the political reflections of the period, as well as the functions and modalities that this presence assumes.

The chapter begins by situating Lycurgus within the framework of the Spartan *politeiai*, engaging with authors such as Critias, and with

Isocrates' *Panathenaicus*, although Lycurgus does not occupy a prominent place in contemporary oratory. It thereby clarifies the political function attributed to the lawgiver in classical thought. The discussion is correspondingly dense, as it moves from Xenophon's *Politeia*, examined in detail, to Plato and Aristotle, and to the historiographical tradition extending from Ephorus to Timaeus and Dieuchidas of Megara. Throughout, the chapter underscores the centrality of Lycurgus as a normative point of reference within fourth-century political theory.

The third chapter, "Le fonti greche di età ellenistica e le fonti laconiche", offers a detailed survey of Greek sources from the Hellenistic period of various kinds, ranging from the inscription of Isyllus of Epidaurus to the erudite and biographical works of Hermippus, Philostephanus, Hieronymus, and Satyrus. A further section examines later *politeiai*, including those associated with the Stoic milieu, such as Persaeus of Citium and Sphaerus of Borysthenes, as well as that of Dioscorides, an author of uncertain identification. The analysis then extends to figures such as Eratosthenes, Apollodorus, Polybius, and Posidonius, alongside Hellenistic Laconian sources of a memorial character, including Sosibius and Aristocrates. The discussion returns as well to constitutional writings concerning Sparta, such as those attributed to Dicaearchus, and the aforementioned Dioscorides, together with other authors of fourth-century constitutions. The systematic treatment of testimonia that are often scattered and difficult to contextualize constitutes one of the chapter's most significant contributions, as it allows the author to delineate the general framework and scope of the surviving evidence.

The fourth chapter, "Licurgo tra l'età tardo-repubblicana e la prima età imperiale", draws on both Greek and Latin sources from the late Republican and early Imperial periods. Diodorus, in the *Bibliotheca historica*, provides a crucial point of departure by elaborating the divine dimension of the lawgiver through parallels with Minos and Crete, as well as with Zoroaster, Zalmoxis, and Moses, within an interpretative framework that, according to Gatto, reflects a rationalizing tendency. These elements serve to articulate a theory of legislative legitimacy grounded in the nexus between divine will and political authority. From Diodorus the analysis moves to Strabo, who is less inclined toward rationalization and more open to historical plausibility, and examines the relationship between Lycurgus and the Delphic oracles. The discussion then turns to Nicolaus of Damascus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, where the parallels between Lycurgus, Romulus, and Numa underscore the continuity posited between Greece and Rome. The chapter also considers the presence of the lawgiver in Cicero, both in *De re publica* and in other works, and surveys Augustan and Imperial Latin historiography, from Livy and Justin to Tacitus. The chapter thus highlights the progressive integration of Lycurgus into interpretative frameworks that are fully Romanized.

The fifth chapter, “La Vita di Licurgo e il *Corpus plutarcheum*”, is devoted entirely to Plutarch. It offers a careful analysis of the Plutarchan corpus, showing how in this author the idealization of Lycurgus reaches its culmination. Plutarch gathers the available traditions and shapes the complex, at times hieratic, figure that has come down to us. Gatto argues that he does not function merely as a compiler, but introduces his own interpretative framework, elevating Lycurgus as both lawgiver and symbolic founder of Sparta. The study necessarily begins with the *Parallel Lives* of Lycurgus and Numa, with particular attention to their ethical dimension. Lycurgus emerges as a legislator intent on the moral improvement of the Spartans, so that his moralization and gradual elevation toward a quasi-divine status proceed in parallel. Section 5.2, “Il confronto con Numa e con gli altri personaggi plutarchei”, underscores the innovative character of the parallel between Lycurgus and Numa, in contrast to the earlier Latin tradition that had privileged Romulus as the primary point of comparison between Sparta and Rome. As the author explains, the choice of Numa lies in the anthropological and cultural affinity between the two figures, and above all in their shared ethical profile. In this section, Gatto examines the connection Plutarch establishes between Lycurgus and Solon before turning to the *Moralia*, where the lawgiver reappears as a paradigm of virtue and as the educator of a community. In this context, Lycurgus is presented as the mythical legislator who shapes the idealized image of Sparta.

The final chapter, “L’*exemplum* di Licurgo oltre Plutarco: dalla letteratura greca di età imperiale alla lessicografia bizantina”, traces the projection of Lycurgus’ figure in Imperial Greek literature and in the Byzantine tradition, thereby completing the diachronic arc of his reception. The analysis ranges from Pausanias and Lucian to the authors of the Second Sophistic, including Dio Chrysostom, Favorinus, Maximus of Tyre, and Aelius Aristides, before turning to the *Strategemata* of Polyaeus, where Lycurgus is credited with three stratagems.

Attention is devoted to the first of these, in which Polyaeus depicts Lycurgus as having appealed to the Pythia for political purposes, allegedly securing her support through rewards in order to legitimize his legislative measures. This episode, together with the others, contributes to shaping the image of a lawgiver endowed with strategic and political acumen. The endurance of the model of the “good legislator” is further traced in authors such as Origen, Julian, and Themistius, culminating in its consolidation within the lexicographical tradition represented by the *Suda*.

In the “Conclusioni”, the author makes explicit what the reader has already perceived throughout the diachronic survey of Lycurgus’ reception, namely that the lawgiver emerges as a far less monolithic figure than is often assumed. From the perspective of reception history, the study reveals a Lycurgus whose image has

been repeatedly reformulated, with different aspects emphasized according to the needs and concerns of each historical context. The construction of such a carefully articulated diachronic trajectory not only allows for the identification of the mechanisms of reception but also enables a return to the sources with greater clarity, restoring them to their specific contexts and situating them within a broader interpretative development that the volume itself helps to delineate.

The volume also includes two appendices. The first, “La Grande Rhetra: cenni sul problema e aggiornamento bibliografico”, provides an updated bibliographical survey and highlights the complexity of our knowledge of the *Great Rhetra*, as well as the current state of the question. The second, “La fortuna di Licurgo e del modello politico spartano: autori antichi riletti da pensatori francesi del secondo Cinquecento”, examines the reception of the Spartan political model in sixteenth-century France, with particular attention to Jean Bodin and Montaigne, and includes its own bibliographical section. Despite their apparent diversity, both appendices respond to issues that arise naturally from the volume as a whole. On the one hand, they address the need to engage with the legislative tradition attributed to Lycurgus; on the other, they extend the diachronic trajectory of reception, making it possible to observe the persistence of the Spartan lawgiver in later intellectual contexts.

While the study succeeds in offering a valuable and comprehensive reconstruction of Lycurgus’ reception, its methodological choice to privilege diachronic description over interpretative synthesis occasionally leaves the reader wishing for a more explicit critical positioning of the Lycurgan figure itself. The volume thus functions primarily as a highly reliable descriptive instrument, mapping the tradition with precision while deliberately refraining from advancing a stronger interpretative reading. This tension becomes particularly visible in the two appendices, which implicitly open paths either toward a broader reception history or toward a more focused engagement with the normative and historical dimensions of Lycurgan legislation.

As a final component of the volume, an extensive bibliography, spanning more than forty pages, attests to the breadth of the research and to the careful engagement with the critical tradition on the subject; no significant references for the study of Lycurgus and his reception appear to be missing. The indices of names, places, and sources complete the work, which rests on a solid historiographical foundation and confirms the rigor and scope of a study that constitutes a substantial and carefully argued contribution to scholarship on the Lycurgan tradition.