Essay of Xenophon Athenians «Lacedaemonion Politeia», as the main source for the study of the laws of Lycurgus Spartanians

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Abstract.
This article is devoted to the analysis of the work of the famous ancient Greek writer, historian and politician of the middle of the 5th – the first half of the 4th centuries BC Xenophon Athenians «Lacedaemonion Politeia», as the main source for studying the laws of King Lycurgus of Sparta.

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This work was written approximately in the 1st century IV century BC and primarily dedicated to Xenophon's interpretation of the main Spartan laws introduced by the famous Spartan politician and reformer Lycurgus of Sparta approximately between the 9th and 6th centuries BC. Sometimes the author adds his thoughts on the given laws, but in general, Xenophon, chapter by chapter (the total number of which is 15), recounts everything he knew and read about the laws of Lycurgus.

Xenophon Athenians is a famous ancient Greek politician, historian, philosopher and commander (approx. 440 – approx. 350 BC), who was born in Athens into an aristocratic family and went down in history as a famous military and political figure of the Ancient Greece, who supported Sparta and its oligarchic system of government all his life. The author wrote a large number of works on history, philosophy, politics and economics [1] [3] [4] [5] [6].

Returning to the work, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that throughout Xenophon’s retelling of the Spartan laws, the author's strong respect for Lycurgus is very clearly visible. For example, Xenophon very often calls the Spartan figure wise, intelligent and often adds the phrase «I am delighted»:

«2. Lycurgus only, who gave them the laws, in obedience to which they achieved prosperity – I am surprised at him, and consider him a most wise man. After all, by no means imitating other states, but, on the contrary, holding an opinion opposite to that of most other states, he achieved exceptional prosperity for his fatherland.» [2].

It can also be added that at the beginning of almost every chapter, Xenophon writes that the given laws and regulations are completely opposite to the laws of other Hellenes (for example, Boeotians or Athenians).

To be more specific, the author really researched the laws of Lycurgus in quite a lot of detail. For example, in Chapter I of his work, Xenophon recounted in his own words the laws related to a certain equality between women and men in Spartan society and emphasized that this was not the case in other Hellenistic states. The following passage just confirms the above:
4. And Lycurgus considered that even slaves were capable of making clothes, and for free women he recognized the birth of children as the most important thing, and therefore, first of all, he established that women should not less than men engage in physical exercises; then he established competitions in running and strength for both men and women, believing that stronger offspring are born from both strong spouses...» [2].

The author devoted the second, third and fourth chapters to the education of the Spartans, actually emphasizing that only the Spartans have the correct education system and only it can provide the best (primarily physical) development. For example, in order to develop a certain resilience and dexterity in children, they were given a small amount of food and if they ran out of food, they were allowed to steal it from others, but if the child was caught, he was severely punished. According to Xenophon, punishment was introduced to show that the child had failed in his task, which is more convincingly shown in the passage below:

8. It may be asked why, if Lycurgus considered theft to be a good thing, he assigned a cruel flogging to the one who got caught. I believe that he did this because in any training, people punish the one who does the job poorly. So the Spartans punish those caught stealing because they steal badly...» [2].

Also, in the second chapter, laws are mentioned about love between boys or men (referring to other territories of Ancient Greece, where this is not prohibited), in which it is forbidden in the territory of Sparta to go beyond friendly relations between men, but without providing for any severe punishments, except that it will be considered a disgrace:

But if it turns out that the body of a boy is lusted for, then Lycurgus, considering this a most shameful phenomenon, arranged so that in Lacedaemon those who were in love with boys abstained from them in the same way that parents abstain from sexual relations with children, or brothers and sisters from loving relationships with each other with a friend...» [2].

When a child grows up, it becomes completely independent, and during youth, he must first of all engage in his physical
training and hunting, in order to improve their fighting skills.

Xenophon dedicated the fifth chapter to the laws of Lycurgus, which are related to the diet of the Spartans, where drunkenness and gluttony are prohibited. Proper nutrition, according to Lycurgus as interpreted by Xenophon, contributes to the improvement of human health and physical form:

«...8. Lycurgus, also noticing that those who exercise due to nutrition become flourishing, healthy and strong, and idlers – puffy, ugly and weak, did not ignore this...» [2].

In the sixth chapter, Xenophon looked at the laws regarding children and slaves, where, according to the author of the Lacedaemonian Polity, both children and slaves could be used by different people, not just parents or masters:

«1. Moreover, his decisions differed greatly from the majority in regard to the following questions. Indeed, in other states, each disposes of his own children, slaves and property, and Lycurgus, wishing to arrange so that citizens would not harm each other in anything, but, on the contrary, would benefit, left to everyone equally dispose of both their children and strangers...» [2].

In the seventh chapter, it is forbidden to engage in enrichment and accumulation of money:

«...5. And he also forbade dishonestly accumulating wealth in the following way: first of all, he introduced such a coin that the appearance of even 10 minutes in the house would never remain hidden from the owners or slaves, since these 10 minutes would require a lot of space and a whole cart for transportation...» [2].

Xenophon devoted the eighth chapter to ephors (elected officials in Sparta) and their activities. For example, the author writes that compared to other states, it is in Sparta that the most influential people are not afraid of state power and quickly do everything they are assigned:

«...2. I judge this on this basis: in other states, more powerful people do not want to even think of them as if they are afraid of the authorities, but consider it unworthy of a free man; in Sparta, the most influential people please the authorities most of all, and are proud of their humility and the fact that when they are called, they execute orders by
running, and not by walking; for they think that if they themselves will strictly obey the authorities, then others will follow their example; that's exactly what happened...» [2].

The ninth chapter of Xenophon's work "Lacedaemonian Polity" is devoted to the choice between death and shame, where the author emphasizes that it is better to die than to live in shame all his life and what a life in contempt of others can lead to:

«...5. Often such a person is left without a place when those who are going to play ball with each other are divided into teams; during the festive choirs he is driven to the most shameful places; and in the streets he should give way and get up from his seats even before the younger ones; he has to keep his unmarried daughters at home, and he must bear the guilt before them for not marrying them; he has to put up with the fact that the hearth is left without a wife and still pay a fine for this; he should not walk around with a serene air or imitate people who are impeccable, otherwise he may be beaten by the best citizens...» [2].

Xenophon believes that one of the best laws introduced by Lycurgus is the law of virtue, which the author describes in chapter 10 of his work:

«...4. Is not Lycurgus' next institution worthy of great admiration? When he realized that citizens who wish [only] to privately take care of virtue are not able to increase the power and glory of their homelands, he in Sparta forced everyone to exercise in all sorts of virtues publicly by decision of the state. After all, just as private citizens, exercising in virtue, surpass those who neglect it, so Sparta, naturally, surpasses all states in its virtue, since only she cares about the moral perfection of her citizens in the state order...» [2].

For example, if an elderly person wants to enter the gerusia (the main legislative body of power in Sparta), then he must constantly do good deeds, primarily for the benefit of the state. If a person who lived on the territory of Sparta throughout his life, but did not do good deeds, then severe punishments fell on him (the author does not specify which ones).
Chapters 11 and 12 are primarily devoted to the organization of military affairs in Sparta and the proper construction of a military camp. For example, in chapter 11 Xenophon, recounting the laws of Lycurgus, mentions the distribution of soldiers during a campaign:

«...4. Having arranged everything in this way, he divided the horsemen and hoplites into 6 pestilence. Each mora, consisting of hoplites, has one polemarch, four lochags, elk penteconters, sixteen enomotarchs. And from these pestilences, at the word of the comma and, divisions are formed, either three or even six enomoties in a row...» [2].

Xenophon devoted chapters 13 and 15 to the laws of Lycurgus about the power of kings. More specifically, in Chapter 13, Xenophon, interpreting the laws of Lycurgus, says that during a military campaign, the Spartan king has absolute power over the army (for example, he must personally receive supplies from the army for both himself and his retinue), but and the king himself must do something before starting the campaign – he must make a sacrifice to Zeus and Athena and only then go to war. This is well illustrated in the passage mentioned below:

«...2. I want to submit for consideration the way the king goes on a campaign with an army. First of all, while still at home, he makes a sacrifice to Zeus-Agetor and the deities, his companions. If the sacrifices are favorable, the "bringer of fire" takes the fire from the altar and carries it ahead of everyone to the border of the state. Here the king again sacrifices to Zeus and Athena.

3. Only if both deities favor the undertaking, the king crosses the borders of the country...» [2].

The 15th and last chapter tells specifically about the power of the king in society, that is, what privileges he can receive while ruling, what he must do, etc. For example, according to the laws of Lycurgus as interpreted by Xenophon, the king must constantly engage in military campaigns and sacrifices, and legislative affairs to be left to gerusia and ephors. It is interesting that the ephors and the king himself must exchange oaths every month, primarily in order to confirm their power and position:

«...7. Ephors and kings exchange oaths every month: ephors
swear on behalf of the policy, the king - on his own behalf. The king swears to rule in accordance with the laws established in the state, and the policy undertakes to maintain royal power inviolable as long as the king is true to his oath…» [2].

Separately, I would like to consider chapter 14, where Xenophon talks about his attitude towards some changes in Spartan society during his lifetime, including changes in the laws of Sparta. First of all, Xenophon emphasizes that the Spartans in his time almost did not follow the laws of Lycurgus, he especially does not like the fact that, instead of participating in military campaigns, the kings of Sparta fight for power in their own state. This situation significantly worsens the relationship between the Spartans and other Hellenistic states.

After his reflections, Xenophon remarked:
«…7. However, one should not be at all surprised that such reprehensible deeds occur among them, since it is quite obvious that they do not obey either God or the laws of Lycurgus.» [2].

It can be concluded that the work of Xenophon Athenians entitled «Lacedaemonion Politeia» is a complete retelling of the laws of Lycurgus with some conclusions and comments of the author of this work. The work also shows Xenophon's very strong respect for Lycurgus himself and for the laws that the famous Spartan figure created in his time. On the other hand, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that Xenophon opposes socio-political changes during his lifetime and, as mentioned above, believes that these changes and non-compliance with the laws of Lycurgus lead only to the deterioration of relations between Sparta and other states of Ancient Greece

It should also be added that Xenophon adheres to political views, primarily those that existed in Sparta at the time of Lycurgus, but it is quite difficult to call them completely oligarchic. According to the same Xenophon, it can be concluded that Sparta had a monarchy with some elements of an oligarchy. In modern words, it is a constitutional monarchy, that is, the king does only what he was told (in this case, he is primarily engaged in military campaigns) the top of the
legislative power of Sparta – the gerusia, which included only aristocrats-oligarchs with their own views and could be elected to the post of the same the king (of which the Spartans had two) of people who were useful primarily to them, and not to the state, which, by the way, Xenophon condemns.

References: