# Battle Of Thermopylae From Tyrtaeus Poems

The testimony of ancient sources demonstrate that Sparta was a military oriented society. The famed Spartan poet, Tyrtaeus, who composed his many of verses during the Second Messenian War, highlights the importance of Spartan military in comparison to other virtues, writing:

“I would not rate a man worth mention or account for skill in running or wrestling, not even if he had a Cyclops’ size and strength or outstripped in the race the Thracian Boreas or if he surpassed Tithonos in good looks or Midas and Kinyras in their wealth or outshone Pelops son of Tantalos in kingliness or had Adrastos’ gift of honeyed speech and every virtue, save a warrior’s might…”

The evidence provided by Tyrtaeus is important due to it coming from a native Spartan, whereas the majority of other commentators are writing from an external perspective based on second hand information. It is evident from Tyrtaeus’s writings that Sparta clearly places value on military strength over other skills and attributes. This position is further supported by evidence from additional ancient sources. Sparta adhered to a strict and regimented warrior code. The military indoctrinated soldiers into believing that it was honorable to die in battle, whereas unwarranted retreat or surrender was viewed as the height of cowardice. In his Histories Herodotus draws attention to this fact with the case of the Aristodemus, who was a soldier during the Battle of Thermopylae. However, due to a purported eye condition, he was ordered by King Leonidas to return to Sparta before the battle, along with another solider, Eurytus. But according to Herodotus, Eurytus turned back and, though blind, fought valiantly against the Persians. When news of this reached home, Aristodemus was treated with shame and disrespect, with Herodotus recounting ‘he had reproach and dishonor… no one of the Spartans would either give him light for a fire or speak with him…he was called Aristodemus the coward’. Furthermore, Herodotus recounts that another soldier, Pantites, who was sent as a messenger, failed to reach Thermopylae in time. As a result, when he returned to Sparta and ‘found himself dishonored, is said to have strangled himself’.

Further, Herodotus also notes that outsiders made specific reference to Sparta’s military prowess and dedication. This is particularly the case in a discussion between the Persian King, Xerxes, and Damaratos, an exiled Spartan king, who states that ‘they are the best warriors on earth…they must never flee from the battle before any multitude of men, but must abide at their post and there conquer or die’. This passage highlights the important role that military values played in Spartan society. Herodotus also notes that a similar message is inscribed on the famed Spartan monument erected at Thermopylae, which reads ‘Go, tell the Spartans, stranger passing by that here, obedient to their laws, we lie’.

The ancient sources clearly illustrate that cowardice was a distinctly issue that was not only subject to immense social exclusion, but also political exclusion. Those who were deemed to be cowards were barred from holding office, prohibited from marriage, and were unable to buy and purchase goods. Indeed, Xenophon, in Spartan Society, goes so far as to argue death was the appropriate punishment for cowardice, writing ‘when disgrace is imposed on cowards, I am certainly not surprised that death is preferred to a life of dishonor an ignominy’.