Kennell, Nigel **M. The Gymnasium of Virtue: Education and Culture in Ancient Sparta. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995. Pp. 241. Notes, bibliography, illustrations, index, two appendices, $39.95 cb.**

Based on his 1985 University of Toronto dissertation on ìThe Public Institutions of Roman Sparta, Kennellís industrious revisionist study challenges the well-entrenched image of early Spartan education as a distinctively totalitarian and brutal but enduring system of severe and primitive customs. In Kennellís Spartan educational system (*agoge*), what was distinctive was not very early and what was early was not very distinctive. He approaches Spartaís early *agoge* as a fairly typical Greek set of religious initiatory practices, not as a secular system of military education. His main focus, however, is on the development of distinctive, archaizing features in the post-classical (Hellenistic and Roman) *agoge*.

Claiming that ìSpartan education has never been the subject of an in-depth, book-length examination that marshals and evaluates the evidence... in the proper historical and cultural contextsî (p. 3), Kennell painstakingly examines the challenging and often inconsistent testimonia, not only the ìprivilegedî literary sources (Xenophon, Plutarch, Pausanias) but inscriptions, archaeology and topography, phonology and etymology of terms, and obscure literary documents. Most of the evidence, and accordingly most of the book, concerns Roman Sparta, and Kennell routinely questions the reliability of evidence from Hellenistic and Roman times concerning early practices. Seeking greater chronological accuracy and rejecting specious continuity, Kennell admits that his reconstruction must be ìan extremely tenuous outlineî (p. 148) because the evidence is ìso patchy, scattered, and obscureî; but, as he says, ìif a mere dearth of evidence had daunted ancient historians, they would long ago have abandoned the study of Spartaî (p. 99)

From admittedly inadequate evidence (e.g., Xenophonís *Spartan Constitution* is taken as the earliest extant witness to the *agoge*), Kennell suggests that early (Archaic and Classical) Sparta had a lengthy initiation process similar to other Greek cities, i.e., rites of passage with boys in a liminal state organized in age classes performing cult games and battles. From the age of 12 on, pederasty and competition in nude athletic festivals (e.g., the choruses of The Gymnopaediae) were part of the agoge, and Kennell draws analogies to other states. At most, sixth-century renovations of the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia may suggest that Sparta was distinctively early in bringing such rites under state control. When Spartan power collapsed in the fourth century B.C., such rites were abandoned, but the agoge was reinvented by the revolutionary king, Cleomenes III (235-222 B.C.), and his cultural adviser, the Stoic philosopher Sphaerus of Borysthenes, whom Kennell sees as ìa veritable new Lycurgusî and ìthe inventor of the *agoge*.î Although ìalmost nothing has come down to us about the Cleomenean phase of the agogeî (p. 20), and we have ìan almost total lack of direct evidenceî (p. 98) about Sphaerus, Kennell argues that Cleomenes and Sphaerus used a policy of ìrevivalî to remake the traditional coming-of-age rituals into a Spartan ephebate, a system of military and educational institutions for youths in age classes from 14

to 20. Later, after leaving the Achaean League in 146 B.C., Sparta again reconstructed its agoge, making it seem even more anachronistic and extreme. Manipulating its past to suit its present, Sparta created an idealized cultural legacy to give itself a distinctive cultural identity in the face of the homogenization of Greek culture under the Roman Empire. Kennell discusses the participation of the youths (ephebes) in various civic athletic festivals in Roman Sparta (e.g., the Carnea and Hyacinthia) that were not part of the institutional framework of the agoge, but his primary interest is the various initiatory rites central to the agoge of the Roman era. Mainly from the second century A.D., inscribed stelai with iron sickles commemorating individual victories attest to ephebic contests (e.g., some kind of song, a competition in singing hymns in the form of hunting cries, a dance, or mimed hunt), but none of these contests can be proven to have existed before the late second century B.C. Kennell sees certain ìspectaclesî as paradigmatic rites of passage in the late agoge. In a mock ìbattleî two teams of youths in a playing field surrounded by water punched, kicked, bit, and gouged until the winning side pushed the other into the water. A type of graduation ceremony for youths who had just passed out of the agoge, a ball game tournament involved teams throwing a ball and pushing each other until the winner pushed the other team over a goal line. The famous whipping contest of naked boys associated with the cult of Artemis Orthia has fascinated modern and ancient authors (Appendix 1 lists 13 pages of testimonia), but Kennell interprets this notorious endurance contest as ìwholly an invention,î possibly by Sphaerus: ì...claims made for the contestís pristine antiquity were bogusî (p. 79). Kennell suggests that the contestís classical precursor was a cheese-stealing ritual, a ritual of dissolution as part of a rite of passage in which a team of youths tried to steal cheeses from an altar defended by another team of youths with whips. With some 46 pages of detailed notes and a 15-page bibliography, Kennellís institutional and historiographic study is impressive but demanding, even for its limited scholarly audience. A fuller Introduction (pp. 3-4) would have helped. However, Kennellís approach to contests as rituals is valuable, and we should heed his erudite cautions about the traditional history of ìearlyî Spartan education.

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