The Geographical Setting – Sources Activities.

Strabo Geography 8.5.6-7

Concerning the nature of the regions, both Laconia and Messenia, one should accept what Euripides [5th century BC Athenian playwright] says in the following passages: He says that Laconia has ‘much arable land but is not easy to cultivate, for it is hollow, surrounded by mountains, rugged, and difficult for enemies to invade;’ and that Messenia is ‘a land of fair fruitage and watered by innumerable streams, abounding in pastureage for cattle and sheep, being neither very wintry in the blasts of winter nor yet made too hot by the chariot of Helios [the sun god];’ and a little below, in speaking of the lots which the Heracleidae [sons of Heracles, founding fathers] cast for the country, he says that the first lot conferred ‘lordships over the land of Laconia, a poor country,’ and the second over Messenia, ‘whose fertility is greater than words can express;’ … Laconia is subject to earthquakes, and in fact some writers record that certain peaks of Taygetus have been broken away. And there are quarries of very costly marble—the old quarries of Taenarian marble on Taenarum; and recently some men have opened a large quarry in Taygetus …


1. List the resources of Lakonia as described by Euripides, via Strabo.
2. What problems were associated with cultivating the land?
3. What advantages did Messenia enjoy in comparison to Lakonia?

Strabo Geography LCL Vol.IV

Mt. Taygetus and Sparta town
… after the Messenian Gulf comes the Lakonian Gulf, lying between Taenarum and Maleae, which bends slightly from the south towards the east, and Thyrides, a precipitous rock exposed to the currents of the sea, is in the Messenian Gulf at a distance of one hundred and thirty stadia from Taenarum. Above Thyrides lies Taygetus, it is a lofty and steep mountain, only a short distance from the sea, and it connects in its northerly parts with the foothills of the Arcadian mountains in such a way that a glen is left in between, where Messenia borders on Lakonia. Below Taygetus, in the interior lies Sparta, and also Amyclae, where is the temple of Apollo, and Pharos. Now the site of Sparta is in a rather hollow district, although it includes mountains within its limits …

Taenarum and Cythera
In the bend of the seaboard one comes, first, to a headland that projects into the sea, Taenarum, with its Temple of Poseidon situated in a grove, and secondly, near by, to the cavern through which, according to the myth-writers, Cerberus was brought up from Hades by Heracles …

After Taenarum, on the voyage to Onugnathus and Maleae, one comes to … Cythium, the seaport of Sparta, situated at a distance of two hundred and forty stadia from Sparta. The roadstead of the seaport was dug by the hand of man, so it is said.


Questions over page …
1. Describe the location of Sparta as given here by Strabo.
2. What mythical elements are linked to the area around Sparta?
3. Where and what is Gythium?

**Thucydides History of the Peloponnesian War. 1.10.**

For I suppose if Lacedaemon were to become desolate … that as time went on there would be a strong disposition with posterity to refuse to accept her fame as a true exponent of her power. And yet they occupy two-fifths of Peloponnese and lead the whole … Still, as the city is neither built in a compact form nor adorned with magnificent temples and public edifices, but composed of villages after the old fashion of Hellas, there would be an impression of inadequacy.


1. What opinion regarding the site of Sparta is given by Thucydides?
2. What impression does he think Sparta will leave on others?

**Pausanias Description of Greece. Bk III**

Here is built a sanctuary of Athena … The building of the sanctuary was begun, they say, by Tyndareus … [I]t was many years afterwards that the Lacedaemonians made of bronze both the temple and the image of Athena. The builder was Gitiadas, a native of Sparta, who also composed Dorian lyrics, including a hymn to the goddess. On the bronze are wrought in relief many of the labors of Herakles … There are also wrought the birth of Athena, Amphitrite, and Poseidon, the largest figures and those which I thought the best worth seeing. There is another sanctuary of Athena; her surname is Erganes (‘the Worker’). As you go to the south portico there is a temple of Zeus …


1. What contribution was made by Spartans to the sanctuary of Athena?

Continued over page …

These are the interesting things at Amyklai. There is a stone stele naming Ainetos a winner of the Pentathlon … at Olympia. There is a portrait of him, and there are bronze tripods. The older tripods are said to be a tithe of the spoils of the war against Messenia. Under the first tripod stands a statue of Aphrodite, under the second is Artemis, these tripods and their decorations are by Gitiadas. But the third tripod is by Kallon of Aegina, and under it stands a statue of Kore, Demeter's daughter. Aristandros of Paros made the Woman with the Harp, who is apparently 'Sparta', and Polykleitos of Argos made the Aphrodite of the Amyklaians, as they call her … Bathyklès of Magnesia … made the Throne of the Amyklaians … along with a statue of Artemis of Good Thoughts. The question as to who taught Bathyklès and under which Spartan king he worked is one which I leave aside, but I saw the Throne, and I will describe it. In front of it and behind it rise two Graces and two Seasons, on the left stand Echidna and Typhoëus, while on the right there are Tritons. It would weary my readers if I went through all the workmanship in detail, but, to summarize … Poseidon and Zeus are carrying Taygete, the daughter of Atlas, and her sister Alkyone. Atlas is also carved on it, and the fight of Herakles and Cyknos, and the battle of the Centaurs in the Cave of Pholos.


1. What sorts of things are ‘interesting things at Amyklai’ according to Pausanias?
2. Pausanias mentions three non-Spartan sculptors who created some of the artworks at Amycla. What conclusions might be drawn from the fact that they were commissioned to work at Amyclea?
The sanctuary of [Artemis] Orthia at Sparta underwent many changes in the long period from the beginning of the cult in perhaps the tenth century BC down to its final abandonment at some quite uncertain date ... [As] digging proceeds from the surface downwards, to reach what is early it must first pass through what is late: the order of discovery is, in fact, precisely opposite to the order of time ... All the stages of pottery are, in fact accompanied by corresponding varieties of [lead] figurines, and it often happened that where a deposit had too little pottery to date it clearly, the deficiency was supplied by the lead. This was particularly the case with the later deposits of the fifth and fourth centuries [BC]. A regular development of type was also observed in the ivory carvings and objects in bone, and the same in the bronzes ...

The actual clue to the site was given by the finding of lead figurines and other small objects in the earth of the river bank below the bottom of this Roman foundation, and the first days of the 1906 campaign, when the site was first attacked, were devoted to cutting into this earth ... [It] is ... contrary to all the rules of excavation to dig a deposit from the side instead of from above: digging from the side inevitably leads to confusion of levels, by objects falling down from above. We therefore tested the site by digging two long trenches across it.

In the arena the series of altars was found: the earliest altar, the archaic altar, and above these and separated from them by the layer of sand the scanty remains of a later Greek altar, and finally the altar of the Roman period. These two last had to be destroyed to get down to the lower levels, and it was, in fact, only when the archaic altar was found that the broken remains of the Roman altar were recognised for what they were.


1. What types of artefacts have been found at the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia in Sparta?
2. What problems have been encountered in excavating the site?