

Spartan Suspicions and the Massacre, Again¹

Sospechas espartanas y la masacre, de nuevo

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Abstract

While narrating Brasidas' expedition to Thrace and the Spartans' decision to send 700 helots to accompany him as hoplites, Thucydides refers to another episode of helots' enfranchisement, followed however by their massacre. The association of the timing of the two policies is indeed suspect, whereas it is possible that in the second case the slaughter may have been carried out in different chasms in Laconia, rather than in the so-called *Kaiadas*, after dividing the helots into groups.

Key-words: Thucydides, Sparta, Massacre, *Kaiadas*.

Resumen

Mientras narra la expedición de Brásidas a Tracia y la decisión de los espartanos de enviarle 700 ilotas que le acompañaran como hoplitas, Tucídides refiere otro episodio de manumisión de ilotas, seguido empero de su masacre. La coincidencia de ambas medidas políticas es en efecto sospechosa, si tenemos en cuenta que en el segundo caso la matanza puede haberse llevado a cabo en desfiladeros diferentes de Laconia, y no en el llamado *Kaiadas*, tras dividir a los ilotas en grupos.

Palabras-clave: Tucídides, Esparta, masacre, *Kaiadas*.

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Thucydides' report of the false liberation of two thousand helots followed by their massacre is a perfect story of both suspicion and fear, and of their political outcome. In 424, he says, the Spartans were glad to send out some of the helots to accompany Brasidas on his expedition to Thrace for fear that the latter could exploit the Athenian occupation of Pylos for uprising. Soon after, he states that the Spartans' policy toward the helots had always aimed at safeguarding themselves from this source of danger; in particular, the Spartans were afraid of the helots' number and of their tendency to revolt. At the same time, Thucydides recalls an episode, vaguely situated in the past, yet inspired by the same fear and suspicion. He relates that the Spartans proclaimed a selection to be made of those helots who would claim to have rendered the best services in war, in order to enfranchise them. However, the announcement was intended to test them; the Spartans thought that those people who were the foremost in asserting their freedom would be the most-spirited and most likely to attack their masters. Thus, they selected about two thousand helots, who crowned themselves with garlands and went round the temples. Not long afterwards, the Spartans put them all out of the way, and nobody knew how each of them was killed³.

In this striking historiographical construction, fear occasions suspicion and suspicion in turn results in a cruel test. At first, fear and suspicion toward the helots is the reason of their military engagement out of Sparta; at the same time these feelings constitute a general statement on the relationship between masters and "slaves", and invoke an extreme, and surely not a conventional episode of violence. In Thucydides' view, the arousal of such feelings (and the promotion of the political measures that they impose) is due to the disproportion between the Lacedaemonians and the helots. This lack of symmetry explains why fear and suspicion are ascribed to the masters rather than to the "slaves". The Lacedaemonians tested the latter, because they suspected them; the helots did not suspect the former and so accepted the test. The Lacedaemonians organized a false examination of 'titles' in order to grant a false freedom; the helots took the test for true and underwent it voluntarily. The helots' lack of suspicion clearly belongs to the historical content of the report. On the contrary, their masters' suspicion and fear seems to belong to Thucydides' interpretation of the event, namely, to the historiographical construction of the episode. Such a construction is apparently deduced from the facts, but in fact qualifies their interpretation. In this way, Thucydides draws the analogy between the two episodes, which are in fact very different. The successful experience of the helots sent to Thrace and

³ Thuc. 4.80.2-5: καὶ ἅμα τῶν εἰλώτων βουλομένοις ἦν ἐπὶ προφάσει ἐκπέμψαι, μὴ τι πρὸς τὰ παρόντα τῆς Πύλου ἐχομένης νεωτερίσωσιν· ἐπεὶ καὶ τότε ἐπραξαν φοβούμενοι αὐτῶν τὴν σκαώτητα καὶ τὸ πλῆθος (αἰεὶ γὰρ τὰ πολλὰ Λακεδαιμονίοις πρὸς τοὺς εἰλωτας τῆς φυλακῆς πέρι μάλιστα καθεστήκει)· προεῖπον αὐτῶν ὅσοι ἀξιοῦσιν ἐν τοῖς πολέμοις γεγενῆσθαι σφίσις ἄριστοι, κρίνεσθαι, ὡς ἐλευθερώσοντες, πείραν ποιοῦμενοι καὶ ἡγούμενοι τούτους σφίσις ὑπὸ φρονήματος, οὔτε καὶ ἠξίωσαν πρῶτος ἕκαστος ἐλευθεροῦσθαι, μάλιστα ἂν καὶ ἐπιθέσθαι. καὶ προκρίναντες ἐς διαχλίους, οἱ μὲν ἐστεφανώσαντό τε καὶ τὰ ἱερὰ περιήλθον ὡς ἡλευθερωμένοι, οἱ δὲ οὐ πολλῷ ὕστερον ἠφάνισάν τε αὐτοὺς καὶ οὐδεὶς ἦσθετο ὅτι τρόπον ἕκαστος διεφθάρη.

then led back to Sparta and manumitted –the *brasidaeioi*– will be followed by a policy of collaborationism. However, such a policy, which is necessarily inspired by trust, completely diverges from the cruel, and false, manumission of the two thousand helots, followed by their slaughter which is said to have been imposed by fear and suspicion. Thus, the analogy between the two different events results in the distorted interpretation of the former (the enrolment of 424) in the light of the latter (the previous massacre), and provides an achronical interpretation, by Thucydides, of the bad relationship between Spartiates and helots. Of course, a bad relationship between the two is conceivable, but still needs to be analysed in an historical context; any relationship has its own prehistory. For instance, a bad relationship is likely at the time of the great earthquake of ca. 464, which triggered a massive revolt chiefly by the Messenian helots. On the contrary, a bad relationship cannot be assumed in 425, when the helots accepted to bring food to the hoplites besieged at Sphacteria nor in 424 when the Spartiates had trained, at least for some weeks or months, the helots they would send with Brasidas as hoplites. They also provided them with weapons which would have been dangerous in their hands, had the massacre be committed only some years or decades before⁴. Still in this historiographical construction, both the vocabulary (*ἀφανίζω*, a *hapax* in Thucydides with the meaning “to murder”) and the final sentence (“nobody knew how each of them was killed”) belong to Thucydides’ interpretation rather than to the “neutral”, and historical, content of the report. Such a vocabulary, though pointing out the obvious concealing of the ex-helots’ corpses, draws the picture of a mysterious, and terrible, murder.

Thirteen years ago, I suggested a revised interpretation of this episode and its historiographical construction, by arguing that either the Spartiates or the helots may have exaggerated, and so controlled, the information circulated for a small massacre for propagandistic reasons⁵. As a matter of fact, I was not the first to doubt the historical truth of the massacre as accounted by Thucydides, since Richard Talbert, Michael Whitby, and Simon Hornblower had preceded me⁶. I myself pointed out the contradictions of Thucydides’ account and the difficulty to execute *in secrecy* such a big massacre. Above all, I underlined the inconsistency of the massacre with the policy of collaborationism, which was inaugurated in 424 and was successfully practised afterwards through the formation of new social groups of enfranchised helots, such as the *brasidaeioi*,

⁴ As to the period when the massacre was carried out, various dates have been suggested, that is as early as the 470s or 460s, between 451 and 447, or closer to 424 (for a *résumé*, cf. Paradiso 2004: 187 and Harvey 2004: 201). At the time of the Pylos-Sphacteria episode, freedom was officially granted to all those who would carry food to the Spartans besieged in the island (Thuc. 4.26): the false manumission of Thuc. 4.80 seems the accomplishment of that promise, but cannot be it, because of the contemporary policy of enrolment and collaborationism.

⁵ Paradiso 2004. See also Paradiso 2008.

⁶ Cf. Talbert 1989: 24-25; Whitby 1994: 97-99; Hornblower 1996: 267, and now Welwei 2011: 498 n.156. See also Rhodes 1998: 266. A different approach has been adopted by Cartledge 2001: 128-30 (= Cartledge 2003: 20-3); Idem 2002 (1979): 211; Harvey 2004; Cartledge, Debnar 2006: 565: all of them recognize the historical truth of the episode itself.

then the *neodamodeis*, the *aphetai*, the *adespotoi*, the *desposionautai* etc⁷. As far as the second argument is concerned, I am still persuaded of the impossibility of enrolling (as volunteers!) the closest relatives and friends of the slaughtered helots, only some years or even few decades after a massacre which must have concerned so many hilotic family groups. This seems to me to be the strongest argument against the historical truth of Thucydides' report⁸. On the other hand, the massacre itself may have been complicated, but still not impossible to be carried out. Although it was not easy to do away with so many able-bodied men, still a well-organized military body could do it. The true difficulty was to accomplish the massacre without leaving any traces, this means to conceal the corpses. The core of the report is Thucydides' remark that "nobody knew how each of them was killed" (οὐδείς ἤσθετο ὅτω τρόπῳ ἕκαστος διεφθάρη), where every "passive actor" (i.e. slaughtered helot) and every "spectator" of this information, either Spartiate or helot, are singled out, allowing one to suppose that only a limited number of Lacedaemonians and nobody among the helots, were aware of it. This difficulty was perceived by Ephorus, who "corrected" Thucydides and rationalized the murder by arguing that it was accomplished by the Spartan *kratistoi* at each helot's house, in secret⁹. Accordingly, a reassessment of the material circumstances of the massacre itself is needed, in the light of the updated publications on both the topography of Laconia and some human skeletal remains that have been discovered in a chasm near Sparta.

As David Harvey has pointed out, 2,000 people fill 40 English buses, each of which usually contains 50 persons¹⁰. Possible ways of getting rid of so many people have been reviewed but most of them must be ruled out, since they are improbable or lack secrecy¹¹. For example, hanging in prison, which was an historical form of capital punishment in Sparta, must be excluded, because it is impossible to carry away, out of everybody's sight, 2,000 corpses hung inside, even during the night¹². Poisoning, stoning, and stabbing must be also excluded, along with starving. Generally speaking, all the methods that involve the conveyance of dead bodies (which are more difficult to conceal) may be excluded. In particular, stabbing, for instance by the young *kryptoi*, may be ruled out since a small number of newly-trained *neoi* who underwent a more advanced initiation, not open to everybody, and were only armed with a dagger, could neither control so many people nor slay them and later hide their corpses¹³. Of course, those ex-helots, who were veterans, were older than the *kryptoi* but, possibly, still quite

⁷ Thuc. 5.34.1; Xen., *Hell.* 3.1.4 and 3.4.2; Myron of Priene *FGrH/BNJ* 106 F 1. See Paradiso 2008.

⁸ Helots as volunteers: Thuc. 4.26.5.

⁹ Ephorus is transmitted by Diod. 12.67.4. See on it Paradiso 2004: 181-182.

¹⁰ Harvey 2004: 204.

¹¹ For a review of such methods of killing, cf. Harvey 2004: 204-205.

¹² In Sparta, executions were carried out during the night: Herodotus 4.146. The Spartiates debated on conveying to the *Kaiadas* only *one* corpse, that of Pausanias the regent: finally, they decided to bury him near the temple of Athena Chalkioikos, outside of which he had died. Cf. Thuc. 1.134.4.

¹³ Plut., *Lyc.* 28 attributes the massacre to the *kryptoi*. Cf. Paradiso 2004: 182-3.

young and strong, at least in part, if they could prove their “titles” (the acts of bravery) and the Spartiates were afraid of either their *neotes* (“youth”) or *skaiotes* (“inclination to revolt”)¹⁴. Also drowning must be excluded, since it is unlikely to drown people and prevent corpses to float. Nor should it belong to the Spartan juridical culture. Certainly, the most convenient solution was to murder those helots in the very place where their corpses would have been concealed. Actually, the most likely way of carrying out such a huge massacre was by precipitation into an abyss. Greek sources know of a chasm near Sparta, named *Kaiadas* or *Keadas*, where criminals, convicts, and prisoners of war were dropped, likely along with weak newborns¹⁵. Both Thucydides and Pausanias point out its traditional, thus “official”, use by the Spartan government: the former while reporting the death of Pausanias the regent outside the temple of Athena Chalkioikos and the following debate about the place of his burial; the latter while dealing with Aristomenes who was hurled into the chasm, along with fifty mates, and miraculously escaped from it at the time of the Second Messenian War¹⁶.

The *Kaiadas* should be located between Messenia and Laconia, and precisely in Laconia. That may be deduced from the fact that Aristomenes, starting from Mt. Eira in Messenia, was caught while sacking the Spartan territory, more precisely the territory of Amyclae¹⁷. Soon afterwards, the Lacedaemonians cast him and his mates into the chasm, which was clearly located in the neighbourhood. Petros Themelis has identified the *Kaiadas* with a huge rent of tectonic origin, located at the entrance to the great gorge of Langada on the Taygetus and associated to it by an old, local tradition. More precisely, this rent is located on the Sparta-Kalamata road, on the boundary of modern Trypi, 12 km. NW of Sparta, at an altitude of 750 mt¹⁸. As a matter of fact, both the debate on the *Kaiadas* and its location are older and start with Octave Rayet’s survey¹⁹. The French archaeologist dismissed Curtius’ old identification with a cavern at Parori near Mystra because the geology of the place did not match the features of Aristomenes’ *Kaiadas*, and identified the latter with the abyss in Trypi which he had explored in September 1879²⁰. Later on, his hypothesis was accepted by W.K. Pritchett.²¹ Themelis and the team

¹⁴ On *neotes* and *skaiotes*, the two variants that appear in the textual tradition of Thuc. 4.80.4, cf. Paradiso 2004: 184 and n.39.

¹⁵ According to Plut., *Lyc.* 16.2, weak newborns were cast into the so-called *Ἀποθέται*, a chasm on the slopes of the Taygetus: it is likely the same as the *Kaiadas*.

¹⁶ Thuc. 1.134.4: ... ἐς τὸν Καιάδαν, ὄπερ τοὺς κακοῦργους, ἐσβάλλειν; Paus. 4.18.4 (from Rhianus) ῥίγμα ... ἐς τὸν Καιάδαν· ἐμβάλλουσι δὲ ἐνταῦθα οὓς ἂν ἐπὶ μεγίστοις τιμωρῶνται.

¹⁷ Paus. 4.18.3-4.

¹⁸ Themelis 1982 (but 1984) and Id. 1985. See also *Archaeological Reports* 31, 1984-1985, 24; *ibidem* 32, 1985-1986, 29 and, now, Cavanagh *et al.* 1996: 293 (HH 110). Coordinates of cave entrance according to the Greek Geodetic System of Reference: 352 .. 370 / 4.106.443 (Efstathiou-Manolakou 2009, 18).

¹⁹ Rayet’s report (a personal communication) has been quoted in full by Couat 1882: 344 (n. 2)-346. It has been partly translated by both Pritchett 1985: 58-60 and Ogden 2004: 78 (n. 11)-79.

²⁰ Curtius 1852: 252.

²¹ Pritchett 1985: 58-60. On the history of the modern identifications of the *Kaiadas*, see Pikoulas 1988.

who explored the abyss with him in 1983 –the geologist E. Kampouroglou, the speleologist J. Ioannou, and the physical anthropologist Th. Pitsios– provided a description of the vertical cave, which is located in a hill, on whose top was an ancient entrance. The present opening is a fissure that has been opened by an earthquake, on the northeast slope of the rocky projection, apparently in the 19th century: it lies at the top of a stairway of 118 steps. The abyss is *c.* 50 mt. long; 1.5 to 3.5 mt. wide, and 18 mt. to 25 mt. high²². During the scientific exploration, Themelis found human bones, spread all over the cleft, and above all scattered on the present ground, which were ascribed at first to 17 individuals. Interestingly, he discovered a skull fragment pierced by a bronze arrowhead²³. Accordingly, he suggested in his 1982 article that the 2,000 helots could have been hurled into it²⁴. This hypothesis has been judged as “intriguing” (by Daniel Ogden in 2004) or quickly challenged (by myself in 2004) but it has never been discussed in detail²⁵. After 2004, many important publications have appeared. In 2008, Yanis Maniatis dated through radiocarbon two separate skeletal samples to the eighth-fifth century BC²⁶. In 2010, Pitsios published an important study on the sample skeleton material collected until then, within the Research Program of Keadas Cavern (Anthropological Museum of the Medical School of the University of Athens)²⁷. From the human skeletal findings, he estimated a minimum number of 46 individuals. That material mainly consists of male skeletons with biological age of 18-35 years: a small number of skeletons have an estimated age of above 40 and 2 or 3 subadult skeletons belong to 12-17 year-old individuals. A sacral bone may be clearly ascribed to a female skeleton. Anthropological analysis has not confirmed the presence of newborn or infant bones. These results are compelling evidence that the chasm is the ancient *Kaiadas*, where convicts (cf. the pierced skull?) and/or prisoners of war (see the skull and above all the skeletons with biological age of 18-35 years) were executed.

Failing a scientific excavation, one wonders whether that chasm could contain the bodies of the ex-helots as Themelis suggested, this means the bodies of (more than) 2,000 people. Possibly it could. However, we cannot provide a volumetric calculation of the *Kaiadas*: we can only calculate that two thousand people fill the volume of *c.* 120 m³ ²⁸. On the other hand, the material conditions

²² So Pitsios 2010: 13; for a more detailed description, see E. Kampouroglou in Themelis 1982: 194-197.

²³ Themelis 1982: 199-201. Cf. also Themelis 1984.

²⁴ Themelis 1982: 185 and Id. 1985: 56.

²⁵ Ogden 2004: 78 n. 11; Paradiso 2004: 186.

²⁶ Maniatis 2008.

²⁷ Pitsios 2010.

²⁸ To calculate the volume of one single person, we suppose that the average height is 1.50 mt, the shoulder width is 50 cm and the average weight is 60 kg, and that the density of a body is 985 kg/m³. The volume ($V = \text{weight} \div \text{density}$) will be calculated according to the following proportion:

$$1 \text{ m}^3 : 985 \text{ kg} = x \text{ m}^3 : 60 \text{ kg}$$

$$x \text{ m}^3 = 60 \div 985 = 0.060 \text{ m}^3$$

If we apply this result to 2,000 people, we shall have:

$$2,000 \times 0.060 \text{ m}^3 = 120 \text{ m}^3 \text{ (Maria Serena Patriziano)}$$

of the precipitation raise doubts. Those charged with the murder should hurl the ex-helots down from the ancient opening, which is described by Rayet as a “rather small hole” (“trou assez petit”) if looked at from the ground of the cave, but it may have been wider in Antiquity. They hurled them in small groups, rather than one by one. Throwing all of them into the abyss in small groups, either dead (and so heavier) or alive (while moving or trying to escape), likely in haste to prevent and stop reactions, would not have been easy, since its walls do have many rough places or cavities and the bodies could be inserted at any stage, closing up the chasm itself. Moreover, the chasm is not perfectly vertical and has different gradients at different stages. It also features a minimal width of c. 1.5 mt. (according to Pitsios) which should obstruct further on the passage of the bodies²⁹. Actually, bones have been discovered at all stages of the walls, on many of their projections, likely belonging either to those people who were hurled in from the upper opening but did not fall to the ground and remained hung on them, or to those who did not crush to the bottom but tried to escape from it and that confirms that the fall was not perfectly vertical. These geological features would have slowed the casting and also made it difficult, even if the massacre had been accomplished openly, at least in this cave. The point is not only whether the *Kaiadas* could generally contain 2,000 bodies, but also whether it could contain so many bodies, all hurled into it at the same time; although this is not impossible, it is clearly not so easy to be accomplished.

From a different point of view, the massacre of so many people also seems problematical, if we suppose that it happened at *Kaiadas*. Problematical is actually its organization. First of all, the Spartans would have to lead 2,000 people away from Sparta, the place of the enfranchisement, to the chasm, in the west, allegedly cheating them about the purpose of such an “expedition”. The (allegedly) cheated ex-helots could not have been led to the *Kaiadas* via the direct way, since the modern main road to Trypi and then Kalamata was built in the mid-20th century, whereas the ancient cart-road which joined Sparta to Messenian Pharai, crossing the Taygetus, passed to the south of it, as Yanis Pikoulas has shown in his 2012 book³⁰. If the *Kaiadas* was the traditional, and thus the official, chasm where people were executed, there must have been a track of some sort going past Trypi, but in this case it would be difficult to justify the diversion from the main road to the place that was well known to everybody for its use. Other roads were less suitable. For instance, two more ancient roads, one from Sparta up to Leuktron and another from Leuktron down to Pharai (Messenia), would have finally led back to Sparta, and so to Trypi again, travelling along the Pharai-Sparta road and taking then the same diversion to the *Kaiadas*. However, the Sparta-Leuktron road to Arcadia passed too north of the Sparta-Pharai one and it would have been too complicated to take it and later “come back” to Trypi: taking such a long route

²⁹ See the map in Themelis 1985: 55.

³⁰ On the Sparta-Pharai road, cf. Pikoulas 2012: Road 87a (pp. 393-5), with the map.

would have been nonsense³¹. Again, the Sparta-Kardamyle road also crossed the Taygetus, but to the south of the road to Pharai, and therefore 2,000 people would have been obliged to travel along a much longer way³². If the massacre was close to 424, one can suppose that the Spartans falsely enrolled the newly enfranchised helots for a campaign to Messenia, where the Athenians were installed at Pylos since 425 disturbing Laconia. However, it must have been impossible to travel along the track to the *Kaiadas* with carts. The military pretext is problematical also because nobody would have judiciously provided with arms people who were to be murdered soon afterwards: thus the ex-helots must have been deceived and led to the *Kaiadas* on a different pretext which did not involve access to weapons³³. Finally, the executioners had to take them to the higher opening. Once their purpose became clear, they had to keep them under control, preventing them from revolting or fleeing away, in order to kill them and cast their corpses into the chasm, or cast them alive, even partially. If we assume that not many Spartans were needed to lead the ex-helots to the *Kaiadas*, a by far bigger number of them should have been charged with the slaughter, possibly hidden nearby and waiting for the arrival of the ex-helots. The topography of the *Kaiadas* perfectly fits an ambush of hidden armed men, but the high number of the ex-helots would have made a full control of the massacre difficult, if not impossible. Thus, we cannot talk about a perfect carnage of all the helots, so that “nobody knew how each of them was killed”. Indeed, neither the number of the slaughtered people nor that of the slaughterers would have matched Thucydides’ remark.

Of course, there were other chasms which could be used for the massacre. According to Strabo, *kaiatai* or *kaietoi* was the name for any tectonic caverns in Laconia and one deduces from it that the *Kaiadas* was only the antonomastic chasm³⁴. Nevertheless, other rents were certainly used: Thucydides knows of a *φάραγξ*, a precipice possibly located near the sea, where the Spartans threw the corpses of some merchants who had been taken as prisoners while sailing around the Peloponnese at the time of the Archidamian war³⁵. Though this was not an emergency execution into the precipice, it reveals alternative practices. Laconian caves and sinkholes have been reviewed by Ioanna Efstathiou-Manolakou in 2009. Most of them have been located so far on the west side of the Mani peninsula and on the east side of the Malea one. Nearer to Sparta, on the west of Mt Parnon, are other caves such as that of Papa Giannakou close to the village of Goritsa,

³¹ On both the Sparta-Pellana-Leuktron road, and the Leuktron-Pharai one, cf. Pikoulas 2012: Roads 12 and 18 (pp. 111-5 and 127-9)/Roads 19 and 88β (pp. 131-3 and 403-7), with the map.

³² Cf. Pikoulas 2012: Road 89, pp. 409-11, with the map.

³³ According to Critias 88 B 37 DK, the Spartiates at home took care to keep the helots disarmed, lest the latter seize them.

³⁴ Strabo 5.3.6 τὰ γὰρ κοῖλα πάντα καιάτας οἱ Λάκωνες προσαγορεύουσι and 8.5.7 οἱ ἀπὸ τῶν σεισμῶν ῥωχοὶ καιετοὶ λέγονται. Cf. also Hesychius κ 208 Latte s.v. καίατα: ὀρύγματα ἢ τὰ ὑπὸ σεισμῶν καταρραγέντα χωρία. For Strabo 8.5.7, the *Kaietas* is a cavern (σπήλαιόν τι) that may be used as a prison. He stresses the seismic origin of such caverns. In 8.8.4, he considers Sparta as an area of high seismic risk (Stiros, Jones 1996: 133).

³⁵ Thuc. 2.67.4.

or that on the Leodakianaki Plot in the village of Geraki or an unnamed one in Karitsa. Farther from Sparta, on the other hand, is the cave named Troupitses at Skortsinos, on the boundary with Arcadia.³⁶ Not all of the explored or excavated caves are huge nor vertical: some are horizontal and preserve material showing they were once inhabited. Some of them preserve human bones, which may belong to primary or secondary burials. In other words, none of the reviewed caves seems fit for such a massacre. However, the Spartans could have used for it another cave in Laconia, so far unknown: other chasms must be located on the Taygetus. If this were the case, the Spartans should be certain that this “alternative” chasm could contain so many bodies; for this was an exceptionally large-scale massacre. Therefore, they should know its huge dimensions so well as they knew those of the “official” *Kaiadas*, and that is not impossible³⁷. Additionally, the chasm should be located not far from one of the main roads of Laconia, but the ones that could be travelled along by so many people. Further on, that road should run not at great distance from Sparta, again for preserving the secrecy of the operation. That may be inferred from the very location of the *Kaiadas* itself, lying on the mountains, isolated, but not so far from Sparta, and quite easily reachable from it via an important road and a useful track. Therefore, the Sparta-Pharai road itself, which crossed the Taygetus chain with its gorges and chasms, or even the Sparta-Sellasia one would have been more suitable than other roads to the far north (e.g. to Pellana) or to the even farther south (to the two peninsulas of Mani and Malea). As we have seen, the Sparta-Kardamyle road also crossed the Taygetus, but too far south of the road to Pharai, which means that 2,000 people would have been obliged to travel along a much longer way. A further possibility would have been the road from Sparta to Geronthrai, and the one from Geronthrai to Karitsa, near which at least two vertical caves have been identified (the Leodakianaki cave, looking like a pothole, that has been only located through a reconnaissance, and the small cave in Karitsa, which has a vertical entrance and dates back to Archaic and Classical times; however, it has only been explored, not excavated, and seems to have been a cult place)³⁸. All those roads, possibly leading to an alternative chasm, located not so far from Sparta, would have been easily travelled along by so many people. However, a massacre accomplished in a different abyss would have been as problematical as the one in the *Kaiadas*.

If a massacre took place, it was only accomplished by dividing people into groups. Apart from the difficulties in leading 2,000 people to one place and murdering them, Thucydides’ text itself provides indirect evidence for this assumption. The expression “each of them” (ἕκαστος) leads one to think precisely of such a way of murder, otherwise the emphasis on the individual death would get completely lost in a

³⁶ Cf. the map of Laconia showing the location of the caves in Efstathiou-Manolakou 2009: 6 fig.2.1.

³⁷ As it seems, Rhianus’ source knew very well the topography of the *Kaiadas*.

³⁸ Pikoulas 2012: Road 28α (pp.167-169) and Road 28β (pp.171-173); Pikoulas 2012: Road 38 (pp. 229-231).

case of mass murder³⁹. Indeed, a massacre accomplished in this way would suit better the reviewed difficulties. The people charged with it would have led the freed helots, separated into groups, away from Sparta to different places. Dealing with smaller groups sent to various places, would be the sole way to keep such a military operation under control and would have made it easier. Such places of execution should be located not at great distance from Sparta. Once again, this may be inferred from the location of the *Kaiadas* itself. That executions took place not far from Sparta is also proved by Pausanias' report on Aristomenes being caught at Amyclae and cast into the nearby *Kaiadas*, and not elsewhere, along with his fifty mates⁴⁰. However, official executions were not secret, so one can guess that the exceptional slaughter of (the groups of the) 2,000 ex-helots would have been held far from Sparta, in other words away from public control. Yet, there is still the problem of both military and political secrecy. We do not know how many people were aware of the massacre, beside those who decided it and those who carried it out, unless the two were more or less the same people, as Ephorus thought. We can guess nonetheless that they were not many. Thucydides' "nobody" (οὐδεὶς) mirrors the point of view of the helots. However, the division of the helots into multiple groups in order to be sent to multiple sites, nearer or farther, across a densely populated country, automatically multiplies the occasions of letting the other Lacedaemonians and the helots understand what was happening. As it is perfectly known from both literary and archaeological evidence, the helots were settled, along with their families, in the *kleroi* of their masters, hence scattered in the countryside, and accordingly their social organization made them able to control information over the territory. An intensive archaeological surface survey, the Laconia Survey, has recently explored an area of some 70 km² to the east of Sparta towards Mt. Paron, where as many as 87 Late Archaic and 46 Classical sites were discovered⁴¹. Their inhabitants, who are thought to have been either helots or *perioikoi*, lived in a large number of dispersed settlements, mostly farmsteads of small dimensions. In the western sector of the surveyed area, the one closest to Sparta, those settlements were likely land owned by Spartiates and cultivated by their helots⁴². Such a rural landscape could have put in danger the secrecy of the operation, especially if it started from Sparta. However, the groups of ex-helots could have been led mostly to the west of Sparta, to the Langada Pass and then to Messenia, that is, to a high, quite isolated place with more caves and precipices than the *Kaiadas*, and then to a country less thinly inhabited and populated⁴³.

³⁹ Harvey 2004: 205.

⁴⁰ Thucydides' merchants cast by the Spartans into a *φάραγξ* seems a different instance. They must have been caught far from Sparta, executed in the place itself, and later dropped into the nearest precipice (2.67.4). The precipitation of Aristomenes and the fifty warriors is instead the most similar instance to the murder of the 2,000 ex-helots, were they divided into small groups.

⁴¹ Catling 2002: 151-256.

⁴² Cf. Catling 2002: 228-238; Hodkinson 2003.

⁴³ The Pylos Regional Archaeological Project, which surveyed the area of 40 km² in western Messenia, c. 70 km. from Sparta, only discovered five definite Archaic and four definite Classical sites that were anyway larger than the Laconia sites. In the Pylos area, the inhabitants, mostly helots, lived less scattered and concentrated in a small number of larger settlements. See Alcock *et al.* 2005: 156-

In conclusion, Thucydides' report, as it has been conceived, is a pure construction and not the perfect mirror of an historical event: it is the sophisticated interpretation of two events, connected through the use of tools such as mystery, suspicion, and fear. As a matter of fact, there are two possible interpretations of the situation: either the massacre did happen, possibly by killing groups of ex-helots, and of course was well known to both its promoters and executioners and likely to a larger number of people as well, or it did not happen and accordingly "nobody knew how each of them was killed". It is not at all plausible that such a huge massacre was carried out undercover and remained unknown to both the helots' families and all the Spartans, except for those who decided and accomplished it, since the number of people involved as victims, actors, and "spectators" was indeed very big. Anyway, a massacre may have been held, the murder of few people, as I suggest, or more people: the material conditions allow one to admit it. It is the timing of both the massacre and the enrolment that induces us to doubt the mass murder. It is the close timing of two contradictory political and military decisions, as it is laid out by Thucydides, which allows one to question his assessment of the Spartan achronical fear and suspicion of the helots' menace.

169, and, for an interpretation of all the Laconian and Messenian data, Hodkinson 2011-2014: 14-15.

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