

Chapter 3

ADMISSION TO THE SYSSITIA IN FIFTH-CENTURY SPARTA

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Herodotus ranged the *syssitia* alongside the ἐνωμοτίαι and the τριακάδες as the military institutions designed by Lycurgus (Hdt. 1.65.5). We need not doubt that the mid-fifth-century Spartans themselves saw their public messes mainly or primarily as organizations for war and had told the visitor from Halicarnassus accordingly. Plato has it that the *syssitia* had been invented for warfare (*Nomoi* 625d, 633a). Indeed, their synonym συσκήνια, ‘tent-companies’, clearly points to the army.¹ In a later source the units of the army in 371 are enumerated in descending order as: μόραι, λόχοι, ἐνωμοτίαι, and συσσίτια (Polyaen. 2.3.11). Likewise, the encamping troops of Agesilaus’ army could be described as συσσίτια and στιβάδες.² In fact, the military function of the *syssitia* in classical Sparta is not in doubt.³ In antiquity it was commonplace to speak of their double character of promoting frugality at home and courage on the battlefield (*Lak.Pol.* 5.2–3; Dion. Hal. 2.23.3; cf. Plut. *Lyk.* 10; 12.1) and to compare them with the clubs and messes which existed in Crete and elsewhere, a comparison that has even been extended in modern times to include institutions of non-Greek Indo-European provenance.⁴

In classical Sparta the συσσίτια were closely connected with the ἐνωμοτίαι, in such a manner that the character of the latter organizations depended in great measure on the composition of the former. The ἐνωμοτίαι were the backbone of Sparta’s army organization and as such were probably as old as the all-hoplite army we meet in the classical sources. In the preserved fragments of Tyrtaeus there is no indication of the existence of ἐνωμοτίαι, and to my mind understandably so, for Tyrtaeus’ Spartan army was not yet the all-hoplite army of later times.⁵ In Thucydides and Xenophon, on the other hand, the *enōmotia* appears as the core unit of the army, consisting only of hoplites. At Mantinea in 418 BC it numbered 32 men at most (Thuc. 5.68.3), at Leuktra not more than 36 (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.12, 17). In both