

latro's manumission

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 30 May 2003

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maa32 — 30 May 2003, 17:30

Crush asked me to post this on Wednesday (sorry for the delay, everyone) Marc Aramini

As Wolfe says in his interview:

"Then they held a ceremony which I described in detail, exactly as it was and they gave each Helot who was to be awarded his freedom as a climax of the ceremony a young Spartan as his companion to lead him through the ceremony. And at a given signal each companion killed that Helot that he was responsible for. And they were all killed except Latros who they did not intend to kill because he was not really a Helot. And he survived and all of the rest of them who had gone in the ceremony were butchered. And they really were, this took place."

The identification of Latro's manumission with the event described by Thucydides (4:80) has always bothered me. Wolfe says the ceremony occurred exactly as he described. But this is what Thucydides says:

"In fact [the Spartans] were so frightened of [the helots] unyielding character and of their numbers that they had had recourse to the following plan. (Spartan policy with regard to the helots had always been based almost entirely on the idea of security.) They made a proclamation to the effect that the helots should choose out of their own number those who claimed to have done the best service to Sparta on the battlefield, implying that they would be given their freedom. This was, however, a test conducted in the belief that the ones who showed most spirit and came forward first to claim their freedom would be the ones most likely to turn against Sparta. So about 2,000 were selected, who put garlands on their heads and went round the temples under the impression that they were being made free men. Soon afterwards, however, the Spartans did away with them, and no one ever knew exactly how each one of them was killed." (translation by Rex Warner)

First of all, Thucydides tells this tale without saying when it happened and under what circumstances. He is merely using it to emphasize that the Spartans were glad to send a lot of the helots to war in Thessaly to get them out of Sparta during the Peloponesian War. Also, this story is significant because the Spartan commander Brasidas is about to make the same offer to the helots, which he will this time fulfill. But while the story probably rings true to Spartan's attitude and sense of honor toward the helots, the story smells like an urban legend. After all, the Spartan's essentially declared war on the helots every year as it was -- with an emphasis on eliminating any helot that was outstanding in anyway. Would such a public elimination be necessary? This is beside the point of course except that there is no evidence that this murder occurred in connection to the Persian war -- but none that it didn't.

Second, the event described by Thucydides did not occur "just as Wolfe described it". Other than the garlands, there are no real "details" of the

murders except that they seem to have occurred some time after the ceremony and they seem to have occurred surreptitiously, not in one go. There is no mention of Spartans paired with each helot (each Spartan had seven helots after all -- so how could there have been enough to pair off?).

So, has Wolfe drawn from a different source here? or a second source? Perhaps one that Thucydides himself drew from?

-- Crush