

LIVING-WALLS:  
FROM *THE LIFE OF LYCURGUS* TO THE *MUQADDIMAH*

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**What is a living-wall?**

The Lacedaemonian disdain for defensive-walls and preference for a ‘living-wall’ – that is, a wall composed of a populace which is capable of defending itself – is well noted. Many such references have been preserved by Plutarch in his *Apophthegmata Laconica* and *Life of Lycurgus*:

1. When Lycurgus, the Lacedaemonian nomothete, is asked whether it is necessary to erect a defensive wall to protect a city, he responds: ‘The city is well fortified which hath a wall of men instead of brick.’<sup>1</sup>
2. Likewise, Antalcidas is reported to have said that ‘the young men were the walls of Sparta, and the points of their spears its boundaries.’<sup>2</sup>
3. In three *χρῆμα*, Agesilaus the Great echoes the sentiment of the aforementioned statements:
  - a. ‘Being asked once how far the bounds of Sparta extended, he said, with a flourish of his spear, “As far as this can reach.”’<sup>3</sup>
  - b. ‘When someone else wished to know why Sparta was without walls, he pointed to the citizens in full armor and said, “These are the Spartans' walls.”’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, trans. John Dryden, XVIII.

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, *Apophthegmata Laconica*, 217e.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 210e.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

- c. 'When another person put the same question, he said, "Cities ought not to be fortified with stones and timbers, but with the strong virtues of their inhabitants."' <sup>5</sup>

What is clear from these apophthegmata is that the Lacedaemonians were not opposed to walls *as such*; that a city required walls for its defense was taken as a given. The reasons for their preference for living-walls (over earthen defensive-walls) are made clear by Plato in his *Laws*:

'As to walls, Megillus, I would agree with your Sparta in letting the walls lie sleeping in the ground, and not wake them up, and that for the following reasons. It is a fine saying of the poet, and often repeated, that walls should be made of bronze and iron rather than of earth. [...] a wall is by no means an advantage to a city as regards health, and, moreover, it usually causes a soft habit of soul in the inhabitants, by inviting them to seek refuge within it instead of repelling the enemy; instead of securing their safety by keeping watch night and day, it tempts them to believe that their safety is ensured if they are fenced in with walls and gates and go to sleep, like men born to shirk toil, little knowing that ease is really the fruit of toil, whereas a new crop of toils is the inevitable outcome, as I think, of dishonorable ease and sloth.' <sup>6</sup>

For Plato, as for the Lacedaemonians, both the living-wall and the defensive-wall correspond to different forms of living (living-as-a-wall and walled-life); the former implies an *active*, healthy form of living whereas the latter implies a *passive*, indolent form of living.

These observations resonate strongly with Ibn Khaldûn's comparative analysis of nomadic and sedentary forms of living which he undertakes in the second chapter of his *Muqaddimah* (over a century later). He writes that the nomads:

'are alone in the country and remote from militias. They have no walls or gates. Therefore, they provide their own defense and do not entrust it to, or rely upon others for it. They always carry weapons. They watch carefully all sides of the road. They take hurried naps only when they

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 210f.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 6.778d-779a. A similar sentiment can be found in Plutarch's *Apophthegmata Laconica*, 230c: 'Panthoedas went on embassy to Asia and when they pointed out to him a very strong wall he said, "By Heaven, strangers, fine quarters for women!"'

are together in company or when they are in the saddle. They pay attention to the most distant barking or noise.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast:

‘...sedentary people have become used to laziness and ease. They are sunk in well-being and luxury. They have entrusted the defense of their property and their lives to the governor and ruler who rules them, and to the militia which has the task of governing them. They find full assurance of safety in the walls that surround them, and the fortifications that protect them. No noise disturbs them, and no hunting occupies their time. They are carefree and trusting, and have ceased to carry weapons.’<sup>8</sup>

For Ibn Khaldûn, the nomadic form of living is characterized by fortitude,<sup>9</sup> toughness,<sup>10</sup> and self-reliance,<sup>11</sup> whereas the sedentary form of living is characterized by weakened souls<sup>12</sup>, softness,<sup>13</sup> dependence,<sup>14</sup> and a carefree disposition.<sup>15</sup> The parallels between the nomadic form of living described in the *Muqaddimah* and the Lacedaemonian form of living described above are striking; as a result of their aptitude(s) and lived-experience, neither the Lacedaemonians nor the nomads rely upon nor require the construction of earthen walls for their defense. Instead, they themselves *are* the walls.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibn Khaldûn. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-5.

<sup>9</sup> Section five of chapter 2 is titled “Bedouins are more disposed to courage than sedentary people”.

<sup>10</sup> See Ibn Khaldûn. *The Muqaddimah*, 93: “The toughness of desert life precedes the softness of sedentary life.”

<sup>11</sup> See *Ibid.*, 95: “Self-reliance eventually becomes a quality natural to them.”

<sup>12</sup> See *Ibid.*, 97: “governmental and educational laws influence sedentary people, in that they weaken their souls and diminish their stamina”.

<sup>13</sup> See note 10.

<sup>14</sup> Not only are those who live a sedentary form of living dependent on those who govern, the military, and the defensive walls of the city, but also “When sedentary people mix with [the nomads] in the desert or associate with them on a journey, they depend on them. This is an observed fact. (Their dependence extends) even to knowledge of the country, the directions, watering places, and crossroads.” Ibn Khaldûn. *The Muqaddimah*, 95.

<sup>15</sup> In spite of the many benefits of sedentary, or walled, forms of living, the criticisms posed by Ibn Khaldûn largely mirror those posed by Plato above.

## How are living-walls formed?

Both the Lacedaemonian and nomadic living-walls are founded on lived-experience cultivated through training. For the former, the ἀγωγή – an educational regime which was mandated for nearly all male citizens – is perhaps the most intense example of this training. It is described vividly by Xenophon in his *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians*:

‘Instead of softening the boys' feet with sandals [Lycurgus] required them to harden their feet by going without shoes. He believed that if this habit were cultivated it would enable them to climb hills more easily and descend steep inclines with less danger, and that a youth who had accustomed himself to go barefoot would leap and jump and run more nimbly than a boy in sandals. And instead of letting them be pampered in the matter of clothing, he introduced the custom of wearing one garment throughout the year, believing that they would thus be better prepared to face changes of heat and cold. As to the food, he required the prefect to bring with him such a moderate amount of it that the boys would never suffer from repletion, and would know what it was to go with their hunger unsatisfied; for he believed that those who underwent this training would be better able to continue working on an empty stomach, if necessary, and would be capable of carrying on longer without extra food, if the word of command were given to do so: they would want fewer delicacies and would accommodate themselves more readily to anything put before them, and at the same time would enjoy better health. He also thought that a diet which made their bodies slim would do more to increase their height than one that consisted of flesh-forming food.

On the other hand, lest they should feel too much the pinch of hunger, while not giving them the opportunity of taking what they wanted without trouble he allowed them to alleviate their hunger by stealing something. It was not on account of a difficulty in providing for them that he encouraged them to get their food by their own cunning. No one, I suppose, can fail to see that. Obviously a man who intends to take to thieving must spend sleepless nights and play the deceiver and lie in ambush by day, and moreover, if he means to make a capture, he must have spies ready. There can be no doubt then, that all this education was

planned by him in order to make the boys more resourceful in getting supplies, and better fighting men.’<sup>16</sup>

The ἀγωγή served a variety of purposes. Aside from cultivating discipline, endurance, resourcefulness, and fitness, this training would have also likely instilled a sense of collective intimacy within the cohort and broader society; the ἀγωγή – in addition to other conventions, such as the συσσίτια (meals eaten in common) or the collective education of the youth<sup>17</sup> – worked to reinforce one of the foundational principles of Lacedaemonian society: ‘the priority of collective interests over private ones’.<sup>18</sup> On the collective level, living-as-a-wall requires a sense of unity wherein each is willing to place the common good before one’s own welfare; on the individual level, living-as-a-wall requires a number of practical aptitudes which are cultivated in the ἀγωγή. It is only with this individual and collective lived-experience that the Lacedaemonians were able to forgo earthen-walls and instead *become* living-walls.

In the case of the nomads, there is no explicit training program mentioned by Ibn Khaldûn. However, through an analysis of their ‘conditions of life’,<sup>19</sup> he provides an account of the cultivation of the lived-experience which allows the nomads to live-as-a-wall. For Ibn Khaldûn, the nomads are able to live without defensive-walls, in part, because of their ‘toughness’ and ‘self-reliance’ which is a product of their exposure to the harsh desert environment. He writes:

‘[T]he bodies of the urban population are found to be more delicate than those of the inhabitants of the desert who live a hard life. Likewise, those inhabitants of the desert who are used to hunger are found to have in their bodies no superfluous matters’<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, they do not enjoy the luxuries of sedentary life; because of the desert environment, they are restricted to:

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<sup>16</sup> Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians*, 2.3-2.7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 6.1: ‘Lycurgus wanted to secure that the citizens should get some advantage from one another without doing any harm. He therefore gave every father authority over other men's children as well as over his own.’

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Hodkinson, ‘Social Order and the Conflict of Values in Classical Sparta,’ *Chiron* (January 1983) 13:243.

<sup>19</sup> The chapter is titled “Bedouin civilization, savage nations and tribes and their *conditions of life*, including several basic and explanatory statements” [emphasis my own].

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Khaldûn. *The Muqaddimah*, 66.

‘the necessary in food, clothing, and mode of dwelling, and to the other necessary conditions and customs. [...] They use tents of hair and wool, or houses of wood, or of clay and stone, which are not furnished (elaborately). The purpose is shade and shelter, and nothing beyond that. They also take shelter in caverns and caves. The food they take is either little prepared or not prepared at all, save that it may have been touched by fire.’<sup>21</sup>

In other words, ‘the desert is a place of hardship and starvation, but to [those with a nomadic form of living] it has become familiar and accustomed.’<sup>22</sup> Much like the ἀγωγή, exposure to the challenges presented by the desert cultivates aptitudes which are necessary in order to live-as-a-wall. In addition to these aptitudes, Ibn Khaldūn notes that nomadic communities are bound together by something that he refers to as ‘group feeling’ (عصبية) which derives from the ‘common descent’ of those in the community as well as their shared struggle for survival. These intimate bonds between members of the community lead not only to ‘affection and mutual help’,<sup>23</sup> but to prioritize the welfare of the group over the individual. Therefore, much like the Lacedaemonians, these collective and individual lived-experiences form the necessary ground for living-as-a-wall.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 102.