# To what extent was Tyrtaeus’ writing *more* than state- sponsored propaganda?

To say Tyrtaeus’ writing is merely state-sponsored propaganda not only ignores the nuances of historical context, but also the importance of a uniting voice for a dissolving society. Further, it negates the wealth of information his poetry provides, and subsequent value as a historical source. Propaganda is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as being “the systematic dissemination of information… in a biased or misleading way,” with the aim of promoting a particular “agenda.” For a state, this translates to a specific “political… cause” distributed by the ruling government.1 In this way, Tyrtaeus’ works could be considered state-sponsored propaganda. However, to assume this would be to assume history is black and white. Instead, Tyrtaeus’ poetry should be read as a vital vehicle for community reconstruction, an elevation of admirable human qualities, and a stressor on the importance of the Spartan way of life, and subsequently, a shining light on a society shrouded from history.

Tyrtaeus’ poetry can arguably read as propaganda, due to his involvement with the Spartan government. In the 7 to 8th centuries, Sparta was involved in the Messenian Wars.2 These were a series of conflicts fought between the city-states of Sparta and Messenia, which resulted in a drastic change to Sparta and surrounding lands.3 The First Messenian war was a result of the extreme “overpopulation” within 7th century Greece.4 Most Greek city states would “alleviate” this stress “by sending out colonies,” through their “ready access to the sea.”5 Sparta, conversely, lay far from the sea, and was mainly “land-bound.” Therefore, Sparta’s solution cam in “conquering Messenian land.”6 Upon their victory, Sparta made all captured Messenians helots, or serfs, and created the “*kleroi* system.”7,8 This system denoted each Spartan citizen be given “a plot of land with helots to work it… to provide food,” which allowed Sparta to have a fully “citizen army.”9 However, this system came with much

1 Oxford English Dictionary, (2024) ‘propaganda (*n.*), sense 3’, *Oxford English Dictionary*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3478124451 [Accessed: October 17 2024]

2 History Skills, (2024) ‘The Messenian Wars: How Sparta conquered and enslaved its neighbours’, *History Skills*. Available at: https[://www.historyskills.com/classroom/ancient-history/messenian-wars/?srsltid=AfmBOopmreNTTPiv-](http://www.historyskills.com/classroom/ancient-history/messenian-wars/?srsltid=AfmBOopmreNTTPiv-) 53b49hoSsCkROSIWV3GVS1rQUfOlupVh77ZUQ4p [Accessed: October 17 2024]

3 Ibid.

4 Romney, J., (2008) ‘The Rhetoric of Cohesion: Allusions to Homeric Heroes in Tyrtaeus’ Poetry’, *The Pennsylvania State University*. Available at: https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/1df6c352-1ce6-4859-8ae8-

8a1cdcce184b/content [Accessed: October 17 2024]

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Bradley, P., (2001) ‘Sparta’ in Ancient Greece: Using Evidence. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press,

pp. 52-77.

8 Romney, J. Op.Cit.

contention, as the land distribution was uneven.10 In particular, it created a “constitutional crisis” between “Sparta’s farmers and traditional aristocracy, who were the major land-owners.”11,12 This left Sparta disunited. Therefore, when the Messenians started revolting around 670BCE and war outbroke, Sparta was in a state of great instability.13 This war prolonged and difficult, despite the eventual Spartan win, and for the majority, it was not “in Sparta’s favour.”14,15,16 This is where Tyrtaeus’ involvement originates, after the Spartan defeat at “the Battle of Boar’s Tomb.”17,18,19 Tyrtaeus, according to many ancient sources such as Pausanias in his *Description of Greece*, was sent by “Athens” on request of “the Delphic oracle,” to become “their advisor,” as well as “address the civil strife and join the two classes.”20,21,22 According to classical scholar Martin Litchfield West, “Tyrtaeus functioned as state poet,” and was a key advocator for all Spartans to “renew” their war efforts.23 Tyrtaeus wrote “a series of poems that could be performed as… battle songs: poetry that could be sung by soldiers as they marched into battle.”24 In fact, Tyrtaeus’ elegiac poetry is characterised by a distinctive “dactylic hexameter and pentameter,” which suited the rhythm of martial music, particularly within the “cadence of marching or the synchronisation of rowing.”25 This, in addition to the main themes of his poems, that of aretē (excellence) through “martial valour and unwavering loyalty to the state,” as well as an emphasis on endurance and discipline, paint a picture of a poet solely employed to inspire “persistence” in Spartan soldiers.26,27,28 In particular, Tyrtaeus exploits “the Homeric ideal of the single

10 Ibid.

11 Bradley, P., Op.Cit.

12 Ibid.

13 Brocklebank, F., (2024) ‘The Lost History of the Messenians’, The 1440 Review. Available at:

https://1440review.com/2024/01/15/the-lost-history-of-the-messenians/ [Accessed: October 17 2024]

14 History Skills, ‘The Messenian Wars: How Sparta conquered and enslaved its neighbours’, Op.Cit.

15 Romney, J., Op.Cit.

16 History Skills, (2024) ‘Tyrtaeus: The ancient poet who led Sparta’s army to greatness’, *History Skills*. Available at: https[://www.historyskills.com/classroom/ancient-history/tyrtaeus/](http://www.historyskills.com/classroom/ancient-history/tyrtaeus/) [Accessed: October 17 2024]

17 Ibid.

18 Compton, T.M., (2006) ‘Victim of the Muses: Poet as Scapegoat, Warrior and Hero in Greco-Roman and Indo-European Myth and History’, *Washington DC: Center for Hellenic Studies*. Available at: <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn->

3:hul.ebook:CHS\_Compton.Victim\_of\_the\_Muses.2006 [Accessed: October 17 2024]

19 West, M.L., (2007) ‘Tyrtaeus’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, Oxford University Press*.*

20 Pausanias, ‘The Second Messenian War’, in Description of Greece. Trans. W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, Loeb Classical Library, 1918.

21 Romney, J., Op.Cit.

22 Compton, T.M., Op.Cit.

23 West, M.L., Op.Cit.

24 History Skills, ‘Tyrtaeus: The ancient poet who led Sparta’s army to greatness’, Op.Cit.

25 Ibid.

26 Tarkow, T.A., (1983) ‘Tyrtaeus 9 D.: the Role of Poetry in the New Sparta’ in *L'Antiquité Classique*, pp. 48-69.

27 Twietmeyer, G. et al., (2022) ‘Aristotle’s Conception of *Arete* and the Meaning of Records in Sport’, Kinesiology Review, 11(3), pp. 229-239.

28 History Skills, ‘Tyrtaeus: The ancient poet who led Sparta’s army to greatness’, Op.Cit.

hero fighting for his own glory by that of the patriotic warrior.”29 This is very noticeable in *Fragment 10*, where he emphasises how a Spartan should rather die fighting for their country, something “glorious…[and] admirable,” than live “cowardly.”30 Furthermore, Tyrtaeus highlights the importance of complete obedience to authority, or, the Spartan officials, at many points expressing how the ideal Spartan “unceasingly… will yield to the leader” (Tyrtaeus, *Fragment 19*).31 H. James Shey, in his article *Tyrtaeus and the Art of Propaganda*, expresses that in these ways, it becomes apparent “Tyrtaeus’ main task is… to win his audience’s emotional acceptance of something which is naturally repugnant,” in this case, being “the willingness of the individual to endanger his life so that the community may survive.”32 In some ways, Tyrtaeus’ poetry almost seems to be aimed at cultivating the perfect soldier- citizen, in addition to boosting morale and encouraging bravery.33 Due to this, it can be strongly argued Tyrtaeus’ writing was nothing more than state-sponsored propaganda. This is furthered by how Sparta did not have theatres, which in the Ancient Mediterranean, was one of the most significant forums to communicate views, ideologies, and provoke thoughtful discussion and change.34,35 Tyrtaeus’ poetry is almost the Spartan equivalent, and very arguably, the most easily accessible equivalent for the Spartan public. This is evidenced by how his “poetry was sung actively on the march,” as well as Plutarch’s account that Tyrtaeus introduced three choirs.36,37 These choirs, that of the “old men… [the] young men… [and] the boys” would sing Tyrtaeus’ poetry in Spartan “festivals.”38 Their music, as recorded by Plutarch, has a distinct emphasis on strength and might.39 Due to all this, it becomes a question of how much of Tyrtaeus’ writings are simply voicing the state’s views, as per his employment by the Spartan government. If this *is* his poetry’s sole purpose, for all definitions, it is arguably just state-sponsored propaganda.

29 Shey, H.J. (1976) ‘Tyrtaeus and the Art of Propaganda’, Arethusa | John Hopkins University Press, 9(1), pp. 5-28.

30 Tyrtaeus, ‘Fragment 10’, in Iambi et Elegi Graeci Ante Alexandrum Cantati, vol. II. Ed. M.L. West, Oxford University Press, 1972.

31 Tyrtaeus, ‘Fragment 19’, in Iambi et Elegi Graeci Ante Alexandrum Cantati, vol. II. Ed. M.L. West, Oxford University Press, 1972.

32 Shey, H.J., Op.Cit.

33 History Skills, ‘Tyrtaeus: The ancient poet who led Sparta’s army to greatness’, Op.Cit.

34 DIAZOMA Association, (2024) ‘Ancient theatre of Sparta’, *Diazoma*. Available at: https://diazoma.gr/en/theaters/ancient-theatre-

sparta/#:~:text=The%20existence%20of%20a%20theatre,%2C%20such%20as%20%E2%80%9Cgymnopaidies%E2%80%9D [Accessed: October 17 2024]

35 Hemingway, C. (2004) ‘Theaters in Ancient Greece’, Met Museum. Available at:

https[://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/thtr/hd\_thtr.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/thtr/hd_thtr.htm) [Accessed: October 17 2024]

36 Gresens, N. (2004) ‘Preserving Tradition: Tyrtaean Martial Poetry and Spartan Society’, Classical Association of the Middle West and South. Available at: https://camws.org/meeting/2004/abstracts2004/gresens.html [Accessed: October 17 2024]

37 Plutarch, ‘Life of Lycurgus’, in The Parallel Lives. Trans. B. Perrin, Loeb Classical Library, 1923.

38 Ibid.

However, given the contextual nuances of when Tyrtaeus was writing, it can be argued his poetry was *more* than state-sponsored propaganda due to it being an absolutely necessary measure to save Sparta, and inspire her citizens. Interestingly, Tyrtaeus’ poetry does not read like other state-sponsored propaganda. Most propaganda has either a distinctly negative tone, aimed at provoking animosity towards a particular person, or a tone of grandeur, aimed at emphasising the greatness or goodness of another.40 Notably, Tyrtaeus’ poetry lacks both, instead playing to the collective. Tyrtaeus does not target one person, and even when stressing the authority of the “kings” (Tyrtaeus, *Eunomia*) does not refer to them by name.41 Instead, most of his poetry portrays a common man with no identifiers, as evidenced in *Fragments 5, 6, 10, 11,* and *19*.42 It could be anyone, from a Spartan soldier in training, to a councilman. Furthermore, Tyrtaeus’ poetry emphasises the importance of community, as well as values such as endurance, perseverance, kinship, and loyalty, which are all very positive.43 These ideas are especially important in a time where “military defeats” were frequent, cultivating a deep lack of hope, and civil “divisions” were of the utmost concern.44,45 Tyrtaeus’ poetry asked Spartans to “trust” each other, and prioritise “*eunomia*.”46 This term, also the title of one of Tyrtaeus’ most famous poems, refers “to good order and governance.”47,48 This resonated deeply with the Spartiates as they held the values of “discipline and obedience to laws” in very high regard.49 Spartan society was conflicted, and so a common ideal to believe in was essential. Luckily, Tyrtaeus’ poetry cultivated a shared value system. Therefore, his poetry does not read like propaganda because it is not *simply* propaganda. In fact, when comparing Tyrtaeus’ poetry to other examples of state-sponsored propaganda, the differences become blaringly obvious. One notable example of state-sponsored propaganda from the ancient world is the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, which translates to “the achievements of the deified Augustus.”50 This was an autobiographical “monumental inscription” commissioned by Augustus, first

40 Psychological Defence Agency, (2024) ‘Propaganda’, Psychological Defence Agency. Available at: https://mpf.se/psychological-defence-agency/knowledge-and-support/theme-library/propaganda [Accessed: October 17 2024]

41 Tyrtaeus, ‘Eunomia’, in Iambi et Elegi Graeci Ante Alexandrum Cantati, vol. II. Ed. M.L. West, Oxford University Press, 1972.

42 e.g. Tyrtaeus, ‘Fragment 5’, ‘Fragment 6’, ‘Fragment 10’, ‘Fragment 11’, and ‘Fragment 19’, in Iambi et Elegi Graeci Ante Alexandrum Cantati, vol. II. Ed. M.L. West, Oxford University Press, 1972.

43 Tarkow, T.A. Op.Cit.

44 History Skills, ‘Tyrtaeus: The ancient poet who led Sparta’s army to greatness’, Op.Cit.

45 Struck, P.T., (2022) ‘Tyrtaeus’, Greek and Roman Mythology | University of Pennsylvania. Available at:

https://www2.classics.upenn.edu/myth/php/tools/dictionary.php?method=did&regexp=2329&setcard=1&media=1&link=0 [Accessed: October 17 2024]

46 History Skills, ‘Tyrtaeus: The ancient poet who led Sparta’s army to greatness’, Op.Cit.

47 Tyrtaeus, ‘Eunomia’, Op.Cit.

48 History Skills, ‘Tyrtaeus: The ancient poet who led Sparta’s army to greatness’, Op.Cit.

49 Ibid.

50 Bileta, V., (2021) ‘Augustus: The First Emperor of Rome’, The Collector. Available at: https[://www.thecollector.com/augustus-roman-emperor/](http://www.thecollector.com/augustus-roman-emperor/) [Accessed: October 17 2024]

emperor of the Roman Empire.51,52 The *Res Gustae* listed, in first person, “35 achievements” from Augustus’ life.53 It possesses a distinctly egotistical tone, emphasising how Italy “demanded” Augustus to be “its leader,” and that he “was the first and only one” to accomplish certain feats.54 On the whole, it emphasises Augustus’ prowess and success to an extreme, and likely exaggerated, degree.55 Compared to the “communal” and encouraging tone of Tyrtaeus’ poetry, there is an evident disparity between the two.56 Even *Pericles’ Funeral Oration*, which is more similar to Tyrtaeus’ works in terms of the concepts it promotes, has a distinct tone of “superiority,” emphasising the drastic differences between Athens and her “antagonists.”57 Overall, there is a dramatic inequality between other ancient propaganda and Tyrtaeus’ poetry. Therefore, in addition with his poetry’s nature as a last resort effort to *save* Sparta, martially and communally, it is arguable his writings are much more than state- sponsored propaganda.

For a modern historian, Tyrtaeus’ writings are much more than state-sponsored propaganda as well. Extant source material on Ancient Sparta is extremely limited, particularly due to the reclusive nature of the city state.58 Spartiates themselves were very insular and exclusive. In fact, one could only be a Spartiate if both parents were Spartiates.59 Furthermore, the state itself was very isolated. According to Plutarch, citizens of Sparta were not allowed to “live abroad at their pleasure and wander in strange lands.”60 This law was to ensure Spartans did not assume “foreign habits,” and imitate “the lives of people… without training” and living “under different forms of government.”61 Additionally, the Spartan citizens had further restrictions within their own communities. When young men wen undergoing military training, they were not “allowed to live as… [they] pleased,” residing in “a military encampment… into the years of full maturity.”62 Likewise, Sparta “did not encourage foreign contacts

51 Butt, M., (2023) ‘5 Pieces of Propaganda from the Ancient World’, The Collector. Available at: https[://www.thecollector.com/propaganda-ancient-world/](http://www.thecollector.com/propaganda-ancient-world/) [Accessed: October 17 2024]

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Willaims, S.A., (2019) ‘The Poetry of Tyrtaeus: The Military Rhetoric of Archaic Sparta’, academia.edu. Available at:

https[://www.academia.edu/44156567/Paper\_The\_Poetry\_of\_Tyrtaeus\_The\_Military\_Rhetoric\_of\_Archaic\_Sparta\_Workin](http://www.academia.edu/44156567/Paper_The_Poetry_of_Tyrtaeus_The_Military_Rhetoric_of_Archaic_Sparta_Workin) g\_Paper\_Version\_1\_0 [Accessed: October 17 2024]

57 Thucydides, ‘Pericles’ Funeral Oration’, in History of the Peloponnesian War. Trans. R. Hooker, University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, 1996.

58 Bradley, P., Op.Cit.

59 Lumen Ancient History, (undated) ‘SPARTA: Social & Political structure’, weebly. Available at: https://lumenancient.weebly.com/social--political-

structure.html#:~:text=A%20Homoioi%20had%20to%20have,(hoplites)%20or%20soldier's%20wives [Accessed: October 17 2024]

60 Plutarch, Op.Cit.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

or visits,” unless they had “compelling reasons,” such as being foreign ministers, doctors, or “armies coming to Sparta’s aid.”63,64 This, in addition to lack of literary sources from Sparta, results in the elegiac poetry of Tyrtaeus becoming significantly important for modern scholars.65 Tyrtaeus’ poetry is one of the most extant written sources we have from 6-7th century Sparta, and also one of the only sources. Similar to Tyrtaeus, Alcman was an alleged Spartan poet from the 7th century.66 However, there is much doubt regarding his origins, which impacts his reliability as a Spartan source.67 Ancient historians allege he hailed from “the continents of Europe and Asia” to “ancient Lydia” to “Messoa.”68 Furthermore, according to Apollonius Dyscolus, Alcman frequently used “the Aeolic dialect” spoken mainly in Thessaly and Boeotia.69,70 This is compared to the “Doric dialect of Sparta.”71 Additionally, his “six books of choral poetry” were lost in the Middle Ages, and all that is left is “a handful of quotations from other Greek authors,” and fragments found on a “papyrus” from “a tomb near the second pyramid at Saqqâra in Egypt.”72 Tyrtaeus, on the other hand, not only has many recordings of his works from other ancient authors, but also many surviving extant fragments. Furthermore, Alcman’s works are primarily “love- poems,” focused “on nature,” as well as “food… wines…[and] pleasure.”73,74,75 Tyrtaeus’ poetry alternatively extensively explores Spartan warrior culture and the Spartan legal system and governmental structure. Due to this, Tyrtaeus’ poetry takes even more significant importance in the eyes of modern scholars, in terms of its use in piecing together the past. Further, upon corroboration with other written sources from the ancient world, such as Herodotus’ *Histories* and Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, analysis of Tyrtaeus’ elegiac poems reveal many things about Sparta’s martial life and societal structures.76,77 For these reasons, Tyrtaeus’ writings are undeniably *more* than state-sponsored propaganda for modern audiences.

63 Bradley, P., Op.Cit.

64 chevalier de Jacourt, L., ‘Xenelasia of Sparta’, in Xénélasie. Trans. H. Mason, University of Bristol, 2014.

65 Millender, E.G., (2001) ‘Spartan Literacy Revisited’, University of California Press, 20(1), pp. 121-164.

66 Delphi Classics, (2023) ‘The Fragments of Alcman of Sparta’, in *Alcman | The Fragments*. East Sussex, United Kingdom: Delphi Publishing Ltd, pp. 7-8.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, (1998) ‘Aeolic dialect’, Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at: https[://www.britannica.com/topic/Aeolic-dialect](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Aeolic-dialect) [Accessed October 17 2024]

70 Delphi Classics, Op.Cit.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Suidas, ‘Lexicon’, in Lyra Graeca: Being the Remains of All the Greek Lyric Poets from Eumelus to Timotheus, Excepting Pindar vol. I. Trans. J.M. Edmonds, Loeb Classical Library, 1927.

74 Delphi Clasics, Op.Cit.

75 Forrest, G., (1986) ‘Greece: The History Of The Archaic Period’, in Oxford History of the Classical World. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, pp. 22-39.

76 Plutarch, ‘Life of Lysander’, in The Parallel Lives. Trans. B. Perrin, Loeb Classical Library, 1923.

77 Herodotus, ‘Book 1’, ‘Book 6’, and ‘Book 7’, in The Histories. Trans. A. de Sélincourt, Penguin Classics, 2003.

Overall, Tyrtaeus’ writings by definition are state-sponsored propaganda. However, that is not all they are. His poetry, in a historical context, was an absolute necessity to reunite the Spartan community and reinvigorate the Spartan spirit. His poetry, in a modern context, is one of the most significant sources we have to colour our understanding of Spartan culture. Not only was it more than state- sponsored propaganda for Spartans, but it is arguably one of, if not the most, valuable written sources for Sparta modernity has.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Performance standard | Grade | Comment |
| KU1 Knowledge and understanding of texts, artefacts, ideas, events, and/or people. | A+ | Student has demonstrated in-depth knowledge and understanding of Spartan society and how this is reflected in the poetry of Tyrtaeus. This has been supported by extensive research into both primary and secondary sources. |
| KU2 Recognition of, and reflection on, political, social, cultural, and/or economic diversity within the ancient world. | A | Well-informed recognition of the political and cultural diversity of the ancient world with comparisons made between Sparta and other ancient Greek city states. |
| KU3 Knowledge and understanding of literary, historical and/or archaeological concepts. | A+ | There is clear evidence of student achievement in the upper A band with their insightful knowledge and understanding of propaganda and Tyrtaeus’ poetry sustained throughout the essay. |
| RA1 Research into and analysis of primary and secondary sources and perspectives. | A+ | Comprehensive research and critical analysis of primary and secondary sources evidenced in the upper A-band throughout the essay. Student has drawn comparisons between ancient sources and used secondary evidence to support their analysis. |
| RA2 Research into and understanding of ideas or innovations that emerged from the ancient world, and consideration of their influence. | A | Consideration has been given to the influence of Tyrtaeus’ poetry on modern understanding of Spartan society and the importance this poetry has for modern scholars. The student has also provided in-depth insight into how the poetry was more than just state-sponsored propaganda; it was also influential at the time for inspiring Spartan society. |
| A1 Synthesis of evidence and appropriate acknowledgment of sources. | A+ | Comprehensive synthesis of primary and secondary source material which is consistently and appropriately acknowledged throughout the essay. |
| A2 Communication of ideas and arguments, using subject-specific language. | A+ | Clear, precise, and highly persuasive communication of ideas and arguments, with sources used effectively throughout to support this. Student has used subject-specific language appropriately and effectively, demonstrating a clear understanding of the historical and literary concepts relevant to this inquiry. |
| A3 Evaluation of the nature of sources and evidence. | A | Student has provided an accurate and perceptive evaluation of the primary source material, drawing comparisons to other sources to strengthen their evaluation. Student ties their evaluation of sources back to their inquiry question, further strengthening their ideas and argument. |
| Overall grade: | A+ | 29/30 |