

It is generally recognized that the so-called *Great Rhetra* was an archaic constitutional document of the Spartan *polis*. According to the interpretation provided by Plutarch (*Lyc.* 6), who lifted the text from Aristotle's lost *Lakedaimonion Politeia*, glossed the more obscure words, and quoted some verses from Tyrtaeus (fr. 4 W²) as confirmation of his reading, the *Rhetra* provided for regular meetings of the popular assembly (ῶρας ἐξ ῶρας ἀπελλάζειν) and indicated the ways in which the assembly ought to work. In particular, it recognized the power (κράτος) of the *damos*, but limited such a power through the attribution to elders and kings of the probouleutic function: only they had the right to introduce (εἰσφέρειν) proposals to the assembly and only they had the right, on the basis of a rider brought in by the kings Polidorus and Theopompus, to reject (ἀφίστασθαι / ἀποστατήρας ἡμεν) any modifications introduced by the *damos*, in case these had distorted the original meaning of the proposals submitted to the ballot of the assembly.

The extensive bibliography about the *Rhetra* abundantly shows that Plutarch's reading creates numerous difficulties. Moreover, it has been long observed that the text of the *Rhetra* was instrumental in the political controversy raised by the Spartan king Pausanias, exiled in 395 BC, who published a pamphlet against the laws of Lycurgus (Strabo 8.5.5; cf. NAFISSI, *La nascita del kosmos. Studi sulla storia e la società di Sparta*, Napoli 1991, 51-71). The use of this document in the service of a political agenda has made scholars cautious in accepting Plutarch's commentary completely. A recent study has also denied the existence of any relationship between the *Rhetra* and Tyrtaeus' fragment (VAN WEES, *Tyrtaeus' Eunomia: Nothing to do with the Great Rhetra*, in *Sparta: New Perspectives*, 1999, 1-41), but none of the critics of Plutarch's exegesis has never gone so far as to deny that the *Rhetra* is speaking about the popular assembly and the way it works. In contrast, what I argue here is that a better understanding of the *Rhetra* can be achieved only if the literary context in which it is embedded – that is Plutarch's text, with his ideologically oriented commentary and the quotation of Tyrtaeus' fragment – is completely set aside. Such an approach allows one to provide a radically new interpretation that identifies *Rhetra* not as a text on the roles of the *damos*, elders, and kings in the popular assembly, but instead as a text on the procedures for admission to the citizen body.

As a matter of fact, although Plutarch translates the term ἀπελλάζειν ('to hold Apellai') as ἐκκλησιάζειν ('to hold Ekklesia'), no ancient text refers to the Spartan assembly by the name of Apella (cf. DE STE CROIX, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, London 1972, 346-47). Rather, the regulations of the phratry of the Labyades (*Corpus des inscriptions de Delphes*, I, Paris 1977, n. 9) attest that, at least at Delphi, the Apellai were the festival during which new members of the community were admitted into the phratry. In the light of this, it seems probable that the terms εἰσφέρειν and ἀφίστασθαι do not refer to the act of *introducing* or *rejecting* a proposal in the popular assembly, but instead to the act of examining whether new members of the community have suitable qualifications for being *admitted inside* or, on the contrary, *set outside* the citizen body. In this perspective, the *Rhetra* would recognize the *damos*' right of introducing or rejecting new members of the community, but would add that, if the *damos* decided mistakenly – presumably by admitting those who did not possess the necessary requirements – it was the elders and the kings who had the right to act as 'setters-aside' (ἀποστατήρες).