**Activity 4.8**

**Spartan government**

Sparta's government fascinated ancient Greek authors because it contained many unique features.

Of the numerous reforms of Lykurgos, the first and most important was the institution of the elders, which Plato says, because it was mixed with the "fevered" rule of the kings and had an equal vote with them in important matters, provided stability and common sense. For the state was unstable, at one moment inclining towards the kings and tyranny, and at the next to the populace and democracy, and by placing the office of elders (gerousia) in the middle as a kind of ballast, and making it balanced, he ensured the safest organisation and constitution, with the twenty-eight elders (gerontes) taking the side of the kings when it was a question of resisting democracy, and alternatively strengthening the people to avoid the development of a tyranny.

*Source 4.18 Plutarch, Life of Lykurgos 5.10–11*

It seems as if there was some god who took care of you, who foresaw what was going to happen and engendered a double race of kings for you out of your one, thus contracting its powers to reasonable limits. And again, after this, a person [Lykurgos] whose human nature was mingled with some divine power, noticed that your government was still fevered, and so blended the prudent power of age with your natural audacious vigour, by giving the twenty-eight elders equal voting power in important matters to that of the power of the kings. Your third saviour saw that your government was still wanton and restive, so he imposed on it the power of the ephors as a kind of bridle, which was almost a power held by lot; and because of this measure your kingship, inasmuch as it had become a mixture of elements and a moderating power, has survived and itself been the reason for the preservation of the rest of the constitution.

*Source 4.19 Plato, Laws 691d-692a*

Many people try to describe it as a democracy because its system has many democratic elements, for example, to begin with, the education of children (for sons of the rich are brought up in the same ways as those of the poor, and are educated in a manner which is also possible for the sons of the poor), and the same is the case in the next age group, and when they become men (for thus there is no distinctive mark of being rich or poor) the arrangements for eating in the common messes (syssitia) are the same for everybody, and the rich wear such clothing as any of the poor could afford. Additionally, of the two most important offices the people choose the members of one and share in the other (for they elect the elders and share in the ephorate). Those who call it an oligarchy do so because of its many oligarchic features, for example that everyone is elected and no one chosen by lot, and that a few people have supreme authority to give sentences of death or exile, and many other similar points.

*Source 4.20 Aristotle, Politics 1294b 19–34*