

Sparta



Greece was a civilization made up of many city-states. Each one had their own separate communities, laws, and traditions. Each city-state also contributed something different to Greek society. Two of the greatest and most powerful city-states in all of Greece were Athens and Sparta. Athens valued intelligence and thinking, while Sparta valued fighting and physical strength. While both of these city-states were rivals, they played important roles in Ancient Greece.

Daily Life in Sparta

Both daily life and education were very different in Sparta than it was in other Greek city-states. With the exception of the Athenians (who thought Athens was the best), Greeks from other city-states had a grudging admiration for the Spartans. They wouldn't want to be Spartans, but in times of war, they most certainly wanted Sparta to be on their side.

No marvelous works of art or architecture came out of Sparta, but the Spartan military force was regarded as one of the ancient world's best. The Spartans were tough, and the ancient Greeks admired strength.

Education:

In ancient Sparta, the purpose of education was to produce a well-drilled, well-disciplined marching army. Spartans believed in a life of discipline, self-denial, and simplicity. They were very loyal to the city-state of Sparta. Every Spartan, male or female, was required to have a perfect body. When babies were born in ancient Sparta, Spartan soldiers would come by the house and check the baby. If the baby did not appear healthy and strong, the infant was taken away, and left to die on a hillside or trained as a slave (a *helot*). A baby who passed this examination was assigned membership in a brotherhood or sisterhood, usually the same one to which his father or her mother belonged.

Spartan Boys:

When Spartan boys were born, they were inspected. If they were considered healthy, they would be trained as soldiers. However, if they were considered unhealthy in any way, they would be abandoned outside the city.

Spartan boys were sent to military school at age 6 or 7. They lived, trained and slept in the barracks of their brotherhood. At school, they were taught survival basics and other skills necessary to be a great soldier. School courses were very hard and often painful. Although students were taught to read and write, those skills were not very important to the ancient Spartans. Only warfare mattered. The boys were not fed well, and were told that it was fine to steal food as long as they did not get caught. If they were caught, they were beaten. The boys marched without shoes to make them strong. It was a brutal period of training.

Legend has it that a young Sparta boy once stole a live fox, planning to kill it and eat it. He noticed some Spartan soldiers approaching, and hid the fox beneath his shirt. When confronted, to avoid the punishment he would receive if caught stealing, he allowed the fox to chew into his stomach rather than confess he had stolen a fox, and did not allow his face or body to express his pain. Boys were taught that courage and strength were more important than safety.

Somewhere between the ages of 18-20, Spartan males had to pass a difficult test of fitness, military ability, and leadership skills. Any Spartan male who did not pass these examinations became a *perioikos*. (The *perioikos*, or the middle class, were allowed to own property and have business dealings, but they had no political rights and were not citizens.) If they passed, they became a full citizen and a Spartan soldier.



Spartan citizens were not allowed to touch money. That was the job of the middle class. Spartan soldiers spent most of their lives with their fellow soldiers. They ate, slept, and continued to train in their brotherhood barracks. Even if they were married, they did not live with their wives and families. They lived in the barracks. Military service did not end until a Spartan male reached the age of 60. At age 60, a Spartan soldier could retire and live in their home with their family.

Spartan Girls:

In Sparta, girls also went to school at age 6 or 7. They lived, slept, and trained in their sisterhood's barracks. No one knows if their school was as cruel or as rugged as the boys' school, but the girls were taught wrestling, gymnastics, and combat skills. Some historians believe the two schools were very similar, and that an attempt was made to train the girls as thoroughly as they trained the boys. In any case, the Spartans believed that "healthy women gave birth to healthy babies".

At age 18, if a Spartan girl passed her skills and fitness test, she would marry her husband, and then be allowed to return home. If she failed, she would lose her rights as a citizen, and became a *perioikos*, a member of the middle class. In most of the other Greek city-states, women were required to stay inside their homes most of their lives. In Sparta, citizen women were free to move around, and enjoyed a great deal of freedom, as their husbands did not live at home.

Dance:

The Spartans loved a good time. They loved jokes. They loved to laugh. And they loved to dance. Dance was important to all the Greeks. The Greeks believed that dance improved both physical and emotional health.

Poetry:

Like all Greeks, the ancient Spartans loved stories about their gods, their heroes, and their history. They also loved poetry. The Spartans, not the Athenians, wrote the first love poems in Greece. They were fierce warriors, but quite romantic in their own way.

Weddings:

In ancient Sparta, the wedding ceremony was very simple. After a tussle, to prove his superior strength, the groom would toss his bride over his shoulder and carry her off. Spartan men only married women who wanted to marry them. There were no forced marriages in Sparta, and no marriages created for social gain. Spartan men married for love. They chose a bride the same way they chose everything—as a teammate for life.

Spartans firmly believed in teamwork. You fought in teams, with a brother warrior, so you always had someone to watch your back. To the Spartans, teaming up with another city-state was logical. Sparta teamed with different city-states at different times for different reasons. For all their warlike behavior and training, when a problem arose with another city-state, Sparta would first try to solve that problem through discussion and negotiation. If that failed, then they would fight. Since they were legendary warriors, in most cases, the other Greek city-states worked out their differences with Sparta without going to war.

Spartan Government: A Combination Government

The city-state of Sparta had a unique form of government. It was actually a combination of different governments all rolled into one. There was a **monarchy**, or rule by a king (although there were two kings). There was an **oligarchy**, or where a few people have power. And there was a **democracy**, where the people have the power.

Monarchy:

In Sparta, there were actually two kings. Both of the kings were in charge of running the army. The kingship was passed on from father-to-son, and if you were king, you were there for life. If the king died in battle, his son became the next king.

Oligarchy:

There was also a Council of Elders in Sparta to help run the day-to-day affairs of the city. There were many different requirements for this council:

- You had to be a **citizen**, or person with the right to participate in government
- You had to be at least 30 years old
- Total: 30 members, 28 of whom had to be over 60 years old
- You served for life

The Council of Elders ran the day-to-day business of government, and acted as advisers to the kings. The kings and the Council proposed new laws.

Democracy:

Along with the two kings and the Council of Elders, there was an Assembly, where all citizens could participate. The assembly voted on all the laws that were proposed by the kings or the Council of Elders. The one place where the assembly really did not have a lot of power was in war. The two kings could declare war without any vote required.

The Spartan government did a lot of work to govern the **helots**, or slaves in the city. The helots did the work like farming and other daily chores. The life of a helot was difficult. They were never allowed to leave the land on which they worked. They were forced to do the most difficult and dirtiest of jobs.

While the lives of the helots were very difficult, there was never any record of a revolt. This was probably because the helots feared what the powerful Spartan army would do to them if they rebelled.