



LIFE IN SPARTA

Sparta was located in a farming area on a plain. No walls surrounded the city. Its buildings were simple and plain compared to those of Athens. Even the clothing of the people in the streets was drab. Columns of soldiers tramped through the streets, with fierce expressions behind their bronze helmets.

In contrast to Athens, Sparta was more isolated. It was located on a plain between the mountains and the sea in the part of Greece known as the Peloponnesus. Spartans were suspicious of outsiders and their ideas. They grew much of what they needed in the fertile soil around Sparta. What they couldn't grow, they often took from their neighbors through the power of their armies. While Athenians boasted of their art and culture, Spartans valued strength and simplicity. They taught their sons and daughters to fight, and they produced soldiers rather than artists and thinkers.

Spartan Government

Sparta was different from Athens in almost every way, beginning with its government. While Athens was a democracy, Sparta was an oligarchy. In an oligarchy the ruling power is in the hands of a few people. Like Athens, Sparta had an assembly. But the important decisions were really made by a much smaller group called the Council of Elders.

The Council of Elders consisted of two kings and 28 other men. The two kings inherited their position and shared equal powers. The other 28 members of the council were elected by the Assembly.

To be elected to the Council of Elders, men had to be at least 60 years old and from a noble family. Some scholars believe that Assembly members shouted for the man they wanted most. The candidates who received the loudest support were elected. Once they were elected, they served for life.

The Council of Elders held the real power in Sparta. It prepared laws for the Assembly to vote on, and it had the power to stop any laws passed by the Assembly that the council members didn't like.

The Assembly in Sparta was made up of male citizens. Because the Assembly was large, it met in a large outdoor area away from the center of the city. The Assembly had very little power. Unlike the Assembly in Athens, it did not debate issues. Members of the Assembly could only vote yes or no on laws suggested by the Council of Elders.

Image from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/ancient_greeks/sparta/teachers_resources.shtml

Text from: Frey, Wendy. "Life in Two City-States: Athens and Sparta." *History Alive!: The Ancient World*. Palo Alto: Teachers' Curriculum Institute, 2004.

Final text in italics added by Ms. Guyer

Spartan Economy

While the Athenian economy depended on trade, Sparta's economy relied on farming and on conquering other people. Sparta didn't have enough land to feed all its people, so Spartans took the land they needed from their neighbors. Because Spartan men spent their lives as warriors, Sparta used slaves and noncitizens to produce needed goods.

The Spartans turned the neighbors they conquered into slaves, called *helots*. The helots continued to live in their own villages, but they had to give much of the food they grew to the Spartan citizens.

The Spartans also made use of noncitizens, called *perioikoi*. Perioikoi were free men, not slaves. They might serve in the army when needed, but they could not take part in Sparta's government. The perioikoi made such necessary items as shoes, red cloaks for the soldiers, iron tools like knives and spears, and pottery. They also conducted some trade with other city-states for goods that Sparta could not provide for itself.

In general, though Sparta discouraged trade. The Spartans feared that contact with other city-states would lead to new ideas and weaken their government. Trading with Sparta was also difficult because of its system of money. Sparta didn't have coins. Instead, it used heavy iron bars as money. Legend says that an ancient Spartan leader decided to use iron as money to make it hard to steal. A thief would need a wagon to carry enough iron bars to be valuable. As you can imagine, other city-states were not anxious to receive iron as payment for goods.

Education in Sparta

In Sparta, the purpose of education was to produce men and women who could protect the city-state. If a baby did not appear healthy and strong, it might be left to die on a hillside.

Spartans valued discipline and strength. From the age of 7, all Spartan children were trained to fight. Even girls received some military training. They learned wrestling, boxing, foot-racing, and gymnastics. Spartan boys lived and trained in buildings called *barracks*. They were taught to read and write, but Spartans did not consider those skills as important.

What was important was to be a brave soldier. Spartan boys were taught to suffer any amount of physical pain without complaining. They marched without shoes. They were not fed well, and they were encouraged to steal food as long as they did not get caught. One Spartan legend tells of a boy who stole a fox because he was starving. When he saw his teacher coming, the boy quickly hid the fox under his cloak. Rather than confess, he let the fox bite his stomach.

At the age of 20 or so, Spartan men were given a difficult test of fitness, military ability, and leadership skills. If they passed, they became Spartan soldiers and full citizens. Even then, they continued to live in soldiers' barracks, where they ate, slept, and trained with their classmates. A man could not live at home with his wife and family until he was 30 years old. And his military service continued long after that.

Women and Slaves in Sparta

Spartan women lived the same simple life as Spartan men. They wore plain clothing with little decoration. They did not wear jewelry or use cosmetics or perfume. Like Spartan men, women were expected to be strong and healthy – and ready to fight. A woman was expected to look after her husband's property in times of war. She also had to guard it against invaders and revolts from slaves.

Spartan women had many rights other Greek women did not have. They were free to speak with their husband's friends. They could own and control their own property. They could even marry another man if their first husband had been away at war too long.

Spartan slaves, the helots, were people who had been conquered by the Spartans. There were many more helots than citizens in Sparta. The Spartans were afraid the helots would revolt, so they treated them very harshly.

The government sometimes declared war on the helots so that it could legally kill any slaves it thought might rebel. Once, the Spartan government asked the helots to choose their best fighters. The Spartans said these men would be set free as thanks for fighting for Sparta. Two thousand helots were chosen. Immediately, the Spartans killed every one of them to eliminate any future helot leaders.

Despite this treatment, helots actually had some rights. They could marry whomever and whenever they wanted. They could pass their names on to their children. They could sell any extra crops they had after giving their master his share. If they saved enough money, they could even buy their freedom.

Summary

Sparta was more isolated than Athens. It was primarily a military state. Its government was an oligarchy in which a few men held most of the power. The Spartan economy depended on farming and conquest. Boys and girls alike were educated to protect the city-state. Spartan women had more rights than other Greek women. The city depended on slaves and other noncitizens to provide for many of its needs

Athens and Sparta were bitter rivals, but did come together to defeat a common enemy with other Greek city-states to fight for their freedom and independence.

This enemy was Persia, under the direction of Darius and later his son, Xerxes. Both tried to make Greece a part of their empire, but Greece was fiercely independent and fought bravely together during the Persian wars to keep their freedom. Spartans and Athenians united their strength of land armies and navies to defeat the Persians forever. Unfortunately, after Persia learned to leave Greece alone, this left Sparta and Athens plenty of time to fight each other in a series of wars called the Peloponnesian Wars. These would leave both so weak that another foreign invader from the north could take over all of Greece – Alexander the Great, from Macedonia.