

# Ancient Sparta

## BACKGROUND:

*Ancient Sparta is known today (if at all) as the militaristic rival of "enlightened" Athens in Classical Greece. Images of harsh discipline, a merciless emphasis on courage and a society lacking art, literature and culture predominate in popular literature and non-specialist education.*

- In fact, Ancient Sparta was far more complex and multifaceted.
- It was the first democracy in recorded history, possibly predating Athenian democracy by more than 200 years. (Most historians, however, date it 50 to 100 years before Solon in Athens.)
- It was the only Greek City-state to introduce a land reform aimed at equalizing wealth among its citizens.
- It was the first and only Greek City-state to develop a complex system of mutual-defense treaties. It interceded repeatedly to restore democracy in other city-states, which had been seized by tyrants.
- It was the only Greek City-state in which women enjoyed elementary rights such as the right to inherit and to public education.
- The public educational system was admired almost universally by contemporaries and praised by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle.



Although Spartans were proud to say they built their monuments "in flesh" - meaning that the virtue and courage of its citizens were the greatest monuments any city could possess - they were not lacking in architectural and artistic achievements. Particularly, their music and dance was famous throughout the ancient world. . . .

Sparta was eclipsed by the rise of Athens, a city with roughly 5-times the number of citizens and, following the defeat of Persia in the early 5c BCE, an Empire. Sparta's once revolutionary and innovative institutions became inflexible while democracy continued to develop in other cities. Its artistic achievements stagnated as the population declined and the demands of power following Sparta's victory in the Peloponnesian Wars grew. But the decline of Sparta starting in the 5th Century BCE should not entirely obscure its early accomplishments.

## THE SPARTAN ECONOMY:

- Spartan Citizens were prohibited from pursuing any profession other than that of arms.
- The Spartan economy was dependent not on property-slaves [chattel], as were the other Greek city-states, but on the non-Doric population of Laconia.

- These were divided into free but non-citizen ***Perioikoi***, and semi-free, serf-like ***Helots***.

To understand the Spartan economy, it is necessary to go back to the origins of the city. The Spartan citizens were in fact the descendants of 9c BCE Doric invaders to the Peloponnese. Rather than exterminating or enslaving the native population, the Spartans had - for whatever reason - managed to come to a unique arrangement with the conquered inhabitants. These continued to live and work in Laconia enjoying distinctly different status and privileges from the Spartan citizens or ***Spartiates***, but far better than that of chattel slaves. These peoples were divided into two broad categories. The residents of the pre-Doric towns, who enjoyed a free but dependent status as ***"Perioikoi,"*** and the peasants, who enjoyed a far more restricted status as ***"helots."***

The *Perioikoi* had their own laws and customs, could pursue any profession or trade they liked and had their own local officials and dignitaries. They were restricted only with regard to foreign and military policy, being subject of the government of the entire territory or city-state, Lacedaemon, which was run by Spartans. They were also required to provide troops for the Lacedaemonian army and support Sparta in time of war. Because the Spartan citizens were themselves prohibited by their laws from engaging in any profession except that of arms, the *Perioikoi* were the professionals, merchants and craftsmen of Lacedaemon. They were not restricted by the Spartan laws and traditions to a stern life-style nor were they prohibited from hoarding gold and silver. In short, they had a monopoly on all lucrative businesses and professions.

The *"helots"* or rural population had a significantly worse status. These "helots" were tied to the land and were officially the property of the Lacedaemonian government. As a result of at least one and possibly more revolts, they were regarded with increasing suspicion and subjected to increasingly harsher laws. In fact, the Lacedaemonian government regularly declared war on the helots to enable quick retaliation against any "unruly" *helot* without the tedious business of a trial. The unique situation led many contemporary ancient commentators to remark on the "exceptional" harshness of the Spartan system. These commentators are even hypocritical enough to regret the fact that the helots were required to give 50% of their produce to the Spartan residents on their respective estates. I say hypocritical because all the ancient commentators so shocked by the Spartan system were themselves slave owners whose slaves worked their estates and gave up 100% of all their produce to their masters.

The Spartan *helots* - if compared to slaves in other Greek city-states - were very privileged indeed. Helots were not chattels. They could not be bought and sold by their "masters." They could marry who and when they willed. They even legally had parents and children. (In other Greek states a slave was not allowed to marry and offspring of sexual intercourse regardless of the partner "belonged" to the owner of the slave; parenthood was not recognized.) They could keep half the produce of their labor - and presumably sell it on the market for a profit. They could accumulate wealth and spend it as they pleased. Many acquired not inconsiderable fortunes, and when given the opportunity to purchase their freedom from the government many could afford to do so.

So why the revolts? The revolts resulted from the extension of Lacedaemon beyond the Eurotas Valley into neighboring Messenia. Although again dates are non-existent and accounts differ, it appears that Sparta invaded and conquered Messenia sometime in the 8c BCE. The Messenians - probably reduced to a "Perioikoi" status - revolted some 50 years later. A second war resulted that was bloody and bitter and very long. At the end of the Second Messenian War the Spartans apparently "helotized" the entire Messenian population in retribution. This means they turned into serfs men who had previously been free, rich, even aristocratic. It means that they "helotized" not pre-Doric peoples, but Greeks. This explains why the term "Messenian" and "helot" are often used interchangeably by the time of the Peloponnesian War. It explains why the Lacedaemonian government declared "war" on the "helots" and it explains why the "helots" continued to try to revolt until they finally did win their freedom with foreign help and re-establish an independent, free Messenia in the 4c BCE. It also explains why other helots were loyal supporters of the Lacedaemonian government and could even be trusted to provide logistical

support to the army. Presumably the Lacedaemonian helots were grateful for their relatively privileged status, while the Messenian helots resented the loss of their freedom and independence.

## THE SPARTAN “ETHOS” [character]:

- The Lycurgan Reforms and Laws addressed more than the political and economic basis of Spartan society.
- The Laws of Lycurgus embraced many aspects of life from education to health care.
- These Laws laid a foundation for a society that was markedly different from the other Greek City-states of the time.



....All adult male citizens were bound together through three distinct and separate institutions. First, the sons of citizens were required to attend the public school system, the "*agoge*," from the age of 7 through the age of 20. Second, all male citizens between and including the ages of 21 and 60 had to serve in the army. A distinction was made between the Spartans in their first 10 years of service. During this time, they were required to live in barracks and were in effect on "active service" and the elder soldier-citizens that lived at home but could be called upon to serve at any time, similar to "reserve" status today. Third, all male citizens were required to join a "*syssitia*" or dining club and to eat at this club every night, providing set amounts of food from their estates to support the common meals. Although every citizen had to belong to a *syssitia* (also known as "*Phiditia*"), choice of which club a citizen joined was left to the citizen and the existing members. One veto from an existing member was sufficient to prevent a new member from joining.

The bonds of school, military and club were designed to keep the society closely knit and not divided along family and clan lines. The commentary of contemporaries suggests that the system worked remarkably well - with the negative side effect that Spartan society was detached and hostile to all outsiders.

## SPARTAN EDUCATION:

- Successful completion of the public system of up-bringing, the *agoge*, was a prerequisite for Spartan citizenship.
- Public education was provided for girls as well as boys.
- Spartan education was famed for its exceptional harshness and emphasis on physical skills and endurance.
- It was also characterized, however, by an astonishing degree of self-government, freedom and responsibility.

Spartan public education was the subject of extensive - and controversial - discussion even in the ancient world. No other contemporary state provided for, and in fact required, its citizens to go through the same "up-bringing" or *agoge*. Unfortunately, because we must rely on descriptions of the system provided by outsiders, we have a kind of "mirror image" of the Spartan *agoge*. Observers reported that

which struck them as unique or different from education in their own cities, rather than reporting systematically about Sparta's system of education....

First, it is important to note that collective education was considered so important that the *agoge* was not only a compulsory prerequisite for citizenship, but all adult males bore an equal responsibility for rearing good citizens. This was manifest in the laws which required boys in school to address all older men as "father," and gave any citizen the right to discipline a boy or youth under age. All citizens were directly involved in the education of the next generation in another respect as well: at the age of 20, before being awarded citizenship at 21 and serving in the army, young Spartans acted as instructors in the *agoge* for their younger classmates. Last but not least, despite the emphasis on public education, it would be absurd to think that parents did not take a very personal and intense interest in the education of their own children. Numerous quotes demonstrate the pride and sense of personal accomplishment that Spartan mothers felt with regard to their sons. Human nature, which has changed very little in 3000 years, suggests that fathers would not have been less proud.

Second, all sources agree that the principle goal of public education was to raise good future citizens. One aspect of this goal is obvious: future citizens were by definition professional soldiers and so the education system very clearly sought to create physically hardened men, capable of enduring hardship, pain and loss. The emphasis of the education was thus on athletic activities and military skills. Many stories are told about the hardships the boys endured, and that they were allowed to steal. Despite a common misconception found even in ancient commentary, careful research indicates that the boys in the *agoge* were not encouraged to steal throughout their training - only during a specified segment. Most likely, this was a form of "survival training" intended to teach the youths how to survive on their own so that they would be able - for example - to operate behind enemy lines. Throughout their public education, they were evidently subjected to harsh discipline, which apparently included flogging - a punishment reserved almost exclusively for slaves in other Greek cities.

Less obvious and often overlooked by modern observers is the fact that the goal of producing good future citizens was not fulfilled by producing good soldiers alone. Ideal future citizens were democratic, self-sufficient and independent. Thus, despite the harsh discipline, Sparta did not seek to break her youth or make them submissive. Instead, they were taught democracy from the very start of their schooling - not in theory but in practice. On starting school at the age of seven, the boys were organized into units, teams, or "herds" - and elected their own leaders. Some sources suggest that they also "elected" their instructors from among the eligible 20-year-olds.

Furthermore, although the emphasis of Spartan education may have been on physical education, this training could not have been exclusive. The fact that no contemporary source mentions that the boys learned to read and write has been taken mistakenly to mean they did not. This is absurd. There is abundant evidence that the Spartans were every bit as well educated as other Greeks. Any thing less, would have put Sparta at a disadvantage in foreign affairs, and made it inconceivable that Spartans were repeatedly requested to assume positions of leadership. Furthermore, the percentage of Spartans who were literate clearly exceeded that of any other city because - in contrast to the other cities - Spartan women were literate. The fact that learning to read and write is not mentioned in the descriptions of the Spartan *agoge* is a function of the fact that all Greeks learned these skills while in school and so this was not deemed worthy of comment. Worthy of comment, however, was the excellence of Spartan education in music, poetry and dance. The boys and youths of the *agoge* were famed for their mastery of all three skills. It must be assumed that these activities were nearly as important as physical education.

Another area in which Spartans excelled was in briefness and clarity of expression. Rhetoric [masterful speaking skills] in ancient Greece was highly valued. Men are known to have paid large sums to improve their speaking skills, and in democratic Athens power rested with those men who could persuade the assembly with their rhetoric...If Athenians collected Spartan sayings and "**laconic**" forms of expression were admired, this is clear testimony of the quality of Spartan education in this regard.

Lastly, the manners of Spartan youth were universally admired in the ancient world and comparisons were often drawn to the rude youth of other cities. One incident describes an old man looking for a seat at the Olympic games. As he stumbled about from one section to the other, the spectators laughed him at. But when he came to the Spartan section, all the Spartans stood to offer him their places - and there was universal applause. The moral drawn by the commentator was: you see, all Greeks know how we ought to behave, but only the Spartans act on it.

It would nevertheless be imprudent [unwise] to conclude that Spartan youth was as virtuous as its reputation. As the stories of theft suggest, it is far more likely that Spartan youth learned to appear obedient and respectful in public, and also learned just how to do whatever it liked when it was "out of sight."

## SPARTAN WOMEN:

- In no other Greek City-state did women enjoy the same freedom and privileges of Spartan women.
- Only in Sparta did girls receive public education - in other city-states most women were completely illiterate.
- Only in Sparta were girls allowed to engage in sport.
- Only in Sparta did women possess economic power and influence.
- Scandalized observers from other Greek cities commented that not only did Spartan women have opinions they were not afraid to voice in public, but their husbands actually listened to them!



The freedom and greater respect for Spartan women began at birth with laws that required female infants and children to be given the same care and food as their brothers - in contrast to other Greek cities where girls were frequently given less and lower quality food. Like their brothers, when the girl reached school age, they were expected or required to attend the public school, although for a shorter period of time than the boys. At school they were allowed and encouraged to engage in sport. (And it was incidentally a Spartan, who became the first woman to ever have an Olympic victory - by entering a chariot at the races.)

When girls reached sexual maturity they were not rushed - as were their sisters throughout the rest of the contemporary world - into marriage and childbed. On the contrary, the Spartan laws explicitly encouraged marrying girls only after they had reached an age to "enjoy sex"....Nor were Spartan girls married to much older men as was usual in other Greek cities. It is estimated that most Spartan wives were only 4 to 5 years younger than their husbands.

With their husbands confined to barracks and on active service until the age of 31 and frequently called up for campaigns or engaged in political and civic duties thereafter, it was left to the Spartan matrons to run the estates. These meant that they controlled the family wealth - and in effect the entire Spartan agricultural economy. Spartan citizens were dependent on their wife's efficiency to pay their "dues" to their dining clubs. This economic power is in particularly sharp contrast to cities such as Athens, where it was illegal for a woman to control more money than one needed to buy a bushel of grain. What was more, Spartan women could inherit and so transfer wealth. Athenian women, by contrast, were never heiresses; all property passed to the next male kinsman, who might at most be required to marry the heiress in order to claim the inheritance. Economic power has always had the added effect of increasing status. This is clearly evidenced by contemporary descriptions of Spartan women. They were "notorious" for having opinions ("even on political matters!") and - what was clearly worse from the perspective of other Greek men - "their husbands listened to them." Aristotle claimed that Spartan men were "ruled by

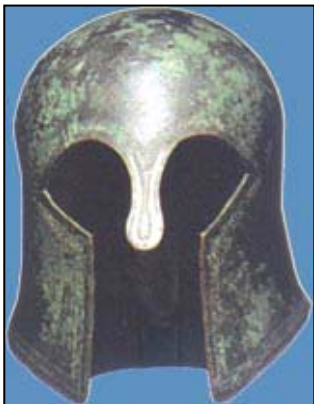
their wives" - and cited the freedom of Spartan women as one of two reasons why the Spartan Constitution was disgraceful.

In a frequently quoted incident, the wife of King Leonidas was allegedly asked why Spartan women were the only women in Greece who "ruled" their husbands. His wife, Gorgon, replied, "because we are the only women who give birth to men." [meaning that only men with the self-confidence to accept women as equals were men at all.]

Spartan women did not have a voice in their Assembly - nor were they required to spend 40 years in the army....

## SPARTAN DIPLOMACY:

- Despite the undoubted effectiveness of its professional army, Sparta did not always resort to war to solve its problems with neighboring city-states.
- In fact, the Spartans demonstrated an acute appreciation of their limits and vulnerability, which in turn gave rise to a predominantly cautious foreign policy which relied heavily on effective diplomacy.
- In consequence, Sparta produced the first known "permanent" alliance system in History: the Peloponnesian League.



Sparta, like most other cities in Ancient Greece, initially followed an aggressive policy toward her neighbors. In two lengthy and bitter wars in the late 8c BCE and early 7c BCE, Sparta conquered its western neighbor, Messenia. Exhausted from this struggle, Sparta, thereafter, sought more subtle means of hegemony [leadership and control].

When during the mid-6c BCE, Sparta came in conflict with its northern neighbor Tegea and suffered a significant defeat, Sparta made the - at the time astonishing - decision to seek not a temporary but a permanent peace. The remarkable initiative is attributed by ancient sources to a certain Spartan citizen, Chilon, whose reputation for wisdom was so great that he was regularly counted among the "7 wise men" of the ancient world. Chilon is even credited with the famous sayings carved in stone at Delphi: "Know thyself" and "Everything in moderation." This seems particularly relevant, because it was probably recognition of Sparta's limited resources, that induced a change in policy. The complete victory over Messenia had created a constant internal threat in the form of a subject population liable to revolt. The treaty of non-aggression and mutual support negotiated with Tegea not only prevented an expansion of the problem posed by the threat of Messenian revolt, but bound the Tegeans to provide support to Sparta in the event that the Messenians did revolt. After the precedent had been set with Tegea, Sparta went on to make similar treaties of mutual-defense with a series of other cities in the Peloponnese. Although little is known about the workings of this League, it is clear that despite a certain recognition of Spartan leadership, a majority vote was needed for planned action, that Sparta had only one vote, and that at various times members of the League acted against Spartan policy at will. In short, this was not a Spartan Empire disguised as a League (as the Delian League was to be later under Athenian leadership).

Sparta's fundamentally cautious foreign policy also kept it out of the military entanglements on the far side of the Aegean. The expansion of Persia in Asia Minor resulted in a number of Greek colonies being conquered or turned into vassal states of the Persian Empire. A number of these cities rose up in revolt against Persia and requested aid from the cities of the Greek mainland. Sparta's refusal to support these cities can be seen as callous or even "unpatriotic," but it reflected the fact that at this time (late 6th and

early 5c BCE), Sparta effectively had no fleet and so no way of supporting a war on the other side of the Aegean.

Last but not least, the conservatism of Sparta's 6c and 5c BCE foreign policy is reflected in the fact that Sparta was extremely reluctant to move against Athens - despite rising pressure for support from the city-states complaining because of Athens' increasingly oppressive and arrogant leadership. Effectively, its Allies in the Peloponnesian League pushed Sparta into the wars we know as the Peloponnesian Wars.

The most important deviations from this cautious policy all served the preservation of Democracy. In the second half of the 6c BCE, Sparta won a reputation as the defender of democracy against tyranny by repeatedly coming to the assistance of democratic elements in other cities and helping them to depose their tyrants. Plutarch claims, for example, that Sparta was instrumental in deposing the tyrants in Corinth, Naxos, Athens (Hippias), and Sikyon. Modern historians have questioned this list, but admit that there had to be some basis of truth for the Spartan reputation. They also suggest that the motivation for these interventions was the tendency of tyrants of this time to ally themselves with Persia. In this case, the Spartan foreign policy of intervention in the internal affairs of other cities can be seen as preventive self-defense. Another explanation, of course, is that the tyrants tended to be populist leaders, who catered to the mob. As such they were viewed as more "dangerous" to the conservative Spartans than "democracies" dominated by aristocratic elites.

Whatever Sparta's motives for opposing tyrants, it demonstrated consistent and passionate opposition to Persian designs on Greece in this period. Sparta made itself ridiculous - in the eyes of the powerful Persian monarchs - by "warning them" against enslaving Greeks. The master of an empire stretching from modern India to modern Turkey had never heard of Sparta. He asked who these people were who dared "warn" him. He was even more astonished to learn that they were masters of just two small, relatively infertile valleys in Greece. When the Persians later sent ambassadors demanding submission to Persia, the Spartan Assembly responded by throwing the ambassadors in a well - an unprecedented violation of diplomatic immunity. When the invasion finally came, Sparta was elected by the informal alliance of anti-Persian cities to take command. Sparta sent one of her own kings, Leonidas, with an advance guard of 300 citizens and larger contingents from other members of the anti-Persian alliance to try to halt the invasion at the Pass of Thermopylai. When a traitor betrayed the position, King Leonidas released the other allies to return to their homes, but he and his Spartans, supported voluntarily by 700 Thespians, remained in position and died to a man in a gesture of commitment. Less than a year later, Sparta fielded an army composed of what must have been every able-bodied man in the city-state and sent it north of the Isthmus - a significant fact because it demonstrated Spartan commitment to defending all of Greece and not just the Peloponnese. This army met the significantly superior Persian land forces still threatening Greek independence despite the defeat of the Persian fleet at Salamis the previous fall. In spite of the deplorable performance of most of the Allied detachments, the Spartans and Athenians under Spartan leadership managed to defeat the much larger Persian forces and end the direct threat of Persian invasion.

When in the following decades, Athenian arrogance led other Greek cities to pressure Sparta into opposing Athens, Sparta went to war reluctantly and with the clear statement that Athens could prevent hostilities if Athens would "let the Greeks go free." As too often in history, it was Sparta's success after nearly a third of a century of conflict that led ultimately to its own destruction. The defeat of Athens made Sparta the dominant power in Greece. The power and the temptation to abuse that power was too great even for Sparta's stubborn discipline.

**Source:** "Sparta Revisited." <http://www.elysiumgates.com/~helena/index.html>  
(modified slightly for high school use.)