

Athens: The School for Citizens

The Agora in Ancient Athens



In Athens, as everywhere, boys grew to become men. But in the ancient city, the process of growth involved much more than physical maturation. The adult male was a citizen, and Athenian citizens had many more responsibilities than their wives, servants, or slaves. The ideal citizen had to learn, as he grew, to weigh the arguments of a debate and reach a decision. He had to learn to express his own views persuasively. He was expected to become an able judge of sculpture, architecture, and drama, for he might be asked to judge artistic works in some of the many competitions which Athens sponsored. He also had to acquire the

physical strength and skills to defend his city as a soldier. And most important, he had to learn the values by which Athenians guided their lives.

The education of the citizen began in the home. As in all societies, child-rearing in Athens set many of the patterns for adult life. The child in his earliest years learned respect for his elders, the basic principles of proper behavior, and his duties to other members of his family. From infancy, the child learned that his father was absolute master of the household. But there is evidence that Athenian parents were somewhat more lenient than their counterparts in other societies. Themistocles, for example, joked that his son was the real ruler of Athens, for Themistocles, the most powerful man in the city was ruled by his wife, and his wife was ruled by their child. Even the toys and games of the young influenced what kind of adults they would become. Boys learned early to be competitive; even before they reached school age they played games in which the object was to triumph over a rival. The boy's toy box nearly always contained a set of clay soldiers which he manipulated in great mock-battles. Boys began to learn military tactics at an early age.

Girls never went to school. They received all their education in the home, learning the necessary skills of womanhood--embroidery, spinning, weaving, and other "domestic sciences." Wives of citizens often taught their daughters to read and write, and many girls learned to dance, sing, and play a musical instrument. Some men argued that women should receive more formal education. Is there anyone with whom you hold fewer discussions than with your wife, they asked? Perhaps home life would not be so intellectually boring, they contended, if girls learned some of the things that boys began to learn at the age of six--the age that Athenians believed marked the beginning of rationality. The boys did not go to free, public schools, for Athens had none. They were educated at their father's expense. Yet Athens valued education highly, and fathers were expected to see that their sons received a formal education. In fact, Athenian law emphasized that a son need not care for his aged father if his father had not provided for his education. The schools were run by professional schoolmasters, stern men who did not spare the rod if a boy misbehaved

Once he acquired a certain amount of literacy, the boy began to read the poets, particularly Homer. He was made to memorize long passages from both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and a few

of the brightest boys even memorized all of the two works. Not only did the boy have to memorize the passages, he was also expected to recite them with intelligence and expression. Athenians believed that this type of instruction would not only cultivate good speaking skills {oratory} in the young, but also instill boys with the ideals symbolized by the heroes of Homer's great epics.

Schoolboys also learned arithmetic in their first years at school. Mathematics was not only useful for keeping accounts, but it also was the basis of many aspects of Greek culture. The Athenians knew that much about the world could be understood best by the application of mathematical logic--proportion in architecture, musical harmonies, symmetry and unity in design. Therefore, Athenian schoolboys learned arithmetic to become capable of making artistic and logical judgments. They did not learn to figure, as later generations would, mainly in order to conduct business affairs or to inquire in the empirical {observational} sciences.

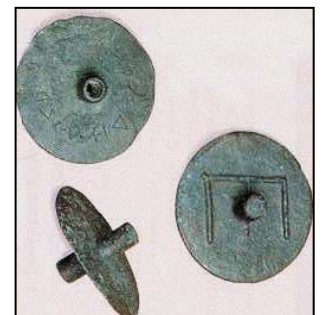
About the time that a boy reached the age of thirteen, his musical education began. He was taught to sing and to play a musical instrument, generally the lyre, a small harp. Music occupied an important part in the curriculum because Athenians believed that it cultivated the feelings Music properly cultivated feelings because it released emotions only within a rational structure. It provided that proper balance and relationship between passion and reason which was the Greek ideal.

Physical training also played an important part in the boy's education. Most of the training was devoted to running, leaping, wrestling, hunting, driving chariots, and hurling javelins--skills which contributed to the boys' ability to defend the city. Physical training also involved learning to use the weapons of the day, the bow and sling. The development of skill, strength, and a competitive spirit took place in the **gymnasia**, and the boys would continue to go there for exercise and conversation even after they became grown men. A large proportion of Athenian boys were too poor to continue formal education after the age of sixteen. These sons of less wealthy parents went to work, while the more fortunate paid handsomely for advanced education with the great professors of the day. Many studied **rhetoric**, for the ability to express oneself well increased his status, prestige, and power. These young men also studied philosophy, aesthetics (principles of beauty), and mathematics. Physical training also continued, as the boys went to professional coaches of wrestling, boxing, spear-throwing, and riding to increase their skills.

At the age of eighteen, all young men began their formal military training. In impressive ceremonies, perhaps a thousand or more eighteen-year-olds marched to a temple, and recited the **Ephibic Oath**:

I will not disgrace the sacred arms, nor will I abandon the man next to me, whoever he may be. I will bring aid to the ritual of the state, and to the holy duties, both alone and in company with many. I will transmit my native commonwealth not lessened, but larger and better than I have received it. I will obey those who from time to time are judges; I will obey the established statutes {laws}, and whatever other regulations the people shall enact. If anyone shall attempt to destroy the statutes, I will not permit it, but will repel him both alone and with all. I will honor the ancestral faith.

The inductees then marched off to Piraeus for garrison duty and military training for several months. They ate at a common mess with the other members of their tribe, hopefully developing the **esprit de corps** [pride in and loyalty to one's group] and loyalty to their fellows which Athenians believed so essential to the life of the city. For men might legitimately disagree with each other on what should be done, but they were expected to be of one heart in their affection, pride, and devotion to their *polis*.



Ostracons ["ballots"]