

The Spartans: Fierce Fighters of Ancient Greece

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An engraving of a battle during the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens. Photo from Wikimedia

Sparta was a warrior society in ancient Greece. It reached the height of its power after defeating rival city-state Athens in the Peloponnesian War, which took place from 431 to 404 B.C. Spartans believed in loyalty to the state and military service. At age 7, Spartan boys entered a tough state-sponsored education known as the Agoge that emphasized duty, order and endurance. Although Spartan women were not active in the military, they were educated and enjoyed more freedom than other Greek women. Because Spartan men were professional soldiers, all labor was done by slaves called Helots. But the Spartans' dominance was short-lived: In 371 B.C., they were defeated by the city-state Thebes at the Battle of Leuctra. After that, Sparta went into decline.

Spartan society

Sparta, also known as Lacedaemon, was an ancient Greek city-state located in the present-day region of southern Greece called Laconia. The population of Sparta consisted of three main groups. The Spartans were full citizens. A group called the Helots were slaves. The third group was the Perioeci, who were neither slaves nor citizens. The Perioeci, whose name means "dwellers-

around," worked as craftsmen and traders, and built weapons for the Spartans.

All healthy male Spartan citizens had to take part in the state-sponsored education system called the Agoge. It emphasized obedience, endurance, courage and self-control. Spartan men devoted their lives to military service and lived in military barracks well into adulthood. Spartans believed loyalty to the state came before everything else, including one's family.

The Helots name means "captives." They were fellow Greeks, originally from Laconia and Messenia. They had been conquered by the Spartans and turned into slaves. The Helots were farmers, servants, nurses and military attendants. They handled all day-to-day tasks and made Spartan life possible. The Spartans, who were outnumbered by the Helots, often treated them cruelly to prevent uprisings. Spartans were even allowed to kill Helots for being too smart or too fit, among other reasons.

The Spartan military

Other Greek city-states, such as Athens, focused on the arts and learning. Sparta, on the other hand, focused much of its attention on a warrior culture. Male Spartan citizens were allowed only one occupation: soldier. Preparation for this lifestyle began early. Spartan boys started their military training at age 7, when they left home and entered the Agoge. The boys lived together under rigid conditions. They were forced into constant competitions, which were often violent. They were given little food and were expected to become skilled at stealing what they needed, among other survival skills.

The teenage boys who demonstrated the most leadership potential were selected for participation in the Crypteia. It acted as a secret police force. Its goal was to frighten the Helot population and kill those who were troublemakers. At age 20, Spartan males became full-time soldiers, and they remained on active duty until age 60.

The Spartans' military training and discipline made them skilled at the ancient Greek style of fighting. This was done in a "phalanx" formation. In the phalanx, the army worked as a unit to move on the battlefield. No one soldier was considered superior to another. Going into battle, a Spartan soldier, or "hoplite," wore a large bronze helmet, breastplate and ankle guards. He also carried a round shield made of bronze and wood, a long spear and sword. Spartan warriors were known for their long hair and red cloaks.

Spartan women and marriage

Spartan women had a reputation for being independent-minded. They enjoyed more freedoms and power than other women in ancient Greece. Female Spartans often received a formal education, although separate from boys. In part to attract mates, females participated in athletic, singing and dancing competitions. Unlike other Greek women, Spartan women owned property. Also, they did little cooking or cleaning because those tasks were handled by Helots.



Marriage was important to Spartans. The state pressured people to have male children to replace those who died in battle. Men who delayed marriage were shamed, while those who fathered several sons could be rewarded. In preparation for marriage, Spartan women shaved their heads, and they kept their hair short afterward. Married couples typically lived apart since men under 30 lived in barracks with other soldiers. In order to see their wives, husbands had to sneak away at night.

Decline of the Spartans

In 371 B.C., Sparta suffered a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Thebans at the Battle of Leuctra. The following year, the Thebans invaded Spartan territory and freed the Helots. Sparta became a second-rate power and suffered a long period of decline. In 1834, the modern-day town of Sparta was built on the site of ancient Sparta.



Quiz

- 1 Read the section "The Spartan military."
Select the paragraph that suggests Spartan soldiers were trained to be tough and ruthless.
- 2 Read the section "Spartan women and marriage."
Which sentence from the section BEST supports the idea that Spartan women had a lot of power for that time period?
- (A) Spartan women had a reputation for being independent-minded.
 - (B) Female Spartans often received a formal education, although separate from boys.
 - (C) Unlike other Greek women, Spartan women owned property.
 - (D) Also, they did little cooking or cleaning because those tasks were handled by Helots.
- 3 Read the section "Spartan society."
HOW does this section contribute to the article's MAIN idea?
- (A) by organizing the population of Sparta into groups with defined roles
 - (B) by comparing the work of Helots to that of the Perioeci
 - (C) by explaining why Spartans had such respect for the Agoge
 - (D) by demonstrating military problems faced by Messenia
- 4 HOW effective is the introduction [paragraph 1] at introducing the idea that the Spartans were fierce warriors?
- (A) Extremely effective; it describes the courage and training of the Spartan military in great detail.
 - (B) Somewhat effective; it summarizes the military principles of Sparta between its rise and fall.
 - (C) Slightly effective; it outlines the difficulties faced by men in the Spartan military.
 - (D) Not effective; it avoids the topic of military training and service for Spartan males.