

Sparta: A Greek City-State

I. The Rise of City-States –

Mountains and the sea cut off Greek centers of population from one another. As a result, separate “city-states” developed. Each city-state or “polis” had its own form of government and system of laws. However, Greeks also shared a common culture, based on their language, religious beliefs, traditions, and economic ties. For example, Greeks from all the city-states participated every four years in Olympic games in honor of Zeus and other Greek gods. Two of the most important city-states were Athens and Sparta.

II. Sparta: A Greek City-State

Sparta was a military society and the Spartans were the greatest warriors of ancient Greece. Boys went into military training at age 7. They were taken from their homes and moved into barracks, where they were toughened by a coarse diet, hard exercise, and rigid discipline. From ages 20-30, men did frontier service. At age 30, they married and lived in barracks, until age 60. Girls were also trained to exercise rigorously and strengthen their bodies in order to give birth to healthy boys for the army. Women were not citizens but could own property and interact socially. Women ran the farms while their husbands were at war. If newborn babies were unhealthy, they were left on a hillside to die.



Sparta was located in the southern part of Greece called the Peloponnesus. In 725 B.C., the Spartans conquered their neighbors and forced the people, whom they called “helots”, to farm for them. The Spartans constantly had to use force to keep control over the helots, who outnumbered them. Due to this threat, Spartan life was organized around military needs. Individualism and new ideas were discouraged. Strict obedience and self-discipline were highly valued. Their emphasis on militarism caused them to neglect art, literature, and science.

The Spartans maintained an “aristocracy” (rule by nobility) in the belief that such a government could act more effectively than a “democracy” (rule by common people) to suppress uprisings. Sparta resisted political change, maintained inflexible institutions, and sought cohesion and stability. Sparta did not develop trade and industry, but remained agricultural. The Spartan philosophy, was that the individual exists to serve the state. Although Sparta was an excellent military state, its power declined as a result of its rigid ways and its inability to change.

Questions to Answer

1. What were the roles of boys and girls in Spartan society?
2. Why was Spartan life organized around military needs?
3. Why did Spartans neglect learning?
4. Why did the Spartans maintain an “aristocracy”?