**Ancient Greece**

Ancient Greece was a civilization belonging to a period of Greek history that lasted from about 800 BCE to around 600 CE. That's about 1,400 years!

Ancient Greece wasn't one large empire with a collection of smaller city-states. The term the Greeks used was polis, which meant (more or less) "city-state." A polis was bigger than a city but smaller than a state. They were scattered throughout the Mediterranean area. Some were sea-ports; others were more inland. Some of the more famous city-states were Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Delphi, and Thebes.

The people living in these city-states were all Greek, coming from a common heritage. But the people of each city-state did different things and had different beliefs.

Sparta, for instance, was a place of great determination. The Spartans believed in a strong army. All Spartan boys were trained to be soldiers. When the Persians invaded Greece, the other city-states looked especially to Sparta and its army to keep them safe.

Athens, another large city-state, was the birthplace of democracy, or the idea that each person could have a voice in what laws were passed and who made up the government. A citizen was a man that was born in Athens and owned land there. Athenian women did not participate in government or vote.

**Athens and Sparta: Similarities and Differences**

GOVERNMENT

Sparta and Athens were similar in many ways. They both spoke the same language and believed in the same Gods. In other ways, they were different. Sparta was an oligarchy. ruled by two kings and a group of twenty-eight rich men. This group of thirty, called the “council of elders” came up with rules that were submitted to an assembly of all free adult males to decide on. Athens was a democracy. It was ruled by men that were elected every year by the citizens. Because Athens' government had leaders who were elected, Athens is said to have been the birthplace of democracy.

LIFE OF SPARTANS

Spartan life was simple. The focus was on obedience and war. Young boys were trained to be warriors; girls also trained in warrior skills. Although the girls would not be joining the Spartan army, they were expected to know how to fight and raise good warriors.

Around 6 or 7 years old, Spartan boys would leave home and move into soldier's barracks to be trained as warriors. Their education was all about learning to fight – they barely learned to read and write. It was a tough upbringing. The young Spartans were provided with basic food and clothing needed to survive but nothing more. When Spartan boys turned 12 years old, they would take on more responsibilities and harsher training. When they turned 20, they became fully trained Spartan soldiers. Soldiers always lived among solders. Spartan soldiers did not live at home, but they could visit their families sometimes.

Once the Spartan warrior joined the army they would become almost brothers with the group of men who they trained with. Because the Spartan were busy being warriors, they didn't have time to make money or take care of land. When they turned thirty years old, they would be given a plot of land and this would be farmed for the Spartan warrior by one of the state slaves, called Helots. The produce grown from the land would allow the Spartan to eat and survive for the rest of his life. The Spartan had many slaves, or helots. The helots outnumbered the Spartan population about 20 to 1.

SLAVES OR HELOTS

Helots important for the Spartans because they did most of the work of growing the food and building structures. They did everything for the Spartan. However, they were treated like animals. Helots were bound to the land, unable to leave.

Helots were legally viewed as enemies of the state. Many of them were people that the Spartan has beat in battle and captured. They were forced to wear ugly, embarrasing clothes to tell them apart from the Spartan people, and they were publicly punished through annual beatings to remind them of their servile position. One ancient writer, Plutarch, described how the young Spartan men could run throughout the country armed with daggers and kill the helots if they felt like it. This was intended to keep them afraid and under control. There was no punishment for killing a helot.

Athenians also had slaves, but slaves were treated much better in Athens than in Sparta.

LIFE OF ATHENIANS

Athenian boys, on hand, went to school at around 7 years old and learned to read and write. They also studied art and music. Athenian life was a creative wonderland. As an Athenian, you could get a good education and could pursue any of several kinds of arts or sciences. You could serve in the army or navy, but you didn't have to. (This applied only to boys, however: Girls were required to be home and learn to become mothers and wives.When boys in Athens turned 18 years old, they spent a few years learning to fight. All young men had to do some military training, even if they weren't going to be soldiers. That way, if Athens needed to go to war, all of the men would know how to defend Athens.

POLITICS

The Greek city-states came together many times to fight against a common enemy. They fought the Persian Empire in a series of conflicts over land and territory. The Persian War lasted about 50 years. Athenian and Spartan fought side by side, along with other Greek city states, like Thebes and Corinth. In battle, Greek Warriors used a military formation, called the phalanx. Soldiers would bunch together, shields overlapping, while holding their spears or javelins in between the shields. An enemy trying to get close enough to cut through the shield would meet the spear point. Using this technique, helped the Athenians win a battle against the Perians, called the Battle of Marathon. Even though the Persians had a lot more soldiers than the Athenians, the Athenians won.

Even though the city-states of Greece were good at coming together to fight common enemies, they also fought many wars against each other. One way that Athens and Sparta were different was in their idea of getting along with the rest of the Greeks. Sparta seemed happy to keep to itself and provide army and assistance when necessary. Athens, on the other hand, wanted to control more and more of the land around them. This eventually led to war between all the Greeks. This was the Peloponnesian War. After many years of hard fighting, Sparta won the war. In true Greek spirit, Sparta refused to burn the city of Athens. Rather, the culture and spirit of Athens was allowed to live on, as long as the Athenians no tried to rule their fellow Greeks. In this way, the influence of Athens remained and grew stronger. Other city-states had the same kinds of temples, buildings, and meeting-places, but it was Athens that became most famous.

WOMEN WARRIORS

Another group of warriors often mentioned in Greek culture, art and mythology are the Amazons. The Amazons were a society of warrior women. In Greek mythology, the Amazons were daughters of Ares, the Greek god of war. They were a women-only society where men were welcomed only for the purposes of making babies, and all male infants were sent away or killed. The Amazon women has long been thought to be just part of legends and myths. Many Greek legends tell of major battles (and love stories) between popular ancient warrior men and Amazon women warriors. Archeologists have wondered: were Amazons real? New archaeological digs have discovered battle-scarred female skeletons buried with their weapons that prove that women warriors were not merely figments of the Greek imagination. It’s not likely that most of the stories told about the Amazon women were real, but there were definitely women warriors in ancient times.

SPARTAN CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY

The Spartan family was quite different from that of other [**Ancient Greek**](http://www.historywiz.com/anc-greece.htm) city-states. The word "spartan" has come down to us to describe self-denial and simplicity. This is what Spartan life was all about. Children were children of the state more than of their parents. They were raised to be soldiers, loyal to the state, strong and self-disciplined.

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| http://www.historywiz.com/images/greece/spartans.jpg |

It began in infancy. When a Spartan baby was born, soldiers came to the house and examined it carefully to determine its strength.The baby was bathed in wine rather than water, to see its reaction. If a baby was weak, the Spartans exposed it on the hillside or took it away to become a slave (*helot*). Infanticide was common in ancient cultures, but the Spartans were particularly picky about their children. It was not just a matter of the family, the city-state decided the fate of the child. Nurses had the primary care of the baby and did not coddle it.

Soldiers took the boys from their mothers at age 7, housed them in a dormitory with other boys and trained them as soldiers. The mother's softening influence was considered detrimental to a boy's education. The boys endured harsh physical discipline and deprivation to make them strong. The marched without shoes and went without food. They learned to fight, endure pain and survive through their wits. The older boys willingly participated in beating the younger boys to toughen them. Self-denial, simplicity, the warrior code, and loyalty to the city-state governed their lives.

Spartan children were taught stories of courage and fortitude. One favorite story was about a boy who followed the Spartan code. He captured a live fox and intended to eat it. Although boys were encouraged to scrounge for food, they were punished if caught. The boy noticed some Spartan soldiers coming, and hid the fox beneath his shirt. When the soldiers confronted him, he allowed the fox to chew into his stomach rather than confess, and showed no sign of pain in his body or face. This was the Spartan way.

At the age of 20 or so, they had to pass a rigorous test to graduate and become full citizens. Only the soldiers were received the aristocratic citizenship. If they failed their tests they never became citizens, but became *perioeci*, the middle class. So to some extent class was based on merit rather than birth.

If the young men passed, they continued to live in the barracks and train as soldiers but were required to marry to produce new young Spartans. The state gave them a piece of land which was farmed by slaves and which they did nothing to tend. The income provided for their support so they could remain full-time soldiers. At the age of 30 they were allowed to live with their families, but continued to train until the age of 60 when they retired from military service.

Girls also were removed from the home at 7 and sent to school. Here they learned wrestling, gymnastics, were taught to fight, and endured other physical training. Spartans believed that strong mothers produced strong children. Young women competed at athletic events and may have competed in the nude as the men did.

If they passed their citizen tests, they were assigned a husband. Because this did not happen until they were 18-20, they were more emotionally mature when they married and closer to the age of their husbands. Because they marred later than other Greek women, the Spartan thought their women produced stronger children, if not as many. To prepare for the wedding night, her hair was cut short and she was dressed in male clothing. The man then returned to his all-male barracks.

Men and women did not live together, but met occasionally for procreation. The wedding consisted of a ritualized physical struggle which resulted in the man slinging the woman over his shoulder and taking her off. By the end of the 4th century BCE there were more women than men in Sparta and women often had more than one father for their children, and a several men might share a wife. Romantic love was discouraged by the city-state, but there is evidence that some husbands and wives loved each other very much. This fact would embarrass them if it were known, a shameful weakness, so such attachments were usually kept secret.

Women enjoyed much greater freedom and independence in Sparta than in other Greek city-states. Because mothers had little responsibility for the care of their children, they were not as tied to the home as most Greek women were. They were allowed to walk abroad in the city and transact their own affairs. They owned their own property, as much as a third of the property in Sparta. Their husbands were only a minor part of their lives, and except in matters relating to the military were generally their own masters.

They were not as close to their children as other Greek women in some ways, but a mother had pride in her son's stature as a courageous and strong soldier. “Come home with your shield or upon it” was said to be the advice one woman gave her son as he went off to war. They shared the culture's shame of weakness.

Although the Spartans did not have a family life as we think of it, there is evidence that in some cases at least Spartan men and women had close ties to their children and with each other. Their system certainly was well-ordered and avoided the "moral degeneration" they despised in the Athenians who they saw as wallowing in luxuries. And there is no doubt that the system produced strong soldiers. The Spartan army was legendary in ancient Greece, and the legend continues to this day.