

Child Soldiers of Sparta

Do you ever find school hard to deal with? For kids in the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta, discipline and hard work were more rigorous than you might imagine. In Sparta, a citizen's identity was bound up in serving society. If you were a boy, this meant one thing: learning to make war.

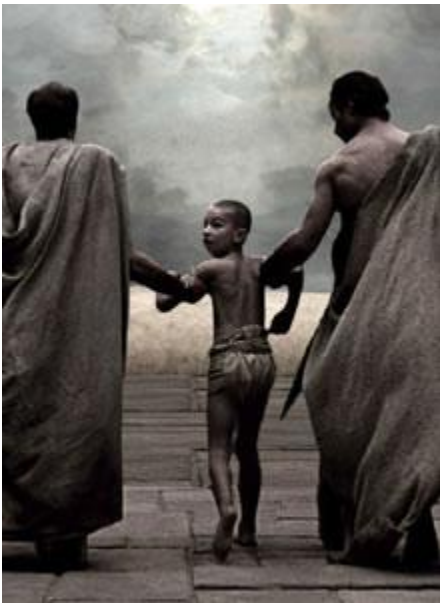
Many historians call the period of around 500 B.C. to 300 B.C. the "golden age of ancient Greece." Two rival city-states dominated the Greek world then: Athens and Sparta.

They were very different. The birthplace of democracy, Athens was rich with philosophers, playwrights, and historians. In Sparta, males were expected to be soldiers--period. Every Spartan was raised to be tough. If the city elders thought a newborn was too weak, they would throw the infant from a cliff to his or her death on the rocks below.

Let Athenians get soft on easy living and philosophizing, the people of Sparta thought. Spartans also had little interest in book learning. Instead, they were determined to be what one admiring Athenian called them: 'craftsmen of war'.

The Severest School

Spartan boys were products of a grueling system of education called the *ugoge* (uh-GOH-jee). At age 7, a boy was taken from his parents; His destination bore no resemblance to grade school as we know it.



Soldiers-in-training lived without shoes. They made their beds from reeds, and slept on the ground. They owned just one garment, worn without underwear. They hardly ever bathed. Otherwise, Spartans believed, they might become too pampered.

Spartan boys, in essence, were trained to live and think like animals. They were even organized into groups called herds and flocks, and their overseer was called a boyherd.

Students were routinely beaten, made to brawl with each other, or dance for hours under the hot summer sun to toughen them. Boys were also purposely underfed, and expected to learn to steal to survive. Those who were caught stealing, however, were beaten. For other offenses, Spartans had a distinctive punishment: getting your thumb bitten!

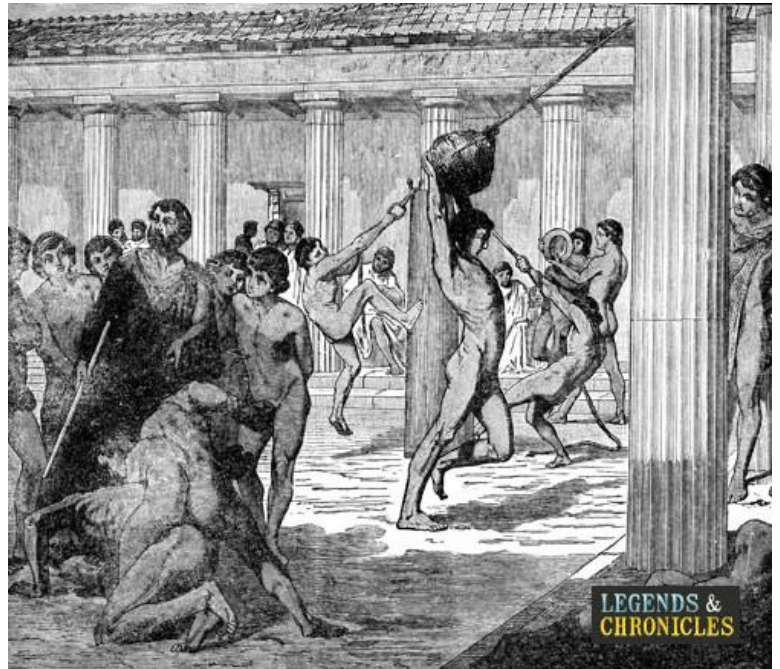
At the age of 20, a young man graduated into the army. When he was 30, a Spartan could finally have a family. Even so, he stayed a soldier until he was 60--if he lived that long.

The object of this conditioning was to enable a Spartan to endure any pain for the glory of waging war for his homeland. The *ugoge* is what made it all possible.

"We should remember that one man is [made] much the same as another," said Sparta's King Archidamus (ar-kuh-DAY-mus) II. "He is best who is trained in the severest school."

Greek Marines

Girls in Sparta were tough, too. They competed vigorously in running and wrestling. According to tradition, Spartan mothers urged their sons to die in battle rather than shame the family by surviving a loss. "Come back with your shield--or on it," they said, sending their sons off to war.



What made Spartans so single-minded? As Sparta conquered other peoples living on the Peloponnesian peninsula, it made many of them slaves, called helots. In time, the helots greatly outnumbered their conquerors.

Constantly concerned about the threat of a slave revolt, Sparta turned itself into "a sort of permanently armed camp," historian Paul Cartledge has written. "(The Spartans) acquired the reputation of being the Marines of the entire Greek world."



For hundreds of years, the Spartans kept that reputation. They perfected a method of fighting using hoplites, heavily armored soldiers carrying long spears and shields. With shields locked together, hoplites moved forward in a massive phalanx. Seeing some 5,000 of these brutes advancing with perfect discipline across a battlefield made a big impression on opposing armies.

The Bitter End

Few soldiers equaled the Spartans when it came to bravery. In 480 B.C., Sparta joined Athens to fight off the mighty Persian Empire. During one of the most famous battles in history, 300 Spartans held off thousands of Persian soldiers at the mountain pass of Thermopylae (thur-MAH-puh-lee).

According to legend, one Spartan warrior was told that there were so many Persian archers; their arrows would blot out the sun. His reply: "Good. Then we will fight in the shade." Not a single Spartan survived the battle. But their sacrifice was key to the Greeks' ultimate defeat of Persia.

Athens and Sparta could never stay allies for long. Both sought to dominate the Greek world. The Peloponnesian War, which broke out in 431 B.C., was the ultimate contest between the two. That long, disastrous conflict finally ended with Sparta's victory in 404 B.C.

But within a generation, Sparta was in trouble. It had too much territory to defend. In 371 B.C., Sparta suffered a humiliating defeat by the city-state of Thebes (theebz). The victors then liberated the Messenians, who made up most of the helots. With the basis of Sparta's slave-labor system gone, its power began to fade.

In the centuries to follow, few societies would rival the legendary power of, or commit its citizens to war with more dedication than, the once-mighty Sparta.

Words to Know

- * city-state [n]: an independent city with power over surrounding territory.
- * helot [HEH-lut] [n]: a slave. In Sparta, helots farmed while Spartan men went to war.
- * Peloponnesian [PEH-luh-puh-NEE-shen] [adj]: of or from the Peloponnese, a large peninsula forming the southern part of mainland Greece.
- * phalanx [FAY-lanks] [n]: an organized mass of people. In ancient Greece, a group of heavily armed soldiers.

Think About It

1. Do you think Spartans' rigorous up-bringing truly made them better soldiers? Explain.
2. What differences do you see between being a citizen of Sparta and one of the U.S.? Do you think that being a Spartan was worth the sacrifice? Why or why not?

What would it be like to have your future plotted out from birth? In ancient Sparta, male citizens had basically one choice in life.