

Child Soldiers OF SPARTA

In this ancient Greek society, being a citizen meant becoming a warrior

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.

→ 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.

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 (see map, p. 15).

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 *agoge* (*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



Boys in Sparta were trained from a young age to become hardened warriors.

any pain for the glory of waging war for his homeland. The agoge 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.

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A phalanx of Spartans was a fearsome sight to 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.

—Bryan Brown

➔ Think About It

1. Do you think Spartans' rigorous upbringing 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?

Reading a Historical Map



Ancient Greece was not a nation as we think of one, and was not all located within the boundaries of present-day Greece. It was, rather, a collection of regions and city-states in a general area that shared a common language and culture. Sparta was located in the region of Laconia, on a peninsula called the Peloponnese.

The people who became the Spartans of Greece's golden era were originally from Epirus and Macedonia. They began settling on the Peloponnese around 1100 B.C. Gradually, those Spartans took over most of the peninsula—including Messenia, from which most of Sparta's helots (slaves) came.

The Peloponnesian War was one

of the most important conflicts of the ancient world. Pitting the empires of Athens and Sparta against each other, it was, in effect, a Greek world war. Athens never recovered from its loss in 404 B.C. Thebes, which fought with Sparta against Athens, soon turned against its ally, ending Sparta's role as a great power.

Questions

Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

1. In which region was Sparta located?
2. Where did the ancestors of the Spartans originally come from?
3. Athens' allies were mainly situated around which large body of water?
4. What narrow body of water led into the Sea of Marmara?
5. Ancient Macedonia was allied with which Greek power?
6. Which Spartan ally later contributed to its decline?
7. Which ally of Athens was located off the coast of present-day Albania?
8. Greek cities on the east coast of the Aegean Sea were located in which present-day country?
9. What is the present-day name of the Greek city-state located at the entrance to the Black Sea?
10. What competing empire on this map rivaled those of the ancient Greeks?