

DAILY LIFE IN ANCIENT SPARTA

Both daily life and education were very different in Sparta than they were in the other city states. With the exception of the Athenians, Greeks from other city-states had a grudging admiration for the Spartans. They wouldn't want to be Spartans, but in times of war, they most certainly wanted Sparta to be on their side. The Spartans were tough, and the ancient Greeks admired strength. Let's see why they have this reputation...

Education: In ancient Sparta, the purpose of education was to produce a well-drilled, well disciplined marching army. Spartans believed in a life of discipline, self-denial, and simplicity. When babies were born in ancient Sparta, Spartan soldiers would come by the house and check the baby. If the baby did not appear healthy and strong, it was taken away and left to die on a hillside or trained as a slave (a helot.) A baby who passed this examination was assigned membership in a brotherhood or sisterhood, usually the same one to which his or her father or her mother belonged.

Spartan Boys: Spartan boys were sent to military school at age six or seven. They lived, trained and slept in the barracks of their brotherhood. At school, they were taught survival skills and other skills necessary to be a great soldier. School courses were very hard and often painful. Although students were taught to read and write, those skills were not very important to the ancient Spartans. Only warfare mattered. Boys in school were not fed well and were told that it was fine to steal food as long as they did not get caught stealing. If they were caught, they were beaten. Boys also endured a brutal training period, in which they marched without shoes to make them stronger.

Legend has it that a young Sparta boy once stole a live fox, planning to kill it and eat it. He noticed some Spartan soldiers approaching, and hid the fox beneath his shirt. When confronted, to avoid the punishment he would receive if caught stealing, he allowed the fox to chew into his stomach rather than confess he had stolen a fox, and did not allow his face or body to express his pain.

Somewhere between the ages of 18 and 20, Spartan males had to pass a difficult test of fitness, military ability, and leadership skills. Any Spartan male who did not pass these examinations became a perioikos. (The perioikos, or the middle class, were allowed to own property and have business dealings, but they had no political rights and were not citizens.) If a Spartan male passed, he became a full citizen and a Spartan soldier.

Spartan citizens were not allowed to touch money. That was the job of the middle class. Spartan soldiers spent most of their lives with their fellow soldiers. They ate, slept, and continued to train in their brotherhood barracks. Even if they were married, they did not live with their wives and families; they lived in the barracks. Military service did not

end until a Spartan male reached the age of 60. By then, a Spartan soldier could retire and live in his home with his family.

Spartan Girls: In Sparta, girls also went to school at age six or seven. They lived, slept, and trained in their sisterhood's barracks. Scholars do not know if their school was as cruel or as rugged as the boys' school, but they were taught wrestling, gymnastics, and combat skills. Some historians believe the two schools were very similar, and that attempts were made to train the girls as thoroughly as the boys. In any case, the Spartans believed that strong young women would produce strong babies.

At age 18, if a Spartan girl passed her skills and fitness test, she would be assigned or choose a husband and would be allowed to return home. If she failed, she would lose her rights as a citizen and become a perioikos. In most of the other Greek city-states, women were required to stay inside their homes most of their lives. In Sparta, women citizens were free to move around, and enjoyed a great deal of freedom, as their husbands did not live at home. No marvelous works of art or architecture came out of Sparta, but the Spartan military force was regarded as terrifying. Thus, the Spartans achieved their goal.

Gods: The Patron god of Sparta was Ares, god of war. The Patron goddess of Sparta was Artemis, goddess of animals and battle.

Dance: The Spartans loved to dance. Dance was important to all the Greeks, as they believed that dance improved both physical and emotional health.

Poetry: Like all Greeks, the ancient Spartans loved stories about their gods, their heroes, and their history. They also loved poetry. The Spartans, not the Athenians, wrote the first love poems in Greece. They were fierce warriors, but their love for poetry rendered them quite romantic.

Greek Weddings: In ancient Athens, wedding ceremonies started after dark. The veiled bride traveled from her home to the home of the groom while standing in a chariot. Her family followed the chariot on foot, carrying gifts, such as baskets, furniture, jewelry, mirrors, perfume, and vases filled with greenery. Friends of the bride and groom lit the way, carrying torches and playing music to scare away evil spirits. During the wedding ceremony, the bride would eat an apple, or another piece of fruit, to show that food and other basic needs would now come from her husband.

In ancient Sparta, the ceremony was very simple. To prove his superior strength, the groom would toss his bride over his shoulder and carry her off. Spartan men only married women who wanted to marry them. There were no forced marriages in Sparta, and no

marriages created for social gain. Spartan men married for love. They chose a bride the same way they chose everything—as a teammate for life.

Spartans believed in teamwork. Spartans fought in teams, with a brother warrior, so they always had someone to look out for them. Sparta teamed with different city-states at different times for different reasons. For all their warlike behavior and training, when a problem arose with another city-state, Sparta would first try to solve that problem through discussion and negotiation. If that failed, they would fight. Since they were legendary warriors, in most cases, the other Greek city-states worked out their differences with Sparta without going to war.

ASK A SPARTAN:

How do Spartans feel about their city-state in comparison to other city-states in ancient Greece? A Spartan warrior might answer something like this:

"You want me to compare Sparta with Athens?" The Spartan warrior laughed uproariously. He waved a few of his fellow warriors over to share the joke. "We would rather die than behave like those silly citizens of Athens." (Nods all around.) "We know we are superior and we are delighted to be Spartan! Lie, cheat, and steal, but do not get caught—that is the Spartan way." (All the warriors nodded. These were wise words indeed.) "We endure unbelievable pain and hardship to become a superior Spartan soldier and citizen! Taken away from our parents at age seven, we live a harsh and often brutal life in the soldiers' barracks. Older children beat us to help make us tough and strong. We are often whipped in front of groups of other Spartans, including our parents, but we never cry out in pain. We are given very little food. We are encouraged to steal food instead. If caught stealing, we are beaten. To avoid severe pain, we learn to be cunning, to lie, to cheat, to steal, and how to get away with it. We are fierce, capable, and proud of our strength. Compare Sparta to Athens? Don't make me laugh!" Laughing heartily, shoulder to shoulder, the warriors marched away."