Sparta

Society

Spartan society consisted of three main groups. The ruling class, called the Spartiates, was Dorian in race. When historians talk about ‘Spartans’ this is who they mean. There were no differences in rank within this class. The Spartans lived in five unwalled villages, scattered across the plain of Laconia in the southern Peloponnese.

The second class was free, but non-Spartiate. They were merchants, craftsmen and farmers. They lived in villages outside Sparta. They had no say in the government and were regarded as socially inferior to the Spartans.

The helots, or slaves, were by far the largest group: some historians have estimated that there were seven helots to each Spartan. The helots worked the land for the Spartans and were not allowed to leave the land of their masters. In time of war they were forced to go to fight.

Figure 3.4 The plain of Laconia, showing the five villages of Sparta
Spartan society
1. Who were the Spartiates?
2. Who were the helots?
3. The Spartiates were socially equal, but how equal was Spartan society as a whole?

Taking notes
In your table of notes, add these point-form notes under 'Sparta' and 'Society':

Social classes
1. Spartiates: ruling class, all Spartiates socially equal
2. non-Spartiates: merchants etc., socially inferior but free
3. helots: slaves, worked land for Spartiates

Political system
The government of Sparta was an oligarchy. The Spartan government consisted of five ephors, a council of 28 men over 60 years of age, and an assembly of all male Spartiates. Although they were elected annually by the assembly of Spartans, ephors had full power to decide on every aspect of Spartan life. They ruled with the advice of the council. The assembly met every now and again to shout 'yes' or 'no' to any laws drawn up by the ephors or council.

There were two kings who were the religious heads of state. One king, accompanied by an ephor to watch his movements, served as the general of the Spartan army when it fought outside Sparta. The ephors controlled the secret police, who watched everybody. The secret police were sometimes ordered by the ephors to go out at night and secretly kill a helot that the state thought dangerous.

Fast Fact
When it came to the election of members of the council, the loudest shout won. The shouts were judged by a board of judges listening inside a nearby house. (The judges were given the order that each candidate appeared in.)

Working historically 3.4

1. Draw a diagram showing the different levels of the Spartan government and what responsibilities each group had.
2. Who held most power in the Spartan government? Who had the least power?
3. What was the secret police used for?

Taking notes
In your table of notes, add the point-form notes under 'Sparta' and 'Government':

1. five ephors: total power; used secret police to watch everybody
2. assembly of Spartans: only voted in ephors, accepted laws
3. kings: religious heads, generals, no political power
Economy

The Spartan state owned all the land. A piece of land, with a farm and helots to work on it, was given to each Spartan boy at his birth. He was not allowed to sell the land or the helots. Both land and slaves went back to the state when the Spartan died. The state decided what each Spartan grew on his land: half the food produced was to feed the helots and half was for the Spartan’s family. A proportion of the food went every month to the mess hall, or sysstition, the Spartan ate in.

As far as possible, Sparta was self-sufficient; that is, the Spartans grew everything they needed for their simple life. Their ‘money’ was heavy iron bars, so no-one could carry them or become wealthy by hoarding them!

Working historically 3.6

1. Who owned the land in Sparta?
2. Who controlled food production?
3. How did the government prevent Spartiates from becoming wealthy?

Taking notes
In your table of notes, add the following point-form notes under ‘Sparta’ and ‘Economy’:

- All land belonged to state
- Land, farm, helots given to boy at birth, returned to state at death
- State laid down what crops grew and where went: % to mess halls
- Sparta self-sufficient

Education of boys

As soon as a Spartiate boy was born, he was shown to the ephors. If they decided he looked unhealthy, he was taken to a cave on Mt Taygetus and left there to die.

Boys were brought up by their mothers until the age of seven, when they were sent to live with 14 other boys in a large wooden hut, a sort of barracks. They were taught enough reading and writing for basic word skills, but their main education was physical. The aim of their education was to train disciplined soldiers. The boys played and exercised naked. They learnt to throw the javelin and fight with the sword.

At the age of 12, Spartan boys were given only a cloak to wear and no tunic. They had to go barefoot to toughen their feet. They plucked reeds from the river Eurotas with bare hands to make a bed. For breakfast, they ate coarse black bread dipped in wine. For their main meal they had soup made out of boiled pig’s blood, a piece of pork boiled in the soup, and bread. The boys had to carry out, without question, all the tasks they were required to do, otherwise, they were flogged. Some time during their twelfth year they were sent to live for two years on Mt Taygetus.
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They learnt to ride horses and to drive chariots, even competing in special games. Above all, the girls were taught total unquestioning obedience to the state.

Girls did not see their father until he was 30; they did not see their brothers after the age of six and they did not see their husband (in daylight) until the birth of the first child. The couple met in secret at night. Marriage was often not official until the first child was born. Love was for the state, not for people.

Wives had to run the farm, supervise the activities of the helots, look after children, and make sure the monthly allowance of food was sent to the syssition. No wonder Spartan women were known for their independence.

Working historically 3.7

1. How did the Spartan system of education encourage boys and girls to be independent?
2. Why were boys and girls given this type of education?

Taking notes

In your table of notes, add the point-form notes under ‘Sparta’ and ‘Education of boys’ and ‘Education of girls’:

boys: at 7 left home; total obedience to state; physical education only = soldier
girls: lived at home until married 18; total obedience to state; physical education only = healthy children

Culture

There were religious festivals in Sparta, at which the Spartans could relax. As well as running, chariot racing and other physical activities, the Spartans competed against each other in music, particularly at choral singing and dancing. Most songs were about fighting and dying for the state, and most dances were military in style.

The Spartans deliberately cut themselves off from art, architecture and literature. Children were not taught to read books, so after the sixth century BC, when the Spartans introduced this way of life, there was no literature. They had no theatre or gymnasium, as the Spartans believed courage and endurance in group activities was more important than individual skill. Very few Spartan individuals are known about by historians, certainly none who achieved cultural or scientific greatness. Individuals we have heard of, such as King Leonidas, were recognised for their extreme bravery. CD 3.4 tells the story of Leonidas’ bravery at the battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC.
There they had to catch or steal any food they could find. Conditions were extremely harsh, as the story in CD 3.3 shows.

At the age of 20 young Spartans were supposed to join a mess hall. Once they joined the *sysstition*, they would belong to that unit in the army for the rest of their fighting life (until 60) and eat their main meal there every day. After they turned 30 they were allowed go home to their wives each night on the farm.

**Education of girls**

Spartan girls lived at home until they were 18 years old. They were given no education in reading and writing, and were not taught spinning or weaving. This task was given to the helot women as it meant too much sitting down for the Spartan girl. The aim of the girls' education was for them to produce healthy children. Like the boys, the girls did physical exercise. They were taught dancing and music, wrestling, running, throwing the discus and javelin.
Leonidas was also known for his laconic humour, which was typical of Spartans. Plutarch, a biographer, reports that at the battle of Thermopylae, the Spartans were vastly outnumbered by the Persian force. Someone made the comment 'It isn’t even possible to see the sun because of the Persians’ arrows.' Leonidas replied, 'How pleasant then, if we’re going to fight them in the shade.'

Figure 3.7 All that is left of Sparta today

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**Working historically 3.8**

Would you have liked to have lived in the first socialist state? Give reasons for and against.

To find out more about why ancient Sparta is considered a socialist state, read the information in CD 3.5.

**Taking notes**

In your table of notes, add the point-form notes under ‘Sparta’ and ‘culture’:

1. festivals: physical competitions and military music and dancing
2. rejected culture
3. group more important than individual
4. Spartan individuals known for bravery, not art, literature, science