4.6 Sparta: political and social structures

Sparta was a city-state set up in the rich Eurotas River valley in Laconia in the Peloponnese (see the map of Greece in unit 4.3). It was the largest state in Greece, having around 8000 square kilometres compared with Attica's 2500. Sparta had fertile agricultural soil, it was rich in iron ore, and it was protected by some of the highest mountains in Greece.

Social and political structure

Early Spartans were not much different in outlook and social organisation from other Greek-speaking people at the time. They were enthusiastic about poetry and art, enjoyed dancing at religious festivals and produced a distinctive style of pottery.

However, this changed when the Spartans conquered the neighbouring state of Messenia for its rich agricultural land. Instead of importing slaves, which Athens did, the Spartans forced the conquered Messenians, called helots, to work the land. When the helots revolted against Spartan rule around 650 BCE, the Spartans feared for their survival. The rebellion was eventually crushed, but the Spartans were determined not to allow it to happen again. They made changes in their social and political organisation, creating a society that was unique in Greece.

Helots were at the bottom of Sparta's social structure. Above these, but still not citizens, were the perioeci, meaning 'those who lived outside' the city of Sparta and were engaged in trade and manufacture.

Three factors help to explain the unique nature of Spartan society among the Greeks:

- The need to keep control of the helots resulted in the need for strong military training.
- Laconia, with its rich resources, did not need to become involved in trade to the extent of other Greek states. This also meant they were less open to outside ideas.
- A man's whole life could be devoted to military service, because the helots worked the land and the perioeci were involved in trade and manufacturing.

Individual citizens did not have as much power in Sparta as they did in Athens. Sparta still had monarchs; there were two kings, so that one could stay at home while the other was at war. However, most of the power was in the hands of five ephors, who were elected each year by an assembly of male citizens. There was also an advisory Council of Elders, made up of the two kings and 28 citizens over the age of sixty.

Spartan women

Although women could not vote, they enjoyed a much greater degree of freedom than women in other Greek states. With male Spartans spending so much time in the military, women were responsible for running the farms and supervising the helots. Spartan women could also own their own land, and it has been estimated that about one-third of Spartan women did so. They could also inherit land if there was no male heir. Both physical and intellectual training was considered important so they could become the mothers of strong soldiers. Plutarch wrote of exercises such as 'wrestling, running, throwing the quoit and casting the dart'.

**Source 1** A bronze statue of a Spartan woman, probably exercising. Note the strong body and the short skirt. Greek women generally were fully covered.

Gorgo was the wife of Leonidas, the king who died at Thermopylae. When a foreign woman said to her that the Spartan women were the only women in Greece who could control men, Gorgo's reply was, 'With good reason, for we are the only women who bring forth real men.'

Spartan warriors

Although Sparta first organised its army to defend against its internal enemies — the helots — the same army could also be used to fight other Greek states or to defend Greece itself. The military abilities of the Spartans became legendary, as in the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE, when the Spartans fought against the invading Persians (see unit 4.7).

The production of Spartan warriors started from birth. The Greek historian Plutarch, writing in about 100 CE, said that the children were not restrained but left to run free. They had to eat whatever food they were given and were trained not to be afraid of the dark or of being left alone.
Boys left home at the age of seven and were trained in barracks. Although they did learn to read and write, the focus was on physical activities. One exercise was to send a group of boys into the countryside without any food or supplies. The only way to survive would have been to steal food, but if they were caught there was severe punishment. Some sources claimed that their purpose was to kill helots to instil fear in them and keep them under control. These would be skills that were very important in real fighting.

**Source 2** The Greek writer Plutarch wrote the following about Sparta in approximately 100 CE, but used sources written hundreds of years earlier.

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**Raising boys**

It was not permissible for each father to bring up and educate his son in the way he chose. Instead, at the age of seven, they were distributed into troops. The boys learned to read and write no more than was necessary. Otherwise, their whole education was aimed at developing smart obedience, perseverance under stress, and victory in battle. So as they grew older they intensified their physical training, and got into the habit of cropping their hair, going barefoot, and exercising naked. From the age of twelve they never wore a tunic, and were given only one cloak a year. Their bodies were rough, and knew nothing of baths or oiling: only on a few days in the year did they experience such delights. They slept together by squadron and troop on mattresses which they made up for themselves from the tips of reeds growing along the River Eurotas, broken off by hand without the help of any iron blade.

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**Raising girls**

He toughened the girls physically by making them run and wrestle and throw the discus and javelin. Thereby their children in embryo would make a strong start in strong bodies and would develop better, while the women themselves would also bear their pregnancies with vigour and would meet the challenge of childbirth in a successful, relaxed way. He made young girls no less than young men grow used to walking nude in processions, as well as to dancing and singing at certain festivals with the young men present and looking on. On some occasions the girls would make fun of each of the young men, helpfully criticizing their mistakes. There was nothing disreputable about the girls’ nudity. It was altogether modest, and there was no hint of immorality. Instead it encouraged simple habits and an enthusiasm for physical fitness, as well as giving the female sex a taste of masculine gallantry, since it too was granted equal participation in both excellence and ambition.


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From the age of 18, young Spartan males were grouped into army-like formations and entered military service at the age of 20. Even though they could now marry, they could not live at home with their wives, but were arranged in groups of 15 men, who did everything together. They lived together in barracks and shared common meals. The only way they could see their wives was to sneak away during the night and return undetected early in the morning. When they reached the age of 30, they became full citizens but until they turned 60 they were still eligible to be called up for military service.

**Source 3** Bronze figurine, from the late sixth century BCE, of a Spartan hoplite wearing elaborate parade armour

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**The decline of Sparta**

Sparta remained a powerful state until the fifth century BCE. However, even though it won the long-drawn-out Peloponnesian war with Athens, it was soon to decline.

Three factors were involved in this:

- the cost of the lengthy war
- Sparta’s isolation from the rest of Greece
- a dramatic decline in Sparta’s population.

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**ACTIVITIES**

**CHECK KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING**

1. Draw a mind map of the qualities that were thought important for Spartan men to have.
2. What characteristics would be considered serious faults in a Spartan man?
3. What things could Spartan women do that were not possible for women in other Greek states?

**DEVELOP SOURCE SKILLS**

3. Write down a list of things that sources 1 and 3 tell us about Spartan society.

4. Read the text and source 2 to answer the following questions.

   a. How did the training of boys help to answer the following questions.
   b. What might women today see as both the advantages and disadvantages of living in ancient Sparta?

   Use the Spartan challenge weblink to complete challenges and see if you have what it takes to become a member of the Spartan army.