SPARTA: THE WARRIOR KINGDOM

The city-state of Sparta was very different from Athens. Sparta had no fine temples or public buildings such as those in Athens. There were never more than 10,000 Spartans and they made up only about a seventh of the population of their city-state. The rest of Sparta's population were helots (serfs who had no rights and were owned by the Spartan state) and perioeci (people from settlements that were controlled by Sparta).

The dominance of the Spartans

The citizens of Sparta were tough, highly disciplined warriors called Spartiates. At all times they had to be ready to fight to suppress any uprising by the helots. The result was that they were full-time soldiers who did military-type training from the age of seven. Although the Spartiates were expected to marry at twenty years of age, they had to live in army barracks until the age of thirty. They were not allowed to take part in any trade and were supposed to avoid luxuries. However, they were expected to be neatly dressed and have tidy hair before they went into battle.

As it had the only permanent army in Greece, Sparta dominated its neighbouring city-states. By 750 BC it controlled Laconia. It also captured the city-state of Messenia and made slaves of its people (see Source C). By 550 BC almost every city-state in the Peloponnese (southern Greece) belonged to a league or alliance of city-states, which was led by Sparta.

Government in Sparta

As citizens, Spartan men had less power than the male citizens of Athens. Their city-state was ruled by two kings and a Council of Elders that was made up of twenty-eight men. Each elder was aged over sixty and held his position for life. All citizens belonged to the Assembly, but this group had little power other than to elect ephors (chief magistrates). The role of the ephors was to punish law-breakers and carry out the decisions of the Assembly.

Spartan women

Spartan women did not have any political power, but they had much more freedom and wealth than the women of Athens. A Spartan woman could not become a citizen, but she could inherit an estate if her father died without a male heir. As the men were often away at war, Spartan women came to control two-fifths of both the land and the wealth of Sparta.

SOURCE D

... From childhood the boy was under discipline; he had but one garment, he went barefoot, his food was scanty—but he was allowed (almost encouraged) to steal food, if he were too hungry. They thought that careful thefts would train the boy for... war, and to make sure that he stole (craftily), he was well whipped if he was caught... There was endless drill for them, in the gymnasium and in the open, and... killing helots at the order of the magistrates.

Plutarch's description of the training of boys in Sparta. Plutarch was a Greek historian who lived from about AD 46 to AD 120.

SOURCE E

One woman sent forth her sons, five in number, to war, and, standing in the outskirts of the city, she awaited anxiously the outcome of the battle. And when someone arrived and, in answer to her inquiry, reported that all her sons had met death, she said 'I did not inquire about that... but how fares our country?' and when he declared that it was victorious, 'Then', she said, 'I gladly accept also the death of my sons.'

Plutarch's account of the reaction of a Spartan woman to the news of the death of her sons.

DID YOU KNOW?

Spartan mothers told their sons to return from war either with their shields or carried dead upon them. Any Spartan who dropped his shield to run from battle was made an outcast.
Under Spartan law, women were forbidden to wear perfume or cosmetics. They wore plain clothing and had their hair cut short. They were regarded as companions to Spartan men and were encouraged to keep physically fit and to take part in sports with the men rather than remain in their houses as did Athenian women.

Questions and Activities

7. What position did each of the following groups occupy in Spartan society:
   a. Spartiates?
   b. helots?
   c. perioeci?

8. In your workbooks, rule up two columns under the headings Athens and Sparta. Make brief notes about each of these city-states under the following subheadings: buildings and arts; system of government; military training; and rights of women and men.

9. Read Source D.
   a. Why were Spartan boys expected to steal food?
   b. Why were the boys punished if they were caught stealing food?
   c. Why, in your opinion, were they trained this way?

10. Read Source E. How would you explain the feelings of this Spartan woman when she heard of the death of her five sons? Do you think these would be common feelings for a Spartan?

11. What does Source F tell you about the men and women of Sparta?

12. What If You Were There?
   a. If you were a boy in ancient Greece, would you prefer to have lived in Athens or Sparta? Explain why.
   b. If you were a girl in ancient Greece, in which of these two city-states would you prefer to have lived? Give the reasons for your answer.

Key Terms
- helots
- perioeci
- ephors
- Spartiates

A Spartan man and woman.