Section:
World History

THE SPARTAN WAY

Sparta's awesome army made it the deadly rival of Athens. What made Sparta the most powerful city of ancient times?

Visitors to ancient Sparta often heard the story about the boy and the fox cub. A Spartan, boy, the story goes, stole a pet fox cub and hid it under his cloak. When the boy was caught, he calmly denied everything—even though the fox had bitten and scratched him terribly. The boy showed no pain, but soon slumped over dead from his wounds.

Most visitors who heard the story thought that the boy's behavior was strange. To Spartans, though, the boy represented the qualities that they held dear: strength, deceit of an enemy, and fearlessness about death.

For more than 200 years, Sparta was the most powerful city-state in ancient Greece. (A city-state is an independent city, plus its surrounding territory.) Sparta's power came from its tough, professional army. Brutal mining and discipline made Sparta's army one of the most feared fighting forces ever.

Deadly Rivals

Sparta waged one of history's most famous feuds with its rival, Athens. Both city-states left legacies that still shape the modern world.

Athens was the birthplace of democracy, where all full citizens could vote on city matters. In Athens, great artists and thinkers built the foundations of Western culture.

Sparta, on the other hand, was a secretive place run by an oligarchy (small ruling group) of rich families. Sparta has been admired over the centuries by people who value order and discipline over everything else.

Spartans kept few written records and left few ruins for historians to study. Almost everything we know is secondhand, from enemies or visitors. But we do know that Sparta dominated ancient Greece from about 600 B.C. to 371 B.C., leaving an unforgettable mark on history.
Growing Up In Sparta

According to legend, a great lawgiver named Lycurgus (ly-KUR-guss) created the rules and customs that made Sparta so powerful.

About 10 percent of Spartan men were full citizens known as equals. Their job was to serve as soldiers in Sparta's army. Sparta's government and strong traditions controlled every aspect of an equal's life. City elders inspected all newborn babies. Those who looked sickly were left on a mountainside to die. At the age of seven, boys were taken from their families to begin military training.

New trainees were put into packs, which were run by older boys. Trainees were taught to obey orders and endure pain. They were whipped for making the slightest mistake, and were expected to show no sign of suffering. Boys always went barefoot and wore only a cloak, even in winter.

While boys in Athens were given lengthy educations, Spartan boys were taught only the basics of reading and writing. Their trainers gave them barely enough food to live on, encouraging them to fend for themselves.

"The boys also steal whatever provisions [food and other supplies] they can, thereby learning how to pounce skillfully upon those who are asleep or keeping guard carelessly," wrote one historian who lived in ancient times. "[But] a boy is beaten and goes hungry if he is caught."

Woman Power

Men became full citizens at the age of 30. Only then could they vote, or hold public office.

All Spartan men ate their meals at army mess halls, not with their families. Spartans looked down on any form of luxury, and their food was deliberately bad-tasting. One visitor remarked that after eating the Spartans' food, he understood why they were so willing to die in battle.

While the main job of Spartan men was to be soldiers, the main job of Spartan women was to have children. Spartans believed that physically fit women had strong babies. So Spartan girls were just as athletic as the boys. They learned to wrestle, throw javelins, and exercise daily.

Despite their overbearing government, Spartan women were more free than other women in ancient Greece. In Athens, for instance, girls and married women were supposed to stay in their homes. They went outside only for special occasions, such as religious festivals and funerals.

Spartan women could not wear jewelry, perfume, or nice clothes. Even so, they had far fewer restrictions than other Greek women. Spartan women could own land, run their own households, and do business.

Such power was shocking to Greek men from other city-states. One time, a visitor kidded a Spartan woman, saying, "You Spartan women are the only ones who can rule men." She replied, "That is because we are the only ones who give birth to men."

No Work Allowed

Spartan men were not permitted to do any manual labor outside of their jobs as soldiers. But Sparta was not always at war. So, on an average day, Spartan men had plenty of free time.

"Except when they were [fighting battles]" one historian wrote, "all their time was taken up by choral dances, festivals, feasts, hunting expeditions, physical exercise, and conversation."
That free time was made possible by two groups of conquered peoples: perioeci (pair-ih-EE-sigh) and helots (HELL-uts). Perioeci, or neighbors, were allowed to be free, but had no rights. They lived in their own towns and were usually treated well. Some even grew rich as craftsmen or traders.

Helots were slaves who were owned by Sparta’s government. All Greek city-states relied on slavery. Democratic Athens had the largest slave population in ancient Greece. But no Greeks treated their slaves more cruelly than the Spartans did. The helots’ main job was to work the farms owned by Spartan citizens. Helots outnumbered citizens by as many as 10 to 1, so Spartans constantly feared a slave revolt.

To keep a revolt from breaking out, teenage boys patrolled country roads. They killed any helot they saw traveling at night. They also killed helots who seemed more intelligent or looked stronger than the others.

Despite these and other efforts, helots did revolt several times. Some of the revolts lasted years, but all of them were put down. Helots despised the Spartans so much, said one visitor, that “they would eat [a Spartan] raw.”

A Dreadful Sight

Sparta’s army and loyal soldiers made it a powerful city-state. Some opposing armies crumbled at the very sight of Spartan soldiers marching toward them.

All Greeks knew that a Spartan equal was expected to fight to the death. One Spartan mother supposedly told her son to return from battle “with your shield or on it.” In other words, come back victorious—or dead.

Sparta conquered Athens in the Peloponnesian War (431 to 404 B.C.). Athens lost that war in 404 B.C., and never regained its former glory.

Sparta remained the leader of ancient Greece. But that dominance lasted only until 371 B.C., when the city-state of Thebes crushed Sparta’s mighty army for good.

Sparta’s Collapse

Without its army, Sparta’s power collapsed. By the time the Romans took over in 146 B.C., Sparta had become a tourist attraction. Visitors went there to watch little boys who could be whipped without showing pain.

Sparta’s government was admired among ancient Greeks. People still admire Sparta today, and several U.S. towns are named after it. But the ancient historian Xenophon (ZEH-nuh-fuhn) pointed out that most admirers of Sparta go only so far. “The most extraordinary thing of all,” he wrote, “is that despite the universal praise for [Sparta’s society], not a single city is willing to copy it.”

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