The Spartans were a war-like people who lived in the south Peloponnese. They took control of the fertile Lakonia region early on and then went on to take Messenia, in the west, during the middle of the seventh century BCE. This gave the Spartans control of a large region of the south Peloponnese. Eventually, the Spartans would control most of Greece.

Slaves in Sparta – the Helots

'Helots' was the name given to the defeated people of Lakonia and Messenia. The Spartans were known for their fierceness, and they treated the helots like slaves. The helots were forced to work in the fields growing crops, while the women had to make clothes.

The helots hated their new masters and the Spartans knew this. There were also a lot more helots than Spartans. To stop the helots from fighting back, and to set an example, the Spartans gave up their drinking and their decadent lifestyle. Instead, they lived like soldiers, making sure they were always ready to fight.

The Spartan Army

At the heart of Sparta was the discipline and hard work that made their army the most feared fighting force in Greece. The Spartans spent their days improving their techniques for war. They employed various different strategies to instil fear and respect in their enemies.

They invented a series of manoeuvres to outwit their enemies on the battlefield. They trained very hard and allowed others to watch their training sessions. This was a clever tactical move that succeeded in scaring their potential enemies.

Spartan hoplites gaze into enemy territory. Before invading, their commander will check whether or not the gods approve of the venture. He will sacrifice a goat and then examine its guts for 'good' or 'bad' signs.
enemies. The Spartan soldiers also grew their hair long to make them look more scary. They rode on horseback into battle, while the helots were foot soldiers. The extra height gave the Spartans an advantage. They also learned how to move at night without using torches. The Spartans forbade the helots from going out at night, so they could not plot against them. The Spartans killed any helots found out at night.

**Control over Neighbouring States**
The Spartans had to prevent the helots from joining forces with any potential enemy, especially those that might attack from the north. So, the Spartans used their army to establish pro-Spartan governments in the central and north Peloponnese regions. They were supposed to protect the Spartans, but the tactic had mixed results. The government of Tegea promised to support the Spartans, while the powerful state of Argos remained an enemy.

In 494 BCE, Kleomenes, a Spartan king, tricked an army from Argos. He knew that the Argives (people from Argos) could hear when he called out orders to his army. He shouted out that it was time to eat. The Argives heard this and decided to eat, too. In fact, Kleomenes had secretly told his men to get ready to attack the Argives, which they did and easily won.

In 464 BCE, the helots started a revolt that lasted nine years. Finally, in 369 BCE, the helots of Messenia finally won their freedom.
Life in Sparta was very hard. Our adjective ‘spartan’ comes directly from the daily life of those ancient peoples and means ‘simple’ and ‘frugal’. To toughen up Spartan boys, they had to walk barefoot and wear few clothes, even in cold weather. They were kept hungry and were encouraged to steal food. However, if they were caught, they were beaten and told to steal more carefully next time.

These techniques were meant to equip the Spartan soldier with the strength and ability to fight the helots and to stop the helots from escaping. Hunting helots might mean surviving in cold temperatures and living off stolen food for several days. When they finally caught a band of helots, there would be fierce fighting.

Spartan boys were taught to respect their elders and follow orders. The army functioned by forcing soldiers to immediately obey orders, especially on the battlefield.

Fear of Family Life
Spartan rulers believed that a family unit could threaten the stability of Spartan life. Boys who were training as soldiers slept together at night rather than returning to their families. Young Spartan boys playing a rough game. Spartans were taught to look on the bright side of death. A brave death in battle was a source of pride to relatives. The bodies and graves of brave men were displayed to make young people feel at ease with the sight. If a king died far away in war, his body was brought home preserved in honey for burial in Sparta.
married couples could not be seen together during the day. Husband and wife were not meant to be close, so Spartan men ate together in army messes away from their families.

By keeping families apart, the Spartans felt that they could make people be loyal to the state rather than their family. Spartan boys were educated to be loyal to the community. The name for the Spartan citizens was homoioi, which means 'the men who are similar'.

Scorning Weakness
No other people lived like the Spartans. The citizens of Athens lived in a much more relaxed way. At religious festivals, people there drank wine and got drunk. The Spartans disapproved of drinking, as they believed it would weaken the security of their city. Humiliation featured heavily in Spartan life. The rulers thought that by humiliating its citizens they would behave better. A man who would not fight, for example, was called a ‘trembler’ and forced to shave one side of his face and keep a beard on the other so that people could instantly tell.

Spartan women, in contrast, were freer than women in other Greek states. They were educated, could own property and managed the farms when the men were away at war.

The ruins of an ancient theatre stand near the site of ancient Sparta, which lay at the head of a long river-plain in a position protected by spectacular barriers of mountains.