6.6 The Spartans

6.6.1 A strong city-state

After brutally putting down a slave revolt in about 650 BCE Sparta became a military state, and it remained so for the next 300 years. Culture and art were no longer valued, and luxuries were despised. The main role of a Spartan man was to be a brave warrior, while the main role of a Spartan woman was to bear strong children.

Like many settlements in ancient Greece, Sparta was a city-state. This means it was a fortified centre surrounded by a town community and farmlands. The farmlands provided the produce that people needed to survive. Like all city-states, it had its own laws and form of government. The city-state of Sparta became very powerful because it was the only one with a permanent army.

**SOURCE 1** As the Greek writer Plutarch notes, the main aim of boys’ education was to teach them to be fierce, disciplined soldiers.

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.

A tough life

Sparta soon dominated the Peloponnesian peninsula. But life in Sparta was harsh. Ancient Greek writers claimed that weak or sickly male babies were abandoned on a hillside to die of exposure. However, recent archaeological evidence casts some doubt on this story.

Boys left home at the age of seven to start their military training in barracks. Everything was geared to protecting the state — personal needs did not matter.

Spartan women

Spartan women could not become citizens, vote or hold public office. However, they could own land and represent themselves in court. There is evidence that Spartan women came to own about a third of Sparta’s land and wealth because so many Spartan men were killed in battle. Like boys, they were taught to be brave and outspoken.

Women wore plain clothing, cut their hair short and did not wear perfume, make-up or jewellery. They trained to keep fit, and exercised and danced naked. Their role was to bear healthy children and to be tough for their men.
**SOURCE 2** Spartan males lived a harsh and disciplined life, much of which was spent in military camps

A. The army barracks and other Spartan settlements had no walls.

B. Even after they married, Spartan men still ate in the army barracks as a member of a mess. To become a citizen, a man had to be a member of an army mess.

C. Men lived in military camps until they were 30, when they could become a citizen and marry.

D. Spartan soldiers grew their hair long and usually wore little clothing. However, when fighting or training, they wore armour and bright red cloaks. When in their phalanx formation, they stood close together, with shields touching and their spears jutting straight out ahead.

E. Boys were often flogged to teach them to put up with pain and develop their courage. Being caught stealing was severely punished—though stealing itself was accepted.

F. Beds were a bundle of long reeds, cut from riverbanks, and laid on the floor.

G. In the military camps, boys and young men exercised, played war games and learned about Sparta's rules of conduct. The boys enjoyed no "home comforts" and discipline was very harsh.

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**The helots and the perioeci**

Unlike slaves in other Greek states, the helots were not owned by individuals. They were the property of the Spartan state, which allocated families of helots to farm the land set aside for each Spartan. Because the helots greatly outnumbered them, the Spartans lived in fear of a helot rebellion. It was probably this fear that led the Spartans to cruelly control the helots and to adopt a system that made Sparta such a harsh military state.

The perioeci were descended from Dorian tribes who settled in other areas around Sparta. Though perioeci men had to serve in Sparta's army if required, they were otherwise free. They were mainly craftspeople and merchants—occupations forbidden to the elite Spartans.

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**6.6 Activities**

To answer questions online and to receive **immediate feedback** and **sample responses** for every question, go to your learnON title at www.jacplus.com.au. Note: Question numbers may vary slightly.

Check your understanding

1. Why did Sparta need to develop such a strong army?
2. Who were the perioeci?