The state of Sparta

Sparta in southern Greece was founded in the tenth century B.C. by the Doriens, who defeated the original inhabitants of the area. Two centuries later, Sparta conquered its neighbour, Messenia, and gained excellent agricultural land. It became a luxury-loving state producing fine crafts. Music and poetry also flourished. Later, the Spartans were defeated in war, and the conquered Messenians engaged in a long-running rebellion, so Sparta turned to military matters. It became a super-power in Greece and the main rival of Athens, and Spartan society was dominated by the need to maintain power. All men of Spartan birth had to serve in the army. Their whole lives were dedicated to learning the arts of war. Boys of seven were taken from their families to live in army barracks. Non-citizens in Sparta were either perioikoi or helots. The perioikoi were free men who, although they did not have the rights of citizens, were allowed to trade, and serve in the army. Helots were the descendants of the original inhabitants of the area. They farmed the land and did all the heavy work for their Spartan overlords.

Spartan Warrior
The Greek historian Herodotus wrote that Spartan soldiers, like this one of the fifth century B.C., always combed their long hair when they felt they might be about to put their lives at risk, as when going into battle. The scarlet colour of the military cloaks became a symbol of Spartan pride.

Natural Protection
This 19th-century German engraving shows the site of Sparta in a fertile plain of Lakonia in southern Greece. Its remoteness was an advantage to the warring Spartans and the high mountains to the east, north, and west, and the sea to the south, formed natural defences.

The Young Spartans
Spartan scenes were a popular subject with artists of the 19th century. This unusual painting by French impressionist painter Edgar Degas (1834-1917) shows boys and girls exercising in the valley of the river Evrotas which runs through Sparta. The girls look much more aggressive than girls from other Greek cities.

Spartan Regime
The Spartan system of education, with its emphasis on physical fitness, was much admired in 19th-century Victorian Britain. Corporal punishment too was regarded as character-forming for schoolboys, just as it was in ancient Sparta. The violence of this cartoon by British cartoonist George Cruikshank (1792-1878) suggests that he thought otherwise.
IN THE LEAD
This girl is taking part in a running race and is looking back to see how far she is in the lead. She is wearing a very short skirt which no girl from any other Greek city would dare to wear. Girls did not fight in wars but, like most boys, they were trained in running and for an outdoor life. This made them fit and strong so that they would have healthy babies who would grow up to be good soldiers.

OFFERINGS
Hundreds of thousands of small figurines have been found at a sanctuary of Artemis Orthia on the banks of the river Eurotas at Sparta. Among animals such as stags, dogs, and horses are representations of Artemis herself. There are also figurines of the goddess Athena wearing a helmet. The figurines were made at the sanctuary and sold to visitors who often left them behind as offerings to the goddess. It was to this sanctuary that Spartan boys were taken to be flogged as a demonstration of their toughness and endurance.