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This image, depicting an engraving of Sparta, shows us that the town is situated in an agricultural valley. Mountains, including Mt. Taygetus, protect the town on three sides. Nearly thirty miles from Gythion, its port, ancient Sparta was not easy to blockade. Illustration online, courtesy Mitchell Teachers.org. Click on the image for a much-better view.

At the time Xerxes and his army were traveling to Greece, Sparta was known for its military power. Ruled by two kings, plus a Council of Elders, Spartans knew that all male citizens would be part of the army. Training started at a very young age.

Archeological evidence reveals, however, that Sparta was not always focused on military strength. During earlier times, craftsmen used bronze and ivory to produce beautiful objects. Many of these items were later found at religious sites, where they had been given as gifts to the gods. We can see a few of these examples at the British Museum:

- Bronze banqueter - probably made in Sparta between 530-500 BCE
- Bronze horse - probably made in Sparta around 700 BCE
- Bronze horse and rider - found in Armento, Italy.

Life in Sparta took a different direction when its citizens began to rely on captives - called Helots - who were really Spartan slaves. The story of how Sparta changed into a military society is interesting. That change greatly impacted the lives of the people, especially its boys.

The first test for a Spartan boy occurred at his birth. If the elders believed he was healthy, the child could live with his family until he was seven years old. If the elders thought the boy was weak, or unhealthy, he would likely be killed.

At seven, a Spartan boy would begin his education. Called the agoge, this rigorous program lasted until he was twenty. (An animation, from the British Museum, helps to explain just how difficult it was.)

Although Athena was Sparta's patron goddess, people in the city worshipped Artemis at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia. It was there that boys, coming of age, were flogged until their flesh was torn and bleeding. (Artemis was linked with the change from childhood to adulthood.) Having survived such rites of passage, plus the agoge for thirteen years, the young man was ready to join the army.

Likely named after the shield they carried - called a hoplon - Sparta's foot-soldiers were called hoplites. They also carried a long spear - longer than a Persian's. Because of the mountainous terrain, horses were less important to a Spartan warrior, although wealthy men had war horses.

A surviving poem of an earlier time, written by Tyrtaeus in approximately 630 BCE, tells us that Spartan soldiers were expected to be disciplined. An excerpt from the poem:

Our man should be disciplined in the work of the heavy fighter, and not stand out from the missiles when he carries a shield, but go right up and fight at close quarters and, with long spear or short sword, thrust home and strike his enemy down.

Spartans, says Tyrtaeus, must also be ready to fight hand-to-hand:

For no man ever proves himself a good man in war unless he can endure to face the blood and the slaughter, go close against the enemy and fight with his hands.

Females in Sparta had different lives than other Greek women. Their education focused on physical and athletic ability. Girls were part of athletic contests. There was a reason for this. Spartans thought that physically fit girls were more likely to have strong babies. If the baby was a boy, he could become a good soldier.

Life in Sparta - don't miss this link where you can "open" all the top-row desk drawers - was very ordered. People were dedicated to the state. They protected Spartan interests and, if necessary, died for them.

It was the perfect place from which to draw the men who would stand against the Persian Great King.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/LIFE-IN-SPARTA-300-Battle-of-Thermopylae>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/LIFE-IN-SPARTA-300-Battle-of-Thermopylae>

Questions 2 Ponder

How Was Sparta's Way of Dealing with Weaker Male Babies Too Extreme?

This image depicts an illustration from an 1896 book entitled *The Story of Greeks* by H.A. Guerber. The couple is Cleombrotus II (a Spartan king of the Agiad dynasty) and Chilonis walking with their children.

Ancient Sparta had an extreme way of dealing with male babies whom the city's elders presumed to be weak. Why would the people of Sparta accept what amounted to death sentences for some of their babies?

Why Did the Education of Spartan Boys Include Severe Beatings?

The education of Spartan boys included beatings so severe that their flesh was torn and bleeding. Why would Spartans do this to their children?

Media Stream



Ruins of Sparta

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 3.0.

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Sparta - Bronze Banqueter Artifact

Image online, courtesy the [British Museum](#).

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Sparta-Bronze-Banqueter-Artifact>



Bronze Horse of Sparta - Ancient Artifact

Image online, courtesy the [British Museum](#).

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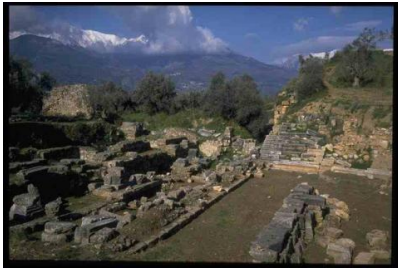


Ancient Artifact - Armento Rider

Image online, courtesy the [British Museum](#).

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Sparta - Ancient Ruins

Image online, courtesy the [Greece Tours](#) website.

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Ancient Sparta - Center of Religious Life

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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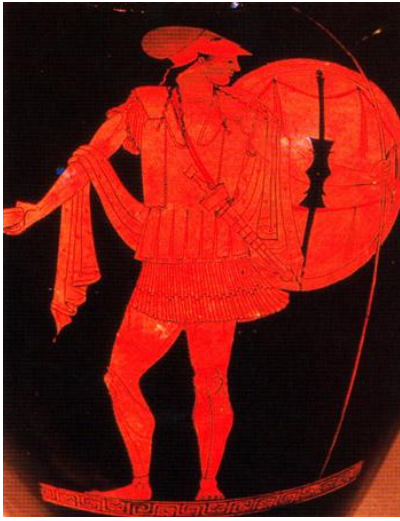


Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia

Image online, courtesy the [exploresparta.gr](#) website.

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Sparta - Shield, 480 BC

Image online, courtesy the Perseus Project at Tufts University.

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Leonidas I

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LIFE IN SPARTA

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