

CHAPTER 12

THE SPARTAN EXPERIMENT

DAILY LIFE IN ANCIENT SPARTA

You might have heard someone say that so-and-so lives a “Spartan existence.” This means that so-and-so doesn’t own many nice things, doesn’t eat out much, and wears plain clothes. But the real people who lived in the *polis* of Sparta deprived themselves of a lot more than luxuries—and were proud of it.

Imagine you are a twelve-year-old Spartan girl in the sixth century BCE. You live with your mother, your sisters, and your little brothers. You have a father, but you hardly ever see him. In fact, you hardly ever see any men, or even any boys near your age. When your brother turned seven, he was taken away. You missed him at first, but for his whole life you knew that this would happen some day, so you quickly got over it.

“ XENOPHON,
PLUTARCH,
HERODOTUS, AND
MENANDER

Most Greek cities were built on hilltops to make them easier to defend from attackers. The Spartans built their city on a plain to tell potential attackers that they were so powerful that they didn't need a hill to protect them.



This statue of a Spartan racing girl shows the kind of clothing other Greeks called “phainomerides”—thigh displays!

Your days are very busy. Unlike most Greek girls, you don't have to worry too much about learning how to spin yarn and weave cloth. Instead, you have to run and do other exercises to get strong. Your exercise skirt is so short that a girl from any other part of Greece would be punished for wearing it. Sometimes you work out naked, which shocks the other Greeks.



WELL, YOU ASKED!

Probably some Spartan mothers grieved for their children who were taken away from them. But many were proud of the strength of their sons and contemptuous of the children of other Greek women. When an Athenian woman asked Sparta's Queen Gorgo, "Why is it that you Spartan women are the only ones who can rule men?" Gorgo replied, "Because we are the only ones who give birth to men."

You are constantly told to be strong. But this isn't because people care about your health. It's because strong girls grow up to be strong women, and strong women—everyone tells you—have healthy sons. And sons are important. Sons grow up to be warriors and leaders.

Now imagine you're that girl's younger brother. For your whole life, you've been spoiled by your mother and your sisters, who were proud to have such a healthy boy in the family. You always knew that when you turned seven, you would be taken away to live with your father and the other men—away from the weakening influence of all those women—so you were excited when the big day finally came.

But life with the men isn't as much fun as you thought it would be. Instead of being everyone's pampered pet, you are toughened up. You're always kept a little hungry. That way, you'll think of clever ways to steal food. And although you get punished if you're caught, the punishment is not for stealing, but for being careless enough to get caught.

You wrestle, run, and do other exercises to strengthen your muscles. Every day you have to swim in the ice-cold Eurotas River. You are frequently beaten, often for no reason. The older boys and the men tell you that this will make you even stronger.

And what is all this hard work for? It's to make you into a soldier. Not just any soldier, but a Spartan soldier, a member of one of the toughest, most feared armies the world has ever known.

The Spartan way of life is hard for us to understand because many practices that most of us take for granted were done in exactly the opposite way there. In the United States, the government is “of the people, by the people, for the people.” But in Sparta, the state did not exist for the people—the people existed for the state.

Ants in an anthill die without hesitation to preserve the queen and the health of the colony. The individual ant counts for nothing. The situation was the same in Sparta. It was a great honor to die for Sparta because one's death would benefit the Spartans as a whole. The greatest shame was to run from danger. The Athenian historian Xenophon wrote in his *Hellenica* that after a battle in 371 BCE, when the Spartans were badly beaten,

those whose relatives had been killed could be seen going around in public looking cheerful and serene, but on the whole those whose relatives were reported to have survived kept to themselves, and those of them who did venture out were seen walking around looking very glum and even sorry for themselves.

Spartan society was structured much differently from the rest of the Greek world. First of all, it was divided into three classes. The *helots*, or slaves, did the heavy work of farming. They had even lower status than that of slaves in the rest of Greece, and could even be killed for no reason. They were beaten once a year as a reminder of their enslavement.

Above the helots were the *perioeci*, or “neighbors.” They were not slaves, but were not fully citizens, since they could



“ Xenophon, *Hellenica*, mid-fourth century BCE

Bronze armor was relatively light and very strong. In addition to the pieces shown here, warriors often wore shin-guards and carried shields.

A Patriotic Poet

Most of the poems written by the few Spartan poets have been lost. It's no surprise that poems about war were the favorites of Spartan poets. Here is part of an untitled poem by Tyrtæus:

“It is a good thing to
lose your life fighting in
the front ranks,
Giving your life for father,
city, people. . . .
The glory of a man like this
is not forgotten;
His name remembered, he
becomes eternal.”

not vote. The *perioeci* did metalwork, made pots, spun wool, wove clothing—did most of the day-to-day work besides farming, in fact.

The highest class of people was called “The Equals.” The name didn’t mean that they were equal to the other groups—it meant that they were equal to each other. Their job was to protect Sparta at all cost. There were never more than 9,000 “Equals” (all of them men), and they were the only Spartans who could vote.

Many Greek *poleis* were at war much of the time, and even in peace, war always threatened. So most Greek men were ready to quit living their regular lives and become soldiers when necessary. But the Spartans went further. They were so concerned about war that they decided to organize their entire society around the military and created a whole class of people whose only purpose was to protect the state.

What made Sparta concentrate so much energy on preparing for war? The Spartans said that an ancient lawgiver named Lycurgus had come up with this way of life. Lycurgus was so worried that the slaves might rebel that he thought of a system that would make the Spartans strong enough that they would never have to fear this. And in fact, when an earthquake in 464 BCE disrupted Sparta and its government, some helots seized the opportunity to revolt. Their rebellion lasted ten years, until finally the Spartans said that they could leave the area if they promised never to return.

So, concern over the threat by their neighbors and fear of the large numbers of helots living among them led the Spartan ruling class to concentrate their energy on strength.



Part of what the Spartans saw as strength was a reliance on men to run things. Spartan women were not included in the government at all, but they were as fiercely patriotic as the men. Mothers, wives, and sisters encouraged the men to fight and were proud when they died. In his *Sayings of the Spartan Women*, the biographer and essayist Plutarch reports two episodes that demonstrate their attitude:

☞ Plutarch, *Sayings of the Spartan Women*, about 100 CE

A mother was burying her son when an ordinary old woman came up to her and said, “Oh, you poor thing. What terrible luck!” “No, by the gods,” she replied, “it is good luck, for I brought him into the world so that he might die for Sparta, and this is the very thing that has happened.”

One woman, seeing her son coming towards her after a battle, asked him how things had gone for Sparta. When he said, “Everyone has perished,” she picked up a tile and hurled it at him, killing him, saying, “And so you’re the one they picked to bring the bad news?”

The other Greeks had a kind of love-hate relationship with the Spartans. The Athenians admired the toughness of Spartan children so much that sometimes they would hire Spartan nursemaids for their own children. They were also envious of the stability of the Spartan government.

The Spartans held on to the **monarchy** long after most other Greek *poleis* had decided to be ruled by elected officials. In order to keep any one man from becoming too powerful, Sparta had two kings at a time. One king was in charge of the army, and the other governed matters at home. They shared responsibility for religious duties.

{ monos + archon = “one” + “ruler” “Monarchy” means “government by a single ruler.”

The Spartan kings did not have absolute power, but were members of the Council of Elders, called the Gerousia. The other 28 Elders were elected, and while any man over the age of 60 was eligible, the Elders were usually wealthy aristocrats. In addition to the Elders, a group of five men called the Ephors, or overseers, made sure that everyone, including the kings, followed the laws. The laws were never written down, so both the memory and the judgment of the Ephors were crucial.

“Laconic,” from the Spartan region, Laconia, means “using as few words as possible.”

Unlike the Athenians, who often held long debates in their assemblies, the Spartans voted without any discussion of the issues.

So the Athenians found much to respect about their neighbor *polis*. But they also found much to despise. For instance, the Athenians admired eloquence. The Spartans, on the other hand, were known for being **laconic**. They thought it was a waste of time to say much. They also did not understand (or pretended not to understand) long speeches made by others, such as the Samians, another Greek people, who asked the Spartans for help. The historian Herodotus reports that

“ Herodotus, *Histories*, mid-fifth century BCE

When the people of Samos, suffering from hunger, . . . came to seek help from Sparta, they made a long speech in front of the authorities. . . . The Spartans replied that they had forgotten the first part of the request and could not understand the last. Afterwards, the Samians met with the Spartan government again, and this time they simply carried a sack and said “sack needs grain.” The Spartans answered, “You did not need to say ‘sack’.”

Another difference was that the Athenians loved poetry and philosophy. Sparta, on the other hand, produced few poets and philosophers. So many Athenians thought they were stupid.

The way Spartan girls were raised shocked many other Greeks as well. They thought their short skirts and habit of wrestling naked were disgraceful. And the fact that some Spartan girls were taught to read and write made an Athenian writer Menander say in horror, “Teach a woman to read and write? What a thought! It’s like giving extra poison to a snake that’s poisonous in the first place!”

But what made the Athenians most uneasy was the great fighting strength of the Spartans. On the one hand, Athens was a powerful military force and admired the ferocity and skill of Sparta’s army. On the other hand, they were worried that if this great army fought against them, Sparta might come to rule not only its own Laconia, but Attica as well.

It was only a matter of time before these two great forces had to come together to prove who was stronger. And come together they did, with results that were disastrous to both sides.

“ Menander, Fragment of a play, fourth century BCE