

CHAPTER 21

GOING TO SCHOOL

GREEK EDUCATION

“ HYPERIDES, PLATO,
AND ARISTOTLE

People occasionally question why they're learning something. Someone might have asked you why you're reading a book about ancient Greece, for example. Maybe you told them that you found it interesting. Maybe you said that a teacher assigned it, or that you had to write a report on Greece. “But will it ever be *useful* to know about the ancient Greeks?” is often the next question.

It depends on what you mean by “useful.” Education does teach skills you will later use to make a living, and that is certainly useful. But it also teaches you about what human beings are like and how we got that way. What you read in books and what you do in school can help you learn how to think and how to communicate—two skills that most people, including the Greeks, consider central to human civilization. So even if your future career never depends on algebra or on knowing about the birth of democracy, learning these things can make you a more knowledgeable and interesting person.

Long before there were schools, Greek children were taught the skills and knowledge they needed for their future lives. Boys were taught to farm, to make useful things, and to be

This image on the bottom of a cup shows boys attending school. The Greeks thought education taught children to be good citizens.



WHAT HAS FOUR LEGS AND A TEACHING CERTIFICATE?

Most students probably have a teacher they find a little strange. But imagine if you walked into your classroom and instead of finding a human, you saw a centaur!

That's what happened to the great hero Achilles. Although centaurs were usually wild, violent creatures, Achilles' teacher Chiron, "the most righteous of the Centaurs," according to Homer, was wise and patient. He taught his pupil the warrior arts of hunting and weaponry, as well as music and first aid—a useful skill on the battlefield.

soldiers. Girls learned how to farm as well, and also how to weave, sew, cook, and raise children. Children and slaves did work that was considered beneath the dignity of free adults.

Probably, in the early days of ancient Greece, in the age of the poet Homer, children who were destined to be leaders also learned poetry by heart and some basic arithmetic. Boys of the aristocracy learned how to be warriors. Future priests had to memorize many prayers and rituals. These children were probably trained by people who already had these skills, not by professional teachers. Particularly wealthy boys (and perhaps a few girls) had private teachers.

Formal schooling began after the introduction of the alphabet. Sometime in the ninth century BCE, the Greeks began using their own variety of the Phoenician alphabet. The Phoenicians were traders and merchants who lived in what is now Lebanon and some of its surrounding areas. The first Greek schools we know of were established in about 650 BCE as people began rediscovering the usefulness of a written language. Most of the schools were probably set up to teach men and boys how to read and write so that they could use this skill in their work. This is an example of education being geared toward a future career.

Education in the warrior state of Sparta was also intended to teach children a clearly practical skill. The Spartans trained their young men to be soldiers and their young women to be wives and mothers of soldiers. In addition to this training, the Spartans also had schools. In fact, they had the only public schools in Greece, paid for by the government, unlike the other *poleis* where parents paid a fee. Sparta was also the only Greek *polis* to provide education for girls.

Athenian schoolboys also learned how to be soldiers. And when democracy became the form of government in Athens, it became clear that in order to be able to participate fully in the life of the *polis*, citizens were going to have to learn how to read and write—if only to be sure that the name on the *ostrakon* was really the name of the person they wanted to get rid of. So literacy, a "useful" skill, became a prime focus of education. And although the children whose parents could afford to pay were more likely to get educated, some

Athenians thought that in a true democracy, rich and poor alike should at least have the opportunity to go to school. Some historians think that by the end of the fifth century BCE, most male citizens of Athens could write enough to sign their own names and write some letters.

But literacy was far from the only goal of Athenian education. In a funeral speech, the Athenian orator Hyperides declared that “our goal in raising children is to make them courageous men.” Skills such as reading, writing, simple arithmetic, and physical training were obviously important, but Athenian children were being educated to be good and courageous citizens, not just soldiers, and they studied many subjects.

School was divided into three areas: reading and writing; physical training; and music and poetry (which were the same subject, since poetry was sung). Sometimes painting

“ Hyperides, *Funeral Oration*,
322 BCE

ANCIENT COMIC BOOKS

Even if it's true that most male Athenian citizens could read, at least a little, the vast majority of the Greeks were illiterate (most women, slaves, laborers). This is one reason art was so important. Paintings and sculptures could tell the story of a myth or a historical event for people that couldn't read them.



Wrestling was not just a recreational activity. Schools were for training the complete citizen, and a male citizen might be called upon to be a soldier at any time. Strength and agility were part of every boy's education.

and drawing were also taught. The Greeks didn't see the point in learning about other cultures, so they did not have history or geography classes. They didn't study science or math either. These subjects were considered important only to a very few people, who learned them through specialized study with experts.

Students weren't expected to become professional athletes, musicians, or artists—those jobs weren't considered appropriate for upper-class men, and no profession was suitable for a well-born woman—so these classes must have been considered important for molding the students into well-rounded citizens of the state. In fact, music was so central that musical ability was looked on as proof of good schooling: The philosopher Plato says in the *Laws* that “by an uneducated man, we mean someone who completely lacks chorus training; the educated man is fully chorus-trained.”

Another philosopher, Aristotle, says in his *Politics* that “no lessons or labors should be imposed on a child under the age of five,” and it appears that most students started school at around age seven. Boys were accompanied to school by a household servant called a **paidagogos**, who was usually a slave or a freed slave. Once at school, the student was under the control of the teacher. But unless you've really been unlucky, you've never had a teacher like an ancient Greek teacher.

The motto of the Greek school system could have been “No pain, no gain.” Old men would sometimes say that they were still terrified of their now long-dead teachers. Surely some people today would also say something similar, but it would be hard to find anyone who thought this was good. But for the Greeks, fear of the teacher was not only good—it was the only way to learn.

Some of the **schools** had just a few pupils, but there are records of some with 60 to 120 students. The boys learned a lot of poetry by heart and they would practice reciting. To learn writing, the boys would make their letters on tablets coated with wax. Papyrus, an early type of paper, was much too expensive to be used for practicing letters. Once the pupils were through with their lessons and the teacher had corrected the writing, a hot bar was passed over the tablet

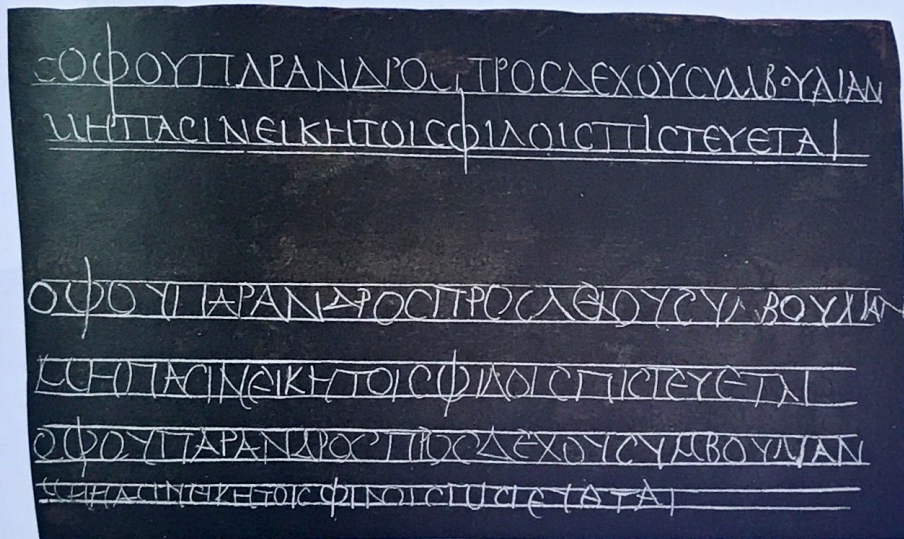
“Plato, *Laws*, early fourth century BCE

“Aristotle, *Politics*, mid-fourth century BCE

“Pedagogy” comes from *paidagogos* which means “the art or science of teaching.” A *paidagogos* wasn't a teacher but probably had some learning himself.

“School” comes from *schole* which originally meant “leisure.” Later it came to mean “what you did in your leisure time,” such as study (this is what you do in your leisure time, isn't it?), and only late in Greek history did it come to mean “school.”

A Greek student practicing his writing was supposed to absorb the meaning of the words as well as to learn how to make the letters. On this tablet, the student has copied out twice what his teacher wrote: "Accept advice from a wise man."



to melt the wax, and it was ready to use again. The tablet could also be used for learning math.

And moving from one group to another would be the teacher, sometimes explaining, but just as often yelling or beating someone who had misbehaved or who simply got a wrong answer.

In another building, students were tuning and playing lyres, and singing songs. Outside, other boys would be swinging blunted swords that still hurt if they hit you. Others would be tossing a discus or a javelin. Sports weren't taught to help students learn about team spirit or cooperation, or even for fun (although some boys must surely have enjoyed them). Their main purpose was training for the battlefield.

A few girls could receive a similar education, but they didn't go to school with the boys. They also probably didn't go to school as long as the boys. Girls didn't have any access at all to school past elementary education.

Very few boys went past the basics, either. Some schools were set up to provide education for future doctors and other specialists. Interested students could also get trained in rhetoric, the use of language to persuade or influence someone, or philosophy.

Books as we know them today did not exist in ancient Greece. Any text too long to fit on a tablet would be written on a scroll, which a reader would unroll with one hand, rolling up the part already read into the other hand.

Higher education got a boost in the second half of the fifth century BCE when a group of men known as the “sophists” set their minds to training future statesmen. *Sophist* originally meant “someone wise,” but for these men, it meant teaching someone else to be wise.

They didn’t work in schools, and in fact moved frequently from one city to another. They gave free public lectures to get people interested and then charged a fee for anyone who wanted to learn more. The sophists weren’t necessarily interested in the natural world, or the world of the gods, but were definitely interested in humanity and human relations.

Some of the followers of the Sophists were young men who were hoping for a career in politics. What skills were thought most important in politics? First, how to win an argument. Then, how to make a good speech. After that, people had different ideas. Some thought a politician should have knowledge of the arts and even how to make crafts, but others thought that was a waste of time. For some, knowledge of the “four sciences” (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and acoustics) was essential. Some stressed that anything learned from instructors in poetry or sports was not with an eye to becoming a professional but rather for proper training in cultured citizenship.

Should you study only the subjects that will help you in a concrete, practical way in your future life? Or should you also take subjects that show you how other human beings think? What subjects would you include?

