City states: Athens and Sparta

Athens and Sparta were the largest cities in ancient Greece, and they were rivals.

Sparta and Athens were the biggest and most powerful of the Greek cities – and they had completely different ideas of how to live.

Athens, just a few kilometres from the sea, is now the capital of modern Greece. In ancient Greek times it was the richest city in Greece, based on trade using its fleet of ships. Sparta was a city in the southernmost part of the Greek mainland. Unlike Athens, Sparta was not near the sea. So it developed an army, rather than a navy.

Rich Athens

Athens was the largest of the city states in ancient Greece. It may have had a population as large as 300,000. (At this time the biggest city in Britain had just a few hundred people!)

Athens also controlled the fertile land around it, forming a region called Attica. Within the land of Attica there were also gold, silver and lead mines and marble quarries. This made Athens a very rich city. Because it was also close to the sea, it could trade these precious metals and rocks for the extra food it needed beyond what its own land could provide. The port for Athens was called Pireus.

Athens became so wealthy from trade and the spoils of wars that it could spend large sums of money on the best artists and builders of the time.

Athens began on a natural hill of white limestone rock about 7km from the sea. It was a good site and easy to defend. Today it is called the Acropolis, meaning highest city. But Athens outgrew its Acropolis and so new houses were built on the plain below. Over time, the hill was turned into a religious sanctuary. It was flattened off and great temples were built on it, including the most famous building of Greek times, the Parthenon.

Democracy

Athens was first run by kings, then by nobles, then by a single general called a TYRANT.

In 510 BC the people tried a new experiment in running their city by giving its male citizens (but not women) the right to vote for their leaders (picture ①).

Athens also developed new ways of dealing with criminals using public law courts and trials by juries comprising hundreds of people. The jurors voted by placing discs in one of two jars – one for guilty, one for not guilty.

Slaves

Like other Greek cities, Athens was run on slave labour. A third of all people living in Athens were slaves. Some slaves were children of slaves, while the stock of slaves was added to by capturing people during wars.

Slaves were not necessarily the poorest and least educated of people. Although slaves did work in the mines and at rock breaking, and toiled in the fields, teachers and nurses, for example, might also be slaves. Even those who kept the peace (the Athenian form of a police force) were slave archers from Scythia.

▼ ① Any free man (citizen) could go to the assembly, where they could speak and vote freely. When there was disagreement, people held public debates.

Festivals and leisure

The citizens of Athens had the time, the money and the imagination to do things other than work. There were yearly festivals to honour gods, athletics competitions and a season of plays.

Rich citizens were happy to be asked to pay for the performers, just as companies and rich people might sponsor events today.

Fighting Spartans

In the early part of the 6th century Sparta was defeated by neighbouring cities and the people decided that this was because, as people, they were too weak and not fit enough to defend themselves. So, from that time, the idea of extreme fitness and a city of soldiers developed.

Sparta chose not to have walls to defend itself. Without walls people knew they had to be tough and well trained all of the time – including women and children.

You can see how this made Sparta a very different place from Athens. No grand buildings, art and writing here. Instead it looked like a group of villages with a lean and mean military rule that everyone else feared.

This was also important because Sparta controlled a bigger state than any other city – and much of it had been captured from its neighbours, so there was always the risk of rebellion.

The city of Sparta was like one vast army. It put fitness and strength ahead of reading and the arts, so the people left no written records of themselves.

In the writings that have come down to us, there is hardly a good word to be said for the Spartans, but this is less surprising when we realise that all of this writing was done by their arch-rivals, the Athenians. The Spartans believed their way was the best, and many of their Greek neighbours agreed with them.

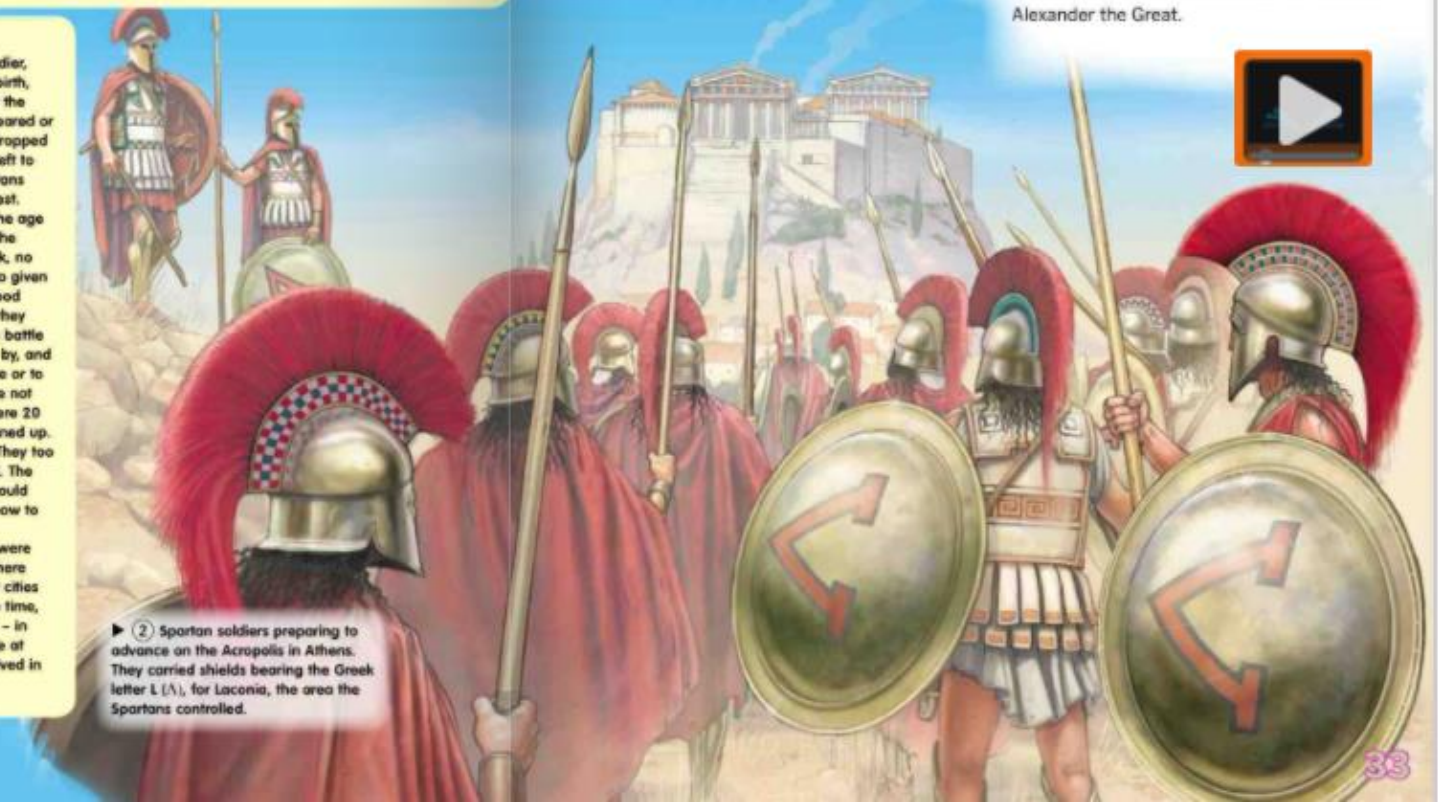
Growing up in Sparta

The ordinary Spartan was essentially a soldier, trained to obey and endure. Shortly after birth, children were brought before the elders of the state, who decided whether it was to be reared or not. If found sick or weak, the baby was dropped off a cliff called the Place of Rejection, or left to die in the mountains. In this way the Spartans followed the rule of the Survival of the Fittest.

Boys were taken from their families at the age of six and trained in the art of warfare in the mountains. They were only allowed a cloak, no other clothes and no shoes. They were also given too little food, so they had to try to steal food from the farms – and if they were caught they were beaten. The point of this was that, in battle conditions, food is often not easy to come by, and so you have to know how to get by on little or to find it from somewhere. Spartan boys were not allowed back to their families until they were 20 – so they spent thirteen years being hardened up.

Girls in Sparta did not escape training. They too were taken from their families and trained. The idea was to produce strong women who could have healthy babies and who also knew how to fight if needed.

Girls were found a husband when they were 18 and then they could return home. But there was another side to this. Whereas in other cities women were kept in their homes all of the time, Spartan women could move around freely – in part because their husbands would not live at home until they were in their thirties, but lived in army barracks instead.



▶ (2) Spartan soldiers preparing to advance on the Acropolis in Athens. They carried shields bearing the Greek letter L (Λ), for Laconia, the area the Spartans controlled.

Sparta versus Athens

When not being attacked by their powerful neighbours, the Persians, Athens and Sparta turned on each other. But it was not easy for one state to win out over the other. This is because Athens had a stronger navy and Sparta a stronger army. When Sparta attacked, Athens retreated behind its walls and supplied itself with food using its ships.

Eventually, the Athenians and the Spartans got involved in a thirty year war (called the Peloponnesian War). They slogged it out between themselves for so long that, in the end they were like two punch drunk fighters. Both were fatally weakened, although in the end the Spartans won and forced the Athenians to pull down their city walls.

But these self-inflicted wounds meant that neither Athens nor Sparta could be powerful again, and it was left to a king from the north to rule both cities and far more. This would be Alexander the Great.