

### Two Greek City-States: Athens and Sparta

From 1000 to 800 BCE many small city-states began to develop throughout Greece. These city-states were independent of one another and were separated by geographic boundaries. Wars were constantly being fought over territory and since there was no central government to stop them, the wars continued for centuries. These wars allowed some city-states to become more powerful than others. The two most powerful were Athens and Sparta.

#### Sparta

Sparta was a collection of villages and agricultural lands on the Peloponnese peninsula, inland from the sea and surrounded by mountains. Sparta was about a 100 miles from Athens. It was a city-state ruled by Dorian Greeks who had conquered local farmers who became known as Helots, which are serfs and slaves. The Spartans had made themselves the ruling aristocracy over the Helots, who outnumbered the Spartans seven to one. The Helots apparently suffered the consequences of military weakness; the peoples of farming communities such as theirs are traditionally less warlike and more pastoral.

Sparta's economy was almost entirely agriculture, with only a few craftsmen and tradesmen. Spartans saw themselves as warriors and looked upon trade and commerce as beneath their dignity. Each Spartan family had an allotment of land and managed Helots that came with their property, and they took half of what the Helots produced. With land divided equally among them, and not allowed to sell their land, no great disparity in wealth arose among the Spartans. And without a disparity in wealth, kingship did not become the property of a single family. Nor could there be an oligarchy of the rich. Instead, among the Spartans rule remained with popularly selected kings—two of them. Power was divided between the assembly of elders, the two kings and five *Ephors* who oversaw legality of the land.

Without a division in wealth among the Spartans, there was greater stability among them than with the peoples of other Greek cities. But the enslavement of Helots was a source of trouble. Occasionally the Helots revolted, and the Spartans suppressed the revolts with bloody reprisals. To guard against plots of the Helots, the Spartans created a secret police, and Spartans could kill a Helot if they were suspicious of him. Being greatly outnumbered by Helots, as well as needing to defend themselves from outsiders, the Spartans saw their ability to wage war as paramount in preserving their way of life. And having the Helots to labor for them, the Spartans were able to devote a good portion of their lives to training for warfare. Being a warrior was a job of glamour in Sparta, and young men hoped for the drama of military action. From the age of seven the Spartans reared their sons as warriors, putting them in barracks and giving them rigorous physical training—until the age of thirty. Respecting strength, discipline and equality among themselves, the Spartans forbade themselves luxuries, including possessing wealth in the form of silver or gold.

Sparta's concern for strength and discipline extended to Spartan women, who enjoyed a status uncommon elsewhere in Greece. Not understanding genetics, the Spartans believed that females who became physically strong through exercise passed these acquired characteristics to their children. So to breed a physically strong and healthy progeny, girls and young women were trained in gymnastics. Also to maintain their success and way of life, the Spartans forbade any among them to travel abroad or receive visitations by outsiders. Sparta was a closed society, void of the stimulations of travel that had contributed to the creativity found in other Greek cities. Philosophy and critical literature would not develop in Sparta as elsewhere among the Greeks, but the Spartans did enjoy music and choral poetry, and every year the Spartans held a festival of poetry in honor of the god Apollo.

### Athens

Athens was a city on the water's edge, and unlike Sparta it was a city of maritime trade and commerce, but like Sparta it was devoted mainly to agriculture. By the 600's, Athens governed an area of about 25 by 50 miles. And with enough land for distribution among its people, the Athenians prospered. They had no need for additional lands and launched no wars of conquest. They enjoyed peace as well as prosperity. Like most other cities in the 600s, Athens was ruled by an oligarchy. Power within Athens and its surrounding areas was distributed among local families of wealth; each of these which ruled over the common people in its locality, they provided protection. This power eventually changed because later Athens became a direct democracy, where the people play a direct role in government.

With Athens' success in agriculture came a rise in population. This was followed by rains washing away topsoil, and fathers dividing their estates into smaller and smaller plot to deal with their sons. Land became scarce, and people began plowing land that was only marginally arable. Overplowing caused soil exhaustion. Those who owned and worked small plots of land were at times obliged to borrow money to tide themselves over until their next successful harvest. Money was scarce and was lent at ruinous interest rates. Increasingly, small farmers were working the lands of their debtor, or giving up a sixth of their crop to their debtor, or they were being sold as slaves abroad.

Education was a very important part of Athens. Most wealthy people were educated in many ways. They studied logic, poetry, mathematics, science and philosophy. Education became a major part of the success of Athens and allowed it to become a thriving center of Greek culture.

Another source of trouble in Athens was its numerous slaves who were foreigners or descendants of foreigners. A third of the people of Athens were foreigner-slaves. And with an abundant supply of slave labor, landless freemen could be hired to work in fields or shops at very low wages. City jobs were also occupied by slaves. People of wealth and the city saw themselves as benefiting from slavery. And those with wealth felt no responsibility for those who had grown poor.

Athenian society was based on the family. An Athenian man could have only one wife. But he could have a concubine living within his family-whose children were not recognized as legitimate and were not given citizenship. Wives, on the other hand, were valued as the bearers of children and given citizenship. The Athenians believed that a woman should be virgin at marriage and remain faithful throughout. And while the male was not required to be faithful to his wife, the law demanded that a husband divorce and unfaithful wife and return her dowry.

In Athens, women were without independent status. They could own no property except their clothes, jewelry and slaves, and they could enter into only minor market transactions. As members of farming families, women had helped in the fields, but with city-dwelling had come the practice of protecting women from public view and confining them to their homes. In such homes, women had their own quarters, and they dined together in a room apart from the men. A man committed an outrage if he entered a house without an invitation from the master of the house while the women were inside. Women were expected to be accompanied if they left their house. They were to be under the protection of a guardian at all times: their father or a close male relative if they were unmarried, their husband if they were married, their son or a close male relative if they were widowed. The only women free of these controls were foreign women, or those few citizens who were living in dire poverty and forced to labor outside the homes or prostitutes.

The Greek city-states were an important part of how each developed into its own unique area. Athens and Sparta became the two most important city-states but are completely different. In the chart below discuss the differences between the two city-states.

	Athens	Sparta
Government		
Culture		
Education		
Men		
Women		