

The Life of a Spartan Warrior

Can you imagine being taken away from your family and your home when you were just seven years old? And then spending the rest of your life learning how to fight and then fighting your country's enemies?

In the 5th century B.C., this was the life of a Spartan boy. It was Spartan law that boys must become warriors. And not just good warriors, but they had to be the best in the world!

What was Sparta and where was it?

Ancient Greece, or *Hellas* as it is called in the Greek language, was divided into many states and city-states. A city-state, or *polis* in Greek, was actually just a city with such power that it controlled the entire state in which it was located. For example, Sparta was the city-state in the state of Lakonia, but because Sparta was such a major power in its state, it was common to use the city name to refer to the whole area.

At the time, Sparta had a population of 100,000 citizens and slaves. Because it was located in the center of the Peloponnese peninsula (the southern half of Greece), Spartans knew that any battles would have to be fought on land. Their city-state would need expert warriors on the battlefield.

Why did Sparta need such strong warriors?

Sparta was located on mountainous, rocky terrain that was unsuitable for farming. It was also located too far away from the sea to be able to use the water for fishing or trade. To survive, Sparta needed to control other parts of Hellas and use their land and access to water. They needed to be the strongest and most fearless fighters to win battles against their neighbors and become the most powerful force in Hellas.

Some say the reason that Sparta was so focused on having a powerful military was because of a king named Lycurgus in the 9th century. King Lycurgus created a lot of laws designed to help Sparta's people remain peaceful with each other, but grow to be very strong and powerful outside of the city-state. When Lycurgus decided to take a short trip to Delphi (a city not far from Athens), he made the Spartan people promise to uphold his laws while he was gone. Unfortunately, he died on this trip and never returned causing the Spartan people to feel obligated to forever fulfill his wishes.

How did the Spartan people live?

Sparta wanted to be thought of as a courageous, strong, and moral society. They did not want their citizens thinking of fun, comfort or any happiness. They thought this would lead to corruption and the downfall of their country. So Spartans lived simple and disciplined lives, deprived of any luxuries. For example, no house could have anything fancy or showy. Money was made of iron and was so large and heavy that it was too difficult to have much of it. Spartans ate their meals together in community halls so no person had anything to eat that was better than anyone else. A typical meal was just a broth that looked like dark gray oatmeal or porridge. It became known as "black broth" or "Spartan broth".

Spartans could not travel outside their city-state. Very few people from outside Sparta were allowed to come inside the borders. This was to protect the citizens from immorality or foreign ideas.

Education was very important in Sparta. It was thought that a society made up of highly educated men would have no need for laws. But Spartan education was not the same as our education. They only taught enough reading and writing to get by. They were taught to speak only if necessary. The goal was to create obedient citizens and strong soldiers. After all, a Spartan must live and die for his country.

How did a Spartan boy become a warrior?

All children were expected to grow up to serve Sparta. The government only wanted healthy and athletic children to train. The officials put baby girls and boys through “fitness” tests at birth and if it was decided that the baby was too weak, they would leave it in the mountains to die from exposure. They thought these children would be useless to Sparta.

The healthy, athletic children were taught as early as possible about their duties to the city-state. At age seven, the boys were taken from their parents and put in military camps in the mountains to begin a thirteen-year-long training, known as *agoge* in the Greek language.

They were taught discipline, independence, toughness, endurance, survival and combat. They had no clothes or shoes. They were given only one cloak to wear for an entire year. They lived in barracks and slept on bushes. They were punished and tortured for doing anything wrong. The boys often fought each other in practice battles. They also were sent to kill *helots*, or slaves, because it was feared that this group was becoming too numerous and bitter about their terrible lives.

Their leaders often made sure the boys didn’t have enough food, encouraging them to steal from nearby houses. Stealing was a good lesson in survival. If caught, they weren’t punished for stealing, but for being caught.

In fact, in 75 B.C., a famous Roman writer named Plutarch wrote a story about a Spartan boy who stole a fox for his dinner. The boy hid the fox under his cloak and headed for home, but the fox bit and tore at his flesh with his teeth and claws, killing him. From his training, the boy was able to endure this horrible pain in silence. He had also learned that it was more important to die than to be caught or to lose.

At age twenty, the boys officially became warriors, or *hoplites*. When not in battle, their jobs at this age were to teach the younger boys. They still lived in the barracks but had to supply their share of food, wine, money and equipment. Battles were fought with huge numbers of men on foot so a hoplite had to own armor, a shield, a spear and a sword.

Plutarch, the famous Roman writer who told of the Spartan boy and the fox, said that when a Spartan mother sent her son off to war, she told him, "Come back with your shield, or on it." If a warrior came back without his shield, it meant that he had abandoned his shield and was a coward. If he came back on his shield, he was coming back wounded or dead, but still courageous. This

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sounds like the mother was very mean and heartless, but actually she just wanted to make sure her son was proud of himself for performing the way he should on the battlefield. If not, she didn't want him to have to live in shame.

At age thirty, the hoplites became full citizens. They were given land farmed by helots. They were required to marry and have children for their city-state. However, they still had to spend most of their time in the barracks with fellow warriors or in battle not allowing them much time at home.

At age sixty, the warriors became elders and could retire from military service. They were finally free to return home to their wives.

Then what happened?

Over the next years, Sparta would win and lose many famous battles. Many civilizations have learned a lot from the Spartan system of government and way of life. And here we are in 2005 continuing to learn about Spartan warriors who lived over 2,500 years ago!! I'm sure King Lycurgus would be very proud.

You can find more exciting information at these websites:

This site has a great chart comparing Athens and Sparta:
<http://www.pbs.org/empires/thegreeks/educational/lesson1.html>

This site has a good map showing Ancient Greece in the 5th century:
http://www.hyperhistory.com/online_n2/maptext_n2/greece_ancient.html

Another good map:
<http://www.ancientgreece.com/geography/geography.htm>

Discussion Questions

1. Would you like to have been a Spartan warrior? Why or why not?
2. Do you think the law we have in the United States requiring a person to be 18 years old to serve in the military is a good law? Why? Do you know of any countries today that require children to start military training before age 18?
3. Can you think of a reason why the Spartan society might fail, even though its people were so strong?

--Karen Rutherford is a freelance writer in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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