
Athens' Choices

Athens was located in one of the least fertile areas in ancient Greece. Its unproductive land could not grow the grain necessary to feed the growing city-state. It solved its problem by growing olives and grapes, which it used to produce olive oil and wine. Athenians traded olive oil, wine, and other goods for grain from other locales. Athens' dependence on trade led to the building of the Athenian fleet, which went everywhere in the Mediterranean, from Spain in the west to the Black Sea in the east.

Athenians built magnificent temples, such as the Parthenon, but lived in very simple homes built of sun-dried brick. Houses had no plumbing, and light was provided by olive-oil lamps. Marriage and family were important to Athenian life. Marriages were arranged by parents. Girls usually were married at about the age of 14 to an older man—sometimes twice her age. Women did not have much freedom in Athens. Although they were citizens, they could not own or inherit property. Women were to remain at home and manage the household and slaves. They could appear in public only with permission from their husbands. Men did much of the shopping at the market. Girls did not usually receive a formal education; most stayed home and learned from their mothers how to manage a household. Boys usually went to school at the age of seven, where they were taught reading, writing and grammar, music, and gymnastics. Instead of paper and pencil, students wrote on wax-covered wooden tablets. At age 18, a boy received a year of military training.

Most Athenian families of the citizen class owned at least one slave. The most common use of slaves was in farming, the main industry in Athens. Slaves also worked in the homes of Athenian citizens, and some conducted trade for their masters or accompanied them on trips. Female slaves cooked, cleaned, and made clothing. Slaves who worked in the silver mines probably endured the worst conditions.

The arts were celebrated in Athens, and great works of art, literature, and drama became the standard by which such works are judged even today. In addition, some of history's greatest thinkers and philosophers walked the streets of this city-state. Among them were the philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Various forms of Athenian government eventually evolved into direct democracy. Athens is remembered as one of the most advanced civilizations of ancient times and the birthplace of democracy.

Sparta's Choices

As Sparta grew, it could not feed its growing population. Sparta solved its food shortage by conquering neighboring Messenia around 725 B.C.E., taking over Messenian land and enslaving the Messenians to serve as agricultural slaves called *helots*. They forced the helots to grow crops for Sparta. The helot population grew and they outnumbered the Spartans by almost 8-to-1. In 600 B.C.E., the helots revolted and were nearly successful in putting down their Spartan rulers. The Spartans responded by reforming their society into one focused on military strength. They formed a government that exerted total control. In fact, every newborn baby had to be presented to rulers who decided whether the baby had the potential to be a great soldier or the mother of strong children. Those who failed the test were abandoned to die.

For men, daily life was focused on the military. At age seven, boys left home and moved into military barracks. Their schooling involved marching and training during the day and sleeping on hard benches at night. To encourage stealthiness, they were fed poorly and encouraged to steal food—but they were warned that if they were caught stealing food, they would be beaten. The goal was to make soldiers who were tough and ready to fight. It is said that when Spartan sons went off to war, their mothers told them to come back carrying their shields (victorious) or upon them (dead).

Spartan women had considerable freedom compared to women living in other Greek city-states. For example, women took on responsibilities such as managing the family estates. Spartan women could even inherit property, a right that was rare in the ancient world. Girls were encouraged to be fit and strong—they ran, wrestled, and played sports. It was thought that strong Spartan women would produce strong Spartan men for military service.

The Spartan government included two kings, a council of elders who advised the kings, and an assembly that approved major decisions. The assembly chose five *ephors* who ran the day-to-day affairs of the people, and wielded the real power in Spartan society.

Spartan society isolated itself from other Greeks. Except during wars, the people were not permitted to travel. Trade was discouraged. Money was made of iron bars to make economic transactions difficult. Free expression was discouraged and the arts and philosophy that flourished in nearby city-states did not occur in Sparta. Spartan society valued strength, duty, and discipline over individual worth and freedom. From this society, we get the English word *Spartan*, which means simple, frugal, or austere. Other Greeks were amazed at the military power of Sparta, but wondered if “Spartans are willing to die for their city because they have no reason to live.”

Characteristics of Society

Instructions: Decide if the statement is a characteristic of Sparta, Athens, or both Athens and Sparta

1. Travel was forbidden.
2. Trade was discouraged.
3. Military power was the focus of society.
4. Slavery existed.
5. Citizens lived in a city-state.
6. Great works of art were created.
7. Philosophy grew.
8. Government was a democracy.
9. Women had considerable freedom.
10. Women had few freedoms.
11. Trade was encouraged.
12. Enslaved helots were used to grow food.
13. Boys learned literature, music, and gymnastics.
14. Boys lived in military housing and trained for war.
15. Government consisted of 2 kings, assembly, and 5 ephors.

Compare and Contrast Athens and Sparta.

Put the answers from the previous page into the venn diagram.

Athens

Sparta

