

Athens and Sparta: A Tale of Two City-States

The competing Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta had very opposing cultures and governments, but both managed to grasp power over Greece. Athens, with its free speaking democracy, allied with many smaller city-states to form a powerful rule. Sparta, with its strong military, conquered many lands and forced them into submission. Athens and Sparta flourished during their time as powerful governments, but both eventually fell.



Greece was composed of hundreds of small city-states who governed themselves. Athens was the most populated. At first, it was ruled by tyrants. Then, in 507 BC, the city-state of Athens formed a democracy. Every month a new set of 500 citizens were chosen to form a council to decide political matters.

At about 471 BC, Athens began its Golden Age, which would last for several decades under the leadership of Pericles. During this time there was peace, economic prosperity, and achievements in learning and the arts. The Athenians formed an alliance of many Greek city-states, known as the Delian League. Athens, being the largest city and having the most powerful navy, received tribute from the smaller cities.

During this time, Athens was expanding with new buildings such as the Parthenon, a gigantic temple honoring the goddess Athena – the goddess of wisdom. Other temples were built to other gods and goddesses as well. **Philosophers**, or great thinkers, such as Socrates, Plato and later Aristotle, kindled the growth of wisdom by urging people to use reason and logic to understand the world. Athenians were entertained through plays like those of Aristophanes, who made fun of political people.

Another legacy of Pericles' rule is the development of a **direct democracy** which is a form of government in which citizens rule directly and not through representatives. Still, Athenian democracy was limited. Only male citizens could participate in government, and citizenship was severely restricted.

Women on the other hand were not formally educated. While boys went to school to read, write, learn poetry, and public speaking, a women's place was at home. They took care of the entire household. If they were wealthy enough, they would have slaves to help them.

Sparta, in sharp contrast to Athens, cared nothing for growth of buildings or wisdom, but only for expansion of power.

Sparta's government was an **oligarchy**. It was ruled by two kings, an assembly of elders, and an assembly of citizens over age 30. There was no freedom. Everybody served the state. Money was not used, for they didn't want any one person to be richer than another. Also, Spartan government would not allow trade with other countries for they didn't want the people to be exposed to foreign ideas.

At about 700 BC, the Spartans decided to expand, so they attacked their neighboring inhabitants. After a hard war that lasted many years, the Spartans victoriously enslaved them. The Spartans' slaves, called Helots, were made to do all the agricultural work in Sparta. The Helots outnumbered the Spartans though, and they revolted several times. In order to control the Helots, the Spartans reshaped their whole culture by building a strong military.



All citizens focused on the military. Newborns, that weren't physically perfect, were left to die. Boys were taken away from their mothers at age 7 to begin their training as soldiers. Even the young girls were forced to undergo rigorous physical training so that they would grow up to be tough. Men lived in barracks, training constantly for battle. As a result of their unparalleled military training, Sparta became the most powerful city-state. The military was so important to Sparta that most technological advancements were made in armor and weapons. In 650 B.C iron weapons and tools replaced bronze ones.

History, however, remembers Athens for its undying wisdom, and Sparta for its unmatched military. Ironically, during their quest for power over Greece, the two city-states caused each other's demise.