

Life in Ancient Athens

Under the leadership of Pericles, it became possible for every freeborn citizen to participate in the government. During this period, Athens became a democracy, a state ruled by the many. Athens allowed only free men to be citizens. All men over the age of 18 who were born free in Athens were Athenian citizens. Women and slaves were not.

Athenians liked to travel. They were eager to spread their ideas and learn from others. They encouraged artists from other parts of Greece to come and share their knowledge of art and architecture. Athens developed strong relationships with other city-states and grew powerful through trade.

Athenian women could not inherit property nor could they chose their own husbands. The main responsibilities of the Athenian woman was managing all of the household affairs and bringing up the children. She educated her sons until they were seven, and when they went to school and her daughters until they were fifteen, (when they were considered old enough to be married). An Athenian woman spent most of her time in the house and never went out alone. Among a people who gave great importance to physical training, she was advised to take her exercises in "bed making."

The chief aim of Athenian education was the building of a person with character. The Athenians were more concerned that their sons should grow up to be good citizens, loving what was beautiful and hating what is ugly, then they should know any number of facts.

While the Spartan conception of life was that every citizen should be a good soldier, defend his country, and fight her wars, the Athenians had a much wider idea. They too believed in the training of the body and making patriotic citizens who would count it a glory to die in defense of their city, but they also believed it was a glory to live for their city, and to this end, they trained the mind and imagination as well as the body.

The Athenian schoolboy went to school when he was seven years old. He was placed in the charge of a trusted slave, called a pedagogue, who accompanied him to school and helped him with his lessons. The slave kept him in good order, taught him good manners and punished him. They were taught three main subjects. There were letters, which means reading and writing, music and gymnastics. They did not have schoolbooks, but memorized great poetry and literature such as the Iliad and the Odyssey as it was read to them (books were rare and expensive so the boys were read the material and memorized it).

The boys were usually disciplined by the slave that accompanied them to school and sometimes by the schoolmaster with the permission of the parents. The boys were educated until they were eighteen. At eighteen, they performed military duties for a few years before becoming full citizens. After becoming full citizens, they took the oath of "young men" and were given a shield and spear of the warrior.

The Athenians' diet consisted of fish and vegetables. Because of the rocky mountainous land, they received most of their food through trade. They traded grapes and olives for needed vegetables.

The chief garment worn by the men and boys was the "chiton" or tunic. It was a piece of cloth wrapped around then with one side out and fastened at the neck with a pin. It also had arm-holds. A man's "chiton" seldom came below his knees. The women's "chiton" was longer and colored in bright colors.



The Severity of Spartan Life and Training

Sparta was an oligarchy; the ruling power is in the hands of a few people). A small group called the Council of Elders (which consisted of 2 kings and 28 other men) made the important decisions.

The rulers of Sparta were determined that every Spartan should be so trained that he/she might become a good soldier. Some of the most important laws concerned the education of children.



As soon as a child was born, he was carried to the elders of the tribe to which he belonged. Their business to carefully view the infant and if they found it strong, they allowed it to return to its parents; but if they found it puny and ill shaped, they ordered it to be taken to a cave on Mount Taygetus, where it was left to die. For they thought it neither for the good of the child itself, nor for the public interest that it should be raised.

It was determined that the Spartans should become good soldiers and that they should be great in war. Instead of leaving education to each member of the city-state of Sparta, all young Spartans were put under the authority of "public guardian" with complete authority. This guardian was selected from those who filled the highest state of offices. He had authority to hold meetings and lessons of the boys and as their guardian, in case any misbehavior to punish them severely. The guardian would also bear whips, to inflict punishment when necessary, with the result that modesty and obedience followed.

Instead of softening their feet with shoes or sandals, the rule was to make the feet hardy by going barefoot. This habit would enable them to climb heights more easily and climb down cliffs with less danger. The young Spartans could run faster than any other.

In every way, the Spartan youths as they grew up were severely disciplined. Every year the older boys were whipped in public before the altar of Artemis, in order to teach them to endure pain without crying, and it is said that some boys died under this whipping rather than uttering a single complaint.

The boys spent little time in learning how to read and write. Most of their education was given to their gymnastics training, to running, jumping, boxing, and wrestling and other kinds of exercise. The girls were educated at home. They were taught to wrestle, to throw the spear, and to dart and to be as strong and brave as the boys.



Every Spartan when he went to war carried a shield that was so heavy that if he fled the enemy, he would have to throw it away so it was considered a great disgrace to return home without ones shield; if he has died in battle, the Spartan was carried home upon it.

Spartan women lived the same simple life as Spartan men. They wore plain clothing with little decoration. They were expected to be strong and healthy—ready to fight. She was expected to look after her husband's property in times of war and guard it from invaders. They had many rights that other Greek women did not. They were free to speak to their husband's friends. They could own property. They could even marry another man if their husband had been away at war too long.

Spartans were forbidden to travel for it was believed that contact with other people would teach them bad habits and make them discontented with their simple way of life. They feared contact with other city-states would lead to new ideas and weaken their government. In general, they discouraged trade.

The only sort of money that was allowed was made of iron. A great quantity and weight of this iron money would be of little value. To save up twenty or thirty pounds would require a large closet and moving it would require several oxen. Not only did this prevent any one-man from becoming too rich, it also lessened the crime of theft—for who wouldn't want to steal that which is of no value. Other city-states were not anxious to receive iron as payment for goods.