

Sparta

The Spartan government was founded on the principle that the life of every individual, from the moment of birth, belonged absolutely to the state. The elders of the city-state inspected the newborn infants and ordered the weak and unhealthy ones to be carried to a nearby chasm and left to die. By this practice Sparta hoped to ensure that only those who were physically fit would survive.

The children who were allowed to live were brought up under a severe discipline. At the age of 7, boys were removed from their parents' control and organized into small bands. The strongest and most courageous youths were made captains. The boys slept in dormitories on hard beds of rushes. They ate black broth and other coarse food. They wore the simplest and scantiest clothing. Unlike the boys of Athens, they spent little time learning music and literature. Instead they were drilled each day in gymnastics and military exercises. They were taught that retreat or surrender in battle was disgraceful. They learned to endure pain and hardship without complaint and to obey orders absolutely and without question. They were allowed to feel the pinch of hunger and were encouraged to supplement their fare by pilfering food for themselves. This was not done to cultivate dishonesty but to develop shrewdness and enterprise. If they were caught, they were whipped for their awkwardness. It is said that a Spartan boy, who had stolen a young fox for his dinner, allowed the animal he had hidden under his cloak to gnaw out his vitals rather than betray his theft by crying out. Girls were educated in classes under a similar system, but with less rigor.

Discipline grew even more rigorous when the boys reached manhood. All male Spartan citizens between the ages of 20 and 60 served in the army and, though allowed to marry, they had to belong to a men's dining club and eat and sleep in the public barracks. They were forbidden to possess gold and silver, and their money consisted only of iron bars. War songs were their only music, and their literary education was slight. No luxury was allowed, even in the use of words. They spoke shortly and to the point in the manner that has come to be called laconic, from

Laconia, the district of which Sparta was a part. There were three classes of inhabitants in Laconia. Spartan citizens, who lived in the city itself and who alone had a voice in the government, devoted their entire time to military training. The peroikoi, or dwellers-round, who lived in the surrounding villages, were free but had no political rights. They were tradesmen and mechanics occupations that were forbidden to the Spartans.

The Helots were serfs, little better than slaves, bound to the farms and forced to cultivate the soil for the citizens who owned the land. These Helots, whose marriages and children were not so strictly controlled by the state, were the most numerous class and bitterly hated their masters. Only the amazing organization and fighting powers of the Spartan state kept them under control.

Another strange feature of Sparta was its government, which was headed by two kings who ruled jointly. They served as high priests and as leaders in war. Each king acted as a check on the other. There was a sort of cabinet composed of five ephors, or overseers, who exercised a general guardianship over law and custom and in later times came to have greater power. The legislative power was vested in the assembly of Spartan citizens and in a senate, or council, of 30 elders consisting of the two kings and 28 other men chosen from the citizens who had passed the age of 60.